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**Law Enforcement Agencies Using Social Media to Provide Better
Service**

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ABSTRACT

Progressive law enforcement leaders from around the country are constantly trying to figure out ways to provide a higher, more effective and efficient method of service to their community while still operating within their budgetary constraints and manpower capacity. This leadership white paper is devoted to one of the most effective and impactful tools for law enforcement in modern time. The ability to use social media to its maximum potential can create an endless amount of results, and this document addresses just a few of those which can make a tremendous impact in the community they serve while creating greater community engagement reducing the crime rate and doing so while saving time, money, and manpower. The numbers are staggering in favor of social media's reach and potential. The ability to reduce crime while keeping the citizens informed and engaged in the inner workings of a law enforcement agency entice organizations to incorporate social media platforms into the arsenal of tools at their disposal. Previously unsolved cases cleared, community programs advertised and all of this at very little or no cost depending on its application. This is why all law enforcement agencies should use social media because it is truly a movement changing the future of law enforcement in the communities which they serve with a positive outcome.

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INTRODUCTION

Law Enforcement agencies across the nation find themselves attempting to achieve a higher level of professionalism and service with limited resources and the consuming the demands of a changing environment. Most agencies change and stay up to date while others are left behind wondering what can be done to stay connected with today's society. Social media has become one of the most powerful forms of communication used regularly worldwide. Through the use of new methods of mobile communication such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones this process is facilitated more so than ever before. Law enforcement agencies' structured regimented style has often left the possibility of using resources like social media out of the question, but this source is being met with less resistance, yet still highly scrutinized.

The Boston bombing incident in 2013 served as an example of one agency's astute use of social media in a chaotic incident that shocked the world. By using Twitter, the Boston Police Department was able to keep the citizens up to date and informed on the investigation as it transpired. They were also able to solicit information regarding the suspects and push out public safety information about the ongoing investigation that occurred in the days following the bombing (Davis, Alves, & Sklansky, 2014). The careful dissemination also gave the agency control of the information during a very difficult situation, constantly updating media channels about the incident through the use of scheduled press conferences and official statements done almost entirely by Twitter. This is only one of many situations where social media has helped a law enforcement agency quickly and effectively disperse information without much effort. Considering that out of the approximately 7.2 billion people on the planet, 3.65 billion

mobile users have access to the internet via smart phones and tablets ((Bullas, 2015). Social media has a power unlike other media sources that can be used in many ways for the good of law enforcement agencies across the nation. Through the use of social media, law enforcement agencies can reduce crime in their communities with crime pattern notifications, suspect and actor identification, and public awareness information that can help prevent crimes from occurring. Agencies may also use social media as a tool to engage the community with a personable appeal that creates a better relationship and a sentiment of transparency between the agency and the community by showcasing community outreach programs and stories with positive outcomes of public interest. These are only a few reasons why all law enforcement agencies should use social media to provide better service to their communities. Through the use of social media, law enforcement agencies can become partners with their communities creating a better working relationship.

POSITION

If a law enforcement agency was to conduct a survey or ask any citizen what some of their primary concerns about the community in which they live are, one of the top responses would be the amount of crime and safety in the town in which they live. Social media can play a significant role in the reduction of crime by clearing cases which would otherwise go unsolved, alerting citizens of imminent public safety concerns, and informing people on how to prevent themselves from becoming a victim of a crime. Several agencies around the United States have realized that using social media can help solve cases through the fast and efficient distribution of information where in the past this information was only disseminated by press releases via

television or radio. In fact, according to the 2014 survey by Lexis Nexis, 34% of law enforcement agencies use social media to notify the public of crime. Take for example the investigator of any given agency who may have exhausted all leads to a case but has managed to obtain a picture or video of the actor. In this situation, an investigator's resourcefulness of distributing this image through social media can reach numerous followers simultaneously and could lead to the identification of the suspect eventually clearing the case. Communities become the benefactors of such incidents because increased clearance rates by investigative divisions around the country are an example of improved service.

In other situations, an imminent threat of victimization may exist. Take for example credit card skimming devices which have become popular in the last few months to steal credit card information. If law enforcement agencies have the availability of social media to quickly disperse information about an ongoing crime trend, then citizens can quickly react and prevent themselves from becoming a victim thus reducing the amount of reports that will be created. In past times, this information would have only been received by the people at the end of a work day or during an occasional local news broadcast throughout the day. The availability of mobile media facilitates that this information reaches the potential victim before they are another statistic. Recent information shows that Americans check their social media accounts about 17 times a day making the possibility of the potential victim being informed prior to getting home much more likely (Chang, 2015).

