

Exploring Social Media Obstacles and Opportunities within Public Agencies: Lessons from the Ohio Division of Wildlife

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Abstract

Advancements in social media technologies have transformed private, for-profit businesses since the inception of Facebook in 2004, the most widely-used social media application across the globe. Private businesses have capitalized on the web-based marketplaces that are created and expanded through virtual networks of “friends” and “followers.” The use of contemporary social media applications has contributed to increased levels of transparency, accountability and engagement for businesses, facilitating and enhancing their marketing and public relations efforts. For public, non-profit agencies, however, the adoption of social media technologies has been less successful. Particularly for state and federal agencies, the incorporation of social media applications into everyday operations has been stifled by the availability of human resources and restraints on technological resources—especially with regard to network security concerns. As is the case with the Ohio Division of Wildlife, for those agencies that have removed the barriers to adoption, the use of social media applications has demonstrated real potential to connect and interact with constituents. Because many state agencies provide public services, connecting with the public in a virtual one-on-one basis is essential to understanding shifts and changes in public perception and public need. This article presents a case example of a state agency’s adoption of social media applications in an effort to facilitate greater interaction among and between constituents.

Key words: social media, non-profit, technology, public agency, marketing, applied communications

Introduction

Social media technologies have changed the ways in which private sector companies communicate with their customers. From advertising and marketing to public relations, social media applications have enabled companies to understand more about their customers and what they want—and do not want—from products or services. A shift from reliance on a supply- or production-centered process, companies have begun using public input to push product research and development into a new demand-centered approach. Businesses have now made it a priority to listen to, interact more with, and solicit feedback from customers. The results have demonstrated successes in improved responses to product or brand concerns among constituents representing both business (Brandel, 2010) and politics (Aquino, 2012).

Anderson-Wilk (2009) argues that the benefit of this shift in communication is two-fold: (1) audiences can adapt information to make it more useful for their unique needs; and (2) they can add value to information by asking questions and offering feedback. Social media applications, including social networking sites, blogs, micro-blogs, and photo and video sharing sites, offer both a feedback loop and a platform for virtual discussions among constituents. These person-to-business and person-to-person interactions represent opportunities for relationship building that have not existed in prior models of mass communication.

Aquino (2012) argues this model of public participation may lead to higher levels of public trust and loyalty, which may be of particular relevance to public agencies given the general lack of trust in governmental organizations. Individuals who engage with an organization via social media may experience deeper connections with that organization than was possible via previously popular communication channels, including websites, email and telephone services.

Anderson-Wilk (2009) also contends social media may increase the propensity for large-scale mobilization among individuals within social networks as compared to conventional mass media based on new person-to-person connections. Indeed, individuals now have the opportunity to self-organize around causes based on mutual interests shared via social media (Kanter, 2009), which is expected to facilitate a sense of commitment and communality (Hallahan, 2008).

Literature Review

Although the private sector continues to increasingly explore such benefits of improved customer relationships via social media applications, those benefits realized by the public sector have been limited (McDonough, 2012). Many government agencies still rely on a one-directional “push” model of communication, which involves the traditional transfer of knowledge from experts to lay people (Durant, 1999). Very few agencies have opted for a multi-directional or “dialogic” model of communication that emphasizes “issue framing, relationship building, fostering trust, and identification” (Kent, 2008) in addition to knowledge transfer.

Yet, the increasing pressure on government entities to engage more with their constituents is evident in recent federal government initiatives, including the Open Government Directive published to the White House website in 2009 (Orszag, 2009), which called for public agencies to:

- Publish government information online;
- Improve the quality of government information;
- Create and institutionalize a culture of open government; and
- Create an enabling policy framework for open government.

This approach, the directive suggests, would allow members of the public to “contribute ideas and expertise” to agencies in the process of maintaining or establishing policies. Further, this “collaboration improves the effectiveness of Government by encouraging partnerships and cooperation” (Orszag, 2009). Any technologies developed to enable public participation in government activities, such as social media applications, could be perceived as real opportunities to improve governmental functions.

