

**The Bill Blackwood
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Social Media Manager in Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

Social media is increasingly becoming a news source and communications tool for many people across the country. The increasing availability of smartphones has given rise to big platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to act as news sources for people on-the-go in our 24-hour news cycle. Social media is not going away. News organizations are having to find ways to more easily reach consumers in the digital era. Further, businesses and government agencies are taking out the middlemen news organizations and going straight to the people. Law enforcement agencies from big cities to small villages need to similarly enter the digital, social media era.

Social media is a free opportunity for agencies to get their message out to the community. It is a two-way communicator with the people that they serve. With so many people on social media, law enforcement agencies have the opportunity to reach and build new relationships within their communities. Moreover, agencies can harness the power of social media to collect tips for criminal activities in the community and alert citizens in emergency situations. Social media is an opportunity to respond quickly and effectively to inaccuracies and constructively respond to criticism.

Having a dedicated social media manager can bridge the gap in the community. While there are a few challenges to hiring one person like budgetary concerns or negative perceptions on social media, a social media manager can improve perceptions of the law enforcement agency in the public and help create a positive and authoritative voice for the community. Social media is incredibly important for community building, and law enforcement agencies need to be a part of that process.

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INTRODUCTION

Our society is increasingly turning to social media as their first and for some only form of communication. Social media as defined by Merriam Webster is “forms of electronic communications as websites for social networking and microblogging through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content as videos” (n.d.). Examples of those sites include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat; these platforms are known as the big four platforms and are the most well-known in society. Because of the rise in smartphone usage, consumers are relying heavily on the internet to keep them up to speed with the 24 hour news cycle. In the article 6 new facts about Facebook, Pew Research states “nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, and 19% of Americans rely to some degree on a smartphone for accessing online services and information and for staying connected to the world around them” (Smith, 2014). The study shows that consumers are increasingly turning to social media to receive real time news updates (Greenwood & Duggan, 2016). Law enforcement professionals should leverage social media to quickly and effectively disseminate information to the public.

Communities are looking toward law enforcement for real time information that is accurate, timely and informative. In the digital era, law enforcement agencies should be where their people are on social media to provide much needed information. Social media platforms are heavily used already and easily engage the community by: providing up-to-date information on criminal activity in the community and local events and, enlist public support for the agency like reporting tips or bridging relationships in the community. Law enforcement must find a way to tap into this craze of social media

using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and other social media platforms to reach the population it serves. Social media that is used properly can open doors of communication with the citizens that law enforcement is serving. Citizens look to law enforcement and their social media pages to provide information on crime reporting, weather conditions and increasingly, as a source during emergency situations. Recent examples of this include critical weather updates provided by the Houston Police Department (@HoustonPolice on Twitter) during Hurricane Harvey and updates during the mass shooting at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (@LVMPD on Twitter). Law enforcement agencies are using social media platforms as tools to communicate with the communities that they serve to gather and provide accurate information. Law enforcement agencies can use social media to push out information quickly to a large group of people. The expediency is crucial especially in crisis reporting or emergency situations when citizens' lives are at risk.

Social media is a free asset. It does not have any upfront costs for agencies or citizens to create an account; more importantly, it's free to access. Most, if not all agencies have access to a computer and internet access within their agencies. This is needed to setup social media accounts. However, simply opening an account will not engage a community. How agencies use their social media matter. While there is no monetary investment, cultivating an online presence does require the intangible investment of time. In his article, Captain Hsiung argues "agencies having a presence on social media does not equate to effective engagement within the community"

(Hsiung, 2016, p. 24). Agencies need to invest time in building relationships with the communities it serves.

To fully engage and educate communities, social media cannot be seen as only a tool for investigations or mediums to announce community outreach programs. It must be used to communicate with citizens. Departments have to be open and receptive. The platform must not be a passive mouthpiece to only decimate information. Two way conversations on social media promote engagement, transparency, and trust building within the towns and cities that are worked. One way communication provides the citizens with the feeling that their concerns are being ignored. Moreover, social media pages that are not regularly updated are a missed connection with the community.

First, the people who liked or followed the page are not getting responses or interaction. Second, few posts mean that the seldom posts will not reach a large audiences due in large part to the complicated algorithm implemented by the big platforms like Facebook and Twitter that prioritize frequent posters. If the department's profiles are not being used in the small moments, then communities will have a hard time being a reliable voice and authenticating posts during the crucial and emergency situations. Agencies have to invest the time to relationship build in the community online that means starting and regularly posting on social sites with clearly defined goals and engaging content.

Law enforcement agencies should have personnel that monitor their agencies' social media; not doing so is doing a disservice to the agency and the citizens it serves. Today's law enforcement agencies need to monitor their social media pages like

business. Brands like Southwest Airlines not only promote their services but also engage their customers whether that is answering questions about flights or responding to criticism in a constructive manner (Shook, 2016). Successful social media for businesses have people that are engaging the community, disseminating information managing public opinion. Social media is imperfect, and it is still fairly new to the public with its issues. Though, it is not going away. Because of this and the aforementioned points, I recommend that law enforcement agencies should have a dedicated person to support social media services or platforms.

