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Social media in law enforcement: The need for an active presence

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Abstract

One of the problems facing departments is the growing trend of individuals to turn to social media for information. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon, however it has certainly become a bigger source for news and interaction for most of the people served by modern law enforcement agencies. As a result, departments can be left struggling to figure out how to identify with those who desire to obtain information in this manner. New media platforms can be problematic as some agencies and command staff can be resistant to getting away from a daily or weekly press release to local newspapers. This can be particularly troublesome as social media also can twist information and misleading "news" can take on a life of its own. As a result, agencies that wish to stay abreast of the stories coming out need to be releasing them correctly the first time.

Agencies need to have availability online to answer requests for information and to put out updates. There is not necessarily a requirement to use every platform, and some situations may only require the use of one or two. What is important is to be visible to the community served and to meet expectations. Not only is this doable with free training, whether online tutorials or in actual classrooms, it is also good stewardship of budgets. This is one affordable way to interact with citizens and build up favorable equity among the public. In addition to being a buzzword among modern law enforcement, transparency also aids in positive interaction with those served by an agency. Agencies of any size should make an effort to establish a steady and observable social media presence and should facilitate the modern era of information demand made on agencies.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of social media use by a department is strongly debated. Departments are seen either getting on board or pushing back against the trend. As the availability of social media has increased, so have the amount people who are turning to it as their source of information. According to Graham (2015) "Social media sites that are most frequently used by law enforcement for investigations include Facebook at 93 percent, YouTube at 67 percent and Twitter at 50 percent" (para. 2).

What this means for agencies is that they have three choices. They can be at the forefront of the trend leading the charge into each new platform that comes into play. They can catch up later, staying behind the curve, or fall somewhere in the middle. A little over half of agencies reported not having a formal process to facilitate social media demand and about a third had resources dedicated to monitoring social media (Graham, 2015).

This issue became prevalent with the availability to garner information instantly through smart devices and the public becoming educated on how to access it. The need for agencies to stay abreast of the growing changes makes it important to keep up. A great way to connect with the public is by staying available where they expect to be able to find the agency. This can partially be done without leaving the office and can even be done remotely from smart devices. One example of this is seen in Taiwan, where strategies were formed from analysis of online visitors, how far the posts reached, and approval on Facebook. Their Police Service App gained almost half of a million views and received more than 26,000 likes showing strong success (Chen, 2016).

Agencies have a duty to be readily accessible to the community they serve and stay current with trends. According to (Copitch & Fox, 2010) "as well as producing more effective and better targeted communications for their local communities, the police also need to develop more interactive and participative communication strategies and, in particular, make more use of social media" (p.44). Social media platforms accomplish this goal as they can be accessed and updated with ease.

If a rural agency has a low number of followers, it may require less time and fewer updates. Increasing the regularity of posts could also increase traffic to the department page. A large agency by contrast may want to make several posts per day. Regardless of where the agency falls in the spectrum, the opportunity to reach many people is available through social media. It offers a quick and easily accessible platform for communities to stay in touch.

The ability to keep up with this emerging trend can be done for a relatively low cost. Few platforms require a fee and outside of staffing a position to keep up with the demands, it should put little strain on a department budget. An agency can improve public perception and approval from the community. Even a two-three person department could post a crime-of-the-week and increase visibility.

Additionally, releasing information through a social media platform will increase transparency. Transparency continues to be a growing area of focus for many agencies. Leary and Rappaport (2008) found that "Departments can use social media tools to enhance community policing initiatives by "promoting better communications, providing greater access to information, fostering greater transparency, allowing for

great accountability, encouraging broader participation, and providing a vehicle for collaborative problem solving" (National Law Enforcement Policy Center of the International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2010), p.2).

Research done by the U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services and Police Executive Research Forum (2013) showed that being available through these outlets will meet the needs of the community. One quarter of people in the 65 and older age group maintains a social media presence. Law enforcement agencies should have an active social media presence to improve community relations. With such a major push by groups such as these, it is apparent that the public wants to meet agencies in the virtual world.

Law enforcement officers within an agency desire to improve public perception. According to Oberle (2004), 94% of California police departments surveyed believes there is an image problem (as cited in Fiedler, 2007, p.131). The negative views often portrayed by the media can be partially countered with presenting the agencies own image. This is important for agency personnel who see the negative press. Officers put their lives on the line and as such, it is imperative for them to believe they have the backing of the community. If there is a lack of confidence, it will negatively affect the service they give back (Blum, 2002, p.3).