Nevertheless, many government agencies have not adopted or fully integrated social media applications as a component of public and/or media relations. Barriers to the implementation of social media applications within the public sector have included the inability to keep up with changing technologies, lack of funds, lack of human resources to manage such applications, and concerns about security threats connected to information technology systems (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Godwin, Campbell, Levy, & Bounds, 2008). Although the public sector may benefit from improved public relations via social media-centered communications, the adoption of such systems seems unlikely in the near future due in part to these specific concerns.

The purpose of this research was to examine a public agency engaged in social-media implementation in order to: (a) assess the potential use of social media strategies by a public agency to facilitate improved interactions and/or relationships among its constituents; (b) determine whether social media adoption enhances the effectiveness of public agencies via increased opportunities for collaboration and cooperation; and (c) identify and assess any human-resource and/or capital stresses on public agency operations.

Research Questions

Based on the literature on the spread of social media adoption in the private sector—and the slower pace at which adoption is occurring in the non-profit and/or public sector—the following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: Has implementation of social media applications within a government agency’s public and/or media relations strategy led to improved relationships with its constituents?
- RQ2: Do social media applications offer sufficient opportunity for person-to-person conversations such that an increased sense of communality or commitment to a cause is evident?
- RQ3: Does the adoption of social media applications increase the ability of a public agency to fulfill its mission?
- RQ4: What are the actual barriers to social media adoption within public sector agencies?

Methodology

Using a qualitative research approach, a series of standardized open-ended interviews were conducted with employees of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife (DOW) representing the Information and Education section in an effort to explore the agency's process for adopting social media strategies for both public and media relations. The standardized open-ended interview, as explained by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), is a structured approach in which participants are always asked identical questions designed to generate open-ended response. This approach was utilized to solicit a variety of viewpoints based on individual experiences, but also to control for researcher biases. All narrative responses were transcribed and then analyzed using open line-by-line coding to identify themes.

The DOW was chosen for this research because of its status as an early adopter of social media applications among like agencies. It was also identified as an ideal case because of its funding structure, which relies heavily on the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. The agency receives 95 percent of its operating monies from public license sales, rather than from federal or state budgets, which reinforces the need to solicit public input in planning and decision-making processes.

Participants: Ohio Division of Wildlife

The DOW is a public agency charged with managing Ohio's wildlife resources that inhabit nearly: 45,000 square miles of land; 2.25 million acres of Lake Erie; 60,000 miles of streams; more than 120,000 surface acres of inland lakes; and 451 miles of the Ohio River. More than 90 percent of Ohio's land is privately owned. The ODNR manages 2 percent of Ohio's land area, of which a portion is managed for fish and wildlife recreation.

Ohio has more than 5 million wildlife enthusiasts who engage in hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. Annual participant spending on wildlife recreation often exceeds \$3 billion. Hunting and fishing generate nearly \$200 million in local and state tax dollars and supports more than 30,000 Ohio jobs. Wildlife watching generates more than \$160 million in local and state tax dollars and supports more than 22,000 Ohio jobs (Ohio Division of Wildlife [ODOW], 2011).

According to the agency's strategic plan (ODOW, 2011), both "input from constituents" and "open lines of communication" are identified as core values. As an agency that provides public services, quality customer service is considered essential to daily operations. Because the agency receives the majority of its funding through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, communicating to those who purchase licenses has become the cornerstone of success. Recognition of the role of effective communication is clear in the agency's statement on connections.

"The future of fish and wildlife resources depends on informed conservation actions by citizens. As technologies change and channels for outreach and education continue to evolve, the Division of Wildlife must stay at the forefront of these changes to deliver products and programs that connect people with fish, wildlife, and habitat. The Division of Wildlife has the responsibility to educate and inform Ohioans about fish and wildlife resources and promote the values of fishing, hunting, trapping, and fish and wildlife appreciation. Collectively, these actions can foster awareness, increase understanding, inform decisions, create a desire to participate in fish and wildlife recreation, and enhance skills and behaviors associated with these activities (2011)."

