REACHING
LET'S FACE IT: SMARTPHONES ARE EVERYWHERE, and a great number of people use them for practically everything. Townships can tap into this trend by adopting mobile technology — from responsive websites and mobile apps to email notifications and social media — to reach residents where they are: on their phones.
If it seems to you that more and more people are practically glued to their smartphones, you’re right. According to the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of Americans own a cellphone of some kind, and 77 percent of cellphone owners have a smartphone.

What’s more, 77 percent of Americans say they go online daily, and 26 percent of adults say they are online almost constantly. (See the charts on the adjacent page for more statistics.)

Combine that with the fact that 1 in 10 adults accesses the Internet on their smartphones, and it’s clear why so many people are never without their phones.

Bottom line: There are a whole lot of citizens who conduct a large portion of their lives online, and they’re using their smartphones to do it. Those same people, who shop, read, bank, pay bills, email, text, and share content on their phones, expect to be able to interact with their local government the same way.

Consequently, townships that want to be accessible to their citizens should start embracing mobile technology and tools to reach residents where they are: on their phones. From mobile-friendly websites and mobile apps to social media, today’s technology offers townships a fresh way to engage citizens, increase their awareness of programs and services, and foster government transparency.

‘The phone has become everything’

If you access the Internet via smartphone, you know there is nothing more frustrating than trying to look at a website that does not adapt to the medium you are using. You have to scroll left and right to see the whole page, navigation menus are hard to navigate, images either appear where they shouldn’t or don’t appear at all, and on and on. Such websites are not mobile-friendly, or configured so that they can be easily viewed, navigated, and accessed on a smartphone, tablet computer, or similar mobile device. When you find yourself on a mobile-friendly, or respon
sive, website, you know it. The page fits the width of the screen, navigation menus often drop down from the top or slide in from the side, and graphics are minimized or eliminated. Such sites are easy to use and don’t make you want to throw your phone across the room.

Ensuring that a website is mobile-responsive was once a nice-to-have feature but is rapidly becoming a necessity. (Remember, 1 in 10 adults accesses the Internet via smartphone exclusively, and that number is destined to grow.)

Congress is so convinced of the need for responsive websites that it passed House Resolution 2331 in December 2017, which requires all federal agencies to ensure that any public websites they create or update are mobile-friendly. It was a sorely needed rule. The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation reported that as of March 2017, 41 percent of the most often used federal government websites were not mobile-friendly.

When it comes to local governments, the number of websites that are not made for mobile is far greater. That’s not surprising, considering that many of them didn’t even have a website a few years ago — and some still don’t.

Still, a few townships have embraced the concept when going through a redesign of their website. Creating a mobile-friendly site is most practical when creating a new website or redesigning an existing one.

That’s exactly how Plumstead Township in Bucks County implemented its mobile-responsive website.

“The last time we updated our website, we tweaked it so you can view it on a mobile device without having to scroll left or right,” manager Carolyn McCreary says.

Pull up the website (www.plumstead.org) on a smartphone, and the navigation bar across the top has been replaced by the familiar three-bar symbol indicating a drop-down menu. The local weather and Plumstead news sections that are adjacent on the home page appear in a column on a smartphone. And four boxes across the page that link to water bill options, an email list signup, documents and forms, and meeting agendas and minutes appear

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**Mobile use by the numbers**

### Percentage of U.S. adults who own cellular devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cellphone</th>
<th>Smartphone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of smartphone owners has soared over the past seven years.

*Source: Surveys conducted 2008-2018.*

### Percentage, by age, of U.S. adults who have no broadband at home but own smartphones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smartphone ownership continues to grow among U.S. adults without broadband access at home. The phones allow these users to surf the web and email via their cellular service.

*Source: Surveys conducted 2013-2018. Data for each year based on a pooled analysis of all surveys containing broadband and smartphone questions fielded during that year.*

### Percentage of U.S. adults who own other devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device Type</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-reader</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablet computer</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop/laptop computer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although desk- and laptop computers have shown some decline, tablet computers have seen steady growth.