POSITION

Law enforcement agencies should have dedicated, full-time personnel to run social media accounts. A successful social media presence requires an investment of time and people to properly cultivate relationships. Further, that investment is worthwhile because an increasing number of the population obtain their news solely from social media sites. Social media managers as a gatekeeper and monitor social platforms to be a reliable and authoritative voice for the department to the community. The role of social media manager is credibly important in digital age. No matter the circumstances, law enforcement agencies across the country should be implementing a social media strategy and have dedicated personnel advancing those goals.

Law enforcement agencies need to establish a social media manager position. Key qualifications for the position are being knowledgeable of the platforms, implementing public relation strategies and knowing which platforms are best for particular goals. The social media manager should have a mastery of the big four platforms at the least and be knowledgeable of social media trends. According to his

article, Fontein states “social media managers are responsible for developing and implementing marketing strategies for a business social media sites this might include blogging, creating social media profiles, managing regular posts and responding to follower” (2016, Social media manager section, para. 1). Preferably, the social media manager should know which platforms is best suited for the particular message the agency is trying to disseminate. For example, Facebook is the most widely used platform especially in older demographics. The manager should be able to identify the department’s target audience and invest more heavily in that platform. These qualities will only help the agency build stronger relationships in the community.

One example of importance of social media for law enforcement is an incident that happened in Seattle, Washington on November 9, 2009. A male went into a coffee shop an opened fire killing four customers. The man left the area before the police arrived. In a synopsis on the incident, Spangenthal-Lee, Whitcomb, and Christie summarized it as: “six minutes into incident, members of the Seattle Police Department’s public affairs team-a hybrid of sworn officers and civilian staff-issued a warning to the public via Twitter that the suspect was at large” (2016, p. 34). Seattle’s Police Department Twitter (@SeattlePD is monitored continuously by public affairs staff. The Department continued to tweet out information until the suspect was captured. The community had minute-by-minute updates of the attack, be on alert and could accurately prepare. In their article, authors Spangenthal-Lee, Whitcomb, and Christie argued that “listing these moments during the event on Twitter, the department is providing a transparent explanation for police tactics and the direct cause and effect

between unlawful acts, violence, and proportional use of force” (Spangenthal-Lee et al., 2016, p.35).

Another advantage of social media is it acts as a public forum. Citizens have an opportunity to ask questions, request guidance, send tips and offer thanks to police officers. Without a dedicated person, the information becomes stale, leads can stall and vital questions go unanswered. A public forum only works if everyone puts in the effort to create and sustain a two-way dialogue. Social media provides the space while a dedicated manager shepherds and grows the conversation. By sharing numerous messages, posts and tweets. The manager helps grow the conversation and grow the amount of people who see and read it.

Social media is a powerful tool, and when used correctly, can do a ton of good. A social media manager can sift through and correct inaccuracies with the click of the button. Further, platforms can be used to gather tips for investigations. For example, if there's a robbery and the agency needs help identifying security footage, the agency can use the collective knowledge of its social media followers to help identify the robber.

Criminologist and Justice Studies Professor Bell states that social media applies the theory of six degrees of separation (Schneider, 2013). Chances are somebody knows somebody and can be used to solve problems quickly. A law enforcement social media manager has the skillset to bring citizens, potential members and law enforcement officials together and can help create a positive image for your agency.

A potential downside to social media is negativity and internet troll; however, a dedicated staff can respond, when appropriate, to help build positive perceptions. Much like Southwest Airlines uses social media to assist passengers by providing accurate

information, law enforcement agencies can use social media to respond to criticism in a constructive manner. Oftentimes, people gripe on Twitter or Facebook because they feel like they are shouting into a void, that no one is monitoring the page. However, consistently monitoring and responding can show that the agency is listening and willing to communicate. By creating a welcoming platform with engaging content and being responsive, agencies can shift their persona to one of responsiveness and willingness to work with and engage in their community. Trust is important in law enforcement. Having an open and communicative online presence can help build and bridge relationships in the community.

To harness the power and properly utilize all that social media has to offer, law enforcement agencies have to give social media managers' full access to the department and its inner workings. Captain Hsuing argues in his article that social media managers for law enforcement agencies need to possess the authority to resolve issues and the tools to solve problems if they are going to be effective (Hsiung, 2016).

The person in the position is empowered to solve problems and be a proactive voice for the department. For example, Shook explains that the role of social media managers at Southwest Airlines is to be a voice that can resolve problems with all the needed resources to do so (2016). Often, airline passengers take to social media to air grievances about lost baggage and delayed flights.

Having someone constantly monitor and respond quickly can help passage issues and control perceptions. For law enforcement agencies, the social media manager should have diverse experience within agency like patrol and criminal investigations. These mentorship opportunities will be invaluable down the road. While

social media is relatively new and some do not fully understand the power, giving a social media manager full access to the department will better equip them to do their job well. Further, realizing that social media is often the first and sometimes only place that people are looking for information is essential. Be where the community is.

