

Whitepaper 14: Social media in the public sector

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The public sector is facing unprecedented challenges – not least huge financial pressures. Chancellor George Osborne's 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review unveiled the UK's biggest spending cuts for decades.

The Government laid out plans to slash more than £80 billion from the public purse, with schools, councils, hospitals, the fire brigade and police all affected.

Brighton & Hove City Council alone has to make £45 million in savings over the next three years - or £15 million every year from a budget of £750 million. Other councils, like Kent County Council, are looking at potentially slashing £340 million by 2014/15.

Modern-day pressures have forced council officers nationwide to re-evaluate the whole model of local government - there is a genuine need to redefine its role to be fit for purpose now and in the future.

The entire public sector is facing similar challenges. In short, the public sector cannot continue working in the same way it has done since the 19th century, when county and district councils began.

At the heart of these challenges lies communication. Research carried out by Ipsos-Mori shows that the more the public feel informed about their services, the more satisfied they are with an organisation.

Communication becomes more complicated with the changing media landscape. Newspaper circulation is in decline both nationally and regionally while online audience share continues to grow apace.

In the face of real change in the public sector, communication has undergone its own quiet revolution. Where local public services need to find more efficient and effective ways to engage with people, social media is proving to be an invaluable new tool.

The case for social media

Various public sector organisations have been experimenting with social media over the last few years. Age-old industries are turning to modern technology to reach their audience, using a medium that is mutually used by people of all backgrounds and ages. But how are different public sector bodies using social media and what impact is it having?

Social media is fast becoming an essential component in an organisation's business strategy. However, social media in itself is not a strategy – it is a tactic designed to help build reputation.

The challenge is to avoid focusing on creating a “social media strategy”. This narrow field of vision ignores the fact that a good reputation is built on an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to reputation management.

This includes aligning an organisation’s business model with an overarching marketing and branding strategy, all of which focuses on connecting with the customer and brand building.

Today’s tech-savvy citizen commands a different relationship. No longer are they willing to be passive recipients; they expect to be active participants in sharing information and creating content.

Citizens are now prosumers rather than consumers. These are people curating content on issues that they care about which often means they can either support or destroy a brand (also referred to as “folk ads”, “open source branding” and “vigilante marketing”).

“Consumers creating such content are acting as self-appointed promoters of the brand and often have firm convictions regarding what is right and wrong for it. We thus define vigilante marketing as unpaid advertising and marketing efforts, including one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many commercially oriented communications, undertaken by brand loyalists on behalf of the brand.” (*Muñiz Jr & Schau, Journal of Advertising, vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 187-202.*)

At the heart of this lies a desire for citizens to feel valued. This means they are being listened to and are involved in the shaping of an organisation’s brand; making them feel empowered and making brands more “social”.

The Twitter hashtag is bringing people together to talk about issues they care about.

Case study - NHS using Twitter

#nhssm is a Twitter hashtag and stands for NHS social media. #nhssm is a community of people who are interested in health communications and social media.

Every Wednesday at 8pm people join the conversation on Twitter, asking questions and sharing experiences of using social media to help listen to what patients have to say, promote health services and talk to patients.

Weekly chats are curated on a blog for people to catch up on at a later stage. Topics vary from how to write a social media strategy to running a webchat, or developing a successful Facebook page.

Each chat attracts up to 30 participants, with hundreds more reading the blog and accessing the community's wealth of expertise.

#nhssm has proven to be a successful forum for sharing experience and encouraging NHS organisations to use social media and understand best practice. It’s on-going.

More information is at www.nhssm.org.uk

The riots in the summer of 2011 across parts of the UK, and specifically in London, demonstrated the power of social media. Social media played a key role in organising people to wreak havoc across the country, costing UK companies millions of pounds; but it was also a force for good in bringing citizens together to clean up and reclaim their streets.

Throughout the August riots, Sussex Police used Twitter to publish a steady stream of updates from the “top cop” all the way down to the frontline – answering questions from citizens and setting the record straight when rumours started to spread.

