City of Asheville

Communication and Marketing Plan
Social Media Addendum
Last Revised 9/20/11

City of Asheville
Social Media Plan

Social media is changing the way we work, connect and communicate. The way cities choose to use social media is continually evolving, as developers add new tools and applications emerge. It is exciting to imagine the potential these tools hold to support the work of the City of Asheville – especially during tight budgets.

The purpose of this plan, a supplement to the City of Asheville's Communications and Marketing Plan, is to outline Phase I Action Items for establishing a social media presence. The plan takes into consideration the way the city will form a formal social media presence, who in the city should use social media and whether to use a centralized or decentralized approach as well as issues related to elected officials and staff who use social media personally, "etiquette" considerations, and legal issues.

Defining Social Media

Credit to Justin Belleme
Social media primarily are Internet- and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information. Social media users can post photos, videos, comments and links to other information to create content on any imaginable topic. Sometimes this is referred to as "user-generated content" or "consumer-generated media."

Social media tools include:
• Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace.
• Blogs.
• Microblogs such as Twitter.
• Video sharing sites such as YouTube and iReport.
• Photo sharing sites such as TwitPic and Flickr.
• Wikis, or shared encyclopedias such as Wikipedia.
• RSS feeds.
• Mobile phone content uploaded to the Internet, and ever-emerging technological tools.

Social media, while accessible through the Internet, is generally thought of differently than a city website. A city website is the official voice of the city, and is recognized as such. Cities typically assign website content development and posting duties to staff as part of their official job duties. Sometimes those duties include a supervisor's review of content before it is posted to the website.

Social media is often perceived as a less formal method of communication. **Cities that are using social media to communicate official city-sponsored messages should be managing that official social media content in much the same way it manages the city newsletter or web site.**

Social Media Considerations

Credit to Justin Belleme
Because social media is relatively new, understanding of liability issues is beginning to emerge. As Asheville moves into using social media tools, staff should be aware that the city could face legal challenges if incorrect, false or non-public information is posted on a site used officially by the city or personally by employees or elected officials. The city will also be subject to considerations surrounding censorship and First Amendment rights if and when it engages in two-

way communication via social media outlets. In other settings, the city may face data requests that could include content posted to social media sites on city and/or personal computers, depending upon who and where content was posted. Additionally, the city should follow its established Web site policy for linking to information in order to protect itself from unauthorized commercial endorsement.

The following sections are intended to help set a course for identifying who should speak for the city, when the city wishes to use social media, where it wants to engage, and more. These considerations are used as the foundation for the Phase I implementation recommendations.

Is social media different than the city's web site?

Credit to Justin Belleme
Yes. The city website functions as an official voice of the city. Often, city websites include formal communication about city events, projects, policies and ordinances. City websites primarily are one-way forms of communication where cities "push" information out to the public, and websites rarely offer opportunities to directly comment on information on the site.

Social media can be used as an official voice of the city, but in a different manner. One of the primary goals of social media is to encourage two-way communication. Information shared in a social media setting typically happens in real-time. Social media information is "pulled" by followers. Simply put, in social media people choose who they want to connect with by deliberately "following" or "friending" them. The act of following someone on microblogs or friending someone on Facebook means that when they visit their accounts, they will see information posted by the people, groups and organizations they follow, and can comment right away on what they see, hear and read – they can have a conversation in real time. While this two-way relationship can be beneficial to engaging citizens, managing this conversation with citizens takes significant staff time and resources and raises issues of censorship should the city attempt to moderate such discussion.

How should the city use social media?

Social media can complement other communications vehicles such as the city's e-newsletter and web site, reach audiences the city otherwise may not connect with, assist with the communication of emergency messages, and partially or fully replace some communications tools. It can also help the city gather valuable input from residents about programs and services while fostering citizen engagement in government decision-making.

Key Messages

See key messages outlined in the City of Asheville Communication and Marketing Plan

Which social media tools is the city using?

Twitter (Microblog): Twitter works well for taking the pulse of current events such as breaking news and special events. Microblogs also work well for sharing announcements about projects such as a street being closed for resurfacing, sharing information about parking, and registration opening for parks and recreation programs. This tool can be used to monitor public opinion.

