



By J.D. McCartney, XStatic Public Relations chief executive officer

WEB 2.0: NEW RULES OF COMMUNICATION



THE BUZZ AROUND USING emerging Internet technologies to communicate with key audiences has become noticeably louder in the last few years. Okay, the buzz is deafening.

Most municipal leaders understand that using the Internet and its many applications should be a key public information strategy in 2009. But even with this awareness, most find it challenging to expand their communication programs beyond the municipal Web site and the traditional press release.

The good news: We are all in this together. Just five years ago, the term “blog” was virtually unknown. We all had to learn the basics, so if you feel behind the curve, there is no time like the present to learn the ropes. (Of course, if you have a teenager or two around to help you out, even better!)

Throw out the old rules

When it comes to public information, we all know the basic drill. But there is a big problem with the traditional approach. Using the same old ways to communicate has become, well, old.

Have you noticed that your press releases just aren't getting the attention they used to from the media? Are you laboring over how to keep your Web site current, only to find that citizens are looking elsewhere for important information? If so, you are not alone. Organizations of all shapes and sizes are struggling to adapt their communication programs to reach an increasingly tech-savvy audience.



With so much information and so many new tools, it is tough to learn how to best use new technology to better reach the communities we serve. But with the challenge comes opportunity: The chance to build better, more positive relationships with citizens, community groups, media, and others who have a stake in municipal goals. This requires a complete understanding of the professional and social environments in which they operate, as well as using the same technologies they are most likely to use.

Part of throwing out the old rules is knowing how and where to apply the new ones. Obviously, it is important to get up to speed on universal methods the world is using to communicate. But it is also important to remain community-focused. For example, does your municipality have a *community* Web site, blog, or online magazine that is gaining popularity? If so, start contributing with a municipal perspective. If you don't know, start by listening — add a relevant question or two to your annual community survey, and observe how your friends, neighbors, and colleagues are using technology to get information. Even informal research can help you identify the most appropriate new ways to reach the community and establish your own new rules.

It's two-way or the highway

Picture the one-way communication of the past. To get information into the hands of the public 10 years ago, it was as simple as making a call to the local



newspaper or posting a public notice. If a citizen wanted to share an opinion about an issue, the opportunity was limited to a letter to the editor or an appearance at a public hearing.

It is important to fully embrace that the days of one-way, top-down communication are long gone. Fast forward to today, and the complexity of how people share and receive information. Now, anyone in the community can share opinions and information online using blogs, discussion boards, article comment threads, text messaging, and social networking Web sites.

The key concept here is building an information exchange, where the community is able to actively and immediately participate in a dialogue on anything from zoning to snow removal. Imagine the possibilities of this approach! With the right strategy, you can increase awareness of municipal initiatives, enhance transparency in government, and capture the collective intelligence and ideas of the community. Once established, many of these methods have the ability to increase efficiency and productivity as you streamline access to information. Imagine how many fewer calls you would need to field about that downtown street closure if information were readily available via the channels the community already uses most often.

Tools of the trade: Facebook and beyond

Once you understand how communication should flow, it's time to dig in and get to know all the new channels available for information exchange.

- **Facebook.** There are more than 175 million people using Facebook to communicate, and that number is growing fast. Do you think some of those people live in your community? You bet, and it is a great way to reach them. Setting up a Facebook organization page takes minutes, and the possibilities are endless. Municipalities can post real-time updates, event photos, and even invite all Facebook members in the community to become connected to your page as friends.

- **Twitter.** Unbelievably simple, Twitter is a social networking service that allows users to post and read other users' updates, called "tweets." Your "followers" can receive your updates in a variety of ways, including online and on mobile devices.

- **Flickr.** There are many good photo sharing sites on the Internet, and using one of them is an entertaining way to engage the community. By posting and captioning event photos on a site like Flickr, you can create personal connections and strengthen community.

- **Local media Web sites.** Communities will always have a demand for local news. If you are not already extremely familiar with the Web sites of your local media, find out how you can participate. Regularly respond to story comments and actively post your own.

- **Discussion boards.** Most local communities have discussion boards that often serve specialized audiences, such as moms or seniors. Get to know the boards, and, more importantly, become part of the conversation with relevant news and information.

One argument against opening up such public participation is the uncertainty of unlimited posting of unregulated information. Thankfully, Facebook and other social networking sites now have more sophisticated settings to regulate what can be posted, what can be seen, and how comments are displayed. The level of control usually comes as a surprise to most critics.

Another common argument against getting involved with social networking is that it reaches mainly teens and tech-savvy computer enthusiasts. But the numbers tell a different story. The fastest growing segment of Facebook users is the 35- to 54-year-old demographic, accelerating to more than 275 percent growth over the last six months. The number of Facebook users in this age group doubles every two months.