Sussex Police is one of a handful of public service organisations that understand the power of social media and deploy it effectively by encouraging almost everyone in their organisation to participate in conversations with the public. This level of presence provides public reassurance and strengthens the police force’s reputation.

Greater Manchester Police is another police force using social media to engage with citizens.

Case study – Greater Manchester Police (GMP) 24-hour tweetathon

Chief Constable Peter Fahy wanted to explain to the public about the role of policing. Specifically, he wanted to “raise awareness of the diverse and complex role of policing, explaining how much time officers spend with non-crime matters”.

He hoped to achieve it by releasing details of emergency and non-emergency calls over a 24-hour period.

Twitter

GMP had already identified Twitter as the force’s main social networking channel.

A media strategy was prepared by the Press Office and the media briefed on Wednesday 13 October 2010. All media coverage was embargoed until 5am Thursday 14 October.

Four new Twitter accounts were established to publish the updates supported by the main account, @gmpolice. Blogging tool CoverIt Live was used to publish the Twitter feeds to the GMP website homepage and the Intranet homepage. This was to ensure that people who did not have access to Twitter could still follow the day’s events.

Results

3,200 incidents were tweeted on the dedicated accounts over 24 hours, and these were backed up with further tweets from the main @gmpolice account. These were published to a combined audience of 78,742 followers across all five Twitter accounts and the GMP website.

The number of followers to @gmpolice increased from 3,000 at the start of the day to 16,000 by the end of the 24 hours.

Activity on Twitter also had an impact on the number of people accessing GMP domains elsewhere on the web:

- The force website received 62,630 visits during the day, which is half of what it normally receives across a whole month.
- The GMP Flickr account received 12,000 hits, its highest ever in a single day, the average per day for the account was 800. Its previous record was 1,800 during February’s snowfall.
- A number of high profile politicians and celebrities became followers of GMP during the day.

Innovating Brighton & Hove City Council

The private sector understands the importance of building customer loyalty and realises that social media can help achieve this aim. While local government has always pursued the idea of empowering communities from the grassroots, it has not fully grasped how social media could play a role.

Sadly, local government is not renowned for innovation. In most cases, the dead hand of bureaucracy often stifles creativity. However, Brighton & Hove City Council has pioneered some of the most innovative ways of working in social media, which is now accepted as part of “normal business”.

In 2009 Brighton & Hove City Council conducted the UK’s first online mapping of a local community to identify who the key online influencers were, what they were saying and in which spaces and with whom they shared their conversations.

This piece of detailed mapping, carried out by Brighton-based social business consultancy NixonMcInnes, was designed to shift the model of communications from the traditional top-down approach to a genuine involvement in which conversations were encouraged.

The fundamental purpose was to connect the council with its community. In practical terms this meant achieving the following:

- Improve customer service by enabling people to access the council services in a way they want
- Break down old barriers – enabling customers to talk to the council openly and honestly
- Reduce the need for phone and face-to-face visits thereby making life easier for the customer and saving the council money
- Improve community and neighbourhood involvement

A ‘sociable’ organisation

Public sector communications have historically been based on a “broadcast” model, in which control over the message and how it was disseminated was central, even when mediated by a third party such as a newspaper.

At first, this message was one-way, with organisations simply talking at audiences. During the late 1990s and early 2000s most public sector organisations realised that they needed to listen to their audiences too, and embarked on two-way communications.

However, this model still placed a premium on message control and considered only the conversations the public sector organisation was involved in proactively or reactively.

An important shift in Brighton & Hove City Council’s journey towards becoming a sociable organisation was to ‘let go’ of control and allow residents to talk among themselves, proactively taking the council’s message and telling friends, neighbours and colleagues. Residents are more likely to trust the message this way, than hearing it directly from their local council.

How is social media used in Brighton & Hove?

Brighton & Hove City Council’s online research discovered that the city’s online communities are big, active and growing.

The researchers found large, diverse and vibrant online communities of local residents, some that had been active for many years, and others that were quickly emerging as the broader population continued to adopt social technologies.

At the centre of these social hubs were influential individuals, local residents who shape and drive conversations, help others out and inform opinions.

