

years from now. But, it's coming. If you're not buying into that statement, think back to the late 1990s when you swore you would never have a cell phone. Or, to a few short years ago when you said you'd never have a personal Facebook page. Today, virtually all of us now have both and use them every day.

What Are You Waiting For?

Your municipality will be using social media eventually. So why wait?

Contrary to what the *Old Spice* guy would have you believe, social media isn't a "campaign." It's a never-ending dialogue with your residents and other stakeholders. There's a learning curve to social media. It takes time to cultivate your voice and your audience, and to build trust. But, when it's done correctly, the potential upside is incredible.

Still not convinced that social media is coming to a town near you? Consider this. According to Ipsos Reid, 50 percent of all Canadians and 60 percent of online Canadians have a social networking profile. And, social networking is no longer the exclusive domain of kids. While younger online Canadians aged 18 to 34 (86 percent) are the most likely to have a social networking profile, their parents are catching up. The majority (62 percent) of those aged 35 to 54 now have social networking profiles, and a significant portion (43 percent) of those 55 years and older have one as well.²

Your audience is already there. Their numbers will only continue to grow. If you don't think the conversation is already taking place without you, you're kidding yourself.

If your municipality is one of those already using social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the like, congratulations! You're a trailblazer! Still, don't hurt your arm patting yourself on the back just yet. Most Canadian municipalities using social media have significant room for improvement in

the way they utilize these tools. Don't feel badly, however. *No one* is doing it perfectly. And, only a small percentage are doing it *really* well. But now that you've (hopefully) bought into the notion that social media is here to stay and that your municipality is someday going to be playing in this sandbox, let's take a look at some common mistakes and tips from the pros:

Common Mistakes

Treating social media like a fire hose – A survey of several dozen Facebook pages and Twitter feeds shows that most Canadian municipalities are using their social media platforms like traditional news media outlets, spraying their audiences with information. The number of "push" messages versus real "conversations" is typically about 25 or 30 to 1. When you use social media as a fire hose, you risk polluting the airwaves and turning off followers. Instead, listen and engage with your audience in a meaningful way.

Not watering the plants – There's a lot of neglect out there, with many languishing Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. While there are many conscientious municipalities posting and conversing on a daily basis, there are just as many that haven't interacted in four, 12, even 25 days. Remember that example about the family asking about bike paths? That was a real question someone posted on a municipality's Facebook page last summer. They're still waiting for a response.

Trying to control the conversation – This is futile. The best you can hope to do is influence the conversation through prompt, transparent, and genuine communications. When social media is done well, it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to your audience. You're simply there to curate, moderate, and participate.

Sticking your head in the sand – The City of Elliot Lake missed a great opportunity to use social media during the mall roof collapse crisis. Instead of embracing these tools, the community ignored its stagnant

Twitter page and deleted the Facebook icon from the city's home page. Crisis communications is one of the most powerful uses of social media. Imagine how invaluable Twitter and Facebook would have been during the Walkerton crisis in 2000, giving responders the ability to tell residents about town hall meetings, letting them know which streets were being disinfected on which days, locations for bottled water pick-ups, and more. (I was called to work in Walkerton during the crisis and instead of having today's social media tools, we had to rely on radio broadcasts and word of mouth – *like on the street with your actual mouth*. It was the year 2000 and the best tools we had were only marginally better than a guy ringing a bell in the town square. Those communication methods seem absolutely archaic compared with what we can do today.)

Some tips from the pros

Have a plan – Before you start, you need a comprehensive social media strategy, protocol, and policies. Engage experts who can help you develop a plan. Find existing resources and adapt them for your community.

Don't sweat the numbers – The number of followers you have is *far* less important than their degree of engagement. Deliver on all the other tips and the numbers will follow.

Embrace negative feedback – Don't bristle when someone says something negative; it's going to happen. They might be doing you a favour, letting you know about an operational problem you can help resolve and then talk about online, demonstrating the community's responsiveness. And, guess what? Those people are *already* saying negative things about you. Social media just gives you the ability to hear it and respond.

Be prompt, friendly, and consistent – People want (and deserve) fast responses to their questions and comments. That means minutes or hours, not days or weeks. And, your community's "voice" should be polite, courteous, and consistent at all times.

2 Canada's love affair with online social networking continues, Ipsos Reid, July 14, 2011.

Care! – This is arguably the most important piece, yet very few organizations get it right. Developing a genuine caring attitude for your audience will put your community in the right mindset for social media success. Have a vested interest in connecting with them, resolving their problems, acknowledging their concerns. Caring

is the key to establishing real, valuable relationships with social media.

These are just a few tips to help get your municipality up and running on social media. In most cases, it makes sense to get experts to help along the way, since you'll need to establish systems, identify online social media management tools, and

navigate potential compliance and legal issues as you build your social media presence. The payoff, however, is tremendous, as social media can give you a powerful, efficient and instantaneous platform for developing truly meaningful relationships with your residents and other key stakeholders for years to come. [MW](#)

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