Embrace the world of citizen journalism

Some of today's most influential journalists don't work for national newspapers or even have a journalism degree. They simply own a computer.

Today, anyone with something important to say can be a journalist and attract an audience. Blogs are one of the most important ways that citizens can establish their very own leading media outlet.

Blogs are Web sites that are maintained by organizations or individuals who post regular entries of information, commentary, events, photos, and even video. Some of the world's leading companies have transformed their businesses by establishing blogs that open a dialogue on topics of interest. Municipalities can do the same.

Consider the positive message it sends to maintain a blog penned by the city manager. Unfiltered and two-way, a medium like this can transform the way a community perceives its government. One of the easiest ways to establish a blog for your existing Web site is to use a free blog publishing platform such as Wordpress. Of course, keeping tabs and commenting on community blogs is a key part of this strategy as well.

Some mainstream media outlets are getting in the citizen journalism game, creating outlets for the community to share its own news and, in some cases, contributing to the media outlet itself. The best example of this in Colorado is YourHub, a community-specific Web site and weekly publication hosted by the Denver Newspaper Agency. If you are a Denver metro municipality and you are not yet posting stories and photos to YourHub, this is one of the easiest ways to get in the game. All stories and photos are posted on one (or more) of the 40 community-specific sites, and many stories are selected for use in the newspaper print edition.

Of course, you simply cannot ignore the traditional media. However, the methods to best reach them are changing. Now more than ever, journalists need brief, immediate information accompanied by Web-friendly tools such as links and electronic photos. Also, it is important to optimize your press releases for search engines, making sure that your announcements not only end up in the hands of journalists, but on Google as well. This can be as simple as making sure that each press release is chock-full of search-friendly key words and posted in your online press room.



SPOTLIGHT



Know when to get help

To a newbie, Web 2.0 can be intimidating. With so many tools, it's hard to know where to start, how to develop a long-term strategy, and how to make the greatest impact. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Try forming a "new media" team that is responsible for exploring all of the influential technologies available to your community. Although the process may seem daunting, the reward is great and the process can be lots of fun. It's also a great opportunity for collaboration between departments, including public information, graphic design, and information technology.

If you simply don't have the internal resources, knowledge, or capabilities to get up and running in the world of Web 2.0, consider getting some outside help. Many public relations firms and communications agencies offer advice, new media services, and even start-up plans to get you up and running. A team of volunteers could also work ... it could even be a great way to involve youth in local government.

Think of what makes your municipality unique. There is no better way to create a more vibrant, interactive community that reflects the personality of its citizens than to use these exciting new technologies. Making the investment now and taking advantage of available technology will pay off with a more informed, educated, and supportive community for years to come.

TAKING THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLUNGE

By Mike Banuelos, Boulder communications specialist

The City of Boulder should update its Facebook status to say, "Boulder has a nervous excitement about using social media!"

And why not? The plunge into social media can be a daunting task. Not only will the use of social media reorient the way in which municipalities interact with their residents, it will test traditional boundaries of community engagement and information sharing. And there are simple procedural and difficult legal questions that need answering before getting your "social media" feet wet.

As with any paradigm shift, the first step is often the hardest; however, with the enthusiastic backing of new City Manager Jane Brautigam, the City of Boulder has already won half the battle. "We have a responsibility to engage our customers and residents in any way that speaks to them, especially ways that can help us understand and meet their needs," says Brautigam. Although she admits to being less than accomplished when it comes to "twittering" around with social media, Brautigam understands the necessity of maintaining a progressive, open, and tech-savvy strategy when it comes to public information and interaction. "The City of Boulder will be a participant in the Web 2.0 community; we just want to make sure we do it in a responsible manner that engages our community in positive ways."

To ensure a broad understanding of everything social media, Boulder has convened a Social Media Policy Group. The group is charged with determining the best practices for the available technology, exploring and researching applicable social media, compiling existing policies written by governmental agencies, and delivering a social media policy and standards for implementation.

Until then, the Web 2.0 community remains expectant. In a recent article outlining the benefits of what he calls "Government 2.0," social media guru Dr. Mark Drapeau says, "Behind every press release, Web page, and social networking account is a person. But when people 'hide' behind organizational brands, it reduces the authenticity and transparency that people — citizens, customers, fans — have become accustomed to seeing in the Web 2.0 world." His vision: "I propose that using authentic and transparent personalities as public outreach ambassadors can help transform 'government for the people' to 'government with the people.'"

For updates or information sharing regarding the city of Boulder's Social Media Policy and Standards, contact Mike Banuelos at banuelosmi@bouldercolorado.gov.