

# Transportation Outreach Planner

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## Public Outreach Strategies

### Internet-based Communication Through Social Media

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#### Recommended Target Groups

##### Education

College Education  
High School Diploma  
No High School Diploma

##### Language

Creole  
Other  
Spanish

##### Disability

Hearing Impaired  
Other  
Physically Challenged  
Sight Impaired

##### Income

Low Income  
Middle to Affluent

##### Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner  
Vehicle Owner

##### Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

##### Age

Seniors  
Working Age Adults  
Youth

## Strategy Class

- Technology

## Strategy Types

- Educational

## Description

Internet-based communication refers to various types of tools and technology that allow people to exchange information on-line via computers and mobile devices. Social media is a form of internet-based communication that enables the user to exchange information, interact with others, and remain anonymous (if desired). Most social media tools can be incorporated or linked to an existing website. Such tools include: <sup>1</sup>

- **Blogs** – These sites are generally used to post online journal entries and may include discussion forums. They are often used to express opinions and experiences. In some cases, aggregator software is used to collect feeds from different blogs so they can be posted in one location (i.e., Drudge Report and the Huffington Post).
- **Chats**: This is an on-line platform that allows live, real-time discussions (i.e. instant messages and website chat rooms).
- **Discussion Forums** – Discussion forums are platforms that enable users to hold discussions (or threads) on a variety of topics. Anyone who joins the discussion forum can start a thread or respond to an existing discussion. However, the discussions are not live.
- **Media Sharing Sites** – These sites allow users to share media, such as video and photographs (i.e. [flickr](#) and [YouTube](#)).
- **Social Bookmarking** – Enables users to interact by tagging websites and searching through websites bookmarked by others (i.e. Blinklist).
- **Social News** - Provides users the ability to vote for articles and make comments (i.e. Digg and Reddit).
- **Social Networking Sites** – These are sites that focus on social networks (i.e. [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#)).
- **Wikis** - These sites allow users to collaboratively edit content (i.e. [Wikipedia](#))

In addition to the above, the following can be used to enhance social media communication and public engagement: <sup>2</sup>

- **Crowd Sourcing** – Crowdsourcing is a method of soliciting feedback or comments on an issue from a large number of independent participants. It can be used to identify problems or develop solutions.
- **On-line Jams** – On-line jams are discussions forums that are moderated by an expert and are time-limited. The moderator reviews comments, provides summary reports, and guides the process.
- **Mashups** – Mashups are web applications that combine the content of more than one source to create a new information source. For example, Google Transit Maps collects transit information from jurisdictions throughout the US. Google then maps the information and provides it in 12 languages.
- **Cloud-Based Computing** – Cloud-based computing provides a means of sharing resources, software, and data over the internet. Such technology can be used for game simulations and the dissemination and collection of large quantities of data.

## Special Uses

Agencies can use internet-based communication and social media to: <sup>3</sup>

- Disseminate information
- Solicit comments and feedback
- Create forums for discussion
- Increase public access to a wide variety of data and resources (on demand)
- Provide multiple options for public engagement
- Educate the public
- Conduct surveys

## When to Use

On-line communication services can be used any time. Internet-based social media communication can be used to provide information on projects and to solicit input on proposed plans. Agencies can also use social media to obtain feedback and monitor reactions to existing projects or policies. It is also possible to use on-line platforms to educate the public and provide access to information and resources. Internet-based communication also provides a useful resource for improving and expanding communication with hard to reach populations and people who have difficulty participating in traditional public involvement activities. <sup>4</sup>

## Cost

**\*\*\* High (\$10000 to \$50000)**

The cost of creating and managing a website that provides social media communication can be high depending on the complexity

of the on-line services and how interactive the site is. Expenses include equipment, software, development costs, and staff time. The costs may range from several hundred dollars to several thousands of dollars. For example, a simple blog or Facebook page may be relatively inexpensive to create and maintain. However, a site that enables users to edit planning documents and provides on-line jams will require substantial technological and staff resources to develop and maintain.

