

Overcoming the Fear of Facebook

Governments must interact using both traditional websites and social media.

[Steve Towns](#) | September 2011

A few years ago, I wrote a little news story around the provocative idea that Facebook pages would one day replace traditional government home pages on the Internet. The story stemmed from comments by former San Francisco CIO Chris Vein, who said popular Web 2.0 platforms like Facebook or Google's suite of services might displace public-sector websites as the go-to destination for many citizen-government interactions.

Reader comments, of which there were plenty, fell into two categories: Those arguing that government reliance on Facebook -- or any other popular social network -- left out citizens who weren't members, and those congratulating Vein on trying to put government services and information in places where Internet users actually spend their time.

Of course, it's really not an either/or decision. It's both. Governments need to maintain traditional websites with up-to-date information and increase electronic services for residents and businesses. They also need to push into new mediums like social networks that give citizens new ways to interact with public agencies. That was Vein's point back in 2010; he wasn't seriously proposing to move San Francisco's entire website to Facebook. But he was -- correctly, I think -- raising the notion that someday government websites might not be the most important electronic link between governments and their citizens.

As a growing number of Americans access government data and services via smartphone apps and interact with city hall via social network sites, that day may be closer than you think.

Take, for instance, the village of Oak Park, Ill., where Social Media Coordinator Leslie Boehms has managed the town's Facebook page for the past three years. The page may not have eclipsed Oak Park's official website, but it adds a valuable channel for engagement between the village government and residents. Beyond announcing events and posting pictures of civic activities, Facebook serves as a lively online forum for community issues. A glance at Oak Park's Facebook page shows Boehms fielding daily questions about missed garbage pickup, battery recycling and bicycle registration.

"We've definitely gotten a return on investment from me spending time on the Facebook page," she says. "You have to do both -- a traditional website and social media -- and you have to interact on both. You can't just put it out there and not expect to interact and answer questions."

Boehms, a 29-year-old graphic designer, splits her workday between social media activities and running the town's internal employee website. She answers most Facebook questions the same day they're posted, often after checking with village departments to make sure she has the correct response. Sometimes residents chime in and answer users' questions before Boehms can.

One thing missing from the Oak Park Facebook page are the negative or insulting comments that many governments fear they'll be flooded with if they begin two-way social media interaction with citizens. "We definitely get constructive criticism and questions, but we haven't encountered negativity," she says. "The only time I delete posts is when they are spam, and Facebook is really good about filtering out most of that."

In fact, social media activity may help defuse antigovernment sentiment that's permeating many parts of the nation. "Our Facebook page puts a face on the village government -- you can see what the village manager is doing, you can see the fire department at a block party, you can visualize what your government is doing on a day-to-day basis," Boehms says. "I think that has taken away the negative light in which people sometimes see government."

Changing that perception may be one of the strongest arguments for investing time in social media activities. As Oak Park's Facebook experience shows, governments have much to gain and not as much to fear as they might

think.

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