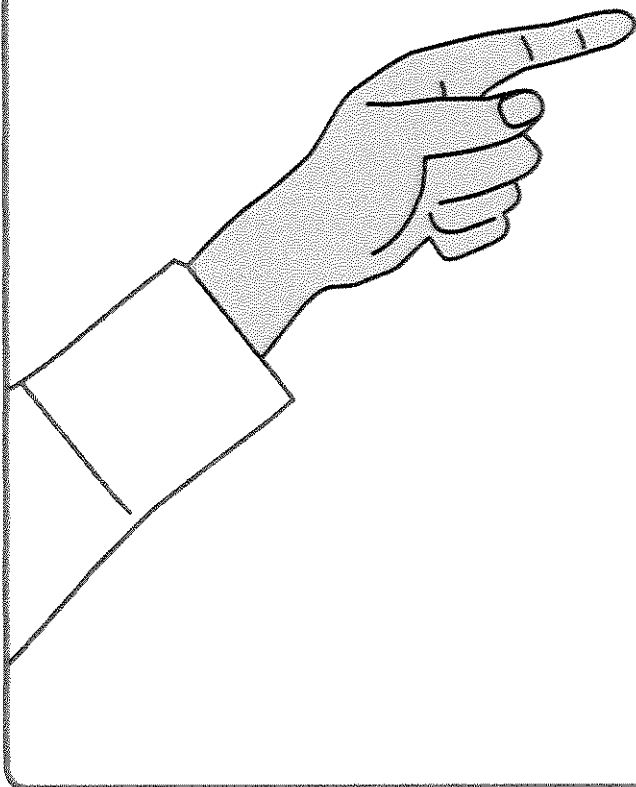


# 10

## Local government social media myths

Perhaps the main barrier to effective take up of social media by councils is a lack of understanding about how social media communication differs from centrally-controlled and largely one-way broadcast communication (print media, for example). And some people may not fully understand the benefits – and risks – of social media. The 10 Local Government Social Media myths is an attempt to counter some common assumptions.



### 1. You have to be (technical/ geeky/ a bit weird) to use social media

Millions and millions of otherwise ordinary people use YouTube and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. On the LG Improvement and Development's own social network – Communities of Practice – over 80,000 local government types are registered, and that's growing every day.

You may have to be a little bit geeky to build some of the more advanced applications, but not always. Anyone can set up a blog in a few clicks. Anyone can upload a photo. Anyone can set up a profile or a group in Facebook. It does take a little expertise to get it all meshed into a good standard for a corporate account. But for individuals and local interest groups, there's no such onus and social media can be a powerful communication tool straight out of the box.

### 2. It's all about 'tools'

Too often people experienced in the use of social media use the names of popular tools (like Twitter) to describe types of interaction and social networking. Unfortunately, that's just the way things have evolved – a bit like vacuuming being described as Hoovering. Tools are the support, but people make the conversations.

### 3. Only young people use social media, so you will only reach them in terms of online consultation

Younger folk may use it as a matter of course, but lots of 'older people' use social media too, and more and more are using it all the time. The average age of Facebook users is 38, and for Twitter it's 39 and Delicious, an online bookmarking service, is 41<sup>12</sup>.

However, you do need to have a good idea of who and where people are congregating online. And understand that some people just don't want to engage this way. That's ok.

### 4. It's a big old waste of time

Human beings are amazing in their ability to waste time. But they don't need social media to do it. People waste time at work emailing their friends, chatting about Formula 1, or wandering around aimlessly holding a piece of paper. And people can waste time on social media, too. But increasingly, many councils and councillors are using social media very effectively. They use it to keep people updated on important but very local issues that wouldn't be covered in local newspapers, or to identify issues which are bubbling up locally before they get out of hand. Communicating and listening constructively is never a waste of time.

### 5. It's too hard

It's not that hard. There are lots of easy ways to get started, and you can focus on doing one thing at a time – like Twitter or blogging or a Facebook page – and get to grips with doing that one thing well. And the great thing about social media is that there are a lot of very social people to turn to for help once you get started.

### 6. It's easy

It is and it isn't. Much of social media is easy and accessible. But good conversation, consultation, listening, facilitation and communication skills take time and effort to develop. We don't expect people to find their public speaking voice the first time they step onto a stage. We don't expect the first report someone ever writes to be a masterpiece. That doesn't mean we don't do it. And just because many people can do these things, it doesn't mean we don't respect those people who do it well.

There are skills, efforts and talents in social media and online facilitation which should not be taken for granted. But they are skills most people can develop with a bit of practice.

<sup>12</sup> Royal Pingdom research, US data, Feb 2010: <http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/02/16/study-ages-of-social-network-users/>



## Local government social media myths

### 7. If we let people say anything, then they'll say the worst thing

A council site or a councillor's blog must never be the home of nasty vitriol, racist, sexist diatribe or links to porn. And these are all things that can happen if you open up conversations online.

But most people are responsible. Most people know what's appropriate. Do we trust local people? We don't let the random loudmouths stop us from holding public meetings. And we shouldn't let the internet equivalent stop us from holding public conversations in spaces online.

Trust people to behave, but be prepared in case they don't. There are a number of simple tools that can prevent bad things from appearing on your site. Be ready to step in and moderate.

### 8. Social media is too risky

What are the risks of not doing it? What are local people talking about? If you're not listening to their message where they're saying it, then you're missing a trick and that's a big risk, too. We can't control what other people are saying about us or our organisations. Better to monitor and manage and counter false messages than to get caught unaware.

On the flip side, sometimes mistakes will happen. Only by actively managing your approach to social media in an open environment can you hope to mitigate that.

**9. You have to hire an expensive consultant to make social media work**

Local government is a big employer. Chances are there's already somebody working within your council or in your local political party who is passionate about social media and they know local government already. They're almost certainly already sharing with and learning from the best in local government.

Find those people and support them to build your approach.

**10. It's a replacement for traditional consultation and engagement**

The invention of the printing press and the development of political pamphlets never stopped the need for us to hear directly from politicians and local people.

True enough, as you gear up with social media some people will switch over from traditional means of consulting with you. But more likely, you'll start to get more and different people engaging with you. And what also happens is that as you demonstrate that you're listening online and supporting an active community, you'll actually get more rather than fewer people turning up to that drafty hall on a wet Wednesday evening.

This, of course, has cost implications. You or council officers may spend more time engaging or have to accommodate more interest in local issues. But we either believe that democratic engagement has its own value and that involving people will make services more appropriate and therefore more efficient, or we don't. If you're reading this, you're unlikely to be in the second group.

"The use of social media is not a replacement for more traditional forms of communication. But as populations become more transient and people lead busy, 24 hour lives, face to face contact and leaflets reach fewer and fewer people. I use Twitter, Facebook, blogs and a regular e-bulletin which enables me to reach residents quickly and effectively and allows them to access information and contact me when and where it is convenient to them. Over the past year I have used social media for tasks from informing residents of rescheduled bin collections in the winter snow to carrying out a quick consultation on views on a proposed 20mph zone in the village High Street – which attracted over 300 responses over a couple of weeks – far more than replied to the consultation in a printed newsletter."

**Sara Bedford, Liberal Democrat, Three Rivers District Council and Abbots Langley Parish Council**