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Transit Agencies Find New On-Ramps to the Information Superhighway
Social Media's Stock on the Rise As a Tool to Reach the Public
By Josh Stephens

The San Francisco Municipal Railway wants to be your friend. So does MARTA, who is not a lady, but rather Atlanta's bus and rail operator. Denver's Regional Transportation District, Los Angeles' Metro, San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit District and countless other transit agencies across the country do, too.

RTD

Agencies like the Denver area's Regional Transportation District regularly communicate information like travel alerts and project updates with riders via websites like Twitter and Facebook.

All of them have lately discovered the places on the Internet where only the cool kids once hung out but have now become global treehouses, meeting spaces, shopping malls, and, increasingly, soap boxes and news services. Though transit agencies' fundamental function is to connect people in real space, they are also finding ways to connect people—and connect to people—in cyberspace.

"There's a natural community that exists on public transit that does not exist when people travel by car," said Jim Allison, multimedia managing producer at Bay Area Rapid Transit, which has been aggressively reaching out with web-based videos. "You get on a train and you're within a community. Whether you sense it or not you're out in the public with these other people, and we want to be out with the public as well."

Internet heavyweights such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (see sidebar) have been remaking the social and entertainment landscape for the past few years by making it easier for anyone with an Internet connection to express themselves, broadcast their ideas and, yes, join communities.

"Facebook is a way to put your story out and have some interaction and input for things like projects and things you're promoting," said Los Angeles Metro Community Relations Manger Jody Litvak, who is generally credited with having

10 Things to Consider If You're Considering Social Media

1. The embrace of social networking is inevitable, so even the most buttoned-down transit agencies might as well get on board.

2. You can't dive in blindly, but you have to dive in at some point. The platforms are malleable enough that you don't have to draft reams of policies before you start, but you should have some sense of pitfalls and internal philosophy.

3. Social networking will never replace traditional outreach, but it's a good complement.

4. No performance metrics yet exist. Agencies shouldn't expect measurable effects of outreach via social networking, especially not early on.

5. People love video and the world of YouTube makes it OK for videos not to be professionally polished. They just have to be competent and follow some basic principles of filmmaking.

6. No one has done it perfectly. There are a few early movers—LA, BART, Denver—but the sky's still the limit for agencies to experiment and innovate.

7. The Facebook numbers aren't huge, but they're often greater than the number of people who come to public meetings. And a Facebook page is a lot cheaper than a meeting.

8. Jody Litvak, Facebook pioneer at LA Metro, recommends Facebook pages for specific projects, not necessarily for the agency as a whole.

9. Figure out your comments policy ahead of time. Determine internal guidelines for moderating, and decide whether comments on social networking sites will be entered into the public record.

state departments of transportation and highway authorities (see sidebar).

Connectivity and user-generated content are the hallmarks of these platforms, formerly referred to as "Web 2.0" or "social networking," and are now so engrained in daily life that they hardly need any introduction. But where these platforms once served largely as surrogate water coolers and cinemas, where idle gossip and homemade films about cute pets abound, they are now playing an ever-larger role in civic life with the imprimatur of government agencies.

For many transit agencies that may not have conceived of themselves as the hippest kids on the block, social media are opening up legitimate avenues for public participation, outreach and dissemination of information. The migration to social media has been so rapid of late that for agencies that have not yet joined Facebook or Twitter—no matter how unfamiliar these media may be—the question is not "if," but "when."

Indeed, even as transit providers cope with perennial problems of keeping buses running on time and attracting riders, social networking is moving full-speed ahead.

"At the [Transportation Research Board Annual] Meeting in January we had a Sunday morning workshop at 9 . . . and we had a full room," said Jennifer Weeks, senior transportation planner at Parsons-Brinkerhoff and chair of the TRB's Committee on Public Involvement. "I think everybody is like, 'Wow, holy cow—we've got to get on the bandwagon.' If there are any contrarians, they're shouted down."

Sites Reach Beyond Public Meetings

The most straightforward function that these sites serve is to send out announcements, especially for new projects and unplanned events like service interruptions. Transit patrons who become "fans" on Facebook or who follow a Twitter feed can therefore be guaranteed of getting notices that otherwise might go out only as press releases or as unseen posts on the agency's website. But the key to social networking is that communication is not one-way—and the often monolithic mien of an enormous public agency can soften a bit.

The major social networking and new media sites each offer unique advantages—and some pitfalls—to agencies that want to use them in the immensely complex process of public engagement, by which they attempt to get input from stakeholders and, ultimately, craft new services and policies that reflect, in part, the public will.

"In most cases, I think it is democratizing. It does open doors to larger groups of people because traditional public involvement or means of providing input to an agency are things that require time and energy on the part of people that they just don't have," Weeks said. "People don't pay attention to their mail anymore, so the newsletters just get shuffled under the bills and thrown out."