In addition, those within the community can then be kept abreast of information from an untainted source. Public information, like weekly arrest reports or the number of vehicle collisions in an area, can be included in routine posts. The ability to put out a press release, update the community on future events, and release notifications of critical incidents can be done with a modicum of control. Department posts can be

shared and the original content will remain as it was authored without others putting a spin on it.

POSITION

Law enforcement agencies should use social media because it improves public perception. These easy to use platforms are an innovative way for agencies to make investments in the public's perception. All too often the media focuses on the negative aspects and presents inflammatory views when officers or departments make mistakes. When this happens, debits can occur as departments are viewed during these negative moments. Focusing on positive posts and presenting a good image will add credits to offset the debits and can build up a balance of sorts.

Taiwan's National Police Agency (NPA) has done this very thing. According to Chen (2016), "Recently, the NPA launched a series of awareness campaigns on Facebook, focusing … to attract the most attention possible... an animation clip … led to 180,000 downloads in just 12 days, increasing the number of total downloads by 50.88 percent" (para. 14). When bad things do happen, it is nice to have made regular and meaningful contributions that result in an investment into the community.

In addition to improving public perception, social media can be a valuable tool to quickly get information out to the public. Facebook has helped make the public aware of crime fighting since 2009 when it began a partnership with AMBER alerts (Richardson, 2013). Using social media has become part of the culture. According to Kolb (2012) traffic updates and AMBER alerts are again noted when talking about the benefits of law enforcement use across many platforms.

Demand for rapid dissemination of information is continuing to grow. According to the research, there is a great deal of time spent online, and 22% of that time is spent on social media (Police Executive Research Forum, 2013, Introduction, para. 1). With the amount of time spent on these sites, a strong presence allows citizens to connect with normal activities of agencies. This should begin before a major or critical incident occurs.

When major incidents take place, the same outlets the public are used to following for routine posts can be utilized with breaking activity. Users can get controlled information, directly from the agency, without the fear of other outlets misquoting or misconstruing. According to a case analysis done during the development of the community incident report, researchers reported, "Microblogs such as Twitter has been found to be especially effective for disseminating information to the general public" (Shih, Han & Carroll, 2015, p.629). An agency can use the same delivery tool in notifying the public of both a road closure due to a vehicle crash and a tornado warning.

Developing a good working relationship with local media will allow reporters to have access to information when events are posted online. If a department does not have a public information officer (PIO) available, then this could serve as an alternative. A patrol officer on scene or a telecommunications officer could be given short-term access to post approved updates. In the event that the PIO is busy in other roles, then periodic updates can still be made on department platforms and the media can be referred there for updates. When a PIO is available on an incident, they can push out

regular updates on department pages. This can keep those who do not have access to traditional coverage informed as events unfold.

While public perception and information sharing are important, departmental transparency is also an issue among agencies. Having an active outlet where the community can turn for information directly from the agency will increase transparency. Mainstream media will put out when a critical incident occurs or an officer is found to have committed an act of mistrust or misconduct. The media outlets will bombard the public within a short time period. This negativity undermines the mission of an agency. This is even more damaging when the information is not presented accurately or fairly.

An agency's ability to respond quickly and do some amount of damage control will help maintain their image (Chen, 2016). When this happens, loyal followers can take up for the agency and point out the positive notes. It is not uncommon to see supporters of an agency defend them against bullying and biased reporting. This positive response from the community will not only help quell the antagonists, it can also reinforce with officers that they do indeed have the support of the community they serve.

According to Harvard and Stanford professors, Nass and Moon, the benefits of reciprocity in a society are that people are more likely to help others who have already given those help (Nass & Moon, 2000). By presenting a positive image online, an agency can expect some reciprocation from the community in a time of strife. A benefit to being open to commentary about a department allows them to enhance strengths and mitigate weaknesses (Waters, 2012). Loyalty can be gained by keeping the public informed and interested in an agency.

Finally, while the social incentives are important, financial feasibility is also required for agencies. A social media presence is fiscally affordable as there are many low cost options available. Espejo & Thompson (2014) discuss the issue of budgeting and the various areas of support needed by an agency. They ask "can police agencies actually afford to cut community oriented policing programs?" (p.101). The negative impact that cutting these programs would have far outweigh the monetary costs associated with them. While budgets are constantly in flux, there is still a desire to maximize what can be done within a budget.

