

# Communicating with Citizens in a Web 2.0 World



## Meet Community Members on Their Terms

### Executive Summary

It is increasingly evident the important role social media plays in everyday life. From the mundane to the catastrophic, events are being reported by peers minute-by-minute, as they happen. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, “one-third (35 percent) of American adult Internet-users have a profile on an online social network site.”

Facebook and Twitter are attracting more users every day. As reported by Fast Company on February 17, 2010 Facebook has over 400 million users, while a study by RJMetrics Inc. reports that the number of Twitter users reached 75 million by the end of 2009. This growing audience is one reason social media is quickly becoming a mainstream platform for forward-looking government officials that want to establish relationships and maintain open conversations with community members. In fact, Emergency Management magazine’s Alerts & Notifications blog listed “growth in the use of social media” among its top ten trends for 2010.

At the same time, communities have made significant investments in mass notification platforms that disseminate important time-sensitive information. And they are wondering how to integrate these authoritative, one-to-many communications into the more conversational nature of the social graph.

### A multi-channel approach to government-to-citizen communications:

- Keeps the public better informed
- Reduces non-emergency calls to 911
- Fosters proactive government and transparency
- Enhances service with minimal incremental cost

There are many benefits to incorporating social media into your city or county communications plan, from reaching new populations to building community confidence in government, communicating instantaneously, and more proactively interacting with citizens. Social media integration is creating a new era in government-to-citizen communication, one that engages citizens and fosters a better administration for all.

### The Evolution of Government-to-Citizen Mass Communication in the 21st Century

The avenues local governments have for communicating with citizens have changed dramatically in recent years. Beginning with central siren systems and television and radio alerts decades ago, emergency communications have evolved to include automated telephone calls, e-mails and text messages.

These significant strides in communication methods have had several benefits:

- With more direct channels of communications, governments have been able to keep the public better informed on a range of urgent matters-- including imminent severe weather, fires, road closures, evacuation routes, disaster preparedness, and relief services.
- Since the public is better informed, the number of non-emergency calls to 911 have been reduced, freeing up first-responders to focus on true emergencies
- Governments are more proactive and better able to satisfy pledges to transparency These newer methods of communications are relatively low-cost, allowing governments to enhance service to citizens even during challenging economic times

The communications landscape continues to evolve rapidly and the need for time-sensitive mass communication has never been greater. In today’s instantaneous world, governments must stay vigilant in meeting the expectations of a tech-savvy public to keep pace with the proliferation of new communication channels. A range of new, social media tools and platforms are already having a positive effect on the way governments and people connect and interact.

## The Emergence of Social Media

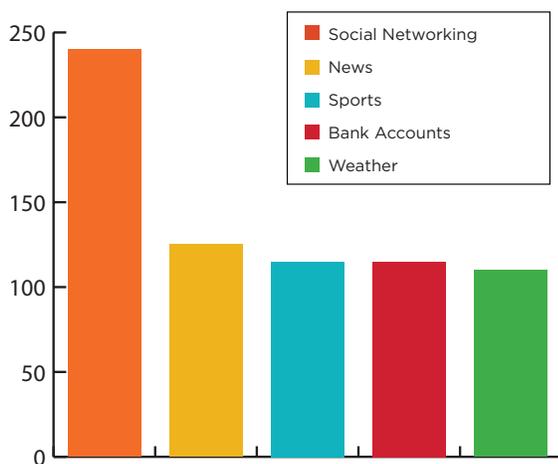
What started as an online phenomenon primarily geared toward young adults and teenagers, the use of social media has grown to play a prominent role in the lives of average, everyday citizens. From students to parents to professionals to elected officials, people from every walk of life are checking their statuses or sharing news to their social networks via social media.

The public is also relying more and more on mobile devices as their primary communication tool and increasingly using these devices to access social networking sites. A June 2010 comScore report found that 14.5 million people accessed a social networking application from a mobile device, up 240 percent from the prior year. "Social networking is by far the fastest-growing mobile activity right now with 20 percent of mobile users now accessing social networking sites via their phone," said comScore's Mark Donovan in a press release announcing the report and its findings.

Sites such as Facebook and Twitter present new avenues to connect and exchange information, and a growing audience is one reason social media is quickly becoming a mainstream platform for state and local governments to connect with their constituents.

Social media "speeds up communication, and, for all practical purposes, it speeds up awareness," said Georges Benjamin of the American Public Health Association, at a March 2009 roundtable on social media.

### Year-over-year Percentage of Growth in Applications Accessed by Mobile Devices



Social networking is currently the fastest growing mobile activity.  
Source: comScore, June 2010

Using social media tools effectively requires some specialized knowledge in terms of messaging formats, styles, and limitations (e.g., Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters or less). But these tools can be quickly mastered, and when used in combination with other channels, provide a high-impact way to deliver important information quickly anytime, anywhere.

## The number of communities announcing plans to start posting emergency information on social media is growing according to Galain Solutions' top 10 predictions for alerts and notifications in 2010.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are helping governments:

- *Reach new populations.* Younger constituents and more tech-savvy segments of the population are increasingly relying on their mobile devices and social media tools to stay in touch and informed. According to a July-December 2009 study by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) nearly 50 percent of 25 year olds do not live in a household with a landline and the vast majority of exclusive mobile device users are under the age of 40. Additionally, according to a report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, African-American and English-speaking Latinos are among the most active users of the mobile web with 87 percent of minority cell phone owners taking significant advantage of the greater range of their phones' features.
- *Build community confidence in government.* The immediacy and accessibility of social media and other social media applications allows government to demonstrate control during times of crisis and disseminate accurate, relevant information to dispel rumors that tend to proliferate when information is lacking.
- *Communicate instantaneously.* The Internet and social media technology provide emergency managers and Public Information Officers (PIOs) with unprecedented opportunities to interact quickly and directly with millions of people whenever and wherever they may be.
- *Create an information exchange.* Forward-thinking municipalities are finding social media tools can build relationships with constituents and create new opportunities to communicate different kinds of information.

