Jurisdictions are carefully evaluating new social media applications before integrating them into their work process, and best-in-class cities have a number of tips and tricks for assessing new social media applications.

This article is adapted from *The Rise of Social Government: An Advanced Guide and Review of Social Media’s Role in Local Government Operations*, a new report by The Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Given the evolving environment of social media and the strapped resources of government offices, the cities the Fels Institute interviewed express a desire to carefully evaluate new social media applications before integrating them into their work process. Several interviewees note that the “so-called social media experts” often neglect to recognize how social media is handled on the ground level in government organizations and instead try to peddle new technologies and techniques that may not be well-suited for certain audiences. To combat this pitfall, cities engage in a strategic assessment of resources and time needed to launch and maintain new social media technologies.**

Specifically, the majority of cities consider:

- The objectives and strategies of the government department.
- The strength of the constituent conversation on the potential social media application.
- The resources and time available to successfully maintain the application.

**How Cities Are Assessing and Generating New Social Media Ideas**

**ASSESSING SOCIAL MEDIA**

Best-in-class cities have a number of tips and tricks for evaluating new social media applications. An important first step cities mention is to stop any urge to jump right onto a new application before doing a strategic evaluation. The following five steps can help to serve as a guide.

1. **Clearly Identify Your City’s Objectives.** Cities report that social media is just one tactic toward achieving the city’s goals. As such, it is important to develop a clear sense of the city’s overall objectives. For example: Are you trying to increase attendance to an event, improve transparency, solicit more community engagement, increase economic development, or improve daily operations?

2. **Determine a Strategy.** After gaining a clear understanding of the city’s objectives, use them as a matrix for determining whether social media can help. Brainstorm with people in the department who are responsible for meeting the city’s objectives. Topics to explore include: What are the key challenges to meeting this objective? How can social media help provide a new solution? Will this allow us to reach a new audience or provide a new service? Keep an open mind in the brainstorming phase.

3. **Listen to the Social Media Conversation.** Chances are that there are already discussions related to the
City. It is worth determining the key participants in these conversations and the social media platforms where these conversations are taking place. This involves “listening in” to the conversations before joining in order to determine what is of interest to participants and how the city can be helpful and involved in the conversation.

4. **Carefully Assess Your Resources.**

Be upfront and honest during a resource assessment. The majority of city managers interviewed for this report have no social media budget and report that social media activities are just one of their many other job duties. The main question is: Do we have the resources — both staff time and any potential fees — to launch and maintain this activity?

5. **Reach Out to Peer Cities and Conduct Research.**

Even if the social media application is the right step for the city, based on the above evaluation, cities still report the importance of checking in with other jurisdictions and with colleagues to gain a better sense for how they are using the application and what challenges they faced during implementation.

### GENERATING NEW IDEAS

Following are promising practices for generating new ideas on how to better use and engage social media.

1. **Create a Better System for Content.**

Ensuring that a social media account such as Facebook or Twitter has enough new content can be a challenge. A few cities solve this problem by establishing wiki sites to help gather information from city departments that can be used as potential social media content. The wiki, a webpage where users can add and change information, is set up for colleagues to post information, and the social media manager can then pick and choose information from the wiki’s content that is best suited for the city’s social media account.

2. **Brainstorm and Share Promising Practices via Social Media Councils.**

Some cities have established social media councils as a way to increase internal brainstorming and information sharing about the city’s social media activities. The councils include representatives from communications positions, IT departments, and other city employees with an interest in or expertise with social media. The group meets regularly to help share ideas across the government and create new ideas for social media activity. While brainstorming, consider these helpful questions:

- What are the specific issues our constituents want or expect government services to resolve?
- Can social media help make any of the government services more accessible to constituents?

### PROMISING PRACTICES for Social Media Policies

Successful social media policies are ones that include the following items:

- State the purpose of the policy
- Define the city’s goals for social media
- List all of the social media platforms that the city approves and utilizes
- State the local and federal laws that the sites must comply with
- Explain the account management: the procedure for launching and terminating a social media page
- Define which employees have what level of access to the sites
- Provide guidelines on acceptable use, with explanation of personal versus professional use and explicit ramifications if unacceptable activity occurs
- Provide guidelines and examples of the type of content to be posted and its tone
- Address concerns over security, in terms of password protection, virus scans, and protection against hackers
- State how social media is handled during emergencies and by whom.
A Promising Practices Checklist

How to Assess New Social Media

- Take the time to clearly identify your city’s objectives.
- Determine a strategy that outlines how the new social media application will help meet the desired objectives.
- Listen to the social media conversation in order to discover where your city or mayor is already being talked about online and by whom.
- Carefully and realistically assess resources to determine if both the staff time and any funding are available to launch and maintain the new account.
- Finally, be sure to reach out to peer cities and conduct research about the new technology.