These were some of the top findings in 2009:

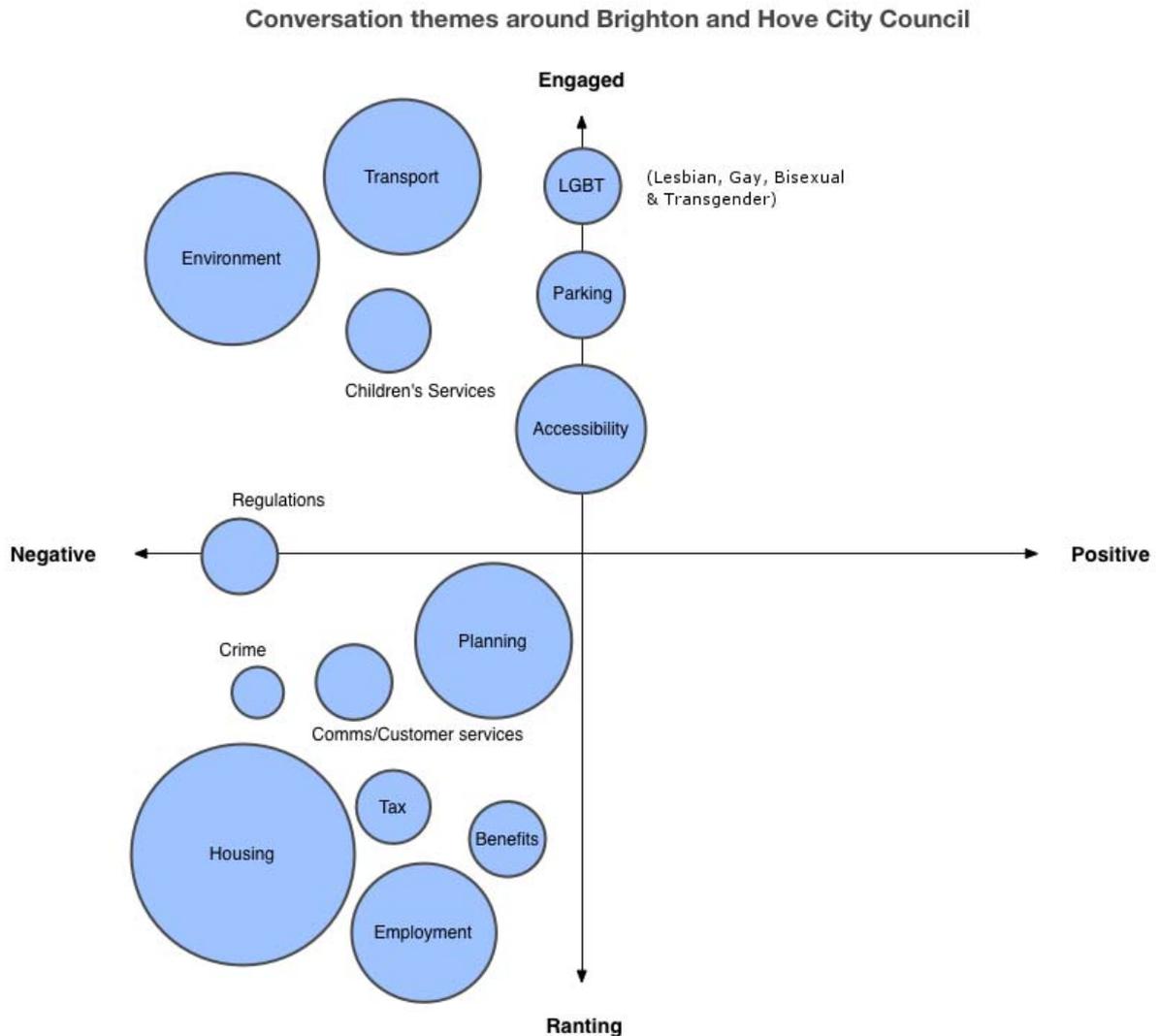
- On **Facebook**, the social networking site, the Brighton & Hove network had more members than there were residents of the city (over 260,000)
- **Twitter**, the micro-blogging site, had at least 1,300 Brighton & Hove profiles including individuals, local businesses, not-for-profit organisations and political groups
- There were at least 130 Brighton & Hove-related groups on **Flickr**, the photo-sharing site (for example, a group which celebrated graffiti art around the city). Several had hundreds of participants and at least one had more than 2,000
- The social network for professionals, **LinkedIn**, which allows members to showcase their skills and experience, had at least 25,000 registered individuals in Brighton & Hove
- **Bebo**, the social networking site popular with teenagers, had 22,000 members in the city
- The advice and support site for mothers, **Netmums**, had at least 4,500 members registered in the very active Brighton & Hove group