The most obvious advantage of social networking is its ability to tap into interested populations that might otherwise never show up at a public meeting or send a letter to a board of directors.

"This is a way younger people are communicating these days, and we want to communicate with them in their preferred method," Allison said.

Estimates vary, but as of March 2009 the website Inside Facebook estimated that 70 percent of Facebook users were between 13 and 34. Although the site was founded in 2002 for college students, in the past year

Even so, the so-called digital divide prevents all stakeholders from participating, and some excluded groups —including the transit-dependent poor—make up a large share of agencies' riderships.

"There are populations of people that aren't fully integrated into the technology revolution," said Weeks. Among them, she said, are "elderly people, who are not tuned into the stuff and, by the way, happen to be an important constituency for transit agencies."

"I don't think we get anything differently than we'd get through traditional methods in terms of the kind of comments we get," Litvak said. "I just think it gives us access to a different population."

On the Record?

Demographic and technological limitations notwithstanding, the ability to get a wide range of stakeholders on the record is the Holy Grail for many proponents of social media. Currently, however, social media represent a potent alternative to outreach methods such as community meetings, which are rife with their own limitations. Though he considers public meetings an "important cultural institution," Brian P. Kennedy, a transportation planner at AECOM who has done extensive work on transit agencies' use of online video, said that they often cause people to bristle or get defensive.

"You're not going to tell me where I have to be, when I have to be there, what I have to listen to, or how long you will let me speak," Kennedy said. "That's essentially what we're doing now—and then telling them you have to read this 300-page document and understand it or interpret these 40 poster boards and then make a meaningful comment."

Tapping into stakeholders' collective wisdom is not, however, as easy a task as is setting up a personal page and uploading a few baby pictures for personal users. The current system of public engagement, though sometimes cumbersome, is well established and includes protocols for receiving and processing public comment. By contrast, opinions that stream off the Internet pose some perplexing challenges. Even the most ardent proponents of social networking emphasize that there's a fine line between public comment and idle rant.

"It's something of a double-edged sword," Allison said. "We respect people's First Amendment rights; we don't want to censor people. We've tried to set up guidelines where . . . we don't have the nonsense that [can] take place."

The same public obligations that compel public agencies to respect the popular will are intertwined with those that require them to watch their p's and q's more carefully than would private-sector companies that merely sell to, but are not beholden to, customers.

RTD

"Being a public entity, we had to think things through differently than a private sector organization," said Pauletta Tonilas, spokesperson for the Denver Region Transportation District's FasTracks light rail system.

Likewise, given that almost anyone can make a comment on a Facebook wall, send a tweet to all their friends, or even write a personal blog, the amount of text that could be considered "feedback"—and is publicly available—has grown exponentially. This proliferation of opinions has challenged agencies to decide what opinions to consider.

*awareness of its
social media pages.*   substantive part of the record?"

"Over the next six months or a year, a lot more about what we should and shouldn't do is going to become clear," Kennedy added.

Getting On Board

Litvak said that she had long discussions about how to treat posts to the Facebook pages that she administers. Ultimately, LA Metro decided that everything posted would in fact go into the public record—and that the page would indicate as much. Internally, Litvak said that agencies must clearly decide who within the agency is allowed to update and post on Facebook pages or send Twitter tweets. Ultimately, she said that agencies just have to "dive in" without analyzing social media to death.

Los Angeles
Metropolitan
Transportation
Authority

*LA Metro is credited
as a pioneer in
employing
social media to
interact with riders.*

What the agencies give up, however, is full control over their own images. By piggybacking—free of charge—on social media sites, they inherently get intertwined with the image and ethos of the sites themselves. Then again, Facebook is becoming popular enough that its "brand" is almost starting to disappear, becoming more of a medium in its own right. But, while the likes of Facebook may not seem suited for the culture of enormous public bureaucracies, agencies that would otherwise be reluctant are adopting a mentality of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"Some folks just felt like this was a trivial way to communicate with people," Tonilas said. "Eventually everybody understood that this was a forum that was out there and that if we didn't proactively get information out there, people were going to go around us. Erroneous information was running rampant and there were people blogging and posting things to different sites that were very inaccurate." Tonilas pointed to one instance when an announced funding cut prompted bloggers to incorrectly warn that the entire FasTracks system—nearly 120 miles of light and commuter rail in various stages of development—was being halted.

As agencies find their place in the social networking cloud, the one axiom that will surely hold true is that cyberspace changes much more quickly than does the average public bureaucracy. And even as they warm up to the new generation of media, no one really knows how resilient any given technology will be or whether the next breakthrough will arise.

"I think it's too early to tell," said Allison. "There's been so much said about Twitter, but now we we're hearing that it's already jumped the shark and nobody pays attention to Twitter. I think it's safe to say that [social media] will definitely be part of any major public agency's community outreach."

—Josh Stephens is the editor of the California Planning & Development Report.