How to Generate New Ideas for Social Media

- Create a better system of content to allow information and creative ideas to flow through the organization.
- Set up a wiki that allows for various departments to post ideas or potential content for social media accounts.
- If the city has a social media council, tap this group to participate in brainstorming techniques for further ideas.
- Solicit feedback from audiences and peers.
- Use current social media applications to solicit information about what people would like to see.
- Connect with peer cities, associations and groups to share ideas. To find connections, try: www.govloop.com, www.meetup.com, or review or begin an online discussion on HowTo.gov’s Social Media Groups webpage: http://www.howto.gov/communities/social-media.

How to Effectively Manage Social Media Activities

- Consider the social media platforms and pages that already exist and their level of success.
- Consider the internal capacity to launch and maintain social media pages.
- Consider the quality and amount of content to post regularly.
- Consider any budget or legal limitations.
- Designate “gatekeepers” who will oversee the development and implementation of a city’s social media campaign.
- Establish an approval process for social media content and pages.
- Pull together a team of people comprising of the gatekeepers, mayor, communication officers from several departments, the webmaster, and an IT officer to discuss the city’s social media campaign and how to best disseminate information.
- Develop a system of coordination across departments for consistent messaging.
- Develop and pilot a social media policy.
- State the purpose of the policy and define the city’s goals for social media.
- List all of the platforms that the city approves and utilizes.
- Provide guidelines on acceptable use, type of content to post, account management, and local and federal laws to be in compliance with.
- Create a social media center, or index on your city’s website listing all of the social media pages.
- Integrate social media into the city’s official emergency management strategy.
- Designate roles and responsibilities in relaying information.
- Test your strategy before a crisis occurs.
- Place accuracy before speed.
- Spur action when needed.

How to Monitor Social Media

- Be sure your office has personnel available to monitor the social media feeds at least daily.
- Determine what content to monitor.
- Experiment with keywords, topics, specific individuals or organizations, demographics or followers.
- Use a free online monitoring software to save time.
- Watch accounts and be ready to respond to comments.

Measuring Social Media

- Don’t just focus on the number of followers, aim to measure the level of engagement.
- Experiment with different online measurement tools and metrics to see what fits your office’s goals and needs best.
- Look to the private sector for measurement strategies.
- Set goals and reexamine them every six months to a year to make sure expectations are in line with current trends.
- Consider qualitative measurements with benchmarking questions (“Were we able to build better relationships with our key audience?” and “Were we able to move from a running monologue to a meaningful dialogue with customers?”).
Does the government maintain data or information that constituents would find useful?

3. Get Ideas from Constituents. Listening directly to the public is another way cities report enhancing their social media activities. The social media applications themselves can be a great way to solicit feedback directly from constituents, including allowing cities to take stock of what content constituents most actively engage with or share. Similarly, other cities also report using surveys to hear directly from constituents about what they might like to see.

4. Connect with Peer Cities, Associations, and Groups. Last but not least, a number of cities cite the importance of connecting with cities of similar size to get new ideas on how to use social media. For some cities, this includes checking out other city Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels to see what types of activities are being deployed. Additionally, cities mentioned using associations to stay up to date on social media activities and new concepts. Some cities reported that the National Association of Government Webmasters (http://www.nagw.org/) was one such association they used to find and share valuable information about social media.

To identify peer cities, associations, or groups try the following:

- Review or begin an online discussions on HowTo.gov’s Social Media Groups webpage (http://www.howto.gov/communities/social-media).
- Connect with other cities and governments about social media on GovLoop.com, a social media network for government practitioners (www.govloop.com).
- Meet with fellow social media practitioners, both in and out of government, in person by searching for social media activity in your area on MeetUp (www.meetup.com), which allows one to search via keywords — such as “social media” — and specify the desired location of the event. Alternatively, host your own “meet up” and promote it so others in the area can attend.
- Review or begin an online discussions on HowTo.gov’s Social Media Groups webpage (http://www.howto.gov/communities/social-media).

CONCLUSIONS

Cities believe that the importance of observing and analyzing social media conversations will continue to intensify in local governments as more and more people share information online.