Facebook (Social network): Facebook works well as a gathering place for people interested in the city, and for building affinity for the city. Social networks can serve as a place to post information and pictures of community events, a project that succeeded because of volunteer efforts, or even of various city staff performing interesting aspects of their jobs. Facebook is a two-way communication channel, allowing the city to interact with members of the community and address any comments, questions, or concerns they may have. It also allows the city to monitor public opinion.

YouTube (Video sites): The city utilizes YouTube for its video content. Posting video can be a way to provide a comprehensive picture of a city event such as awards and even be a virtual way to show residents the range of work done by city staff.

Blog: The CoA blog is set up in a news outlet format of articles, photos and video. This platform works well for stories explaining city operations, information pieces, and "good news stories."

Flickr: Flicker provides an opportunity to share photo galleries which can then be teased on Facebook, Twitter or even the blog.

How should the city approach new forms of social media?

New forms of social media are being created everyday, and some of these may be beneficial to the city; however, not every social medium is appropriate for the city's use. **Creating and maintaining social media pages is time-consuming, and it is worse to create an account and not maintain it than to never create an account.** As such, new forms of social media should be researched and usefulness analyzed before a city account is created on any social media site.

If the city is to create a new social media page, the following questions should be addressed:

- How popular is the site? Are there enough users to warrant a city account?

- What is the general purpose for using the site?

- Does the site overlap with over forms of social media that the city is already using? (i.e., Facebook vs. Friendster or MySpace)

- What kind of audience is the social media site attracting? Is the audience general enough for the city's purpose?

These questions can be used to determine whether or not it is worthwhile to create an account for the City of Asheville.

Should the city take a centralized or decentralized approach to social media?

Credit to Justin Belleme

A combination of both. They City of Asheville should create a primary account which encompasses all departments and actions taken by the city. Only a few people should have access to log on the account at any time (one or two persons is preferable) and it should be

checked regularly. It is important to maintain this account and make it a hub of important information for all citizens.

At the same time, there are certain city departments and services that would be best served through independent accounts. This will allow specific audiences to access information they need without having to receive information from all city departments (i.e., Civic Center patrons, Transit riders, etc.). These decentralized accounts also allow time sensitive information to come from those with certain area of expertise (emergency notifications from Asheville Fire & Rescue). Maintaining a social media page is time-consuming and can be difficult, and it is recommended that only a few departments use decentralized accounts. Should a department decide to operate it's own account, whomever is responsible for its maintenance should be educated on the responsible use of social media.

Are postings to social media government data and/or subject to records retention?

Yes, if the content is related to city business it is considered public record under the North Carolina Public Records law.

Official use vs. personal use of social media

Staff with official responsibility for social media should receive training on how to manage social media and should also have these responsibilities designated as part of their job description and work plan. Access to social media sites through city technology and during regular work hours would be approved, and may be considered for remote access privileges so that timely postings to social media can happen in accordance with the city's guidelines. When staff are assigned to serve as the official voice and required to access social media after hours, the city should consider what this means in terms of their employment status. Appendix 1 is designed to provide guidelines for employees who are assigned to serve as the official voice of the city and should be reviewed during training with employees who are assigned this responsibility.

Staff without explicit job duties detailed in a job description should be expected to follow the city's existing computer use policy when it comes to using city technology to access social media sites. The city's computer use policy outlines when and how staff can use city technology for personal use, employee privacy expectations, reference other policies that might come to bear such as harassment prevention policies, and discipline for violating the policy.

City staff without official social media responsibilities likely use social media to keep in touch with friends, family, colleagues and groups with mutual interests. As part of their personal use of social media, it's not difficult to imagine that sometimes city staff may comment on city-related issues or use their personal site to communicate about their professional work. Such a scenario often starts out innocently enough, but can lead to problems down the road.

An example of use of a personal social media account that crosses the line from strictly personal to city related could be of the public works director who has a personal Twitter account. The public works director created the account to talk about and follow others with shared interests on topics such as hobbies, raising kids, and professional sports.