One way to prepare for criticism and address concerns inside and outside the department about the role social media will play is to outline social media policy. The policy should outline the job description of the manager much like suggestions above and discuss the goals and vision that the department has for how social media will be used. A social media policy will act as a playbook and clearly define expectations so as to accurately outline how social media will fit into the department's public relations strategy.

COUNTER POSITION

While social media is increasingly becoming an essential tool for government officials and agencies, not every agency will immediately have the budget or resources to hire a dedicated social media manager. Common arguments against hiring a new person are that the agency is short staffed and personnel is already spread thin and that a person on social media is not fiscally responsible use of their manpower. These agencies see social media as a supplement rather than a necessity and will assign officers to social media as an axillary task. According to Captain Hsiung (2016), agencies who subscribe to this model believe that it is better to be great on a few social media sites as opposed to being mediocre on many. However, a few steps can be taken to utilize officers already on staff better rather than hiring a new person for social media.

Reorganization of a law enforcement agency can be utilized to achieve a position of social media manager. Most agencies have a crime prevention division or community outreach division. Personnel within those divisions already have strong communications skills that can be translated to fit social media. Divisions with these skillsets are known as community policing which uses partnerships and problem solving techniques to proactively address the conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime. The community policing division is the logical place to start in reorganization efforts to find a social media manager.

Social media is the new wave of community policing as they are both about building relationships. Captain Hsiung's department exemplifies reorganization efforts because his agency converted a full-time, non-sworn public information officer to be a social media manager. He summarized the move as positive by saying that the social media manager made a huge impact on growing an online community of residents who have come to trust and appreciate the openness and transparency of the department (Hsiung, 2016).

In addition to budget constraints, another concern that department may have prior to instituting a social media manager is that social media can turn against agencies causing public backlash and negativity. Some social media users are constant sources of negativity and are known as internet trolls who look to point out mistakes and spread inaccurate information. These citizens are not held to the same journalistic standard as reporters. As Kehres (2016) points out, these trolls are more concerned with their personal agendas, elevating their own profiles and increasing likes, comments and shares on their pages. Often, according to Waters (2012), these individuals are

attention seeking and use social media as an outlet that they do not have in the real world.

Again, law enforcement agencies should respond carefully to these kind of commenters. If there is an opportunity to provide constructive feedback, it can be crucial for relationships building; however, sometimes engaging the trolls will only fan the flames. Southwest Airlines uses social media to engage passengers and customers even the trolls, at times if there's an opportunity to generate conversation and advance company values. Law enforcement agencies should similarly respond to criticism when appropriate but beware of users who only want to agitate. A social media manager is able to discern which internet trolls to respond to and which conversations can be constructive to which the agency to respond.

RECOMMENDATION

As media continues to evolve and move more online, law enforcement need to keep up. To do this, agencies should hire a dedicated social media manager. Dedicated personnel will help connect with the community that uses social media as the primary form of communication and news sources. Law enforcement agencies must reach these people. It is necessary to be on social media and engage with accurate and timely information. A social media manager should be knowledgeable in social media and understand the trends. The manager should be responsive and proactive with the public. The social media manager will be able to respond in a timely manner to inquiries and criticism from the public. This will open the door of communication with the communities that agencies are charged with protecting. Managers have the skill

and the ability to bring citizens to unique understanding about your department abilities and shortcomings.

Law enforcement can learn from brands like Southwest Airlines and how to implement social media in their public relations strategy. Southwest Airlines is active on social media especially Twitter and responds to passengers. Their engaging content can provide crucial information to their online community whether that is updating passengers about flight status or lost luggage or alert the larger community about fare sales. Further, Southwest Airlines empowers their personnel to respond to comments and are given the resources to accomplish it. Their social media strategy has clear direction, and the team is strong, reliable voice for passengers (Shook, 2016).

Law enforcement agencies should establish social media guidelines and before they even post or tweet, know what they envision their pages representing for the community. Define goals with the agency and empower the social media manager to connect with the community. Social media is a powerful asset and harnessing this can bridge the gap with officers and the community. Law enforcement agencies should give managers complete access to the departments so they can have complete and total information to provide to citizens. Finally, trust is incredibly important between the manager and command staff. Command staff should trust the manager to speak for the agency and respond with the right information at the right time. By creating a detailed social media playbook, the department can ensure everyone knows the agency's vision and goals for social media how it will fit into the overall public relations strategy.

Social media is a crucial tool with increasing importance in our digital era. While its free to access and use, agencies may face roadblocks to hiring a dedicated social

media manager. Reorganization of the department is an option to address this especially in crime prevention or in community outreach divisions which already have personnel with strong communications skillsets. Further, these divisions may already deal with and have the know how to handle with the inevitable criticisms on social media.

Social media can help enlist public support it can turn on a dime and do the opposite, due in part to the nature of media and the community. The prospect of negatively should not be a reasons to deter agencies from investing in a social media strategy; instead, the department should prepare by creating social media guidelines and policies that outline agency expectations.

Social media is incredibly important. It is an opportunity for law enforcement agencies to be a reliable voice in the community and be a resource for citizens. Most people receive their news and communicate solely on social media. Law enforcement agencies need to be where the people are on social media. Being where the community is already active will go a long way in building, bridging and sustaining relationships in the community.

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