Town Communications

Prepared for the 69th Annual Town Officers Education Conferences

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Municipal Communication: Best Practices and Legal Considerations. This workshop presents best practices for Vermont municipalities in using electronic tools for communication. Topics include the utility, administration, and legal implications of maintaining a municipal website and using social media. Social media platforms discussed include the Vermont-grown community based network Front Porch Forum, as well as popular global social media networks like Facebook. Presenters: Sharon Combes-Farr, Vermont Council on Rural Development; Michael Wood-Lewis, Front Porch Forum; and Charles Merriman, Tarrant, Gillies, Merriman & Richardson.

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Presentation Flow

1. Open the session with all attendees giving a brief statement of their name, role, and why they are attending.
2. Document key reasons for attendance / questions to refer to during the talk.
3. Presentation Order:
    a. Sharon – What is social media? Town case studies. Questions to ask before starting.
    b. Charlie – Open Meeting Law. Email communications bill. Legal considerations for engaging in social media.
    c. Michael – What is Front Porch Forum? Launched in every town. Town Case studies. Best practices for Town engagement.
4. Questions.

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What is Social Media?

1. Webster's Definition: "Forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)."
2. Front Porch Forum: A community-based social network unique to Vermont. Updates from community members are sent electronically as digests via email.
3. Facebook: The world's largest social network. Users create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages, including status updates. Organizations and groups can also create pages and Facebook users can "like" those pages.
4. Twitter: A social networking platform that allows groups and individuals to stay connected through short status messages (140 characters). You cannot block someone from "following."
5. Blogs: A web-based platform for dialogue and discussions on a specific topic or opinion.
6. YouTube: Video hosting.
7. LinkedIn: A social network for professionals.
8. Instagram: A free photo and video sharing app now owned by Facebook. Easy tools to enhance photos.

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Engaging with Social Media: What's In It for You?

1. Helps get your message out and make your community more connected.
2. When done right, it is interactive and instantaneous.
3. Removes the filters or layers between your audience and your message.
4. Gets you free publicity and communication.
5. Responds quickly to events and issues.
6. Reaches people you may miss with traditional media.
7. If you aren't doing it, other people might be doing it for you and you cannot control what they are saying!

Questions to Ask Before Engaging with Social Media

1. Do you know your goals and audience?
2. Do you have the technical resources for the long term – volunteers?
3. Will you really keep it updated and respond to posts from others?
4. Do you have a specific policy that clearly outlines the roles & responsibilities of account managers and municipal staff?
5. How will you comply with State Records Retention Guidelines and OPRA requests?
6. Have you thought about information security?

I'm Ready. What Are The Next Steps?

1. Make sure you asked and answered the above questions before you begin.
2. Determine your communication goals.
3. Determine the audience for your social media presence.
4. Leverage resources from the Vermont League of Cities & Towns.
5. Start with one medium – e.g., Front Porch Forum or Facebook. And, then build from there.

Municipal Website Best Practices

1. Engage the community, enable greater efficiencies, make government more accessible to citizens, promote economic prosperity, and build resilient communication channels to citizens in times of emergency.
2. Have a Homepage Notification Banner for activation during emergencies or severe weather.
3. Use an add-on which enables the website manager to update the homepage by email.
4. Integrate online payment available in your Town-anything from a dog license to a tax bill
5. Provide information to visitors, residents, and businesses.
6. Have an integrated community calendar, which is easy to update.
7. Use Word Press to make Content Management easy.
8. Use Google Analytics to track visitors and capture critical information about how the website is performing.

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Legal Considerations

Always bear in mind the constitutional goal underpinning our open meeting and public records laws: "Officers of government are trustees and servants of the people and it is in the public interest to enable any person to review and criticize their decisions even though such examination may cause inconvenience or embarrassment." 1VSA§315

1. What is a "meeting?"
    a.   Current definition 1 V.S.A. § 310(2)
    b.   Proposed amendments (H. 497)
2. What is a "public record?" Anything "produced or acquired in the course of agency business." 1 V.S.A. § 317(b)
3. Holding (and noticing) a meeting
    a.   Currently
    b.   If H. 497 becomes law
        i.   Posting agenda to website 48 hrs b/f regular meeting, 24 hrs b/f special meeting
        ii.   Special procedure for virtual quorum meetings.
4. Complying with record retention laws.
    a.   Content, not form, is the critical issue.
    b.   Posting an existing public record to a website does not create a new public record
    c.   Check with VSARA
5. Official postings only or public forums?
6. Develop a policy. See, e.g., VLCT's Model Social Media Policy.

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Front Porch Forum

Front Porch Forum's mission is to help neighbors connect and build community. FPF does this by hosting a statewide network of local online forums. Vermonters use FPF to talk to neighbors about lost pets, plumber recommendations, borrowing ladders, reporting break-ins, organizing community dinners, helping neighbors in need, announcing events, and much more. 73,000 households participate with thousands more joining every month.

Local public officials are welcome to put their local Front Porch Forum to use. More than 1,000 town managers, clerks, treasurers, listers and others, including select board and school board members use FPF now. In many locations, more than half of the local households participate on their FPF.

Vermont local public officials use FPF to...
1. Listen to constituents raise and discuss local issues
2. Announce public meetings and share meeting minutes
3. Share public information, e.g., facts about Town Meeting Day items
4. Engage constituents about local issues through FPF

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Links for More Info

Using Facebook:
- Social Media Overview from Tufts: http://webcomm.tufts.edu/social-media-overview13/
- Vermont Towns Using Facebook: http://vtrural.org/programs/digital-economy/updates/municipal-social-media
- Governments Using Facebook: http://www.governing.com/columns/tech-talk/overcoming-fear-facebook.html
- From Facebook – for Government: https://www.facebook.com/GovtPolitics
- From Facebook – for Nonprofits: https://www.facebook.com/nonprofits
- From Facebook – for Businesses: https://www.facebook.com/marketing
- Check list: http://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/www.sog.unc.edu/files/Tufts_fb_helpguide.pdf

Municipal Websites:
- Snelling Center Municipal Website Approach: http://www.vtrural.org/programs/digital-economy/updates/new-mendon-website
- eVT Toolkit: http://e4vt.org/programs/e-vermont/toolkit/municipal-government-toolkit
- Best Practices: http://www.howto.gov/web-content/requirements-and-best-practices/best-practices
- More Best Practices: http://www.qscend.com/filestorage/526/77/313/216/220/242/QSCEND_WHITE_PAPER-Best_Practices_Web.pdf

Front Porch Forum:
- Main Link to FPF: http://frontporchforum.com
- FPF Now In Every VT Town: http://www.vtrural.org/programs/digital-economy/updates/front-porch-forum-for-every-town
- More FPF Info: http://www.yankeemagazine.com/article/features/local-networking-vt
- More FPF Info: http://www.vpr.net/news_detail/96319/vt-social-media-site-expands-seeks-towns-financial/
- More FPF Info: http://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/programs/front-porch-forum#

Legal Considerations:
- For Vermont Constitution and statutes, see: http://www.leg.state.vt.us/statutesMain.cfm
- For H. 497: http://www.leg.state.vt.us/database/status/summary.cfm?Bill=H%2E0497&Session=2014
- If you desire to be frightened by copyright law and the remote possibility of being party to copyright infringement, see Digital Millennium Act: http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf
- For record retention schedules, see: http://vermont-archives.org/records/schedules/general/
- For VLCT's model social media policy, go to: http://www.vlct.org/league-resources/search-vlct-resources/ and search "social media"

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