There were several other sites (for example North Stand Chat, the forum for Brighton football club's fans was very active), and tens of thousands of individuals involved.

Many of these individuals and groups were extremely active. Many of them talked regularly about issues affecting or interesting to the council. However, many of these comments and conversations portrayed the council in a negative light. The vast majority, when the research was done, were going on without the knowledge, let alone the participation, of the council. In short, the council was not engaging with these audiences.

Having ascertained how many people were talking about the council and where, the research team analysed particular areas they were discussing, the tone of their comment and whether they were engaged in the issue or simply 'ranting' in an unmeasured or disengaged way.

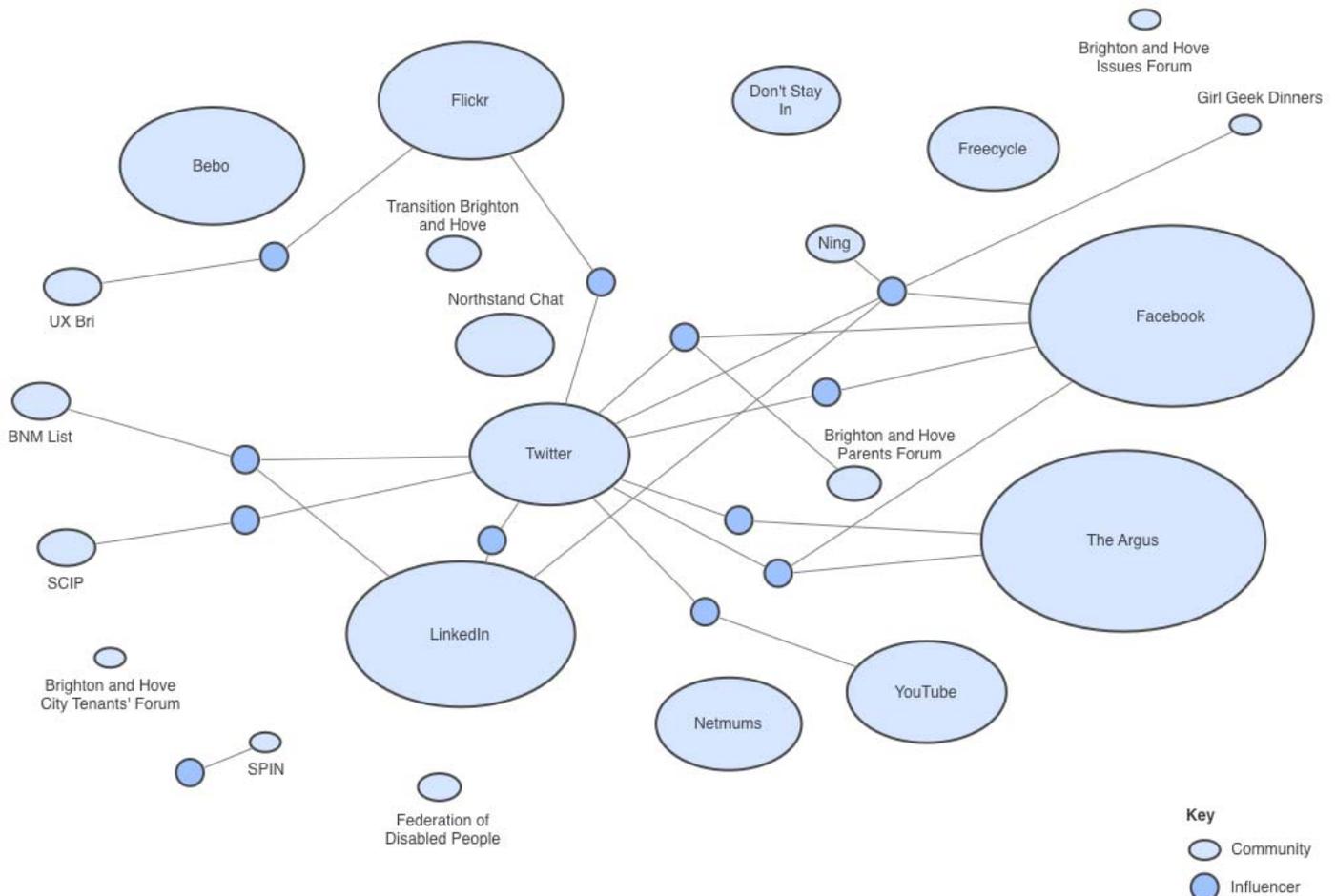
The following diagram sets out some of the findings in 2009:



