



Open  
house @  
twp hall  
Saturday,  
10 a.m.

## Texting, tweeting and town hall meetings Townships are reaching out to build community relations



This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment is worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 26 for details.

### OBJECTIVES

- Offers new innovations to enhance traditional methods of community relations
- Examines the importance of an effective community relations program.

### CORE COMPETENCIES

- To work effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes
- To utilize public relations skills to position the township positively
- Possesses vision, especially relative to the township's needs or potential

*A full volunteer roster ... resident support for a much-needed fire millage ... active citizen participation at township board meetings ... enthusiastic turn-out for community events ...*

*Sound too good to be true?*

*Even in today's fast-paced, overscheduled society, the above scenario is within the reach of every township. One of the keys to accomplish such an objective is a sound—and active—community relations program.*

*While it may seem like a “no-brainer” that townships must engage with their citizenry, in tough economic times, this effort may fall by the wayside. However, townships must continue to reach out to their citizens to garner support and appreciation for the vital programs and services that township government provides.*

*Read on for ways that townships can enhance traditional community relations techniques—such as newsletters, open houses and Web sites—with new advances in technology, including social media, as well as ramped-up face-to-face interactions.*

## FUSING TRADITIONAL AND NEW METHODS

It has become one of the first things **Saginaw Charter Township** (Saginaw Co.) Manager **Ronald Lee** does in the morning. Checking overnight responses to “The Township Side of Managing,” his blog for the community, is something that has become an essential part of the township’s interaction with community members.

The blog, which debuted in August, offers a way to provide accurate, timely information to township residents—with the township controlling the message.

“This blog is our attempt to get our message out clearly and accurately,” said Lee, who wrote a monthly column covering township matters in a local weekly newspaper during the 1990s. “The blog is still in an infancy stage. Right now, I’m including updates on the project to repair our township hall. Ultimately, the blog will include an announcement of an event, or an explanation of how we do things. Or it may be a response to questions submitted to the township.”

Like Saginaw Charter Township, many Michigan townships are fusing traditionally effective community relations tactics with new media, amid extremely challenging economic times.

**Bath Charter Township** (Clinton Co.) recently held its initial “Community Conversation” meeting. According to Bath Charter Township Superintendent **Troy Feltman**, Community Conversation is the first of a series of meetings where township officials will present the “state of the township.”

“Rather than presenting the more traditional PowerPoint presentation, we’re hosting fireside chats so we can create a two-way dynamic by including feedback from residents,” said Feltman.

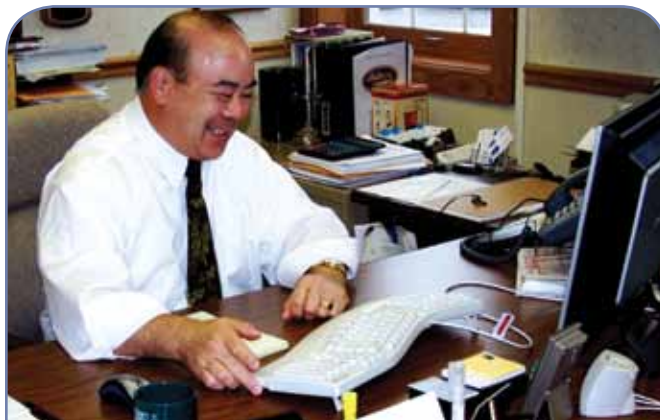


### Online or Offline?

## Recent poll shows more Michigan voters are going online

A November 2009 poll conducted by Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group (MRG) found that people of all ages are adapting to today’s fast-paced approaches to getting all the information they want, whenever they want it. According to the MRG poll, 80 percent of likely Michigan voters have e-mail—and more than half check it at least once a day. The poll found that more than one in four have an account on one of the various online social networking sites, with Facebook being the most popular social media site.

However, townships are cautioned from relying solely on social media to reach constituents, as the MRG survey also found that 97 percent of the voters still haven’t taken social media beyond traditional e-mails.



Saginaw Charter Township (Saginaw Co.) Manager Ronald Lee (above) checks the latest feedback to his blog, “The Township Side of Managing,” created as part of the township’s community relations program.

“With our performance-based budget, we will be able to discuss services with citizens on a cost-per-unit level,” he added. “One example is road patrol. We can tell the public how many miles we traveled, the cost per mile and then evaluate this cost against a target that was established prior to the budget. This format gives people information to make more educated decisions.”

The blogging and the fireside chat-style meetings demonstrate two different approaches to incorporating a community relations program for your township.

Face-to-face contact with citizens, such as fireside chats, are ideal but require time for planning and preparation. A growing number of townships, like Saginaw Charter Township, are using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Wikis and LinkedIn to enable citizens to express opinions, ask questions and get answers in real time.

Now more than ever, it is critical that townships integrate both face-to-face contact and social media into their strategies to engage all community members effectively. If you’re only holding sporadic meetings, you’re missing out on real opportunities to communicate with your key constituents. If you’re only “tweeting” just to Twitter, you’re missing out, too.

