



Digital Communication is Essential for Local Governments

By Heidi Hormel, Contributing Writer

Borough digital communication has been moving with lightning speed past email and websites – although they remain important.

With more and more residents on smartphones and more people expecting information 24/7, borough officials need to think long and hard about the best ways to communicate digitally, while balancing costs and staff time.

Linda Rooney, founder and CEO of Dandelions Digital, which works with municipalities including Media Borough, Delaware County, said, “Rumor control and getting the correct factual information out there before it becomes an issue is an important goal of all digital communication.”

Jeralyn Brown, senior account manager, Savvy Citizen, a calendar and mass notification app, regularly speaks with boroughs across the state including Littlestown Borough, Adams County, and Edinboro Borough, Erie County, and one of the greatest challenges they struggle with is “getting word out” about all sorts of things within the municipality, from road closures to community resources.

There’s also the time spent by staff answering the same question again and again, such as when trash is picked up after a holiday. A proactive and well-thought-out communication plan and tools can stop the calls in their tracks, which saves staff time, which saves money.

Websites

For Rooney, the down and dirty of electronic communication starts with a website, even if it’s “smallish.”

She added that all communications should reflect the borough “brand” by using the same colors and logo “so people know that it’s a true government communication.”

“Digital communication only works if everything is in place to lead people to the source of information,” which should be the borough’s website.

The majority of the information on the site should be “evergreen,” with only a news and calendar section that would need to be updated regularly. “The other pages can be general information about the borough that rarely have to change.”

Other important and evergreen sections of the website should be:

- A community section where residents go for all the information they typically ask about, including codes, zoning, police, fire, and parks and recreation.
- The “nuts and bolts on how the borough works” with council members listed (along with pictures) and how to contact them as well as borough staff listings that include contact information.

It’s also important that the website and any communication directs people to the right places and that links work.

For emergency situations, the website can include a “mini-page” with information that is not meant to be there long term but more than just a day. Rooney said one client had a county garage collapse, so the borough included a mini-page with information on where to park.

Savvy Citizen’s Brown said that websites are important to a communications plan but not if they rely on a “pull strategy.”

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“Pull communication is very passive,” she said, for example, “the borough puts information on the website and just hopes that residents go to it.”

A push strategy, on the other hand, would actually lead residents to the site.

She said to remember residents aren’t going to the website every day like it’s a news channel, so that means important information must go out to them.

This can mean reaching out to them through an app like Savvy Citizen or even a monthly newsletter that directs them back to the website.

Newsletters

Digital newsletters also can be a way to encourage residents to use the website by writing articles that are short and direct them to go to the website for more information.

Perhaps, more importantly, this sort of link or push to the website gives officials the opportunity to offset “rogue” groups who put out false, misleading, or incomplete information.

“I am a big fan of the monthly digital newsletter,” Rooney said because material may be out of date with a quarterly one. Her suggestions for articles included bulleted items of what was discussed at a council or committee

meeting as well as progress on ongoing projects.

If a printed newsletter is also needed, she suggested producing that quarterly.

“What we’ve heard on return of investment [in a monthly newsletter] is that there are fewer phone calls” about routine items such as trash pickup, recycling, or events. That means less staff time is spent answering these repetitive calls.

Social Media & More

By having a newsletter more often, with timely and very brief articles, social media posts are more or less created in advance. Rooney suggested taking newsletter articles and scheduling a few posts every week.

No matter where the posts originate, all departments, commissions, boards, etc., should all be under the umbrella of the borough, she said.

Beyond the usual social media of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Rooney pointed out that setting up a YouTube channel, which is free, is the perfect location for videos of meetings, events, and projects. Then, these items can be linked to from digital communications, from the newsletter to a Tweet.

If a municipality’s resources for communication are small, start

small, Rooney reminded, by using tools like Hootsuite that would allow staff to schedule posts to multiple social media platforms.

Brown said borough officials have asked her why they need anything beyond Facebook. Her answer is that this social media platform regularly only shows 10 percent of a page’s followers a post.

“They think timely information is getting out,” but it’s not, which is why boroughs need to have a number of strategies.

Apps, Push notifications

Direct communication with residents through alerts either as texts or calls is something many municipalities have had set up for some time.

“They can’t be abused,” Rooney said because residents will ignore important messages or opt out.

However, Brown said for regular communication, a service like Savvy Citizen can be a way to create community as well as inform.

The app has become very popular with PA boroughs, which Brown said is the result of positive word-of-mouth among municipal officials. Additionally, Savvy Citizen is scalable so a borough of any size can use it.

These types of calendar and mass notification app, allows an



administrator to post something to a calendar of events through a dashboard and have it also update the website.

“It kills two birds with one stone. It consolidates part of communication efforts.”

This style of notification can also target the notifications it sends. For example, an alert about a water problem can be sent to the specific area/ward that is affected.

These apps can also provide automated information to subscribers. For example, one borough had an employee manually typing in weather alerts from the National Weather Service. Now, through Savvy Citizen, that information is “pushed” to residents’ phones, who have opted in.

Additionally, a borough can also schedule notifications, such as changes in the garbage schedule around holidays.

Brown said she’s heard the argument that “our population skews older,” but Savvy Citizen did analysis and quickly realized people 65 and older have smartphones and use apps.”

This notification service doesn’t just have to be just about an app or the cellphone. The same type of system can send emails or simple text messages to residents.

“We won’t reach everybody, but if they want to be reached, we want them to know” that there are options to get important borough and community news.

Staffing

While none of these digital communication options take specialized skills, they do take time.

Rooney said her company spends 15 to 20 hours each week for her municipal clients.

With that time commitment in mind, she suggested splitting up duties, such as website updates, social media scheduling, and newsletter creation. For some information, say about tourist-centric events or places, a municipality should rely on business or professional organizations, such as a chamber of commerce, to get the word out.

Using a social media scheduler like Hootsuite can make posting to these sites more efficient and less time consuming. News items can be planned in advance and the app will post the items on chosen dates and times.

If there is an emergency or a last minute item that needs to be posted on social media, that can still be done.

Another bit of help can come from software that creates and emails newsletters, such as Constant Contact and Mail Chimp. These options also can create a print-style newsletter as well as sending emails to residents.

“You need to get the right tools,” Rooney said, but the bottom line is “You can only do what you can do.”

To keep track of and coordinate communication efforts, she said a free Google calendar works well and can be shared with others.

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Brown agreed that sharing the communication tasks is the only way, along with coordinating these efforts.

Even with multiple departments and individuals posting, the borough manager or police chief or council can limit authorization on how or when items are posted.

Savvy Citizen, for example, allows for as many employees to have access to posting but that doesn't mean their can't be someone also set up as the person to authorize some or all of the posts.

Evaluating Costs

Not every borough can afford a consultant for digital communication or for someone else to take care of it on an ongoing basis, but borough officials should do a thorough review of all costs associated with communication before making a final determination.

As for an app like Savvy Citizen, pricing is based on population. "We wanted to make sure it was available for little guys," Brown said.

A borough of under 500 people would pay \$20 a month, while

one with a population closer to 2,000 would be \$69. For exact amounts, a borough can go to the company website, enter its ZIP code and get a cost.

"It's not based on number of times you use it. The borough can send an unlimited number of messages and have as many administrators as they want," Brown said.

No matter a borough's size, digital communication is within its reach from monthly newsletters to scheduled social media posts to pushed notifications. **B**

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