In most cases, once an on-line site is operating, the most expensive costs for maintaining the site will be staff time. However, the expense is generally outweighed by the benefits. For example, agencies can save a great deal of money by disseminating information on-line rather than through direct mail. It is also possible to handle public information requests more efficiently on-line, since programs can be created to handle frequent requests.

Low (up to \$999)	*	<i>Disclaimer:</i> The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.
Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)	**	
High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)	***	
Very High (Above \$50,000)	****	

## Time

### \*\*\* Multiyear

Although most internet-based social media sites can be developed within a relatively short amount of time, they require on-going maintenance and updates. For example, a site that is very interactive may require daily monitoring to ensure that the public comments and questions are addressed and properly monitored. However, a site that is only used to broadcast announcements and information may only require weekly updates.

1 to 3 months	*	<i>Disclaimer:</i> The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.
6 months to a year	**	
Multiyear	***	

## Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

- **Develop a strategy for social media communication.** Social media can be used in a variety of ways to enhance public involvement efforts. To ensure that social media tools are being used effectively, agencies should determine what they want to achieve and the message they want to convey to the public. They also need to have a clear understanding of who their audience is and that target group uses social media. The following provides recommendations for using social media platforms: <sup>5</sup>

-Social Networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, can be used to establish a web presence, recruit volunteers, promote projects or programs, conduct surveys, or solicit feedback from specific demographic groups.

-A professional networking site, such as LinkedIn, can be used to maintain communication with the media, consultants, academic experts, and other professional contacts.

-Sites such as YouTube and Flickr can be used to educate the public or to promote projects or programs.

-Twitter can be used to inform the public of upcoming events or to provide transportation/transit related news and alerts.

- **Decide on the level of public participation that will be provided on-line.** Social media allows for varying levels of participation. However, greater public participation also requires more staff time and technological resources. Below are some of the options that agencies may consider: <sup>6</sup>

-Interactive participation: In this option, agencies can post plans, policies, maps, and other documents on-line and enable the public to edit or change the content. Users can also hold on-line discussions, as well as cooperate and collaborate with others in developing joint recommendations. Examples include Wikipedia. This level of participation requires substantial resources to develop and manage. Some agencies restrict the placement of information by the public on a website due to security risks and the time needed to monitor postings.

-Basic posting, broadcasting, and networking: In this case, agencies use social media to broadcast information. Users are able to respond with comments and hold public discussions. This requires the least amount of effort to undertake and can take the form of blogs, tweets, surveys, discussion forums, and chat rooms.

- **Ensure that on-line communication is consistent with agency policies and procedures.** Agencies need to develop a protocol for on-line communication. The on-line practices should be consistent with the agency's policies for receiving and transmitting information, and should include procedures for public information requests. This is important because there is a

tendency to be less formal with on-line communication. Furthermore, employees need to be aware that emails, twitters, and other types of social media communication can be considered part of the public record if conducted through an agency's official communication sites.<sup>7</sup>

