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Social Media in Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

Across the country, law enforcement agencies have begun to embrace social media to engage with the community online. They have shown a significant impact on their community regarding transparency, relationships, crime alerts, notable weather events, traffic issues, and even humor, to name a few. It is a cost-effective tool to drive the department's message, dispel rumors, and engage with the community they serve on a more personal level. Law enforcement agencies should implement all social media platforms. However, some departments still refuse to enter social media due to a lack of knowledge, personnel, and funds. Some departments may feel that it is time-consuming and not worth the effort. Law enforcement agencies have an opportunity to drive the correct narrative when it comes to factual and non-factual news regarding their police department. Social media is beneficial for citizen interaction on many levels. Still, it's important to note that a truly engaging social media platform will bring the community together in a time of need. Posting on social media, if done correctly, is a cost-effective tool to garner "buy-in" from your community. All law enforcement agencies need to start by creating a social media presence for their agency, train the individuals responsible for using the departments' social media, and then start engaging the public and utilizing social media to maximize the goals and wants of their department. Not only will the police department benefit, but the community will benefit as well.

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INTRODUCTION

The following tweet was sent out via Twitter on April 19, 2013, from Boston Mayor Tom Menino on the police department's Twitter account after the two terrorists responsible for the Boston Marathon were contained. Mayor Menino stated "I'm so proud of all our first responders. Thanks to them – the people of Boston will sleep well tonight." One was killed and the other captured.

The Boston Marathon bombing was a domestic terrorist attack during the annual Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013. The citizens of Boston were afraid, saddened, and wanted answers and an immediate resolution. The Boston police department as well as federal and state agencies quickly solved the issue and put Bostonians and the citizens of the United States at ease when the "tweet" went out. Law enforcement's use of social media truly works.

Before social media, the news was disseminated by newspaper, television, and word of mouth. Most Americans remember where they were when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were the centers of attack on September 11, 2001. This attack happened prior to social media. One can only wonder if lives would have been spared if social media accounts were active at the time. If social media had already been invented on that tragic day in 2001 and utilized by law enforcement and the public, many souls could have been saved. Citizens of America could have received warnings of the attacks instantaneously and simultaneously through social media.

On February 4, 2004, a Harvard sophomore named Mark Zuckerberg launched a social media website known as "The Facebook" (History.com Editors, 2019). He built the website platform to connect Harvard students so they could work together on

common goals and assignments and get to know each other (History.com Editors, 2019). The site gathered thousands of students almost overnight (History.com Editors, 2019). The social media application was launched to the public in 2006, known simply as “Facebook” with memberships available to anyone over the age of 13 (History.com Editors, 2019). Many social media sites followed to gain the momentum that Facebook was garnering. Sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Tik-Tok followed the social media “bandwagon” to gain their share of the audience on the public sharing platforms.

Over 58 percent of the world uses some form of social media which is over 4.6 billion people (Datareportal, 2022). With these types of numbers, the reach of social media is incomparable and should be utilized to its full potential (Bankmycell, 2022). Over 6.7 billion people own a smartphone, which is over 83 percent of the world’s population (Bankmycell, 2022). Total this with feature phones, this makes up over 91 percent of the world’s population (Bankmycell, 2022).

Social media platforms show no sign of slowing down with their instantaneous reach to billions of people. Law enforcement agencies must embrace the concept and take advantage of its resources and functions to reach the public they serve. Police departments that fail to embrace this communication platform will miss an opportunity to connect with the public, gain their trust, and provide transparency, which is critical in an ever-advancing world.

Law enforcement agencies must take the initiative, time, and resources to maintain a social media platform. The communication element is critical for one’s message, mission statement, and branding. It also allows the community to engage

personally and gain a status of “buy-in” within their community. This is critical when enlisting your community to help solve a crime.

A police department must make a “lot of deposits” into its city or town by utilizing social media to promote its community and department. Transparency is key to a successful campaign. Inevitably, a “withdrawal” will happen. Therefore, law enforcement agencies must have enough “deposits” to cover that withdrawal or mishap. Social media must be at the forefront of its community to stabilize and report what is happening within the city or town they police and serve. By perception alone, a law enforcement agency, due to social media, may succeed or fail in the public’s eye.