Public awareness information dedicated to the reduction of crime has been very fruitful recently. The deliberate distribution of information combined with the use of

crime analysis and crime mapping has revolutionized crime prevention strategies around the country. In the text *Crime Analysis with Crime Mapping*, several situations are identified where the use of the internet is beneficial (Santos, 2013). A key factor in crime analysis is the dissemination of information to the stakeholders in a community to prevent or reduce the amount of crime in a neighborhood, such as nuisance or reoccurring crime like auto burglaries which plague cities with little avail nationwide.

Through the use of social media, information can be delivered to a larger audience about contributors of crime patterns that have surfaced in a certain area. Crime mapping allows crime analysts to visually display these problems, and social media can help spread the message directly or through shares or retweets on certain social media platforms. Mobile apps adopted by some law enforcement agencies may also showcase some community programs such as “Hide, Lock, Take” or “Lock it or Lose it” which are designed to prevent and reduce the amount of auto burglary and theft. Both initiatives have been shown to reduce crime. Information delivery through social media is a contributing factor in the reduction of criminal activity due to the broad reach of these applications.

Perhaps one of the most prevalent recent issues surrounding law enforcement is negativity captured by main stream media surrounding controversial events which have occurred in the last couple of years involving police officer misconduct. Through social media, agencies can create a platform to showcase their agency in a positive and influential manner by displaying their community outreach programs, and presenting the professional yet personable image of their agencies. Davis et al. (2014) stated, “Using

social media, the police can deliver information in a non-sensational and expedited way” (p. 8).

First and foremost, the community partnership between agencies and the citizens is paramount to public safety. By using social media law enforcement agencies can make information available about community programs, such as Citizens Police Academies, Neighborhood watch programs, Kids Police Academies, Coffee with a Cop programs, and various other community projects that are a benefit to the citizens. Even though this information is made available in person or through the regular website by most agencies, social media serves as a reminder and an easier method of delivering the information to a different audience. In order to improve police services, making this information available to everyone in any community is a goal and social media gets an agency closer to accomplishing that goal.

The image of an agency may also be an influential and captivating force for any law enforcement agency. Take for example the City of Rosenberg Police Department. As of July 2017, it had over 123,000 likes on their Facebook page, which is three times the population of their city of just over 33,000 (Rosenberg, 2017). Such a spike and increase in their social media fan base was caused by a very entertaining video published in 2014 by the Rosenberg Police Department of two police officers in the car dancing and singing Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse.” Naturally the humor of this video attracted thousands of social media users to their department but also gave them control over the story and the benefit to their agency would likely present itself in other ways later on down the road. Recently a story shared by the Midland Police Department (MPD) of an MPD officer playing basketball in the street with some

neighborhood kids was viewed over 90,000 times in the first four days of its posting on the Midland Police Department's Facebook page (Midland Police Department, 2016).

Positive interaction is not the only interaction that can be reported by using social media. Social media provides an avenue to provide transparent communications and gain control over the department's reputation (Noble, 2015). According to Noble (2015), Chief David Brown from the Dallas Police Department tweeted an officer's firing to increase transparency. Sensationalized news stories about questionable police conduct can be harmful to a department, but by publishing information, a department can use this method to remain transparent and defend their reputation. This type of exposure serves as social capital to the department and can be used as a bridge to close the gap between citizens and law enforcement. Social media provides the method of transportation that can let law enforcement agencies reach that higher level of service.

COUNTER POSITION

For those agencies that are reluctant to use social media, the reasons usually center around two factors. First, personnel necessary to make social media accessible in their agency is not available and getting training in this area may be costly. In the 2012 IACP Social Media Survey, 42.9 percent of the agencies identified personnel as the barrier for which they were not using social media in their agency. Secondly, law enforcement agencies fail to understand how social media can be beneficial because not everyone uses social media so they lack to see the benefit of it and dwell on the negative connotation associated with these sources.

Agencies who have personnel or cost concerns feel that no one in their department may be able to run the social media sources for the department adequately

or struggle to find someone within their department who may have time to take on an additional task given their strained workload already. Also, one might find that some officers do not have enough experience with social media sources to feel capable of updating them or them regularly. In order to hire a person specifically for this purpose, another officer or non-sworn member would have to be hired. With an average police officer starting salary of \$48,815 this option is a very difficult one (Police Officer Salary, 2016). For those agencies who are currently struggling with personnel issues, this is not an endeavor that they are able to afford nor is it in the best interest of the community they serve. Another option could be to relegate this assignment to a non-sworn member of the department, however reallocating assignments in order to accommodate social media is not always possible especially when each member of an organization is already tasked with certain duties and responsibilities. Compounded by equipment and training costs social media availability usually takes a backseat to urgent concerns such as public safety.