The threats of this new form of conversation were clear: if a negative picture of the council in social spaces was allowed to grow, and did not include any input from the council, its reputation could be damaged. Not only because of what was being said, and that it was often erroneous or untruthful, but because the council could appear to be unwilling to engage.

An example of online communities talking about Brighton & Hove City Council:

Online Communities and Influencers in Brighton and Hove



The opportunities

The vast majority of the public sector still relies heavily on traditional communications based on media relations, marketing (for example posters, leaflets and events) and paid-for advertising. All three are problematic and resource intensive.

Media relations means relying on TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, often with declining audiences, to disseminate messages that may not necessarily convey the full story. This may limit the audiences' understanding of the organisation's actions, which in turn has an impact on the organisation's reputation.

Advertising is expensive and often ineffective when applied to people who are increasingly impervious to obvious marketing.

Therefore social media tools, including blogs, podcasts and social networks present a better opportunity for the public sector to communicate in both directions in a cost-effective, authentic and direct way.

It presents engagement opportunities with traditionally hard-to-reach groups, for example young people, and can reach a new audience as a consultation tool.

Equally important, in the case of Brighton & Hove City Council, is that this form of communications paved the way for a transformation in the way in which it approached citizens.

By using social media, public sector organisations are able to talk to citizens in the way they want, where they are and on their terms - addressing the issues that are important to them. Not only can these organisations share information about new services and listen to discussions taking place in the blogosphere – that may or may not include the public sector organisation – but the opportunity exists to contribute to these discussions.

Together with the rise of the internet and social media, this provides local public services with an opportunity to forge new relationships with citizens.

Schools are recognising that social media can be used for educational purposes. Instead of seeing it as a distraction to pupils, they are adding it to the curriculum. This gives schools an opportunity to teach in a surrounding that pupils are comfortable with and enjoy.

Case study - Social media in schools

Radiowaves

Radiowaves is a social learning environment that provides social media for education. It enables schools to create safe internet radio, podcasts, videos and blogs. With a free Radiowaves website pupils can start podcasting, join national campaigns and develop digital literacy skills.

In 2005 Fife Council started working with Radiowaves on a cluster pilot with eight primary schools and one secondary school. Six months later they purchased an authority subscription for all Fife schools (181).

Radiowaves is written in the Education Service's e-vision strategy. It is driven by pupils, working alongside teachers. The developments that Radiowaves have introduced fit with this way of working in and supporting schools.

One school 'station' is entirely pupil-led. The school's station can be viewed here:

www.radiowaves.co.uk/inverkeithing

The Fife network is at: www.radiowaves.co.uk/fife

It has given a range and number of people in Fife a real start to getting to grips with this type of technology.

Results

In Fife there are over 6,000 pupils on Radiowaves who have created over 13,000 stories and 18,000 blogs. Radiowaves offers sports reporting and live events, which fit perfectly with Curriculum for Excellence.