While agencies are being asked to do more, with less, it is feasible to maintain this platform. In large agencies, where the budget allows, one or more people can be hired to do this full time. In smaller agencies, where this is not feasible, it can be a collateral duty. It is suggested that departments "implement creative procedures and policy changes that maintain community-oriented policing practices" (Espejo,). Considering the low cost to maintain a social media platform, this is an option no matter how tight the budget gets.

Rarely does an agency have the potential to gain a wide audience, gain support, and share information for minimal investment. Printed media and other outlets often require a cost. The same, if not greater, coverage can be obtained through free online platforms. A social media presence is easy to maintain and should have little impact on budgetary constraints. This issue is not whether an agency can afford to be there but rather, how an agency can afford to absent.

COUNTER POSITION

One issue that could keep agencies from wanting to move forward is the growing number of platforms. Facebook, Twitter, Kik messenger, Instagram, and Snapchat are just a few of the rapidly growing list of applications that fall under social media. There are so many options that it may seem daunting for an agency to figure out which platform to choose.

It may seem like it is not worth the bother to engage in the current frontier. MySpace came and went, and there was a short resistance to Facebook when that transition occurred. History shows how that resistance ended. Many people thought that if they stayed on the old platform, then it would stay relevant. However, the social media machine will drive itself and the platforms will likely change at a more frequent pace. The changes have been ongoing since the internet became popular, and it does not appear to be slowing down.

Platforms are growing but it is possible to keep up with the changes. Graham (2015) stated, "Fostering in-house social media experts who are trained on the platforms and affiliated agency policies provide more effective information that can be disseminated and leveled across the investigative or community function" (p .61). Online searches, YouTube videos, formal training, and keeping up with trends can allow agencies to pick the specific outlet(s) that are a good fit for the area they serve.

As new platforms become popular and replace existing ones, a transition can take place. Departments will have gathered followers and people who share and promote their posts. These same followers can be brought to the new platform by

sharing links to the future application. Once sufficient notice has been given, a seamless transition can occur.

Another issue is that time spent online decreases personal interaction. According to Getnick (2009, para. 9) this allows people to "hide behind screens". There is a fake sense of socializing without actually seeing anyone. Pseudo friendships are developed and displayed by a high number of friends or contacts.

This can be countered, however, by maintaining a healthy balance. This is explored by Chen (2016) when discussing community policing in Taiwan. While it allows an important way for the public and police to interact, it cannot replace in person interaction. Personal interaction is necessary in community policing and forming connections. In Taiwan, officers are very involved in the community. Being proactive and looking into suspicious activity and the cares of the community drive them. In addition to having an active online presence, officers have helped start neighborhood watch programs thereby not limiting themselves to online interaction. Using online platforms to enhance, not replace, interactions will form a well-rounded approach and meet the expectations of the community.

RECOMMENDATION

Agencies should be continually seeking out new ways to invest in the communities they serve. An active social media presence allows for an easily obtainable platform to nurture public trust and give access to information. Whether it is a platform that is well established or a newly released avenue, its use should be considered.

Perception, transparency, and public demand for information can all be addressed by having a social media presence. Perception and transparency can improve, and information can be disseminated in a rapid manner. Not only can the information be put out quickly, it can be controlled by the agency. Living in an immediate information society, it is clear that the expectation will continue to grow and law enforcement will best serve the public by keeping up with these trends.

Constantly changing platforms should not be a deterrent. Utilizing individuals within an agency who are knowledgeable about technology or seeking out a brief training class will allow agencies to stay current. Either of these options should be available to an agency of any size. Not all platforms need to be used simultaneously and in all areas. Some events may only warrant one or two platforms while other may need to be broadcast through as many channels as possible.

A fear of shutting out the public and throwing information onto the internet should also not make an agency shy away from social media. Social media is a tool, as are many available to modern peace officers. It should be used in conjunction with regular outings at community events and going to the coffee shop. It should never replace the handshakes and in-person interaction.

Research supports the public expectation for law enforcement agencies to stay current with trends (Shih, Han & Carroll, 2015). Additionally, it shows that departments would be well served to keep up with the changing times. An investment made into positive policing can pay dividends on the return.

Agencies should plan to put into place an active social media team relative to their size. A chief in a one-person department should get to a class if they are not

familiar with the option and start a presence online. A mid-size agency should assign

one person to put something out at least a few times per month. A large agency should

post daily to keep up with the expectations that come with being in a large community.

Law enforcement agencies should have an active social media presence to improve

community relations. An agency should desire to match the needs of the citizens

served by posting to social media, basing the frequency on what is expected from them.

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