- **Be familiar with regulations governing “fair use” and public domain materials, as well as copyright regulations.** Although agencies can use the internet to create a virtual library of material for the public to access, it is important to ensure that the information that is posted complies with regulations relating to intellectual property rights. Before posting any information on-line, agencies need to determine whether the material is considered part of the public domain, or whether it is copyrighted. Most government documents are part of the public domain. The same is true for information that is generated through social media communication (i.e. postings to blogs or discussion forums). However, there may be some publications that may be subject to copyright regulations, such as studies or documents produced by contractors or academic institutions. To publish, disseminate, or duplicate such materials, an agency must compensate the owner and follow the conditions of the copyright or licensing regulations. To avoid such issues, agencies can provide a citation to the document and include a link to the source (if the document is available on-line). It is important to note that photographs, clip art, videos, and music are also subject to intellectual property rights. As such, agencies need to make sure they have the licensing rights to such material in order to avoid any potential legal issues. They also need to monitor what gets posted on-line by the public to ensure there are no issues with intellectual property rights.<sup>8</sup>
- **Determine how electronic documents will be archived.** Agencies need to develop an electronic archiving system prior to engaging in social media communication. Since such information can be considered part of the public record, agencies need to ensure they have sufficient storage capacity for the volume of information that may be generated. They also need to create a system for cataloguing and retrieving the information. <sup>9</sup>
- **Assign staff to manage communication and keep the information updated.** For a social media site to remain relevant to the public, it must provide valuable information, be updated on a regular basis, and provide a constant stream of new information. Assigning a dedicated staff person to manage the site will help to ensure that public requests are addressed in a timely manner, that information is regularly updated, and that public postings are monitored for inappropriate content. <sup>10</sup>
- **Promote the site. In order to attract users to a social media or internet site, the site needs to be promoted.** Information should be included on all agency material, including newsletters, brochures, reports, etc. An agency can send email announcements to its constituents to let them know of the site. If the agency has sufficient resources, paid advertisement should be used to further promote the site.
- **Monitor participation.** On-line communication offers agencies a means of monitoring and measuring participation that is not possible with other public involvement tools. For example, Facebook and YouTube offer extensive metrics on how people use the sites and frequency of use. It is also possible for agencies to evaluate their website using the following techniques:
  - Rating and voting mechanisms can be used to obtain information on likes and dislikes.
  - WebsiteGrader.com can be used to assess the technical quality of a website.
  - Compete.com can be used to analyze the site's traffic. This same site can be used to compare the results of other agency websites..

## Recommended Target Demographics

As internet-based communication has become more affordable and accessible to the general public, it has become possible to reach a wider demographic through this medium of communication. No longer is it necessary to have a computer. More people are using cellular phones and other mobile devices to access social media sites and communicate online. Indeed, a survey of smart phone users by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that one in four users utilize their device as the primary tool to go online. Pew research also shows that blacks and Hispanics are more likely to use their cell phones to access the internet.<sup>11</sup>

Because social media sites generally collect demographic data on their users, it is possible to target specific groups through these communication platforms. However, it is important to note that, even though the use of social media sites is growing, some groups remain under-represented, such as low income households. Indeed, research published by Google indicates that the majority of users of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube tend to be college educated working age adults (ages 25 to 54), with household incomes of \$50,000 or above. <sup>12</sup>

When developing an on-line communication strategy, agencies need to remember that there is a segment of the population that are suspicious of social media platforms or that view them as cold and impersonal. In addition, there are people who have chosen not to have computers or on-line services. Agencies that focus too much on communicating through social media or obtaining public input through such channels can run the risk of alienating those who do not have access to on-line communication platforms. <sup>13</sup>

## Lessons Learned/Challenges

- **Avoid information overload. Information overload can manifest itself in two ways.** First, the volume of information that is placed on-line can make it difficult for the user to navigate through the site. Second, if too many messages are sent to users too frequently, the agency's messages may be viewed as junk mail or spam. <sup>14</sup>
- **On-line participation does not represent the entire community.** Much like participation at public meetings, on-line participation cannot be viewed as a representative sample of a community. As is the case with regular public involvement efforts, a small group of people tend to be active and vocal, while the majority of the communities do not participate. This is referred to as the “Power Law of Participation” or the “90-9-1 Principal” (90 percent never contribute, nine percent contribute a

little, and one percent account for most participation).<sup>15</sup>

- **On-line participation can complement public involvement efforts, but should take the place of public meetings.**
- **On-line information should be updated frequently in order to maintain public interest.** To show that information is current, it is important to include the date of each update. This helps the reader determine the credibility and relevance of the site.
- **All materials offered on-line should be provided in formats that enable persons with disabilities to access the information.**

## Case Studies

The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit uses a variety of social media platforms to communicate with its customers. In addition to having a blog, a Facebook page, and sending email alerts, BART uses Twitter to send messages to its users regarding transit services and inform them of new content on its website. This is part of the agency's effort to provide more interactivity and real-time information (<http://www.bart.gov/news/twitter/index.aspx>).<sup>16</sup>