Strengthening relationships

Reputation management is everyone's business. At Brighton & Hove City Council this philosophy is being spread across the whole organisation, and so too is the use of social media.

Social media has an unprecedented ability to strengthen relationships through the power of conversation. For example, by using YouTube the council managed to encourage the city's skateboarding community to get involved in the re-design of a skate park.

Fortuitously the world's most famous skateboarder Tony Hawk skateboarded at a show on Brighton seafront. The council filmed the show and interviewed Hawk about the need for skaters to get involved in skate park design, and edited the film to include a web address where skaters could help decide the final design of the skate park.

This video was posted on the council's YouTube site and has so far been watched over four thousand times and counting.

The council's YouTube site (<http://bit.ly/mAiuTi>) also aims to put individual faces to roles and services by featuring officers explaining how to recycle, what has been done to ensure the council is prepared for severe weather and how cycling is promoted across the city. This all helps to destroy the 'faceless' council criticism.

The Department of Health has also used social media to get citizens involved in the creation of a project.

Case study – Department of Health crowdsourcing

In August 2011 Secretary of State for Health Andrew Lansley challenged people to nominate their favourite health apps and information maps, and suggest ideas for new apps.

The Department of Health wanted to find examples of the best, most popular existing health apps, and hear people's ideas for apps that hadn't been developed yet.

Participants included patients, doctors, nurses and developers.

The aim of the project was to help people think about how apps can help with the following challenges:

- Personalisation and choice of care and support - apps that allow people to search for health information online
- Better health and care outcomes - apps that allow patients to manage their health condition
- Autonomy and accountability - apps that allow patients to rate and review their local health services
- Improving public health - apps that track levels of exercise
- Improving long-term care and support - apps that help patients plan their own care

Results

The project used an innovative, low-cost crowdsourcing platform called Ideascale, which allowed people to submit their entries, read others and vote for their favourites. Individual ideas

were also shared across social networks, which helped generate 497 ideas, almost 8,000 votes and more than 900 comments.

Alongside the crowdsourcing platform the Department published a blog, led by Dr Shaibal Roy, one of the judges. The project had no marketing budget, so relied on existing corporate social media channels such as Twitter and YouTube to help promote the ideas and encourage participation.

View the Maps and Apps website: www.mapsandapps.dh.gov.uk

Social media in a crisis

It's not just about encouraging citizens to use services. In crisis situations social media has enormous potential.

Social media can be updated and provide information to people in real time. It enables organisations to join conversations where people are online and give them information on their terms, which means they don't necessarily have to go searching for it.

During the winter outbreak of severe weather in 2010/11 Brighton & Hove City Council informed residents about school closures, gritting, buses, recycling and campaigned for 4x4 drivers to help deliver medicines and food. The council was updating information from its main website to various social media sites.

The public feedback was very positive with most comments congratulating the council for providing timely, regular and relevant updates that helped reassure residents the council was doing everything it could to keep roads clear and safe.

Anecdotes from Twitter:

[#FF @BrightonHoveCC](#) < Great to see our local council engaging so much with residents via [#socialmedia](#)

Really impressed with the [@BrightonHoveCC](#) Twitter feed today; great way to keep up with the election

really impressed by [@sussex_police](#) & [@BrightonHoveCC](#) & their engagement within twitter to disperse the stupid rumours - makes me feel v safe

[@BrightonHoveCC](#) - just been into the Museum at Brighton. The Council have done the City proud

Praise when Praise is due to the [@RecyclingRefuse](#) teams [@BrightonHoveCC](#) for using twitter in many council departments, bigup!

London Fire Brigade used Twitter on Bonfire Night 2011 to show citizens in real time the pressure it has to deal with and to give advice on keeping safe.

Case study – London Fire Brigade twitterthon

In November 2011 London Fire Brigade (LFB) wanted to get its message across about how to stay safe on Bonfire Night. It used its main Twitter account ([@LondonFire](#)) to tweet about every fire its crews were called out to between 4pm and midnight on 5th November.