Existing communication channels relied on heavily by the agency prior to 2010 included a call center, website, email, magazine, print educational materials, direct mailers, and electronic newsletters. All communication channels were administered by the Communications Manager for the Information and Education section, a full-time position overseeing an average of 10 full-time positions within the field, including four coordinator positions.

Observations

Early-Phase Adoption

In July of 2010, the DOW launched an initiative to engage social media technologies for the purposes of enhancing customer service and facilitating media relations. In interviews with agency representatives, two primary goals for adopting social media practices were identified and included:

- providing continued customer service to an increasingly digital customer base, including publishing news to media outlets;
- relationship building and creating positive interactions with new and potential customers.

At the same time, the DOW released its first official social media procedure (Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife [ODNRDOW], 2011), which defined more specific agency goals: (a) Protect the Division brand; (b) Be more accessible to constituents; (c) Find and get to understand new audiences; (d) Disseminate information quickly; (e) Start a conversation with our audience; (f) Get non-scientific feedback on projects and ideas from the online user group; (g) Promote events, projects, and initiatives; (h) Recruit new people to outdoor pursuits; and (i) Retain participants by helping to make the outdoors accessible.

According to the official procedure, account management responsibilities were assigned to a “Social Media Team” (SMT), which consisted of two positions—those of the existing full-time Web Site Coordinator and existing full-time Electronic-Newsletter Editor. The procedure also specified two social media applications the agency would implement in its initial phase of adoption—Facebook and Twitter. The Web Site Coordinator reported that most of the information submitted to Facebook and Twitter by web users took the form of questions typically handled by the existing call center, though call center volume did not decrease. This implied the addition of social media as a mode of public inquiry added to the agency’s capacity to solicit and address public concerns or questions rather than simply redistributing it across existing channels. Most early inquiries via Facebook and Twitter centered on hunting and fishing regulation information, but later expanded into more diverse and specific interests.

“I think we grabbed people that might have been hesitant to call or didn’t realize they could call. We started getting questions based on people’s interests—What bird is this? Where can I fish?”

Questions and comments fielded through both social media applications were sorted by content type, pooled, and then sent to the appropriate content expert within the DOW. The agency referred to this approach as the “gatekeeper system,” which utilized experts from various areas of the agency (e.g. fish management, wildlife management, communications management, law enforcement and agency administration) charged with responding to content-relevant public inquiries. Responses were sent back to the Web Site Coordinator and Electronic Newsletter Editor, who then posted them to the appropriate account on behalf of the agency.

Although much of the early efforts of the SMT emphasized responding to public inquiries, the agency did report engaging in some advance content planning.

“Our communications group plans our Twitter and Facebook posts about a month in advance, or at least roughs out a plan that is subject to change. Keeping in mind it is not always possible to please every audience, we attempt to post an equal amount of topics that include appeal to hunters, anglers, birders and general wildlife enthusiasts.”

Late-phase Adoption

Within the first six months of social media implementation, the agency reported having to add support staff to the SMT in order to respond to the increase in web-based queries. An intern and two “emergency” back-up staff were given social media support responsibilities as needed.

“I don’t think there was any real grasp of how much time any social media effort would take. We have people trying to respond and work on social media in addition to their regular jobs. It is sometimes too much or overwhelming.”

With the added human resources, and prior to the one-year advent of social media adoption, the DOW began to focus more on relationship and trust building within and among their social media audience. The priority shifted from responding to the public to engaging with the public. At that point the agency began using a variety of tactics, including web polls, quizzes, and contests to expand its social media networks. In addition, the SMT began pushing more information out to its customers based on information gleaned through early interactions.

“Facebook does a great job of building relationships. We have a good number of fans that interact with each other as well as with us. Twitter is fantastic for exponential communication, and in the past few months, we have seen a change from followers simply re-Tweeting us to actually interacting with us.”

Once the agency had established a significant following on both social media platforms, the SMT began to use feedback, in part, to determine how best to plan agency operations, including the offering of new educational seminars for wildlife enthusiasts and a change in the way hunting and fishing regulations were conveyed in print publications. Social media applications were also used later for reputation management—or in an effort to efficiently address negative media attention and/or to control for misinformation among constituents.