*Source: Surveys conducted 2008-2018.*
MOBILE ENGAGEMENT

one at a time on the phone screen. To see the next one, just swipe left.

Transitioning to a mobile-friendly site made sense as part of the township’s efforts to get information out in multiple ways, McCreary says.

“There are so many different outlets that people use,” she says, “and it’s not as generation-specific as you might think. We have older residents who still like to receive printed newsletters, but we also have older residents who are very tech-savvy. We have to reach all of them.”

The township also added the free Google Translate service to its website so that it is accessible by those who don’t speak English as a first language.

The efforts are paying off. Plumstead Township received first place in the Websites category in PSATS’ 2017 Citizen Communication Contest, as well as first place in the Other Publications category for its “Constant Contact” email blasts. These notify residents about such things as upcoming township events, park and recreation programs, and other items of interest. Like the township website, the email blasts are mobile-friendly.

“The phone has become everything to so many people,” McCreary says. “Anything we can do to get information out in multiple formats is in everyone’s best interest.”

Stephanie Mason, manager of

“WE NEED TO USE ALL OF THE TOOLS AT OUR DISPOSAL TO REACH PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.”

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Doylestown Township, also in Bucks County, agrees, and says that’s why the township has a mobile-friendly website. “You want people to go to your website because you have information there,” she says. “You want it to be accessible, and 9 times out of 10, people are going there on their phones. You have to stay current with technology because your residents are.”

Mason also points out that when severe weather causes a power outage, the township may need to get information out to residents about downed trees or road closures. Without power, residents can’t log onto the Internet from a computer, but they could go to the website on their phone using cell service.

“You have to make sure you can get information to your residents and property owners,” she says. “We recently had a meeting about emergency communication and how to make it more seamless and accessible. We need to use all of the tools at our disposal to reach people where they are.”

‘An awesome means of communication’

Townships that want to move even further into mobile territory can consider a mobile app. Just like with other apps, residents would download it onto their phone and then use it to receive notifications, report road-related issues, make payments, and register for programs, plus whatever other options the township wishes to include.

Richland Township in Allegheny County was the first Pennsylvania township to try the Savvy Citizen app, developed by Pittsburgh-based Management Science Associates (MSA), which exhibits at the PSATS Conference. The app has a feature that allows the township to send notifications and emergency alerts. In addition, the app’s community calendar includes information about the township and surrounding municipalities, such as events, road closures, and other things that affect people beyond municipal boundaries.

“A person’s ‘community’ is larger than the geographic boundary of the
MOBILE ENGAGEMENT

municipality,” MSA Account Director Chuck Warden says. “We have three goals: to improve residents’ awareness of what’s happening in their community, increase engagement in local government, and foster government transparency. The more information you give to residents, the more transparent your township.”

As of May 1, Richland Township had 662 residents out of 11,000 who had downloaded the app. However, 2,019 people in total have subscribed to the Richland Township app, many of them from surrounding municipalities.

The township has been using the app for a little over a year, and public reaction has been positive.

“It’s an awesome means of communication,” says Jennifer Saunders, who is responsible for accounting and reception duties at the township and also helps manage the website and mobile app. “The information comes directly from the township, so residents know it’s accurate. We can send out emergency notices immediately, such as road closures due to downed trees or event cancellations due to severe weather, as well as reminders about community events and programs.

“People have stopped in the office to tell us how much they like it,” she adds. “One resident, who is about 80 years old, says she loves it.”

MSA developed the app partly in response to comments from Rich McConnell, business development manager for MSA and a planning commission member in Buffalo Township, Butler County. McConnell said that his township struggles to get timely information to residents.

“A website is not the best way to communicate time-sensitive news,” McConnell says. “Residents would have to go to the site all the time to get the latest updates, and most people won’t do that. The app is designed to be a one-stop shop of community information.”

Most users download the free app onto their smartphones and sign up to receive push notifications, MSA’s Chuck Warden says, although people can also receive the information via email or text.