## JUMPING ON THE VIRTUAL BANDWAGON

Are you looking for another avenue to stay connected with your busy residents?

Politicians are jumping on the virtual bandwagon—and are reaching the masses in the process. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (@Schwarzenegger), for example, recently broke 1.4 million followers on Twitter, and held a live Twitter-based press conference where he received some 400 questions in 45 minutes.

You can use social networking to communicate directly with your residents, business community and those outside your township to ensure that the information is accurate, timely and

relevant. The information age creates a greater expectation for transparent government, and an even greater expectation that the information is both real-time and easily accessible.

Some units of government tweet everything from notices about Request For Proposals (RFPs) for various projects to traffic accidents and flu updates.

Saginaw Charter Township uses its Web site as a bulletin board where it includes traffic accidents and road closings. The township launched a Facebook page when it was working with the local school district on a community garden. They also used it as an avenue to post photographs and updates on the garden project. It generated great interest.

"Saginaw Charter Township sits in an urban area and the residents here expect to be able to pay bills online," said Lee. "Many residents are adjusting to the fast-paced means of getting information quickly and whenever they need it. We feel a duty to keep up with changing technology."

To start a blog, Lee said it takes a commitment of time and upfront legwork to come up with topics to cover. He has

someone assist him with the technology but only Lee writes and edits his blog.

## REMEMBER TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION OUTREACH

While new technologies are making it easier—and faster—for township officials to reach out to residents, that does not mean that traditional methods of communications should be abandoned. A face-to-face conversation, meeting or community event still go a long way in helping residents feel connected to their township.

Located in a growing rural area, Bath Charter Township still faces some infrastructure challenges for residents who don't have a speedy connection online, which is why the township continues to execute a traditional community relations model to reach its stakeholders, including hosting its "fireside chats" at different locations around the township each quarter.

Feltman said the township has solicited topics from residents for discussion at these meetings. One topic generating high interest is the housing market. The township plans to invite outside experts to provide an update and to answer questions.

## Tips for social media

When first starting out using social media to reach residents, there are a few aspects township officials should consider.

**Reach.** How do we encourage more citizens to use technology? How do we reach everyone?

The quick answer to this question is, "You can't." Citizens need to adopt new technologies at their own pace and using only technology to reach them is a guarantee that you'll be missing people.

On the other hand, residents are adopting new technologies faster than ever. Facebook, for example, reaches over 104 million U.S. people monthly. Over the next few years, watch for online tools to be more and more effective at reaching a more representative group of citizens.

There are ways for townships to encourage faster adoption of new technology. The best way is to use online tools to offer value that cannot be found in other ways. For instance, encourage interested citizens to sign up for a calendar of events instead of sending out a newsletter.

**Implementation and use.** What is the most effective technological method to engage citizens? What's my next step?

There's no single best method to engage citizens through technology, just as there is no single best method to engage them offline either. Different people are at different places in their civic lives and in their technological lives.

The best first step is simply to begin! Join townships like **Harrison Charter Township** (Macomb Co.), and add a Facebook or Twitter account—and use it to disseminate information. At the same time, watch what other units of government (and other organizations) are doing, and start to emulate those



things. In general, these won't be strategic, resource-intensive initiatives but will instead be clever uses of the existing tools.

For example, some local units of government have realized a great deal of success by issuing a status update regarding a particular government event—for example, if it is a sunny day and there's a farmer's market, the local government might issue this Twitter update: "A perfect, sunny day to come out to the farmer's market at [address]!"

**Beware.** The virtual world is a tool with its own standards. The rules of engagement call for a personal touch that is transparent and collaborative while remaining professional and within the realm of public information guidelines. In other words, posters need to:

- Represent themselves and not pretend to be someone else
- Develop a dialogue, not project to the audience
- Convey a consistent message in all mediums, both online and in person

These tools allow two-way communication. Public officials should use these tools wisely. They need to listen and not just pronounce their message.



Residents in Bath Charter Township (Clinton Co.) recently took part in the first of the township's "Community Conversation" meetings (pictured above), where township officials and residents discuss the "state of the township."

In **Hartland Township** (Livingston Co.), Manager **James Wickman** said the township has made it a priority to promote the township when they are out and about.

"We are meeting people where they are and bringing our message to them," said Wickman.

Part of Hartland Township's community relations strategy is to update and connect with community and civic organizations and homeowners' associations.

Wickman added that he participates in a local radio public affairs program, as well as panels outside the township to discuss township business. It is critical for township representatives to be active in their regional chamber of commerce, economic club, school district and civic organizations where township messages can be delivered and discussions can occur. Issues debated at such forums help educate not only residents, but members of the broader region too.

Community relations provides support to elected officials and department heads in order to provide residents with quality services and enhance the township's image around the region and across the state. Often times, misinformation or lack of information leads to uninformed ideas in Lansing, such as reforming local government. Education begins at the local level.