## Opening the Door to Broader Communications

Utilizing social media channels opens up the door to more effective and different kinds of communications between government and the public. For example:

- *Responding quickly and directly to community concerns and comments.* The Los Angeles Fire Department has been using Twitter to post information about fires or other emergencies it is responding to in real-time. These messages are sent to users signed up to receive the information on their mobile devices and help allay concerns. Other municipalities are using Facebook as a way for citizens to discuss the need for services such as mosquito abatement or to raise concerns over public health issues such as availability of a flu vaccine.
- *Engaging citizens.* Proving that engaged citizens make for better government, some cities, such as St. Paul, Minn., are using Facebook as another channel in addition to phone, Internet, mail and e-mail, to conduct surveys and promote city meetings. While others, like the City of Ann Arbor, Mich., are finding social media tools can help in encouraging citizens to vote or participate in community watch and clean-up programs.
- *Population retention.* Many cities find that their younger residents move away after high school or college graduation. The City of Boston is using Facebook and other social media tools like YouTube to help engage and retain this population by promoting economic development initiatives and activities designed to attract the 20 to 34 age group.

## Blackboard Connect™ at Work for Government

Blackboard works with state and local governments to disseminate important time-sensitive information with a multi-channel approach, most recently adding social media tools to the mix.

### **Dundee, Mich.: Bridging the Gap between Government and Residents**

The Village of Dundee, Mich. has an active presence on Facebook. Located in the southeastern part of the state, the Village of Dundee is about 20 minutes away from Ann Arbor and has a population of about 4,000 residents. Launched in November of last year, the community's Facebook page has already been "liked" by more than 800 fans.

A year ago, Village Trustee Greg Lazette decided to implement the Blackboard Connect service to better communicate with residents and share information, not only about urgent situations, but also for community events and happenings. Since April 2010, Lazette has been updating the Village Facebook page using Blackboard Connect.

"[Social Media] speeds up communication, and, for all practical purposes, it speeds up awareness."

Georges Benjamin  
*American Public Health Association  
Executive Director*

With the Blackboard Connect social media integration feature, keeping residents informed is easier than ever. After a brief training and implementation session, Lazette now sends notification calls using Blackboard Connect and, by simply clicking the appropriate box, he can automatically update the Facebook page with the same message.

"We use the function every time we make a call," said Lazette. "By sending a combination of messages using a variety of communication platforms, we want to overcome negative perceptions about local government and disprove ideas of folks working behind closed doors. Increased community outreach helps in bridging the gap between local government and residents."

A quick scan of Dundee's Wall posts on Facebook confirms the conversational nature of the Blackboard Connect notifications. When recent storms led to a tree collapse and road closures, the Village's Blackboard Connect messages were cross-posted on Facebook, and residents could weigh in with supporting information – and even "Like" the message. Dundee also uses the Facebook page to alert the community about upcoming test calls and surveys from Blackboard Connect, as well as to drive residents' enrollment of contact information into the system.

The feedback has been great so far. One resident wrote on Dundee's Wall: "I love the new system it's wonderful to keep us so informed on all that is going on."

## Blackboard Connect for Government

Whether it's a time-sensitive situation or a routine event, safety, reliability, efficiency and speed are universal needs for local governments. The Blackboard Connect service provides millions nationwide with time-sensitive information – via voice, text, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and more. It is a proven way to alert your stakeholders and enhance their safety by keeping them informed, involved and prepared.



Blackboard

- *Prepare for the unexpected.* Notify and update constituents within minutes of time-sensitive situations. Communicate with concise, timely information to help contain rumors, control media spin and maintain safety while providing information and reassurance to residents, businesses and media
- *Involve and engage citizens.* Leverage the power of ongoing, proactive communication to keep constituents informed about day-to-day events that make a big difference in their lives—everything from health advisories and power outages to town hall meetings.
- *Coordinate communications.* Synch responses to both time-sensitive and routine situations across multiple disparate departments by giving team members the details of any current situation, recalling off-duty staff, calling up volunteers, aligning efforts and duties, requesting mutual assistance from neighboring jurisdictions and sending text messages when voice-communications are impacted.
- *Drive cost savings.* Because staying within budget is every bit as crucial as the ability to reach your entire community our predictable cost structure will not cause unexpected spikes in spending. There is no hardware, software, or additional phone lines required on your end. Multiple departments can also share the use of the service.
- *Generate revenue.* Thousands of dollars in warrants go uncollected every year due to ineffective notification methods. Reminding citizens of outstanding warrants via alternate communication channels and mass communication of amnesty programs has enabled municipalities to recoup tens of thousands of dollars in revenue while allowing citizens to satisfy their obligations.

## Blackboard Connect for Government lets you:

- Prepare for the unexpected
- Involve and engage citizens
- Establish a leadership voice
- Drive cost savings
- Collect revenue

## Conclusion

No government organization can rely on one channel to communicate important information. Refining communications strategies for time-sensitive information is a continuous process. Governments need to stay abreast of new channels and introduce them alongside current channels. Blackboard is committed to helping governments deploy a multi-channel communications approach to ensure the broadest and most timely dissemination of information when it matters most. If your organization is interested in exploring the vast array of government to citizen mass communication options, contact Blackboard Connect to learn more.

To learn more about Blackboard Connect, visit [www.blackboard.com/connect](http://www.blackboard.com/connect)