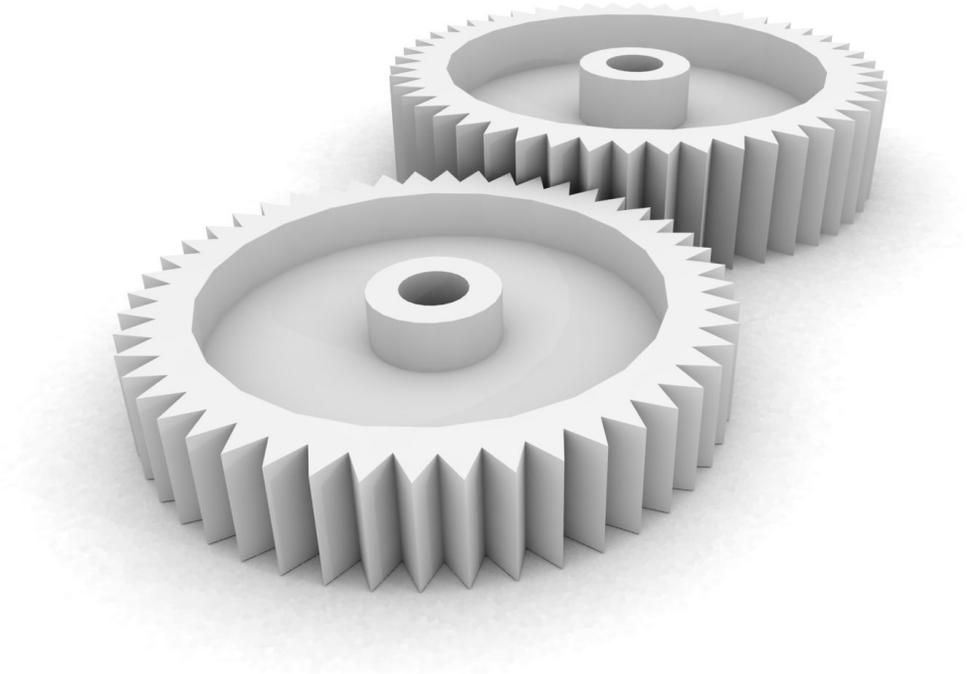


GETTING THE WORD OUT



INSTITUTE FOR
LOCAL GOVERNMENTSM

TIPS



Email Lists, Notification & Newsletters

- Check website software to see what capabilities already exist
- Decide what type of notification to use
- Make sure the notification system does not require duplicate subscriptions

Blogs

- Consider if the blog will enable comments on posts vs. an info only approach
- Think through if it may be preferable to create a blog for the program or proposal vs. using an existing blog

Social Media

- Social media can bring a large audience to an agency's information & meetings
- Some agencies create project or proposal specific Facebook pages
- Ability to re-use information but best to reformat it to fit each service's style and "vibe"

Another key area to explore is technologies and tools that help get the word out to the public to further encourage participation and provide information updates. Many local government agencies have an opportunity to dramatically increase awareness of meeting and workshop opportunities along with updates to the proposals, documents and reports.

About the Institute for Local Government

ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Public Engagement and technology visit www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-technology. To access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/GettingtheWordOut.

- The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:
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SOME TRADITIONAL METHODS

While the focus of this series is on public engagement and technology, traditional methods of getting the word out are often underutilized. This includes posting meeting and workshop dates and agendas at agency buildings, making meeting materials available in hard copy form at libraries or community centers, notices in the local newspapers, mailed notices to residents and quarterly printed newsletters or utility inserts mailed to residents.

All of these approaches work and help to share information. Using them in conjunction with additional options available with technology enables a city or county to reach more people in the multichannel approach to public engagement.

NOTIFICATIONS, EMAIL LISTS & NEWSLETTERS

Other ways that local agencies can get the word out about proposals and projects, materials and upcoming meetings include:

- **Notification Software** - Some software programs notify interested parties that a web page or pages have new information on them – but it is up to the person being notified to figure out what has been added or changed. This is the simplest approach to notifications but may result in calls to the agency as subscribers to the updates may not know what was added or changed.
- **Email Lists or Listserves** - These programs allow residents to subscribe to specific topics and types of documents. The software also allows the agency to add a brief write-up of each type of topic and document that can be subscribed to. Once the topic is updated or an article is added, the agency staff can cut and paste a description of the change, meeting or the document summary into an email notice. The next step is to check the list or lists that this material is sent to and the software does the rest.
- **Custom Newsletters** - While the email list programs often allow you to enter text or an alert, the agency may want something more complete or elegant. In those cases, several vendors offer programs that provide a combination of custom newsletters and email list distribution and tracking. This is another excellent way to get the word out on a proposal or meeting.
- **Sending Files & Documents** - In some cases, the agency may want to send a file or document to a list of subscribers. In addition to the approaches listed above, which drive the resident to the agency website and document management systems, links to file, document or presentation itself can be provided. This can be an interesting option if the document(s) are very large or not on the website or in the document management system. Some of these products also provide information on how many subscribers have accessed the document and allow expiring access to the documents after the workshop or meeting date has passed.

WEBSITE

The first place to look at to disseminate information is websites. Website software for cities and counties often goes beyond basic features to include notification and distribution features. Key examples of these features worth considering:

- **Headlines & News** – Website software usually allows an agency to feature major programs and initiatives in a brief story on the main or “home” page. Visitors to the website will be drawn to this information when they visit the main page and will learn about the proposals or meetings that are coming up.
- **What’s New** – Websites often have a “What’s New” section that shows all of the pages or documents on the site that have been recently updated or added. Featuring new information on the proposal or meeting here will also draw attention for website visitors that check this section to see what is new.
- **Project or Meeting Sections** – Local agencies can create sections on their website that list meetings for commissions and governing bodies as well as each proposed project or development and its progress.

