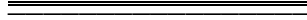


**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Effective Social Media Presence for Law Enforcement Agencies



**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**



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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly changing social environment of 2021 individuals have grown accustomed to information being instantaneously available at their fingertips, on a cell phone. The reality of how impactful social media is goes far beyond what research has taken into account, which shows that a large percentage of the population takes the information in as their main information and news source. Law enforcement agencies have to become a part of this information network, but, due to its rapid availability and its permanent nature, the agency must proceed with a clear and guided presence. Social media is the stage for community engagement in the 21st century. Law enforcement agencies have to commit to monitoring and limiting so that even though the quantity of activity is directly related to community engagement, the agency does not sacrifice quality and professionalism for the quantity of information. Through this community engagement, law enforcement can build trust and the citizens can hold a stake in assisting with solving crimes as well as crime prevention within the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies should have a well-defined presence on social media. For decades, American law enforcement agencies have been striving to improve their community relations and community policing models. In general, the idea of community policing was to create a mutual relationship between the community and the police that serve their community. This relationship was to allow the two to become integrated in each other's settings (Beshears, 2017). The idea of community policing became necessary as fewer law enforcement agency's find themselves less engaged as they no longer have officers on the walking beat of their communities. Another source of connection that occurs less often is officers serving in the community that they are from. Both of these aspects created vast amounts of community engagement, which have changed with technology. During the police academy in the early 1990's many cadets would hear that the patrol car with radio and air conditioning was the end to this era of policing as the open dialog was altered forever. A vast majority of the world population lives in a society with two distinct communities on separate planes. One community is the physical community that they live in and all the sub-communities that go along with that physically interactive community. The second community exists on the digital plane, in the form of social media, where a persons' attendance and interaction in that community is through their profile within a social media platform. This community is also made up of sub-communities. People can set up their existence in the social media world to their geographic area and interact with sub-communities within that area actively. Realistically, the social media existence is global and far-reaching beyond the individual's geographic area and physical community.

The information exchanged and community interactions within this digital community are instantaneously having far-reaching effects and consequences. In this new digital community, the walking beat where people can express what is going on in their area has become the Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram post. For law enforcement to be able to engage them, they also must be available on those platforms. With the number of individuals getting their news feed from social media, sixty-nine percent of all adults in the United States of America use Facebook, and, of those, the majority check the site once a day or more (Auxier, 2021). Social media offers vast opportunities for information exchange between the community and law enforcement.

While there is little doubt of the opportunities for communication that social media creates, there are also concerns and hazards for the law enforcement agency. In order to combat these hazards for the agencies it is vital for them to establish a directed presence on social media with guidelines on use, communication, content and who can post on behalf of the agency. By doing this, the agency can maintain a relevant presence that allows an authentic connection with the community to foster two-way communication and community involvement while maintaining the agency image and transparency. This two-way communication will not only engage the community with a place for interactive communication but can also be used as a news outlet for the agency to spread traffic alerts, crime alerts, and bulletins. This important aspect and the responses to citizens on two-way communications requires an agency to carefully craft content and direct responses to foster the engagement but maintain a professional and positive image.

POSITION

Social media is the new stage for community engagement and the largest “National Night Out” event an agency will ever see. It is imperative that agencies recognize this and prepare and utilize the opportunity that is presented to their advantage. One very evident change that increases the size of this stage is the result of the Covid 19 pandemic for 2020 and 2021. In-person gatherings became non-existent. National Night Out events were cancelled by law enforcement agencies across the country. In this moment and into the future this has further established the importance and viability of social media platforms as a community engagement platform. Studies performed by Pew Research have found that 69 percent of all adults in the United States utilize Facebook, and, of those, 70 percent visit the site daily (Auxier, 2021). Incredibly, the social media platform of YouTube has increased from not being included in a 2016 report on social media to 73% of all users in 2019 (Perrin, 2019) and a staggering 81% of all US adults who say they use online platforms in 2021 (Auxier, 2021).