“All of the information — the calendar and the notifications — resides in the app,” he says. “The nice thing is that you can swipe a notification off your phone if it doesn’t interest you, but you can always go back and find it in the app if you change your mind. People without smartphones can access all of the information online, and it’s also on the township website.”

The app is designed to allow users to easily share notifications, as well.

Richland Township in Allegheny County was the first township in Pennsylvania to adopt the Savvy Citizen app. Users can view a calendar of upcoming events in the township and surrounding municipalities (left) and sign up to receive push notifications about event cancellations, emergency road closures, and other timely topics.
Save the Date!

PSATS’ 97th Annual Educational Conference & Exhibit Show is set for April 14-17, 2019, in Hershey.

Mark your calendars now so you don’t miss anything that this one-of-a-kind event has to offer!
“Buttons at the bottom give users the option to share a notification via text, email, Facebook, and other social media, which extends the township’s reach,” MSA Senior Account Manager Jeralyn Brown says.

MSA counsels its clients to practice restraint when sending out notifications, Warden says. A few reminders a week are probably adequate.

Richland Township tries to follow that advice, according to Sarah Knapp, the township’s environmental compliance coordinator who also helps manage the website and mobile app.

“We basically try to keep the app streamlined and choose information that we think people will want to know,” she says. “We don’t want to overwhelm them with too many notifications.”

Knapp says that this up-to-the minute communication method has cut down on phone calls about events and activities, such as that familiar question of when trick or treat night will be held.

“We still get the calls, but not as many,” she says, “and now when they call in, we can tell them about the app.”

The app has also increased citizen engagement. Registration forms for township programs and events have a question at the top asking registrants how they heard about the activity, Knapp says. The township is getting more and more forms indicating that the person learned about it on the app.

“The township sells discounted ski tickets through the parks and recreation department,” she says. “Traditionally, we didn’t sell that many. This year, we put out a notification on the app, and within an hour, a man showed up and bought a lot of tickets. He said his wife got the notification on her phone.

“It has definitely made people more aware of our programs and services and emergency situations, such as road closures,” Knapp adds. “The more informed residents are, the better.”
Because many of the app’s notifications and community calendar items drive users to the township website for more information, the township has made sure that the site is also mobile-friendly.

“Since the app often links to our website, we want to make sure everything works in any format,” Saunders says. “It tells people that we make an effort to get the word out and are willing to do it in different formats.”

What information is communicated via the app is entirely up to the municipality, MSA’s Jeralyn Brown says.

“Savvy Citizen is comprehensive in the type of information that can be sent out,” she says. “Townships are realizing that they have a lot more to communicate than just emergency alerts. Residents find just as much value in knowing about e-cycling events, for instance, as in road closures.”

The app works for any size community, McConnell says. The largest municipality using it has about 30,000 residents, and the smallest has just 1,000.

“I would absolutely encourage townships to try a mobile app,” Richland Township’s Jennifer Saunders says. “We couldn’t be happier with ours.”

‘What’s best for your community’

North Fayette Township in Allegheny County has found similar success with a mobile app from CivicPlus, a municipal website design company that offers a mobile app as an add-on. The township, which has been using its app for a little over a year, wanted to reach another demographic.

“We realized that younger residents — millennials — are more often using their phones to get information than going to the website to look things up,” manager Robert Grimm says.

The app includes a community calendar, a list of businesses in the township, a staff directory, job listings, and emergency alerts. It also links to the township’s mobile-friendly website to give users a seamless experience.

“One of the nice things about using CivicPlus for the website and the app is that it is fairly easy for our staff to update them,” Grimm says. “The challenging part was deciding what to include and what we wanted it to look like.”

Users can “customize” the app by selecting which notifications they want to receive, he says. Not everyone gets every notification — unless they choose to.

Grimm says residents have responded positively to the app and how easy it is to use. He also believes the app, along with the website and township social media channels, has increased participation in township events.

For example, the township had about six weeks to get the word out about a veterans tribute this spring, Grimm says. A lot of interest was generated via the website, Facebook, and the mobile app.

