



How to Embrace
Social Networking in
Local Government

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

If you have picked up this issue of PM magazine and are younger than 30, you are likely already an expert at navigating social media and social networking in your personal life. But whether you've struggled to understand blogs and Twitter or find them old hat, applying them to the daily practice of government is still a valid question.

Whether you see yourself as old-fashioned or on the cutting edge, if you aren't using tools like LinkedIn, Facebook, or Plaxo at work, you may soon be called a dinosaur for not connecting with the vast number of potential contacts in your extended network worldwide. And if your organization has not created a fan page on these sites, you may be missing out on the fastest-growing, hottest way to communicate and connect with your community. Intrigued? Read on. . .

As we look back over our careers as public administration professionals, many of us remember our offices evolving from carbon paper to copier machines, from typewriters to computers, and from receiving letters and phone calls to receiving e-mail requests and calls for service.

In fact, many public administrators have seen a decline in "live and in person" participation at public meetings, focus groups, or other venues where we seek the public's input on important topics related to budget, planning, and public safety.

As one communications technology has been replaced by another, administrators have evolved as well.

BlackBerry smartphones, texting, and instant messages keep us even more connected to our business contacts and our community members—albeit sometimes at the expense of our personal lives and downtime. But all and all, these tools have allowed our organizations to respond to the mandate of better, faster, cheaper.

The companion article on social media and social networking written

by City Manager Rick Cole of Ventura, California, highlights the social media phenomenon and its uses to engage citizen participation. This article highlights the importance of that article's sister topic—social networking.

What Is a Social Network?

In the not-too-distant past, the extent of social networking was your neighbors over the fence in the back, and both sides of the house, and maybe across the street. By the way, these were the same people who ratted you out to your parents if they saw an infraction that you somehow slipped by your family!

As we became adults serving in the public sector, our networks included community activists, business groups like chambers of commerce and Rotary, and program and service participants from recreation, citizen police academies, and the like. These networks were highly important and, in many ways, created that sense of community many of us serving in local government long to re-create in the cities, villages, townships, and counties we serve.



View the pages of government staff. Yes, it is legal to do so in order to ensure that information they are providing does not reflect negatively on the organization as a whole.

These local networks remain important today but are harder to engage. This proves to be even more difficult as many of our colleagues and community members wish to be engaged electronically through our websites, e-mail, and other technology. This is especially true for people aged 35 and younger.

No one argues that networking is not important or is not a good business tool. In fact, building these networks is critical. You never know when you might need to call on a friend of a colleague in another city to help with a project or assignment.

In these times of increasingly complex business being conducted globally with local contacts, we need to be able to do this effectively but less expensively than traveling the globe. A virtual meeting through teleconferencing is one tool that is used, but that is only after the essential business contact is made. Such a meeting is much harder to achieve if you know whom you need to meet but have not been introduced to that individual or organization.

The next wave of communications technology that we can't ignore as public administrators is technology-based social networking opportunities. Facebook, Plaxo, and LinkedIn, to name a few, have extended our business contacts beyond people in the immediate vicinity to contacts with coworkers and colleagues around the globe. Some believe these sites are entirely social in nature, but these networks actually give us the ability to connect with even more members of our communities and our professional colleagues for business purposes.

In fact, such member-community sites as MySpace and Facebook account for almost 10 percent of all Internet time according to the recent report, "A Nielson Report on Social Networking's New Global Footprint" published in March 2009 by The Nielson Company. These sites have a growth rate more than twice that of any of the other largest, most popular activities on the Internet, including 1) search, 2) general interest portals, 3) software manufacturers, 4) member communities, and 5) e-mail. This information was provided by the Global Index, December 2007 to December 2008, at Nielson Online.

A social network is simply a social structure made up of nodes (generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency such as friendship, employment, financial exchange, likes, dislikes, relationships (professional or personal), beliefs, knowledge, and prestige.

The idea is simple. If I know John Smith from the city of Anywhere, and he knows Sally Jones from the Anywhere Economic Development Authority, and Sally happens to know Bob Brown from the Big Company That Is Expanding in the Midwest, and I want to meet Bob Brown to discuss the possibility of moving some operations to my city, I can do this through a series of introductions that link me from John Smith all the way to Bob Brown.