Law enforcement agencies can utilize these social media outlets as a true two-way communication in order to fully engage the community in a way that allows for an organic and living flow of information and responses, which build trust through transparency. Truly engaging departments will keep the interaction from the community going by posting announcements and responding to questions from the community. This tends to increase post shares, likes, and comments, thus, increasing the reach of the message and the feeling of community engagement from the department by the citizens. It also adds to a sense of buy in with the department that further develops

support, and, frequently, that support will come to the department's aid when negative posts occur. Negative posts can also present opportunities for engagement when they are a person expressing a negative experience or belief. This can be an opportunity to show engagement, even when it is not expected, by asking the person to contact the department where more can be learned about the situation or options can be offered for resolution, if available. These actions can further gain community trust, engagement, and buy in. The department needs to be cautious with this approach as there are page instigators that will attempt to bait the department for a response. The best response to those baiting the department as instigators is no response. In many cases, the community will reply to the negative comments due to the level of trust and support the department has developed with them throughout social media stage engagements. The idea of having a website, which is static and completely non-engaging, or simply having the account and profile is not enough to bring people to view and interact with the site or build trust between the law enforcement agency and the community they serve (Hsiung, 2021).

Law enforcement agencies should direct their social media presence in order to maintain relevance. Many people who are online use formats that they scroll through for information and non-relevant information or information that is not updated is just one more thing that a person will scroll past. A law enforcement agency should develop their social media presence so that content posted is either informative of a situation or relevant to a current trend or situation being discussed. Agencies should refrain from simply posting content to post something. Many agencies utilize the social media platforms to post traffic alerts or emergency notices, which are relevant and timely;

however, they are not within the control of the agency for updated content. Agencies that have been progressive about just how much of a necessity content is to building a strong community relationship and following have created regularly changing content and have then monitored the community engagement. An example would be a “Beyond the Badge” program or series with regularly updated content showing officers at community events or celebrating officers’ actions. Another example would be “Most Wanted” postings on regularly set schedules and featuring different fugitive suspects (Murnik, 2015). While the humanizing-the-badge type content is very engaging with the community, the agencies need to monitor this to not overly expose their officers’ information where additional online information can put them at risk (Waters, 2012).

The agency’s level of activity on social media is directly related to the community’s level of engagement; however, quantity should not replace quality. Not having a well-defined presence or limitation to content and posting activity can affect the agency’s image. For example, if the agency posts officer videos that are engaging and humorous, but unprofessional, it can brand the department in the community’s eye and take some time to repair. There is also a legitimate concern that some of these more humanizing videos, especially when they are all that the agency posts, can illicit the question as to why tax money is paying for this activity. Remember that social media has created an environment where a normal person’s thoughts and influence has a much larger audience than what would have been formally available to them (Burguan, 2013). If a post from the community is responded to in a negative way from the agency or it is a legitimate concern and not responded to at all, then the agency begins to lose credibility. This issue can be avoided or at least mitigated by having a clear policy that

outlines proper use and personnel that are authorized to post or speak on behalf of the agency (Graham, 2015). An agency should not only develop a strategy for effective content posts but should also develop a strategy for who can create those posts, what the parameters are for each group with accessibility to post, and who can respond to public inquiries. An agency only remains relevant while they are effectively engaging the community, and this means some posts will not wait until the agency's Public Information Officers (PIO) is available. Due to this issue, some training for watch commanders or shift supervisors can allow them to assist in timely posts. This can be utilized in immediate public safety, emergency and awareness type posts needing timely publication.

The community reached through effective and directed social media can assist in solving and preventing crime. A law enforcement agency can control the narrative from the start on a developing case or immediate assistance requests to the community. These can be utilized in the form of a BOLO (Be On Look Out) for involved parties or vehicles related to a crime as well as missing person alerts. These posts are quickly able to reach the immediate impact area, subject to immediate on-the-spot updates by the agency and all users of the social media platform are not only able to share it throughout multiple communities, but they are also able to share it across multiple social media platforms. Traditional media outlets will also frequent law enforcement agency social media pages for trending or breaking crime stories and are aware that 94% of law enforcement agencies have a Facebook page (Brunell et al., 2018). Cold case investigations are another extremely engaging subject for the community as many want to help and the social media outlets are a way for them to be aware and also share cold

case assistance requests for information throughout multiple far-reaching communities. The scope of reach available through this is unprecedented and can prove very effective in new leads or information as many victims may even be unidentified and someone may recognize them. Law enforcement agencies can also report current crime trends through the social media page to alert citizens of rising issues in a particular geographical area. Agencies have used social media effectively to not only solicit the public's assistance in sharing information, but also in seeking their assistance in not sharing information on a platform while an ongoing situation unfolds, as it may jeopardize the investigation (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The need for this aspect of an agency's directed presence becomes very important as current investigation information needs to be considerably directed to ensure the integrity of the case. The agency will also need to consider that all records and posts could become evidence in the case.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Some opposition to a law enforcement agency having a directed presence on social media is that the agency does not have the resources to create an effective presence on social media. This requires someone posting to the agency page more frequently than an agency would update news on a website page for example. In order to be effective, there also needs to be a monitoring and response system in place to respond to the community posts as well as monitor for unacceptable behavior such as obscenities and hate speech that steps over the stated monitoring lines. If an agency develops a YouTube presence, the amount of time increases to create videos to post, which subscribers will see weekly from the agency and increases engagement. Once

an agency has increased their presence on social media, it is also a good idea for them to frequently search for their agency being mentioned in other social media profiles so they can respond as necessary.