Mobile-friendly websites and apps allow townships to reach residents wherever they are, whether it’s a kids’ soccer game, a doctor’s waiting room, or a supermarket’s checkout line.
app, and about 2,000 people showed up. The manager says that reaching out to residents in mobile formats just makes sense.

“We recognize that there are more and more people who use their phones for virtually everything,” he says.

Do townships need a mobile app if they have a mobile-friendly website? It depends on their goals, experts say.

Studies have shown that mobile apps have higher engagement rates than mobile websites, according to Civic Apps. Digital media users spend 89 percent of their mobile time on apps, and only 11 percent on mobile websites. In fact, people are more likely to watch videos, check utilities, play games, and use social media through an app.

Another advantage is that once a citizen downloads a municipal app, it is on their phone and ready to be opened with a tap of their finger. Websites can be bookmarked, but the user must first open a web browser to access a website.

A township app is also more likely to keep users coming back for up-to-date information.

Whether a mobile app is right for a township always comes back to demographics, however.

“Before going to the expense, look at your constituents,” advises North Fayette Township’s Robert Grimm. “Are they heavy phone users? Some parts of the state may not need mobile apps. You may be able to get similar results by using a mobile-friendly website and social media.

“When talking to web providers or app services, look at your residents and figure out what’s best for your community.”

‘Change the way we do business’

For townships that aren’t quite ready to jump into the mobile app pool, recognize that you may already be reaching your residents on their phones. Many townships have systems in place to send mass email notifications to residents who sign up for them, which means a lot of people are reading them on their smartphones along with their other emails.

Plumstead Township, for example, does not have a mobile app but it does send out email notifications to people who sign up. In addition to emergency alerts, the township pushes out information about events and activities, such as a blood drive, and even solicits volunteers.

Some counties have emergency alert apps or email notification lists as well. Townships should explore the possibility of pushing out emergency alerts through these systems.

Doylestown Township, for example, can alert emergency dispatchers to a critical situation in the township and have Ready Bucks, the county alert system, notify people in affected areas. Bucks County police departments also have Crimewatch portals that inform residents who sign up about public safety-related issues. An accompanying mobile app is in the works.

More people access social media on smartphones than on computers so townships with social media channels are reaching residents on their phones, as well. If your social media pages drive your residents to your website for additional information or registration, complete the loop by making sure your website is mobile-friendly.

Social media has also proven to be a good communication tool for Plumstead Township, manager Carolyn McCreary says.

“People can share and retweet information, and it doesn’t change as it gets passed on,” she says. “It’s a good way to get the word out.”

MSA’s Chuck Warden cautions

“Look at your residents and figure out what’s best for your community.”
about relying too heavily on social media for time-sensitive news, however. Facebook and other social media platforms use algorithms to determine which posts users receive, so not everyone may get every post.

Still, for townships that are just beginning to branch out from a website, social media is a good way to reach residents in a more mobile-friendly format.

Regardless of the communication methods townships use, it’s always a two-way street, and residents can choose to ignore or dismiss the information.

“It can be frustrating,” Doylestown Township’s Stephanie Mason says. “We have been having a conversation about the fact that we put out all of this information and some people still don’t know what’s going on.”

Still, she advocates using the most current tools available to townships, including mobile formats, because a person’s phone is nearly always with them.

In the end, it comes down to townships doing their best to keep residents informed and engaged.

“By and large, it’s trying to put information in as many places as possible to reach people,” North Fayette Township’s Robert Grimm says. “People are doing more and more on their phones so we have to change the way we do business.”

Check out these mobile-friendly websites

If you’d like to see the mobile-friendly websites mentioned in this article, use your smartphone or tablet to visit the following:

- Doylestown Twp., Bucks Co.: www.doylestownpa.org
- North Fayette Twp., Allegheny Co.: www.north-fayette.com
- Plumstead Twp., Bucks Co.: www.plumstead.org
- Richland Twp., Allegheny Co.: richland.pa.us