BLOGS

A blog provides a series of articles on a variety of topics. Each article in the blog has an issue date and title and can also have features including web links, photos, graphics, videos and calendars.

Blogs can often be developed as part of a website. Another option is to use vendor software that typically comes with blog hosting services. In some cases, a single blog per email address is provided free to encourage exploring the concept with more advanced features carrying a cost. It is also worth noting that the cost of operating a blog can be very low (in some cases under \$20 per month) with the vendor providing security, bandwidth and storage for that cost.

Local agencies can use blogs for a variety of purposes. In some cases, they share information from the newsletter that is issued by the city manager or county executive or provide links to the latest news releases from the agency. For other agencies, they highlight programs or events in a specific department like police or human resources.

One of the more interesting uses of an agency blog is to highlight a specific program or proposal and describe it in some detail. The [City Manager Blog](#) in the Town of Atherton is a fine example of that approach.

When it comes to public engagement, an agency can use an existing blog to provide more details and explanation about an issue or program under discussion in that agency. The agency may also want to create a new blog that is specific to the proposal at hand to focus more attention on it and provide continuing updates.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media services are another way to distribute information about proposals, projects, programs and meetings. This is increasingly true as more residents use smartphones, tablets, laptops and computers for information, news and to watch videos. For example, a Pew Research Center study found that 10% of people get their news today from Twitter while 30% get their news from Facebook. This demonstrates once again the importance of being multichannel and using different ways to distribute information.

While there are a number of social media services available to agencies, the three most commonly in use are Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

TWITTER

Twitter is referred to by some as a “micro blogging” service that features short updates. It has over 500 Million users worldwide.

Anyone can set up a Twitter account and begin posting messages at no cost. Messages or “tweets” are limited to 140 characters in length and focus on breaking news and updates. Photos may also be posted. Most agency twitter sites tend to be agency-wide in scope or to focus on areas like police, fire and other services.

It is important to use abbreviations and to link to more detailed source information on the agency web site and document management system to use Twitter to full effect. The posts can be created and read on a web browser or on a dedicated software program which offers additional features.

FACEBOOK

Facebook also focuses on short messages but it does not have a strict message limit like Twitter does. This enables agency messages and updates to use full sentences and be more conversational in tone. Facebook has over 1 Billion users worldwide.

Facebook users also enjoy photos and videos making the system a more visual medium. Agency Facebook pages tend to be agency-wide but also focus on key service areas involving events and services with Parks & Recreation being an especially effective area here. In some cases, agencies will create a dedicated Facebook page for a long-term initiative or annual program versus solely publicizing it on the agency Facebook page.

LINKEDIN

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking service and is mainly used for professional networking that now has more than 259 million members in over 200 countries worldwide. LinkedIn can be used to advertise agency job openings, connect with other local agencies and disseminate information to residents. LinkedIn now also supports the formation of interest groups. Local agencies can form groups on LinkedIn and use this channel to ensure the group members are kept informed through emails with updates to the group, including most talked about discussions within their professional circles.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSIDERATIONS

When using social media as part of a public engagement program, there are some things to keep in mind:

- As with in person engagement, it helps to go where people already are. Start by “listening” online to conversations taking place where people are thinking about issues related to yours.
- Meeting and workshop announcements do not tend to be big traffic drivers. It is best to add this information to existing sites that already have an audience.
- If possible, post project or program information on the agency’s existing social media pages versus creating a new project-specific page. This will eliminate the need to build an audience for the site to be effective.
- Re-format announcements on meetings and the project or proposal for each site. The two services are different and there is an expectation that agency posts are not “just duplicating the website.”
- Since social media outlets feature short messages and posts, make liberal use of links to the agency web site and document management system where the full detail of a proposal and complete reports, documents and visuals are stored. This allows the agency to drive residents that do not visit the website often to the source documents.
- Providing program visuals, graphics, photos and maps helps grab attention and interest.
- Some cities and counties retweet or repost stories of what their partners outside of local government are doing to help build a tone of collaboration.

Following these tips can result in more awareness among residents about the project or proposal under consideration. It will enhance a public engagement program and bring residents that may use the agency website sparingly, if at all, into the discussion. A goal that is well worth attaining.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Best of 2010: State and City Blogs

<http://www.govloop.com/profiles/blogs/best-of-2010-state-and-city>

Boston Mayor Launches Transition Blog

<http://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-boston-mayor-blogs-out-of-office.html>

Agency Blogs

Town of Atherton

<http://ca-atherton.civicplus.com/Blog.aspx?CID=1>

City of Brisbane

<http://www.brisbaneca.org/blog>

City of Hayward

<http://www.hayward-ca.gov/citymanager/index.php/category/general-topics/>

City of Redwood City

<http://redwoodcitypd.blogspot.com/>

City of Riverside

<http://riversideca.gov/cmblog/>

City of Sunnyvale

<http://sunnyvale.ca.gov/Newsroom/CityManagersBlog.aspx>

San Mateo County

<http://hr.smcgov.org/employee-success-blog>

Facebook & Twitter: Articles & Books

Legal Issues Associated with Social Media

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/document/legal-issues-associated-social-media>

Spotlight on Marin County's Social Media Efforts

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/spotlight-marin-countys-social-media-efforts>

Who Gets Their News from Twitter?

<http://www.govtech.com/internet/Who-Gets-Their-News-from-Twitter.html>

Social Media Websites

Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com>

Hoot Suite

<https://hootsuite.com/features/social-networks>

Tweetdeck

<https://about.twitter.com/products/tweetdeck>

Twitter

<http://www.twitter.com>

Linkedin

<http://www.linkedin.com>