Change is not easy. Law enforcement agencies in the past have never experienced instantaneous news or information. They must be ready to adapt, correct, deny, or confirm what may be placed on a social media platform. Police departments must build a team with expertise, credibility, trust, and common sense. Social media must be concise, intentional, factual, humorous, and informative.

Social media posts by law enforcement agencies must always be mindful of their audience. The audience is comprised of age, social, economic, and generational levels. The team in charge of law enforcement social media posts must always strive not to offend, upset, or make a political or controversial post. Law enforcement agencies must develop a vision of branding for their department and consistently communicate that brand and concept every time a post is generated on social media. They must and can develop relationships with their community by taking the time to respond when possible.

Law enforcement agencies can utilize multiple social media platforms to run and maintain a successful social media campaign. Although there are numerous sources,

the future will provide many more. The staples like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tik-Tok will expand into many more social media platforms that law enforcement agencies must embrace and not shun. An effective social media campaign will include defining a department's audience, creating its content, using hashtags, sharing, compelling leads, broad and vibrant visuals, videos, humor, and consistent updates. Law enforcement agencies must nurture their social media campaign, listen to, and be responsive to their community.

Law enforcement agencies have an opportunity to drive the correct narrative when it comes to factual and non-factual news regarding their police department. Social media is undoubtedly helpful for citizen interaction on many levels, but it's important to note that a truly engaging social media platform will bring the community together when needed. Crime prevention tips, safety ideas, and emergency notifications will bring the average citizen to the law enforcement social media page. Still, they will truly see the benefits when the public's help is needed for solving crimes and finding lost children or adults. Law enforcement agencies should implement all social media platforms.

POSITION

All law enforcement agencies should implement a social media program in their police department. Social media outreach has specific benefits regarding transparency from within their departments. The citizens crave news beyond the traditional approach of news outlets. The public wants to be more engaged and involved with the police department which serves them.

Multiple factors determine the cost of social media including, the specific platform being used to the specific industry. Businesses can invest anywhere from \$4,000 to \$7,000 monthly on social media management, to include marketing and advertising on several networks (WebFX, 2022). Outsourcing social media services can be costly ranging between \$900 to \$20,000 per month and social media consultants' range between \$75 to \$500 per hour but can also have tremendous benefit (WebFX, 2022).

By developing and training departments' police personnel to maintain a social media platform, costs are negligible compared to the return on investment. Utilizing social media is a cost-effective way to get a department's message out to the public by simply "clicking a button." A social media assignment can be added to a representative's regular duty assignments. However, the person chosen must be articulate, creative, and have common sense. An effective social media effort would involve as little as five hours a week up to 10 hours, depending on content and community activity.

Swapping between accounts and media venues can be time-consuming if an employee manages multiple accounts across several social media platforms. Planning ahead of time and scheduling social media posts in advance will streamline this effort. Several tools available, such as Cyfe, Sobees, Scruddle, Hootsuite, Buffer, Sprout Social, and Jyst, will allow an employee to schedule posts to all social media accounts from one source. Additionally, specific platforms allow designing from within their forum. For example, Facebook will allow a person to schedule posts weeks in advance.

Nationwide perception regarding the proper use of police force is a factor in today's world of instant news. Law enforcement agencies can utilize the power of social

media to their advantage. Social media posts, texts, comments, and " tweets " can directly connect with the public regarding critical community updates and receive candid feedback regarding local concerns within their jurisdiction. The practical advantage social media offers is that it can help spread vital information to the public regarding emergencies and natural disasters. Social media affords these advantages when time is of the essence for first responders, such as the location of the incident or to help a person in need. A simple text message can be the channel of choice if speed is needed.

According to the Pew Research Center, 98 percent of text messages are read within two minutes (Cruz, 2020). This response time can mean the difference in saving severe injury or life during an emergency (Cruz, 2020).

Law enforcement agencies utilizing social media tend to use Facebook as their first choice to reach the public, with 94 percent of agencies using that platform as reported by the nonprofit, Urban Institute (Cruz, 2020). In second place would be Twitter at 71 percent, followed by YouTube at a distant 40 percent (Cruz, 2020). According to the Social Media Guidebook for Law Enforcement Agencies, 91 percent of police departments use social media to notify the public of safety issues or concerns, followed by 89 percent for community outreach and engagement, and 86 percent for public relations and to manage their reputation (Cruz, 2020).