“We are able to be open and honest, and let people be open and honest with us.”

Although the agency reported some successes with relationship building between and among its constituents and with reputation management, representatives of the SMT identified several obstacles that threatened widespread adoption of social media strategies. The most significant threat, according to most members of the SMT, was lack of sufficient human resources.

“It is difficult to meet society’s expectations of immediate response and constant monitoring. For example, a Facebook question asked on Friday doesn’t get answered until the following week. There have also been times when it takes a few hours to respond, and customers posting on Facebook are irritated that it is ‘taking too long.’”

Pressure to add support staff to social media efforts forced the SMT to face questions from agency administrators regarding the return on investment. In other words, administrators questioned whether the gains (e.g. improved relationships, increased trust in the agency, and enhanced customer reach) could be quantified.

“Here is the struggle most agencies have: Is social media affecting behavior? We don’t know. Sure people are reading our stuff, and where it is appropriate we can track purchases based on posts, Tweets, advertisements, etc. But, how is the average person who just views the information or video reacting? We don’t know.”

Nevertheless, several members of the SMT cite quantifiable metrics related to the impacts of social media adoption.

“Interestingly, our Facebook audience mirrors our hunting and fishing constituency by being about two-thirds male, aged 23 to 54. This contrasts with what had been the typical Facebook user—female. So, the argument that our audience isn’t engaged in social media is not valid.”

One member of the SMT cited an example from Twitter in reference to whether gains could be quantified:

“A quick example pulled from last week’s analytics on Twitter: We Tweeted the youth deer-gun hunt results news release. It was re-Tweeted 13 times. The re-Tweets had a resulting 66,000 impressions (views). One post with 66,000 people viewing it—people that are not our friends or followers—is a pretty large number, especially compared to some of our other daily tallies.”

Conclusions and Implications for Public Agencies

It is clear through analysis of agency responses to questions regarding the relationship- and trust-building opportunities of social media adoption, the decision to divert existing human, capital and technological resources to the development of a widespread social media strategy within the Ohio DOW was effective. Representatives of the agency reported an expanded capacity to relate to and address the concerns of its constituency. In addition, as is evident in the analysis of its Facebook and Twitter applications, the use of social media created a real “community with specific interests in mind.” Because the impact of social media adoption on the effectiveness of public relations strategies was additive—and audiences, expanded—it is argued that the agency’s ability to achieve its mission is enhanced by the use of social media applications.

Typical concerns associated with the adoption of social media applications within public agencies were found to be mostly unwarranted, as applied to this case study involving the Ohio DOW. One year out from initial implementation of Facebook and Twitter, the agency reported no security breaches or threats brought on through the use of social media. With regard to whether the agency’s existing human and capital resources were sufficient to handle the demands of social media management, the agency did identify several valid concerns. The agency’s initial management approach involving two full-time employees already working in other roles was not sufficient to handle the capacity of inquiries from both social media applications. Ultimately, additional staff had to be assigned to the SMT to meet the human resource demands of social media management.

Although the DOW was staffed in way that would allow for the expansion of programs and resources, an agency with less flexibility in financial or human resources would likely be limited in this area.

Although the findings of this research provide insight into the value of social media adoption by public agencies, several limitations to the study should be considered. Because of the small sample size—a handful of individuals representing one agency—these findings are not generalizable beyond the DOW. And because of its unique funding structure, by which 95 percent of its operating dollars come directly from constituents rather than from federal or state resources, identifying agencies with such a direct connection or relationship to its constituents may be unlikely.

Nevertheless, the experiences of the DOW shed light on the unique opportunities and barriers faced by public agencies exploring social media adoption. Agencies that have lagged in the testing or full-scale use of such technologies should explore these and similar findings in order to assess whether social media applications could advance their public- and/or media-relations strategies. New communication technologies, like social media applications, will surely continue to offer opportunities for direct public participation. Future research should focus on how those new forms of public interaction may augment public-agency relationships.

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