Reaching Critical Mass on Facebook

Case Study Category

Communications

Jurisdiction Name

City of Carlsbad, California

Jurisdiction Population

107,000

City/County Manager Name

John W. Coates, city manager

Would you like the application to be considered for an Innovation Award? (eligible to Alliance member jurisdictions only)

Y

Would you like the application to be considered for our Rapid Fire Session?

Y

Project Leader (Primary Contact for case study notification)

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*What is the intent of the project/program/service?*

The City of Carlsbad, like many cities throughout the nation, is faced with a shrinking local media presence and a community that is increasingly utilizing digital channels for communication. At the same time, through the recent recession, the city reduced its communication resources by nearly one third. The city was challenged to find new, low cost ways of reaching community members in a way that was relevant and engaging. The goal of establishing a presence for the City of Carlsbad on social media was to “meet the audience where they are,” meaning providing information and opportunities for input on channels already used by residents. To accomplish this goal, the city launched a variety of social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Vine and Pinterest.

The city decided to focus its audience building efforts on Facebook and use those followers to leverage other secondary channels. Facebook was chosen as the focal point because of its mainstream appeal and ability to engage through likes, comments and sharing features. The city has built its Facebook fan base to become the second largest city Facebook presence in California (14,000 and counting) through a variety of strategies. These included promoting the page through e-newsletters and the city website, advertising the page in local publications, participating in community discussions through the city’s Facebook identity and targeted Facebook advertising.

The Facebook ad invited people who lived within 50 miles of the city to “stay connected with their community” by “liking the City of Carlsbad for news, events and more.” As the ad drew likes to the page, the city refined its content strategy by monitoring engagement. The city increased the use of images, including beautiful photos of the community to catch followers’ eyes and simple, short language that made it easy for them to read and comment. A fun “Foto Friday” post was implemented each week, featuring a vibrant photograph of the city’s gorgeous coastline, popular nature trails and other landmarks highly valued in the community. This feel-good weekly snapshot of different corners of the city draws hundreds of “likes” and dozens of “shares” each week. The city mixes these lifestyle features with more substantive city news to achieve a blend of content most appealing to the page’s followers. Residents are even utilizing the Facebook page to post questions about city services and issues and receive timely and trusted responses.

*What were the costs, if any?*

Initially, $50-100 a day was dedicated to the Facebook ad, but as the audience grew, the Communication Department decreased the amount, focusing on continuing to bring residents to the page through shareable content. The annual total spent on Facebook advertising is $12,450, or an average of about $34 a day. Now that the city has built a Facebook audience, it can leverage this tool for virtually no cost beyond staff time required to manage its content.

*What were the savings, if any?*

By building a large, engaged audience on Facebook, the city has been able to reduce spending on traditional advertising for city programs and events. This savings in fiscal year 2012-13 was $9,400. In fiscal year 2013-14, the city plans to further reduce paid advertising as well as direct mail, resulting in an annual ongoing savings of $20,000.

*Identify innovative characteristics and explain how they improved the organization.*

The analytics built into Facebook, plus the analytics we use for the city website, were able to demonstrate the dramatic reach of the city Facebook page, helping to make the case for continuing to invest staff time in its curation. The benefited the organization because it helped social media skeptics see the potential power of this new medium and event resulted in more city staff becoming active on social media so they could follow the city.

*What obstacles, if any, did you encounter when starting or implementing this program?*

The most significant obstacle was the process associated with creating a policy for the use of social media in city communication.

*What outcomes – cost savings, for citizens, any performance measures information, etc. did you have?*

Based on city website analytics, Facebook is the source of 79 percent of all social media referrals to the city website and is consistently the number one Web referrer to the city’s online newsroom. According to Facebook analytics, the city’s Facebook page reaches an average of more than 80,000 people a week.

*Please list applicable results and real world practicality.*

The City of Carlsbad was able to increase the number of community members it reached by 300,000 per month while reducing communications costs.

*Was a private consultant used? If yes, describe their involvement; and identify the consultant and/or firm, including contact information*

Yes, in 2009 MarCom Interactive helped the city develop a social media policy, terms of use and social media strategy. The firm researched the online behavior of Carlsbad residents and use of social media by other cities.

Linda Zimmer, MarCom Interactive, Office: 714-769-9159, [www.marcominteractive.com](http://www.marcominteractive.com)

*Briefly describing what your case study presentation might include. We want to know how you will make your session creative and unique.*

We propose to deliver this presentation using a series of six second Vine video loops instead of the traditional PowerPoint. This new application is growing in popularity and will demonstrate how new media is turning traditional communication upside down. Vine videos will be projected onto a full size screen and reinforce key points through screen shots of noteworthy Facebook interactions with residents, sample Facebook ads, headlines and related video images that bring to life the key messages of this case study – create engaging content using simple graphics and compelling story telling that resonates with your audience. Audience members will be invited to follow the presentation on Vine and Twitter, using hashtags to involve an even greater audience in the discussion.