Running a successful social media campaign within a police department is essential in a society of instantaneous news. When something happens in one's community, the citizen within that community wants to know what happened now, not later. Social media users will begin to state what they "think happened," "what they

heard happened,” or even “guess what happened.” Within minutes, the untruths become the truth regarding social media. An excellent social media team within a law enforcement agency will immediately address the incident and dispel rumors by stating facts. News media can be law enforcement’s most significant asset or largest nemesis when reporting the news about law enforcement agencies. Police departments have the ability to disseminate the information and make sure that the reports are articulated accurately within minutes.

Social media is just part of the overall communications picture. Working with the news media continues to be, and will always be, essential during critical events such as police-involved shootings, threatening storms, and major crimes. Law enforcement administration within the command positions should also be skilled at communicating effectively with the media through traditional platforms, such as press releases, news conferences, and public statements (Police Media Relations and Social Media Strategies, 2022).

When police departments have a trusted and reliable social media presence, news outlets know to go there first for the most accurate and up-to-date details in a situation; this will help control misinformation. Humanizing the police department is one of the many assets social media can contribute to a police department and its employees. Social media is a great tool to showcase the everyday good deeds that police officers do daily.

In 2020, there were 696,644 full-time law enforcement officers employed in the United States (Statista, September 2021). With this number of officers working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it’s essential that those doing the right thing,

every day, be shown in a positive light to combat the small number of officers doing the wrong thing. Social media has the power to do this with little effort and cost by a simple social media post. Convenient, effective interaction, broadcasting of safety-related events, self-defense tips, property protection, status updates, and asking the public for assistance regarding criminal investigations, are a few samples of the numerous benefits offered through social media when it comes to law enforcement.

Social media can become a tool to communicate with the public. It is simple for an assigned officer to keep the public informed regarding various issues throughout the community they serve. Positive interactions with police officers can be used through social media to bond with the people they serve. Public awareness and trust are the cornerstones that help achieve the goals of community policing (Williams & Fedorowicz, 2019).

Social media platforms can increase public trust, confidence, and satisfaction by communicating with the public. Citizens can follow a law enforcement agency on a social media platform, knowing that they will stay informed and updated about what is going on within their community. Perception versus truth and transparency will prevail within an expert-run social media platform.

Studies have shown that the use of social media by police departments increases public trust and confidence. In terms of social media impact on police-community relations, social media used by police departments' increases public confidence, trust, satisfaction, and perceived legitimacy (Williams & Fedorowicz, 2019).

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Sites like ArchiveSocial.com can directly connect to a law enforcement's social media platform and capture and preserve all the content necessary to protect the department from violating any such open record act. A police department can then stay compliant with public record laws and regulations. Communications sent or received by government organizations, such as police departments are subject to open records. For a plan must be developed to collect and archive messages and posts for transparency's sake guaranteed by each state's open-records laws (GCN, 2020). Law enforcement agencies may have a hard time finding the right employee to devote themselves to creating, posting, and responding to comments on social media created by their police department. Law enforcement agencies may feel it will be cost-prohibitive.

An argument could be made that maintaining a social media presence will take away a primary job function of a police employee and involve too much time. However, social media duties can be easily absorbed within police personnel with little to no cost and very little time is needed to make an impact. A Vertical Response survey indicated that 43% of businesses spend only 6 hours per week on social media (Maddox, 2021). A study completed within Manchester and Hanover, United Kingdom, police departments increased their social media presence while saving money by not having to print and distribute posters and flyers with for information. Driven by a small group of social media enthusiasts involved in community policing found that social media engagement was much more cost effective than traditional print (Webster, 2013).

In many cases, these officers posted and tweeted outside their working hours. The other main factor accounting for the success of a social media approach was the fact that in many cases police presence on Twitter and Facebook was driven by a relatively small number

Law enforcement agencies may lack the monetary resources to compose and support a social media platform. Statistics suggest the average cost of a social media campaign can range from \$4,000 to \$7,000 per month, with costs spiraling upwards of \$20,000 (Shiotsu, 2018).