Bonfire Night 2011 saw the fewest number of fires across the capital since records began, according to initial figures from the London Fire Brigade. Preliminary figures show that the number of fires fell this year despite expectations that Bonfire Night would be busier than usual due to it falling on a Saturday.

The capital's fire crews were called to deal with around 130 fires, almost a third fewer than in 2010, when they dealt with 175 blazes. The Brigade says that this is, in part, due to its effective communication of fire safety messages to the public in the run up to Bonfire Night and on the night itself.

A total of 128 tweets were sent. Tweets were sent about a range of incidents, including a huge number of out of control bonfires and several blazes caused by stray fireworks, including one in Peckham where a firework caused a serious blaze on the balcony of a flat.

The Brigade received an overwhelming level of public support via Twitter on the night and several of the Brigade's tweets were retweeted by hundreds of people.

As a result of the twitterthon, the Brigade increased its Twitter followers more than 25 per cent to over 14,500. London Fire Commissioner, Ron Dobson, said: "I'm pleased to be able to say that this year's Bonfire Night passed off without major incident. There were far fewer fires on November 5th and our Bonfire Night twitterthon and the publicity that surrounded it played a big part in this."

Location-based applications: Foursquare

Brighton & Hove City Council was the first local authority in the UK to use location-based social media to tempt people into its libraries.

In November 2010, the council partnered with Foursquare, one of the world's fastest-growing social networks, to attract a new tech-savvy audience by holding a 'Foursquare Day' at 15 libraries.

Anyone 'checking in' on the Foursquare app was entered into a prize draw for 10 annual audio visual subscription cards worth £30.

Visitors were able to leave 'tips' and suggestions electronically using the app. The campaign generated online buzz and harnessed the power of the social networks as people who had checked-in could also link it to their Twitter and Facebook accounts, enabling them to spread the campaign.

Council-run venues, like museums, leisure centres and one-off events, will eventually start offering 'specials' for mayors (the user who has checked-in the most in the past 60 days) and check-ins across many public buildings in the city.

The local authority is already conducting customer service relating to refuse collections on Twitter and this, coupled with the Foursquare initiative, represents the beginning of embedding social media into all of its services to drive up quality of communication and bring down costs.

Social media gives the council the opportunity to transform the relationship it has with citizens because it can be available to them 24/7. With smartphones the council can communicate with people wherever they are.

Libraries are just the sort of service that can benefit from location-based technology like Foursquare, because a goal of that service is to tempt people in through the front door. This is exactly what the network helps to do. The council is also able to learn from the feedback visitors leave using Foursquare and develop a whole new two-way dialogue.

Other options a public sector organisation could explore include experimenting with building location-based services into all venues whether they are swimming pools, libraries, gyms or held events. Why not embed social media into all services?

Embedding social media

Brighton & Hove City Council has established a dedicated social media unit within the overall communications department. The team monitors all online commentary about the council and actively participates in conversations – either directly resolving the issue or sign-posting to another source of information.

The communications unit is also tasked with developing the council's social media eco-system – this is the network of “brand champions” within the council who can represent the organisation and participate in conversations with citizens.

The communication unit's main functions are to co-ordinate and curate conversations between staff and citizens and to manage the overall reputation of the council.

Therefore, the strategy is to devolve social media to all parts of the organisation while retaining oversight of the over-arching reputation of the organisation. The communications unit is now more a curator, than a creator, of content.

Social media success for Brighton & Hove City Council

In one business unit alone where the council has fully embedded social media as part of its customer service strategy, the savings have been significant.

The council's waste and recycling department has one of the highest call volumes from residents. Prior to 2009, the council's main point of contact was by telephone. As an example, during the 2009 winter call volumes increased by over 50%. The service received over 15,000 calls in two months and struggled to answer a quarter of these.

By introducing social media as part of the overall customer services strategy the council reduced call volume by 30%, abandoned calls dropped from 40% to 1%, email and letter response time dropped from nine days to two days, webpage views increased by 50% and online reporting increased by 50%.