After being on Twitter a while, the public works director finds an official account for a professional group that he belongs to – the American Public Works Association. He already regularly visits the APWA website, but following the APWA on Twitter means he gets real-time updates about things that impact his job – national wastewater rule changes, upcoming conferences, and job openings. He's now started to merge his personal and professional lives.

Now consider that he's developed a following on Twitter that includes his friends who live in the city, and some of their friends start to follow him. One day the public works director realizes he has a broad network of people interested in what he has to say, and some folks are following him just because he works for the city.

He starts to see Twitter as a way to communicate important information to residents about snow emergencies or ice rinks opening, and he does so. His following grows because people know they can get important city-related news when it matters most. At first, the city information being communicated is straightforward, doesn't bear any real negative impact for the city, and actually helps the city do its work – residents are moving their vehicles before plowing begins!

But the city still should consider what it means that the public works director has started to use personal social media for official city business. The city could determine it would like to make use of social media part of the public works director's official job duties. Some questions to consider in this scenario include: What happens if the public works director is disgruntled because a new equipment request is denied and he posts information blasting the council? What if he comments negatively about a staff member, or shares non-public information about that person in his personal social media accounts? What happens if the city faces a data request and a personal computer or other technology has been used to communicate on the topic of interest? What happens if he takes a job in another city and the city loses those connections to the public that he developed via social media?

Before departments or city staffers launch their own sites to promote city information, it is important that they consult with the Community Relations Division to discuss how the account fits into the city's overall communication plan and the best way to disseminate that information. Staff would ask the department for a clear strategy on how the tools support the department's communications plans as well as how the department will resource the tools. See the recommendations about account authorization.

Conclusion

Social media is a powerful new tool that can benefit the city in a number of ways. However, it is also advancing rapidly and new ways of communication are being created everyday. Thus, it is important that the city monitor new forms of social media and be aware of changes made to currently existing forms. Not all social media sites are created equal; in less than a decade, sites like Friendster and MySpace have been risen to prominence and quickly fallen out of public favor. New social media sites may also see a similar fate. Before new accounts are created on social media sites, it should be extensively discussed and researched. Maintaining these sites is difficult and will require time and manpower; it is vital that these resources are not wasted.

Social Media Best Practices

Social media is quickly becoming one of the fastest and easiest methods of communication, especially on a large scale. However, once you hit the "Post" button, anything you've said is now public and available for all to see. It will also reflect on the city of Asheville's government, so it is important to be cautious about what you post. These best practices will offer basic guidelines that should be followed whenever using the city's social media sites to ensure that mistakes can be avoided.

WordPress Blogging Best Practices

The CoA blog is one of the first social media sites that the city began to use, and has provided a way to convey information using a news outlet manner. Articles usually contain video and/or pictures in addition to the story. It is up to the poster to determine the voice necessary for individual blog posts. Some articles may feel more relaxed and casual, while others may read more like a press release; in fact, there are times where press releases can be posted verbatim.

Blog posts see fewer comments than posts on Facebook or Twitter, as the blog is more useful in conveying information than starting conversations or stirring controversy, which tend to incite the most comments. Therefore the blog should be used for simply conveying information, and other sites used for conversational topics.

- **Small post length**

Keep blog posts to a relatively small size. An average post should contain between 200 and 400 words.

- **Share blog posts on other sites**

Share blog posts on other social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Using a widget for this purpose may be effective.

- **Use interesting titles**

An eye-catching title is one of the fastest and easiest ways to raise interest in a blog post. It will also bring in traffic from people using search engines.

- **Use effective key words**

Using key words that people are likely to search for on search engines will increase awareness of the blog, especially among people who do not regularly check the city's other sites.

- **Find a voice**

Blog posts are often less formal than a press release or news story, and often they are a way for the poster to reveal more about himself or herself. As such, blog posts do not need to be all business: use the opportunity to let the poster's personality shine through.

- **Syndicate the RSS feed**

Submit the RSS feed to blog directory and RSS feed directory websites. The RSS feed is one of the top ways readers keep up with the blog and is a valuable resource.