The City of Portland, Oregon used social media to engage the public in the development of the city's 25-year plan. In addition to traditional public involvement efforts, the city used Facebook, twitter, Flickr, email and on-line surveys to obtain public feedback and encourage participation (<http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/>).<sup>17</sup>

## For Further Information

**Copyright and Fair Use, Stanford University Libraries:** This website provides useful information on public domain, fair use and copyright regulations ([http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright\\_and\\_Fair\\_Use\\_Overview/chapter8/8-a.html](http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright_and_Fair_Use_Overview/chapter8/8-a.html)).<sup>18</sup>

**Planning Pool:** Planning Pool is a multidisciplinary blog related to urban planning and urban issues. The site provides links, articles and other useful information on transportation and other areas of planning. (<http://planningpool.com/about/mix-urban-planning-social-media/>).<sup>19</sup>

**SeeClickFix:** This site provides tools to help communities use social media to report problems. It allows for map based reporting, twitter and Facebook integration, and smart phone messages (<http://seeclickfix.com/>).<sup>20</sup>

**WikiPlanning:** Wikiplanning offers tools for integrating on-line interactive technologies to civic engagement practices. These tools include multi-media learning sessions, online chat events, message boards, surveys, and downloadable podcasts of proposed projects (<http://www.wikiplanning.org/index.php?P=virtualcharrette>).<sup>21</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> Fergusson, Daniella , "Why Mix Urban Planning and Social Media?" Planning Pool, 20 September 2011, <<http://planningpool.com/about/mix-urban-planning-social-media/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Nash, Andrew, "2.0 Applications for Improving Public Participation in Transport Planning," 14 November 2009, Vienna Transport Strategies, 20 September 2011, < <http://www.andynash.com/nash-publications/2009-Nash-Web2forPT-14nov09.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Internet-based Communication," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 <<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>5</sup> Cravens, Jayne, "Nonprofit Organizations, NGOs & Online Social Networking: Advice and Commentary" 5 August 2011, Coyote Communications, 22 September 2011, <<http://www.coyotecommunications.com/outreach/osn.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Fergusson, Daniella , "Why Mix Urban Planning and Social Media?"

<sup>7</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>8</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>9</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>10</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>11</sup> Washington, Jesse, "For Minorities, New 'Digital Divide' Seen," 10 January 2011, Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, <<http://www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2011/For-minorities-new-digital-divide-seen.aspx>>.

<sup>12</sup> "Double Click, Ad Planner, The 100 Most Visited Sites: United States," January 2011, Google, 21 September 2011, <<http://www.google.com/adplanner/static/top100countries/us.html/>>.

<sup>13</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>14</sup> FHWA, Internet-based Communication."

<sup>15</sup> Fergusson, Daniella , "Why Mix Urban Planning and Social Media?"

<sup>16</sup> Bay Area Rapid Transit, "Twitter Feed," 21 September 2011, <<http://www.bart.gov/news/twitter/index.aspx>>.

<sup>17</sup> City of Portland, "Portland Plan: Public Participation," 21 September 2011, <<http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Stanford University Libraries, "Copyright and Fair Use: Welcome to the Public Domain," 2010, Stanford University, 20 September 2011, <[http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright\\_and\\_Fair\\_Use\\_Overview/chapter8/8-a.html](http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright_and_Fair_Use_Overview/chapter8/8-a.html)>.

<sup>19</sup> Planning Pool, "About," 22 September, 2011, <<http://planningpool.com/about/>>.

<sup>20</sup> SeeClickFix, "Tools for Governing," 22 September 2011, <<http://seeclickfix.com/>>.

<sup>21</sup> WikiPlanning, "The Virtual Design Charette," 20 September 2011, <<http://www.wikiplanning.org/index.php?P=virtualcharrette>>.