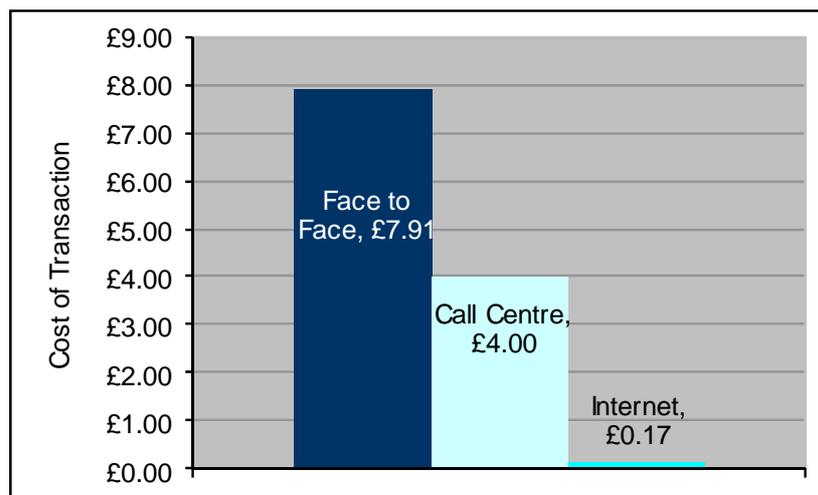
In 2009 the council's waste and recycling unit received a third of its customer contact by phone and in 2010 this dropped to one sixth as customers used other channels.

At the time of writing, a detailed study into return-on-investment was being carried out to measure the total savings made by the council through the use of social media.

To illustrate the point, the typical costs for an online transaction are £7.74 less than face-to-face contact and £3.83 less than in a call centre.

Therefore, the business case is clear: shift interactions online, participate in conversations and improve customer satisfaction and overall reputation.

Savings through the use of social media



Next Steps

Brighton & Hove City Council is now rolling out a “Social Media Innovation Group”. This is a council-wide project in which people from across the organisation are brought together to spearhead innovation through social media.

The purpose is to explore new ways of working such as open data, hyper-local communities, semantic web development, and wider partnership working involving residents, other government bodies, charities and private sector bodies in an effort to produce solutions that will lead to better service provision and improved reputation.

This follows on the heels of the recent CityCamp event (led by the council) held in Brighton in March 2011 which saw hundreds of local residents, technologists, developers, artists and representatives from the private and public sector collaborate over a weekend to create new applications that could improve public services.

This piece of city-wide collaboration was hailed as another local authority first – a project in which the community was encouraged to help co-design and co-deliver services. Another CityCamp event is planned for 2012.

A new business model

Social media is an essential part of the council's business strategy.

The work carried out by the communications department created a new way of working. It saw the council shift its operating model from the traditional 'top-down' approach to a more horizontal model in which departments and partner organisations are now encouraged to "join-up" to improve service delivery for the citizens of Brighton & Hove.

The focus has been on creating a "networked council". This means devolving leadership and responsibility so that even our frontline staff are empowered to take decisions on the spot where customer satisfaction is at its most potent.

As chief executive of Brighton & Hove City Council John Barradell pointed out in an interview with the Local Government Chronicle in January 2011:

"Councils must demonstrate their relevance by adapting to the changing environment and constantly innovate. We need to adopt a Google-like mentality in which innovation becomes ingrained in our DNA, and achieved through collaboration and co-creation.

"The question is how do we connect the three interrelated parts of the council, the community and innovation?"

"First, we've got to relinquish power and hand control to the community. Second, we've got to involve them more in the design and delivery of services. Finally, we've got to complete the triangulation of council-citizen-innovation in order to become truly relevant."

Social media is one key element in the council's business model that helps achieve these aims.

By encouraging staff to connect and work collaboratively with partners and citizens, the council can connect with the city, build a dialogue with residents and improve the reputation of Brighton & Hove City Council.

This model of communications and engagement can be applied across the whole public sector.

Social media use in the public sector has not yet reached its height. As we carry on learning more about its possibilities and form stronger relationships with audiences along the way, our organisations' reputations will continue to grow.

About the author:

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