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SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COUNCILS

Engage or ignore?



By Jason Dawson
Community Relations Manager
Northland Regional Council

Social media have changed the way in which we work, do business and socialise.

As expectations grow on Councils to engage, work openly, be more accountable and move faster on issues, social media provide the ideal platform to achieve real results. The other great thing for cash-strapped Councils is that nearly all social media tools are free to use and can be set up in a matter of minutes.

So how can social media help Councils? It keeps your citizens informed, helps them report problems, enhances democracy, assists with campaigns, helps build communities and deliver services. Other benefits include reaching audiences who do not usually participate in civic issues, such as young people.

One of the most successful ways of Councils

using social media is to keep their citizens up-to-date with important, time-critical information about their community. Many Councils are realising that delivering public notices, civil defence warnings, job vacancies and event information through social media channels can vastly increase their reach for very little cost.

The social nature of this channel also offers another advantage – allowing people to forward your message to family, friends, workmates and others, which helps important news to travel faster and further than you could manage on your own.

The tsunami warnings of 2009, and more recently in 2010, spread quickly through social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook. A few months before the Ministry of Civil Defence launched its Twitter account, Northland Regional Council posted confirmation on Twitter that no tsunami had been generated from an earthquake in Vanuatu on October 8, 2009. Through its tweet, the Council provided a link to the Ministry's website, which



achieved 1298 clicks, 196 shares on Facebook and 186 comments. Such is the power of forwarding messages through social media.

Local democracy and citizen engagement are important priorities for Councils. Social media tools provide excellent opportunities to engage people during public consultation, council, committee and community board meetings at a micro level.

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However, despite the low cost and clear advantages to Councils, a recently commissioned survey by the Association of Local Government Information Management (ALGIM) on Council websites and online services found the use of social media by Councils is still low. Of the 71 Councils who completed the survey, only 24 Councils used Facebook, 17 used Twitter and 15 used YouTube. There was an even lower take-up of other social networking tools such as LinkedIn, Flickr, MySpace and Bebo.

In April 2010, the biennial "Kiwis Count" survey of New Zealanders' satisfaction with their public services was released by the State Services Commission. The result gave another compelling reason for Councils to use social media, with 81% of people surveyed preferring the internet to carry out transactions with public services.

There may be some who still view social media as a novelty, "nice-to-do" service, but the fact is that Councils simply cannot afford to ignore social media anymore. Not engaging now represents a far greater risk to you than getting involved. Remember,

There may be some who still view social media as a novelty, 'nice-to-do' service, but the fact is that Councils simply cannot afford to ignore social media anymore. Not engaging now represents a far greater risk to you than getting involved.

your citizens will still use these networks to talk about you, whether you add your voice to the conversation or not.

- Jason Dawson is on the ALGIM Executive, co-convenes its annual Web Symposium and is presenting on social media at the SOLGM Opus Business School Communications Forum on May 24.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION FORUM

May 24 • Wellington

The forum will cover topics such as:

- TAFM – what it means for communication staff
- Communicating in election year
- Civil defence and crisis communication
- Social media
- Diploma in Local Government Communication
- Case studies from Councils

Minister of Local Government Rodney Hide will be addressing the forum.

Registration fees:

\$400 plus GST – SOLGM members
\$425 plus GST – non members