Agencies that have a PIO have an advantage in this area; however, it is not a requirement. Agencies are having to put someone in charge of public announcements, media connections, and community engagement at one level or another, even if they do not have a formal PIO position. There is a quid pro quo ratio that the social media platforms become a time saver when realizing the community engagement that is occurring for the time investment in comparison to traditional methods. Members of the agency that deal with community policing can be responsible for updating postings to the social media platforms where their return is likely to be far greater on community engagement than in-person events and with no overhead cost. The social media platform also assists in spreading the word for larger in-person events when those begin to occur again (Hsuing, 2021). There are additional time savings and much larger return for PIOs as well. If a PIO keeps a relevant presence on social media and utilizes it for breaking news situations, crime alerts, BOLO's, and even human-interest posts, the media outlets will monitor those posts also. Instead of the PIO spending time meeting with mainstream media to try and get the story out during the news hours or through the newspaper, the media outlets will be able to follow up based on their monitoring of the agency's social media page. This will also allow immediate updates to the information as the story progresses or changes.

Another opposition that agencies may encounter when developing a directed social media presence is the position that it subjects the agency to additional public

display and scrutiny. Individuals wanting to post hate speech or bait a response from law enforcement can post things specifically to cause a reaction from the agency or supporters in the community. This can include individuals in the community that may post negative comments about law enforcement incidents that occurred within the agency's jurisdiction or outside of it and seeking a local response to what the poster perceives as police misconduct. These posts and their responses can bring more local and national or even worldwide scrutiny to the agency.

Some ways for an agency to overcome these challenges boils down to the fact that the agency, and law enforcement across the board, is already in the spotlight and under scrutiny on social media. The difference is that if the agency chooses to be an active participant, then the agency is also able to at least control its own part of the narrative and possibly even address other anti-police narrative being circulated. In order to do this, it is crucial that the agency have dedicated and trained members to monitor and respond accordingly and within guidelines developed to maintain the integrity of the department (Murnik, 2015). There will be times that there is no response. The agency further needs to clearly state that its social media sites are monitored, and any hate speech or obscenities will be hidden from view. This has already been addressed in the case of Miller v. California, U.S. Supreme Court (1973), where it was decided it is not a violation of the person's first amendment right to hide a post that is hate speech or obscene, provided it is clearly stated. As agencies are governmental organizations, they will need to retain records of all posts and activities for open records requests or subpoenas; however, they do have the control to be able to hide posts that violate the rules stated for conduct on the site.

RECOMMENDATION

In the rapidly changing social environment of 2021 individuals have grown accustomed to information being instantaneously available at their fingertips. The reality of how impactful social media is goes far beyond even what research has considered, which shows that a large percentage of the population takes the information in as their main information and news source (Auxier, 2021). Law enforcement agencies must become a part of this information network, but, due to its rapid availability and its permanent nature, the agency must proceed with a clear and guided presence. During 2020 and into 2021, YouTube has moved, from not even being shown in a 2016 study published by Pew Research, to being the strong leader in activity in 2021, with 81% of adults in the U.S. utilizing the platform (Auxier, 2021). There is little doubt that the Covid 19 pandemic sped up the explosion of social media's use as the leading information and engagement source, but it was heading that direction for a larger percentage of adults and all young adults. With the changes likely to occur with online meetings remaining even when the pandemic is over, law enforcement must understand that the use of social media by the majority will also stay and continue to grow even as people return to normal. In light of this, agency's presence should also grow, but with guidelines to help avoid the pitfalls that can fuel a negative or unprofessional light on the agency or law enforcement in general. Ways agencies can expand their reach will include greater use of YouTube as a platform. Many YouTube channels have developed short, weekly videos for subscribers and have had enormous success in reaching thousands, and, in some cases, millions of subscribers. A law enforcement agency can create a series on YouTube about K-9 officers, followed by a

series on specialized training for swift water rescue units. Both of these will bring in viewers from all walks of life and expose them to links to other agency platforms, thus increasing the agency's community reach while maintaining a relevant, professional image.

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