The idea behind extended connections and their usefulness is not new. Thousands of years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus wrote,

"A hidden connection is stronger than an obvious one." He was on to something!

Technology provided by LinkedIn, Facebook, and similar social networking sites allows the type of introductions described in the example not only several states away but also internationally. Incidentally, membership in ICMA is tailor-made for such sharing of contacts because LinkedIn and Facebook offer ICMA member groups.

By linking to others through these sites, your personal network grows to include other useful colleagues and contacts—like Sally Jones and Bob Brown whom you've met through John Smith in the above example. Sally and Bob were always in your extended network because they were connected to you through John Smith, but they were hidden from you before. By adding them to your network through John Smith, that part of your network is no longer hidden and is suddenly more useful.

How to Join a Social Network

Most social networking sites are free to join. As a participant adds more information to a personal profile, the LinkedIn network "suggests" contacts who you may know. In addition, as you add more colleagues by e-mail, the potential network grows.

Just like using a map to help you get to a destination you haven't been to before, these sites allow you to connect with your *hidden* network more easily. Most individual networks have huge po-

tential for business contacts, information related to jobs, places to live, and the like. *But* they are only as valuable as the personal connections you can see. Your potential grows because you can see not only your personal friends and professional contacts on these sites but their personal friends and professional contacts, too.

There are numerous examples of the great variety of uses of these sites, and, most recently, we saw an explosion of their potential during the 2008 presidential campaigns. Both candidates of the two major parties used LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook to connect to millions of social networking users to open a virtual dialogue with extended networks of supporters and critics. On a much smaller scale, but no less important, local government can use this technology to engage citizens in community dialogues.

Protecting Your Privacy

For many of us, social media and networking have changed our lives in some meaningful way. Perhaps we've reunited with a college or high school friend. Maybe a professional colleague introduced you to a business contact that led to a new job. Collectively, social media is changing the world—and for the good. Given the pace of innovation, change is a constant in most of our lives, both personally and professionally.

Because of the power of these tools, it is important to remember these tips as you enter into the world of social networking:

- No matter what type of password protection you have, the sites are NOT private.
- Post only what you'd want your board, council, supervisor, parents, AND spouse or life partner to see.
- Your page is the equivalent of your digital résumé, so make sure it's accurate. Recruiters *do* look at these sites.
- Remove any objectionable images, ideas, comments, or information

that other people might post on your page or your wall.

- Do not use your page or wall to vent about last night's meeting, a professional colleague, or a business or company. People have been terminated over rants on their networking sites and blogs.
- Apply the ICMA ethical standards when considering posting recommendations or promoting an event, vendor, or person. Musing about an upcoming election is not a good idea.
- Avoid providing too much personal information about your home and family on information and profile pages. If you want to connect "live" with a contact, communicate "off grid" by telephone or e-mail to identify an address and phone number for someone.
- View the pages of government staff. Yes, it is legal to do so in order to ensure that information they are providing does not reflect negatively on the organization as a whole.
- When in doubt, contact Martha Perego at ICMA (mperego@icma.org) for further guidance on protocol and related ethics issues.

The generations behind us will inherit a world profoundly changed by technology and the social media movement. Teens today are already constantly communicating electronically and will mature into adults with the same expectations, taking for granted that they will be connected globally to thousands of people.

Much like the transition from mailed letters to e-mail and from newsletters to website updates, we as public professionals need to anticipate these changes in communication expectations and if we haven't already, join the social networking movement. The possibilities are endless. **PM**



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ICMA

Calendar of Events

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UPCOMING EVENTS:

October 1 Credentialing Deadline

October 20 Audioconference:
*Bob O'Neill—Leading Ideas Series:
Community Building*

October 21 Web Workshop:
Ethics and Human Resources

November 4 Web Workshop:
*Leadership, Management & the Key Role of
Performance Measurement*

November 12 Audioconference:
Ethics for Leaders

2010 ICMA 2010 Regional Summits

March 11-12 Mountain Plains/West
Coast, (San Diego, CA)

March 25-26 Northeast Region,
(Baltimore, MD)

April 8-9 Midwest Region,
(Oak Brook, IL)

April 15-16 Southeast Region,
(Nashville, TN)