



Kansas LTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Road & Bridge Agencies

Are You Using Social Media?

By Kirk Raymond

In a profession not especially known for its social skills, does using social media make sense? More and more public works agencies are saying yes. Find out why in this article.

What social media offers

Social media refers to a variety of web and mobile device-based technologies that connect users on social media websites. These sites allow users to share resources such as images, videos, messages, articles, PowerPoints, and micro-blogs. To be competitive with other products, social media providers seek to provide a unique service, such as the sharing of a particular media type—for example, video, for YouTube.

The main benefits of social media are: 1) the ability to share information instantaneously (a fallen tree blocking a road...a traffic signal not operating properly...); and 2) the ability to share links to other related media to obtain more information or resources on a given topic—all from a computer or handheld device, anywhere, anytime.

Types of social media

Social media types vary due to the type of media or information shared and how it is displayed. Here are some services most commonly used by public works departments:

Facebook, a networking site, allows a user to create a unique page (“profile”) that links to other users’ profiles to share images, videos, and messages through “posts” on a profile



page. Twitter provides for real time micro-blog updates, or “tweets,” that users can “follow” (subscribe to). It’s similar to texting on a cell phone, but the text goes to a group of people. A blog is similar to an electronic newsletter but differs in that an e-newsletter is typically distributed through email whereas a blog is viewed on one central location and messages are archived according to date published. Unlike Twitter, a blog does not have a text limit. An RSS, or Rich Site Summary, uses a special reader to check a user’s subscribed informational sources (a.k.a. “feeds”) regularly for new postings. It downloads any updates that it finds, and provides a user interface to monitor and read the feeds. Flickr allows users to upload pictures to share with a community of users. SlideShare is a PowerPoint-sharing site. You can create a link from a blog, Facebook, or Twitter to the location of the PowerPoint on SlideShare’s site. YouTube allows the uploading and sharing of video. Pinterest is a photo sharing site, organized by a theme.

Social media differ from traditional websites in that users are notified of new content rather than having to take the initiative to go to the website to find out what’s new.

Who is using social media?

Some examples of cities in Kansas with links to their social media sites are shown on page 6. Details are below.

The city of Overland Park uses Flickr, Twitter, and Pinterest. They are using Flickr to show pictures of the Antioch and I-435 construction phasing and completion. The Pinterest site includes pictures of workers crack sealing and operating trucks for snow removal. Videos on the YouTube site focus on snow removal issues and high crash intersections to avoid during extreme weather.

Olathe uses their RSS feed to keep citizens informed on recent news.

Garden City’s social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, account for 481 twitter followers and 2,531 “likes” on Facebook. [A “like” creates a connection between the user and the Facebook page to be liked.] Garden City’s public works department uses social media to broadcast things like road closures and water line breaks, said Freburg. Twitter and Facebook have been used in the city since 2009. The City uses Twitter to broadcast news to other media outlets. The city uses Twitter to instantly relay a message to the newspaper and radio in real time, with a link for updates. Although “the message may be short and concise, we can link the message to a longer news piece,” said Freburg.

KDOT uses a variety of social media sites, including Twitter. Kimberly Qualls, KDOT’s Public Affairs Manager, uses Twitter to provide weather updates,



traffic information, and road closures to KDOT's Northeast Kansas audience. Pictures, videos, and other forms of social media can be reached through their Twitter page. Qualls has received feedback that people are using the site. She even received feedback from an unexpected source—a local pizza delivery driver. “He told me tell me he uses our page to get credible and instantaneous road and weather updates,” she said.

Transportation Matters, formerly an e-newsletter of the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), recently switched to a blog format. MARC's Jen Houston said MARC uses Facebook and Twitter to provide kernels of information and then links this information to the blog.

Houston said the blog's advantages are efficient archiving, filtering, and searching, and the ability to engage readers by soliciting and posting their comments. MARC used the Atlanta Regional Council's blog as a model.

Further afield, the Washington State DOT uses SlideShare to upload important meeting presentations and highlight construction projects. Check it out at <http://www.slideshare.net/wsdot>.

Value added from social media

Some social media, like Facebook and blogs, are “primary” social media vehicles that can “drive the others,” said KDOT's Qualls. For example, from a Facebook page, a user could connect to videos posted on YouTube, pictures on Flickr, PowerPoints on SlideShare, or micro-blogs on Twitter. Primary vehicles create the ability to connect to other types of social media, and different types can be used together to reinforce a particular message.

Although “good old days” of radio and television are still here, public outreach can be improved by using social media to provide real-time information—and more options for learning about a topic. Public works departments have an opportunity to communicate more with the public and in ways not available before social media. Like Overland Park, you can use social media to go beyond communicating alerts to informing the public about the great work you do, in some unique and creative ways.

To see an example of a Facebook page that integrates different social media platforms, visit the KDOT Northeast Kansas Facebook page at the link in the sidebar on this page. See also the links from some local public works agencies in Kansas that are using social media, many of which were mentioned in this article. ■

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Take a Look!

Garden City, Kansas

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CityofGardenCityKS>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/cityofgcks>

Kansas Department of Transportation – Northeast KS

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NEKansasKDOT>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NEKansasKDOT>

Olathe, Kansas

- RSS Feed: <http://www.olatheks.org/news/feed>

Overland Park, Kansas

- Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cityofop/>
- Pinterest: <http://pinterest.com/opcares/public-works/>
- YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/OPCares>

Butler County, Kansas

- Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Butler-County-Kansas-Government/257252784339048>
- Twitter: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Butler-County-Kansas-Government/257252784339048>

Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)

- Blog: <http://transportation.marcblogs.org/>