

Calling all social media holdouts!

Any municipality that ignores social media in a 2015 world is leaving tremendous value on the table

It's hard to believe that in the year 2015, there are still municipalities that have not started using social media. After all, social media was created to build and support virtual communities. And municipalities are the ultimate, real-world manifestation of just that – *communities!*

We've all heard the excuses: *Social media is a fad. We don't have the resources. We don't know how to do it. It's too risky. Social media is for kids. It's a waste of time. What if people say something negative about us?*

Some of these reasons might have been valid in a 2007 world. But, sorry – in 2015, these excuses don't hold water. Social media has more than proven itself as a set of powerful, scalable, and extremely cost-effective tools for facilitating two-way conversations and engagement with audiences.

That doesn't mean it's easy to do social media properly. It takes a lot of work, planning, and measurement. Are there potential risks? You bet. However, many of the leading municipalities that have been using social media for five, six, or seven years now will tell you the rewards *far* outweigh the risks.

I'll go one step further and say that if your municipality doesn't establish a presence on social media in the next few years, it will actually negatively impact your community's very relevance among your target audiences. That's a bold statement, but it's one that can be

backed up, both anecdotally and with statistics.

The Stats

The good old newspaper has traditionally been a vital communication tool for municipalities. But newspaper readership continues to decline. In 1950, paid newspaper circulation in Canada was equivalent to 100 percent of households. By 2000, that figure had dropped to 44.5 percent. In 2012, it was 27 percent.¹ See a pattern here?

How about the other old mainstay of municipal contact information, the phone book? If you hadn't noticed, the phone book has become virtually irrelevant. In 2012, the City of Phoenix recycled 415 tons of phone books.² That's 376,500 kilograms of phone books that went directly from residents' doorsteps into their blue boxes.

Those eyeballs that used to be reading newspapers and phone books haven't disappeared. They've moved online. In fact, according to research conducted in 2014, Canada has the highest social media penetration in the

world, with 82 percent of Canadians using a social network (compared with 75 percent of Americans). Among Canadian internet users, 85 percent have a Facebook account and 46 percent have a Twitter account.³

Anecdotal Evidence

If you're like most adults, there was a time (actually ... probably not that long ago) when you defiantly declared that you would *never* have a Facebook account. Just curious ... how did that work out? If you PVR your favourite TV shows, do you sit through the commercials? Or, do you fast-forward them? And, when you're watching TV, are you doing it with a laptop, smartphone, or tablet in front of you? When was the last time you rushed home to read all your direct mail – or listened to an entire telemarketing call at dinner time?

If you want to see evidence of the ubiquity of social media, just look around you. At the mall. On the street. In your home. Canadians are increasingly reflecting an "on-demand" culture. We value our time more than ever.

- 1 Daily newspaper circulation trends 2000-2013, Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Communications Management Inc.
- 2 FOX 10 news story, "Phone book considered obsolete, but still comes to your door," November 12, 2013.
- 3 Global digital statistics 2014, WeAreSocial.sg.



WARREN WEEKS sold his first newspaper to his grandmother at the age of five, was Wayne Gretzky's PR handler for a day in 1998 and, in the spring of 2010, started the viral social media campaign to get former NHL coach Pat Burns into the Hockey Hall of Fame. Connect with him on Twitter <@ElevenPR>.

The vast majority of us are now using the internet, smartphones, and social media on a daily basis in our personal lives to connect with our friends, families, celebrities, sports teams, and our favourite brands. Despite all this, when it comes to the workplace, there are still hundreds of municipalities that are still communicating like it's 2007, with little or no social media presence. It's also worth noting that many of those communities that do have accounts are failing to take full advantage of them by posting infrequently, not engaging with residents, and not measuring their performance to allow for continual improvement.

At the same time, we should commend the many municipalities that are doing excellent work on social media. They've embraced social media as a vital communication channel and, after some hard work, they're seeing the benefits. So, if you're contemplating getting your municipality up and running on social media, spend some time studying what the leaders in this space are doing – cities like Regina, Saskatchewan; Halifax, Nova Scotia; and Guelph, Ontario to name just a few.

"While it may be free to join a social media network or set up a new online account, managing the city's web and social media activities requires real investment in staff time, ongoing training, hardware, software, administration, and analysis," says Tara Sprigg, general manager of corporate communications and customer service with the City of Guelph. "Make sure you've allocated adequate and appropriate resources and that you have a plan to keep engaging fans and followers by sharing compel-

ling content. It takes a great deal of skill to engage people 140 characters at a time."

Significant Benefits to Community

Still not convinced that social media would be extremely useful for your municipality? Well, before you dismiss it for another year, consider the following worthwhile benefits social media can bring to your community.

Increased speed and scope of communications – Social media provides a virtually instantaneous way for you to speak with (and listen to) your community. These features make social media useful for marketing purposes and absolutely critical in the event of a crisis (like Mayor Naheed Nenshi's masterful use of Twitter during the floods that hit Calgary in 2013).

Decreased cost of reaching your audience – While running a decent social media program entails an investment in training and personnel, unlike traditional advertising channels, the tools themselves are free to use.

Better customer service – By using social media channels to address residents' concerns, solve their problems, and keep them informed, you can actually enhance the level of customer service you're delivering to the community.

Enhanced transparency – Whether it's live tweeting your council meetings, providing information about programs or processes, or dispelling rumours and speculation, the low cost and immediacy of social media can give residents added clarity and confidence about how the municipality is being run.

A stronger brand – You no longer have to rely on the mainstream media (e.g., paid or earned media) to tell your

story. Social media allows you to "be" the media and speak directly to target audiences. Invest in creating exceptional content, images, and videos; your community will see, like, and share it, in the process, strengthening and extending the reach of your municipality's brand.

Handling Negative Comments and Criticism

This continues to be one of the biggest concerns among people and organizations who shy away from using social media – the fear that some in the online community will say negative things about them. "We now live in a world where people are having conversations about you online – regardless of whether you're part of them," says Stacey Hare, senior communications officer for the City of Guelph. "Your municipality might as well get in there and be part of the conversation. And, having a social media presence allows you to do that."

For its part, the City of Guelph, one of the leaders in the municipal social media space in Canada, says it continues to be pleased with the results of its social media efforts. "In terms of reaching those in the city who have historically been difficult to connect with, social media has become a powerful tool to fill in those gaps," says Hare. "People might not be reading the paper every day, but they are online and listening to their friends. And, while there will be those people who say some not-so-nice things, and while you do have to be prepared for that, social media gives you an opportunity to correct misinformation. On the whole, our experience with social media has been extremely positive." MW

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