- **Provide links to other sources**

If a source is used for a blog post, then consider linking people to that source. At the very least cite the source at some point.

- **Post early and often**

The more blog posts that the city writes, the more traffic the blog sees. Three to four posts per week is a good average. Remember to post often, but avoid posting late Friday afternoons, as traffic is minimal at this time. Try to have a post ready for Monday mornings, as this is when traffic is very high.

- **Use tags and key words/phrases**

Every blog post should include a list of relevant tags that will allow it to be searched for more easily. Also remember to use key words and phrases often (i.e., "Asheville Police Department")

- **Watch out for "spam"**

If someone posts a link that is not clearly related to the topic at hand, it is most likely spam. These comments can often lead to sites with viruses or malware, so spam comments should be deleted for the safety of other readers.

Facebook Best Practices

Facebook is one of the city's most responsive social media platforms, as readers can easily like or comment on press releases, blog posts, or announcements. Facebook is also the most popular social media site.

Facebook allows users to post pictures as well as videos, making it an effective multimedia platform. It is also an excellent referral site for posting links. In fact, Facebook links are responsible for 18.3% of the blog's page views. This allows readers two opportunities to communicate with the city: they may comment on the Facebook link, or on the blog post itself.

The comment format has provided several opportunities to engage with readers who have questions or concerns, and replies under the CoA account have been met with appreciation by those participating in the online conversation. As on the CoA blog, comments can sometimes stray from the topic at hand or be framed in a style intended to air frustrations or "snark" rather than engage in constructive conversation.

Compared to the city's blog, posts on Facebook need to be more timely. Posts on Facebook can quickly become buried amongst other traffic in people's news feeds, so it is important to time your posts well and to post often enough to earn a spot in people's news feeds.

- **Post regularly, but not too often**

Try to post at least once a day or a few times a week. The more the city posts, the more likely the city will show up in people's news feeds. However, try not to post more than 3-5 times a day unless the information is of high importance. Flooding news feeds is the primary reason Facebook pages get "unliked"or "hidden."

- **Time your Facebook posts**

Instead of posting everything at once, try to spread out posts. Also, traffic on Facebook is heaviest in the mornings and after 5 p.m., so posting at these times will draw the largest number of viewers.

- **Use a conversational tone**

Whereas the blog is more of a one-way communication channel, the Facebook page is two-way. People respond well when the city engages in Facebook conversations with them. When responding to a question or comment, make sure to start your reply with "@nameofuser," to avoid confusion.

- **Link to other sites**

Facebook is a very effective site for linking to the blog, the city's website, or Asheville Today. Remind people about these sites from time to time to ensure that readers are aware of them. However, try to avoid linking to the city's Twitter page, as these pages can sometimes overlap and annoy readers.

- **Avoid arguments and delete obscene posts**

Some people will create arguments using disrespectful posts. Do not respond to these posts, as well as to people who are trying to vent. Also, they city's Facebook page is viewed by people of all ages and posts that contain inappropriate links or language should be deleted. Make sure to get a screen grab of the comment before deleting it, so you have proof that the comment was inappropriate. Remember, you can't win an online argument.

- **Try to delete "spam"**

Some people may post links advertising other sites on the city's posts or wall, and these sites can often contain viruses or malware. As such, if someone posts a link that is clearly not related to the topic at hand, delete it to avoid putting other people's computers at risk. Many of these posts are due to someone hacking the person's account, so only block that person if it continues.

- **Keep things appropriate for mass consumption**

Facebook is a public site used by many people. Anything you post can be seen by everyone and once something has been posted, it cannot be taken back. Even deleting the post is not enough,

as it has already been seen by someone and they may have taken a screen grab of it. **Using a** casual **voice is important, but the message should always be something you would be comfortable seeing in print.**

Twitter Best Practices

Twitter has proven a useful tool for the City of Asheville since the organization launched an account in 2010. The social networking tool has allowed the city to direct the public's attention to news on the blog site and the Asheville Today page of the city's main website. This action has resulted in repeated "retweets" by other users, further propagating the CoA's messages and even resulting in placement in outside media outlets.