Personnel concerns are legitimate; however, further investigation into the issue surrounding personnel as a barrier dictates otherwise. For example, most agencies have delegated this task to the public information officer (PIO) who already exists within a department, and the amount of time occupied utilizing social media is only about 1 to 5 hours of a week (IACP, 2012). Normally all agencies have the access to a public information officer, and this may serve advantageous to the agency because of their knowledge in the release of information and connection with existing media outlets. Deciding who will be in charge of this particular function in the department is critical so selection should be carefully considered. One considering factor in selecting someone

for this duty is considered a “digital native” versus a “digital alien” (Burns & Perron, 2014). This may help resolve two concerns first and foremost the person assigned may have a legitimate interest in this assignment and may also possess the skills necessary without much or very little training since they are considered a common user of social media already. Cost of training may also be minimal compared to other specialized training. In a recent survey published by Lexis Nexis (2014), they showed that about 75% of the users of social media are self trained making training costs a non issue. A growing demand for social media savvy Officers is essential to be marketable in this new method of alerting and communicating with the public but a valuable and cost effective method of staffing a position to control an agencies social media channels (Ericksen, 2014).

The other portion of the agencies who are reluctant to adopt social media measures defend their position by questioning the amount of people who have access to social media sources and state that the majority of people still receive their news on television. A Gallup poll conducted in June of 2013 of 2,048 national adults showed that at least 50% of every age group polled still turned to the television to receive their news (Saad, 2013). This is one reason why some agencies do not feel compelled to engage their communities in social media forums.

For those agencies who are reluctant to introduce social media sites into their arsenal of criminal justice the following information substantiates the benefit to all law enforcement agencies. According to Chang (2015), “people in the U.S. check their Facebook, Twitter, and other social media accounts a staggering 17 times a day, meaning at least once every waking hour, if not more” (p. 1). This supports the idea

that departments can take advantage of these opportunities to post and push out information that may be relevant at that exact time. Having this opportunity to engage citizens throughout the day validates many concerns about when people will review the information and when they will receive it.

RECOMMENDATION

Social media is all around, and to simply ignore would be unreasonable. It is in the best interest of law enforcement to embrace and use it to their advantage. All law enforcement can and should use social media to provide better service to their communities. First and foremost, crime can be reduced by using social media and this is something that is of extreme interest to every law enforcement agency in the country. Out of several agencies surveyed in 2015, 86% use social media for criminal investigations (IACP, 2015). Combined with up to the minute alerts of crime patterns, and public awareness information to prevent further victimization, crime can be reduced with social media. Secondly agencies can improve their image and create a sense of transparency and openness with the community they service with community outreach information through social media. The engagement with the community through social media can solicit information that otherwise would be unknown because people feel free to speak openly in these forums. Agencies that are reluctant to make this change and incorporate this form of communication hang on to the defense that it is too costly of an endeavor with strenuous personnel concerns and training costs. The need for such a process versus the benefit does not seem worth it to some agencies either.

Research shows that the tasks of someone to monitor the social media methods can be delegated to someone already working for the agency like a PIO or another

competent and interested person within the agency who can operate social media.

Training costs are not a sustainable argument since it is also shown that most people learn on their own without much specialized training being required.

The need for social media seems to be a motivating force behind those agencies who still do not adopt social media into their regular forms of communication because those same agencies claim that not enough people use those methods. The data to support the fact that mobile data in the form of smartphones of over 1.75 billion users in 2014 should help sway their decision (Brewer & Bray, 2014). Recent studies, including the 2015 IACP social media survey and the 2013 Gallup poll, show that Americans are using social media in alarming amounts and much more so than expected (IACP, 2015; Saad, 2013). This amount of continuous use of social media throughout the day gives law enforcement agencies such an advantage and opportunity to communicate and inform the public about a variety of issues that was unheard of and impossible in the past.

Agencies who are convinced or persuaded to add the social media compliment to their department should first locate someone within their agency who is interested and can utilize different forms of social media which will help with the training curve required to use these sources. Selection is key to the effective integration of social media into a department, a younger person may be the natural selection, but the seasoned individual with a firm grasp of the overall “big picture” may be a better choice (Burns & Perron, 2014). The amount of time needed to monitor and update these sources is not extreme so it would not be necessary to hire someone specifically for this responsibility. For agencies that want to obtain a more comprehensive arsenal a mobile app may also be

an option. Several app developers are available to create an app specifically for law enforcement agencies. This does come at an additional cost, but this source is becoming a very popular option. For those who do not like social media sources like FaceBook and Twitter, the apps may be an option that still gets them the information in the same amount of time without loggin in or creating profiles.

The overall mission of any department is to keep its citizens safe and to be in touch with the citizens' needs and concerns. Recently, agencies around the country are conciously attempting to provide a higher level of professionallism and service which many residents expect and come to appreciate from their respective law enforcement agencies. Service is at the root of each one of those missions and social media provides an oppportunity to bridge the gap of communication between society and law enforcement. It is only through ingenious methods of establish that connection that law enforcement can achieve that mission.

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