Social media is a modest investment in technology, and the investment has the potential for a greater return on investment. The importance of transparency within law enforcement agencies have never been greater, therefore, although social media presence can be expensive, the benefits outweigh the cost, and if done correctly can be minimal.

A study in Manchester, UK, and Hanover, UK, showed police forces greatly increasing their social media presence at little or no cost (Webster, March 2013). Some police forces saved money since they were not having to print and distribute posters or flyers for information (Webster, March 2013). Another factor for a successful social media presence was the fact that in many cases, police presence on social media was driven by a small number of enthusiasts within their departments helping them with their local communities (Webster, March 2013).

Law enforcement agencies can utilize command staff, patrol officers, and even civilian employees to maintain or monitor social media platforms. They can also assign more than one employee to lessen the workload overall to keep a cost-effective tool for

reaching the public through social media. Additionally, one social media publicized community event can cover the cost of this effort, and the Return on Investment (ROI) is felt throughout the community through trust in its police department.

RECOMMENDATION

All law enforcement agencies should take the time to learn and embrace social media platforms and utilize them when it comes to communicating with the public.

Utilizing social media platforms is cost-effective, easy to maintain, and necessary for transparency within police departments. The positive benefits outweigh the negative uses of transparency from within their departments. The citizens crave news beyond the traditional approach of news outlets. The public wants to be more engaged and involved with the police department which serves them.

Police departments must develop a plan to collect and archive every comment, text, and message to ensure transparency when it comes to open-records laws (Cruz, July 2020). Law enforcement agencies must be conscious of social media responses and posts being subject to open records. However, there are currently many options to archive and save every post and or response from a law enforcement social media account.

In order to comply with the state of Florida's public records law, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement adopted technology to capture, retain and archive text messages made between officers, staff, and citizens (Cruz, July 2020). Many companies and institutions have realized the importance of social media data and have created programs that will aid in data accrual. The importance of social media archival

procedures should be considered and implemented (Social Media Harvesting Tools, 2014).

Law enforcement agencies across the country that choose to use various forms of social media are ranked as follows: Facebook is used 94 percent of the time, followed by Twitter at 71 percent and YouTube follows at 40 percent (Cruz, 2020). Ninety-one percent of police departments use their platforms for safety concerns, followed by 89 percent for outreach and citizen engagement, followed by public relations at 86 percent (Cruz, 2020).

Law enforcement agencies may believe that it is not cost-effective to assign an employee to post, maintain and comment on social media platforms; however, the cost is negligible when it comes to the benefits of communicating with the public.

Social media is a modest investment in technology, and the investment has the potential for a greater return on investment. Governments surveyed respondents who ranked the average time required to launch and maintain social media sites, on a scale of 1-5, as a "2", corresponding to "very little," which indicated that social media takes little time to perform and succeed (Kingsley, 2012). Nearly all respondents rated the importance of social media between 3-5, and 80 percent believe that their priority is increasing (Kingsley, 2012).

Police departments that utilize social media platforms are understandable, approachable, and communicate with the public more effectively. Police departments can showcase and personalize the department to the general public with its use. Social media platforms are an effective communication tool for law enforcement agencies to interact with the public. Events, safety tips, arrests, wanted persons, and missing

children are just a few of the many social media posts that can garner community support and help.

Using social media will increase public awareness and build trust within the community, that is, to help achieve the goals of community policing (Xu et al., 2016).

Law enforcement agencies can implement social media platforms within their agency within weeks and begin to communicate effectively, drive the narrative, and become transparent. Creating a social media team is inexpensive and easy to accomplish. Most importantly, departments should use social media because it works.

Social media marketing is one of the most effective forms of marketing available. Marketing data from 2017 showed that 75 percent of people buy an item after seeing it in their social media feed. Fifty-seven percent of people are more likely to buy from a brand they follow (Howard, 2020). Social media marketing has a 100 percent closing rate compared to other types of marketing (Howard, 2020).

Law enforcement agencies should complete a social media policy before implementing their platforms and publishing them to the public. While many policies and procedures are available through agencies willing to assist, one of the best policies can be found on the IACP (International Chiefs of Police) website.

Due to the increased use of social media, police departments should ensure policies are implemented that would regulate social media use among employees to determine best practices (IACP, 2019).

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