Twitter has provided an effective platform for quickly relaying up-to-date messages to city residents which played a large part in the communication plan during blizzards in the winter of 2010/2011. Response from twitter users and local media outlets indicated that the city's use of the social media tool was well received.

The platform has also allowed for a closer comprehension of conversations that are happening in the community but outside normal media formats. Questions and exchanges on twitter gleaned from following several search criteria on the platform Tweetdeck allowed for correct answers and contact information to make their way directly to concerned residents. Responses to questions or concerns on Twitter often resulted in positive feedback from those to whom responses were directed. This kind of interaction increases the perception of a city organization that is increasingly engaged with the public.

- **Use hashtags often**

Hashtags are a way for Twitter users to search for content regarding a specific subject more easily. Here are some current examples: #avlnews, #asheville, #avlent, #avltransit, #avlgov. In short, just about anything preceded by #avl can become a hashtag for the city.

- **Other sites can make tweets more effective**

Getting across information in 140 characters or less is difficult to say the least. However, there are other sites that can help you. Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, Twitpic, and other sites can offer you different ways to make the most out of your 140 characters. Also use a URL shortening service such as bitly.com to save space when linking to other sites.

- **Time your posts**

Avoid tweeting late at night or on weekends, unless the information is timely. Save tweets in the morning instead of posting them late at night, and if its the weekend then save them for Monday. Also avoid posting a bunch of tweets at once. Hootsuite allows you to schedule your tweets so they can be automatically posted at different times. Remember, traffic is heaviest at around 9am and 5pm.

- **Link to other sites**

Twitter, like Facebook, is an effective way to remind others about the city's blog, website, Flickr account, or Asheville Today. Use Twittter to link to those sources often, especially the blog. Try to have all tweets lead back to content on another site. However, try not to tweet links to Facebook posts, as these can often overlap and may annoy readers.

- **Relax**

Tweets are not press releases. Posts on Twitter should be relaxed and more conversational in nature, as readers tend to be more responsive to such a tone.

- **Address questions and comments**

Twitter is a good site for quickly exchanging information, so if someone is asking a question *that can be answered correctly,* then respond to them. Be sure to address them using @twitterusername. However, avoid questions that may lead to long drawn out discussions about policy, etc. on Twitter. Instead, refer the person to the appropriate staff member or info on the website.

- **Avoid arguments**

Sometimes people don't want to ask reasonable questions, they want to vent or argue. Questions that are hostile should be left alone unless a good way to diffuse them can be found. Do not advance an argument on Twitter, Facebook, or the blog comment section. You can't win an argument in those formats because the other people involved can go places you can't. You can also expect any such online arguments to be picked up and broadcast on blogs and media outlets.

- **Address rumors if possible**

If you see an incorrect rumor beginning to spread, then address the rumor by directing them an answer or give them the contact info to someone who can provide them an answer. Address the people who are spreading the rumor using @twitterusername. Response time must be swift to be effective, as Twitter conversations move quickly.

- **Keep things appropriate for mass consumption**

Twitter is a public site. Anything you post can be retweeted and spread around for all to see, and once something has been tweeted, it cannot be taken back. Even deleting the tweet is not enough, as it has already been seen by someone and they may have taken a screen grab of it or retweeted it. **Using a casual voice is important, but the message should always be something you would be comfortable seeing in print.**

Social Media Addendum

From: Dawa Hitch, Director of Communications and Public Engagement
Date: Sept. 1, 2016

To all Asheville employees who manage social media channels for the City:

- A social media page manager is responsible for monitoring comments for adherence to the guidelines set out by the City of Asheville on the social media site s/he is managing. Appropriate action should be taken for comments that do not adhere to the guidelines.

- A social media page manager is expected to check Facebook comments once a day.

- If inappropriate comments, as defined in the social media page's guidelines, are hidden, social media page managers should use "Print Screen" to capture 1) the post with the comment hidden and 2) the time and date located on the desktop.

- Social media page managers should forward any threatening comments to the police department staff or City of Asheville Threat Assessment Team (see Workplace Violence Policy) for review as a potential threat.