

Social Media and Municipalities: Risks and Rewards

More and more Ontario municipalities are coming out of their shells and logging onto social media. Few are venturing boldly, but they are going there just the same. If your municipality is not one of them, we have good news and bad. The bad news is that local residents are already talking about your municipality on social media. You just don't know what they are saying about you. The good news is, your municipality can get engaged (and caught up) fairly easily.

Let's start by taking stock of where you stand. In April 2010, about 25 Ontario municipalities had an official presence on social media. By August 2011 that number grew to more than 125 municipalities – a 600 per cent increase over 15 months. How long it will take the remaining 300 or so to join the trend is anyone's guess, but the smart money is on rapid adoption.

Municipalities are not the last organizations to embrace social media, but they are close. They've been cautious and this deferred decision making on how to approach social media. Use by the private sector, the general public and other levels of government marched forward. Today, the sense that municipalities should be engaged is palpable. More and more residents expect it – and more and more elected officials are discovering its potential. A few may even owe their seats to it.

Those municipal managers who continue to defer the adoption of social media are left holding a loaded spring. The longer they put it off the greater the demand grows to join the online community.

Where do they begin? What will they say? Who will say it? And why?

These are all valid questions, particularly when bundled with what will it cost us? What are the staffing commitments and what are the risks?

In the remainder of this article, we will try to answer all of those questions and more. We will assume that you know what social media is and start with why you should invest in it. If we have assumed too much, please Google Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, then sit down with anyone who owns an iPhone.

The most practical incentive for municipalities is the ability for social media to transmit and disseminate information very quickly. To give you a sense of how fast, consider that hours before North American news media covered the August riots in England, people around the world were following real-time reports from residents, witnesses and participants. One particularly prophetic tweet captured that BBC's news van was engulfed in flames.

It is ironic that fire departments and other emergency responders were among the first municipal service providers to embrace social media. Pioneering municipalities such as San Francisco recognized that if an earthquake hits, instant advice to the public could be broadcast, provided that the audience was listening. Early on they set out to build that audience so that they were connected to the public, just in case.

Parks, recreation and culture divisions showed pioneered use as well. Want to get more people out to your festival? Why not broadcast a picture of the opening band on stage, along with a message that there is still an hour to come down and catch the main attraction?

The success of these initiatives, which were often unauthorized, prompted a number of municipalities to explore official Facebook pages and YouTube channels. During the past 12 months or so, the growing popularity of Twitter has also prompted a number of municipal accounts. They are using these forums to share basic information, to promote their communities and to keep an eye out for building political issues.

Importantly, most federal and provincial politicians now have Twitter accounts. Their municipal cousins have taken note. Use by mayors and councilors is ballooning. We wish we could say that the adoption of municipal social media policies has kept pace, but surprisingly few have introduced them, which brings us to the risks.

One common refrain from critics is “how can you share any meaningful information in 140 characters or less, which is the limit for Twitter posts?” One obvious answer is that successful careers have been ended by single posts. So in fact, quite a lot can happen in 140 characters.

In our view, municipalities should have at least three social media policies. There should be a general policy for all staff. A social media post made on an employee’s personal time but that harms your municipality’s reputation or hampers its operations can constitute grounds for disciplinary action or dismissal. Every municipality should make sure their employees know this. A policy is needed to guide their judgments about social media use, while at work and after hours and ensure that employees understand they are not to communicate on the municipality’s behalf unless given specific permission.

Secondly, your municipality should have a policy to guide the official use of social media by employees who are given permission to speak on the municipality’s behalf – “designated communicators.” One format that we introduced with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario was a simple green light, yellow light and red light model. AMO’s social media managers have a green light to communicate on matters that are always safe, such as posting AMO’s analysis of proposed legislation. A yellow light is assigned to posts that could be contentious and require managerial approval, such as a municipality’s resolution to criticize the proposed legislation. Finally, a red light is assigned to posts that are inappropriate, such as criticizing the MPP who introduced the legislation.

A third social media policy is recommended for elected officials. It’s best to have clear codes of conduct with respect to the use of social media during council meetings. Many don’t allow it. Montreal does. It’s your council’s decision to make, but they should all be on the same page before something awkward comes along. Similarly, they may want to set out expectations with respect to the tone of their posts. One would hope they follow the same standard that is followed around the council table. Over the past year there have also been several controversies involving posts that relate to the content of closed meetings. These occurrences have been toxic. Invariably they sow discord, tarnish a municipality’s reputation and expose taxpayers to legal liabilities. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Once policies are in place, feel free to start small. Lurk rather than launch. Join the legion of municipal managers that are finally joining LinkedIn. Take two minutes to open your own Twitter account. You may want to reserve your Facebook for your social life. That's its strength. Next, pay attention to how news media, elected officials and respected colleagues are using Twitter. Resist the urge to post anything until you have taken some time to get to know the rules. When in doubt, conduct yourself as though you were at a community event within your city's square – because in a very real sense, you are.

When you are ready to start posting, try to be:

- Helpful
- Humble
- Not overly promotional
- Positive
- Productive, and
- Interesting

If you are using a personal account, use your own name and act accordingly. If you aren't 100 per cent sure you want to post something, hit delete. Feel free to sleep on your decision. The witty tweet you dream up at 11:00 p.m. will reach a larger audience at 10:00 a.m. the next morning, if you still think it's a good idea.

Resist the urge to engage in debates or spats. Your best bet is to be diplomatic and build up a loyal following over time. Trust in your audience to engage anyone who is being particularly unreasonable.

That brings us to the matter of "what's this going to cost my municipality?" The best answer is, "it depends." A number of municipalities have invested significant time, energy and IT resources into designing sophisticated pages and programs. We're not sure that's necessary for the same reason that we hate seeing a lime on a glass of Coke. Why mess with a formula that obviously works? Many municipalities have standard Facebook and Twitter pages that are very successful. They were set up in seconds at no cost; followers know how to navigate these pages without fail; and they facilitate the kind of two-way relationships that sets social media apart from other communications tools.

Staffing requirements can also be simple. One municipality that impresses us estimates that each day, one staff member dedicates about one hour's time to maintaining its social media presence. It's a single tier municipality with a population of about 350,000 people. Their program isn't fancy, but it works. Other municipalities have managed to provide full time maintenance of their social media activities by assigning staff on a rotating basis.

By all means, invest more into the development and maintenance of your social media presence. What's important is determining the needs of your individual municipality and devoting the appropriate time and resources to meet your communications objectives.

One last caveat to add: while it may be true that people under the age of 25 live and breathe this stuff, don't assign your social media responsibilities to your intern. The connections that you foster on social media are as important as any other stakeholder relationship – and at least as risky, if not more. Use social media to engage. Use it to listen to your community and to understand it better. But recognize that from time to time, senior level attention is going to have to be invested into ensuring that your social media presence supports your municipality's brand and values.

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