Saginaw Charter Township's Lee said his blog has received a positive response from residents to peers within the local chamber, businesses and civic organizations.

"We put a lot of weight on communications. This is another way of reaching out to our public," added Lee.

## YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO SHORT-CHANGE COMMUNITY RELATIONS

With severe revenue reductions threatening local government budgets and rumblings in Lansing to reform local government

as a way to reduce the state budget, it is even more important for townships to make community relations a priority. Further, there is a greater expectation for transparency in government.

As Bath's Feltman put it, "We err on the side of communication. We communicate even if statute doesn't require it."

Michigan townships have a long track record of being the most efficient form of government and being closest to the people. Townships deliver government services at a lower cost to taxpayers than any other governmental units in the state.

More than half of all Michigan residents live in a township, and a survey conducted by MRG for the Michigan Townships Association found that the majority of Michigan citizens support township government. The December 2008 survey found that Michigan citizens gave local government high marks. According to the 600 residents surveyed, townships provide good value for tax dollars. However, the survey found that township officials need to do a better job of educating their constituents on the scope of services that the township provides.

A strong community relations program is an effective tool to build a dialogue with citizens. Educating citizens about the value provided by townships is also an essential part of a

good public relations program. The more residents understand the township's budget challenges, programs and services, the more local officials can earn public trust and understanding. In addition, a community relations program is important to building a positive image within—and outside—your township.

According to Wickman, the job of local government is already difficult in providing a broad range of services that residents know and understand. In Hartland Township, officials research and analyze services to make sure each choice is for the benefit of the community.

Wickman added, "We want residents to understand our decision-making. When problems occur, it almost always boils down to a misunderstanding, a lack of understanding or a miscommunication."

Implementing a community relations program doesn't need to require a large budget or a large staff. What community relations does require is a commitment to engage with a myriad of audiences within the township. A good, effective community relations program will involve the people, businesses and organizations that live, work and operate in the township.

When using Internet and social media for community outreach, for example, townships need someone to handle the day-to-day tasks of issuing updates, and continually adding content into the social media stream. This function also needs oversight at the management level. That doesn't mean townships need to hire new people to do these things. Existing staff can be tasked to do it.

While many townships produce a newsletter to connect with residents, Wickman said Hartland Township stopped sending out a newsletter. Instead, the township submits an article to the monthly local school publication that is a source of information to the community.

Meanwhile, Wickman said, Hartland Township also incorporates traditional media due to the challenges posed by tight resources in maintaining an updated Web site and using social media. The township had planned to hire a community relations specialist to assist with cable TV programming and provide multi-media services, but had to eliminate the position in the latest round of budget cuts.

Hartland and other townships continue to use earned media—through traditional media sources, such as newspapers, radio and TV—to connect with residents by issuing press releases on positive news or big issues, and doing media interviews.

### **COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE**

Benefits from good community relations do not come automatically. In fact, some organizations may fail to realize the rewards from such work. They miss the payoff because they fail to tell people about their efforts.

## **10 ways to implement a community relations program on a reduced budget**

1. To reduce printing and mailing costs, consider converting your township newsletter to an online or e-newsletter format, if appropriate and the change is supported by residents.
2. Designate a township board member or manager to wear the media relations hat. This person will reach out to local and regional media on a regular basis.
3. Write and distribute press releases.
4. Write opinion-editorials and letters to the editor in local newspapers.
5. Communicate on a regular and timely basis with employees, board and committee members, and volunteers.
6. Address community civic and business groups. Let them know you are available to speak.
7. Regularly update the township Web site.
8. Partner with other organizations, as appropriate.
9. Attend local chamber of commerce and other community meetings.
10. Expand your knowledge base on community relations and social media methods by attending professional development programs.

▶  
*Continued on page 25*

It is important for townships to be accessible and stay connected with the community, using both traditional and emerging community relations methods.

In addition, communication must always be open, clear and honest. If you don't know the answers to residents' questions, let them know the township is looking into it and will respond back with the information.

With just a little effort, insight and embracing today's changing times, townships can reap the benefits of better community relations, garnering more public support and involvement to improve their community. ■

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Turn to page 26 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.

## Are you connected?



MTA's "Community Connection" is an online networking site targeted to address the needs of township officials by providing officials from all over Michigan the opportunity to learn from one another about trends and best practices.

This social media tool provides a "virtual community" where township officials and other community leaders can gather 24/7, 365 days a year to exchange information and share files, including sample documents, with one another. "Community Connection" offers a forum for discussing issues of importance affecting all townships, with the opportunity to create blogs and participate in polls.

Visit [www.michigantownships.org/communityconnect.asp](http://www.michigantownships.org/communityconnect.asp) to request a password, and join what some township officials call "one of the best things offered by MTA."

Join MTA Director of Communications and Education Debra McGuire at the educational session, "All Atwitter: Activate Your Community Through Social Networking," held Thursday, Jan. 28, from 10:15 to 11:30 a.m., at the MTA Annual Educational Conference.



# Continuing Education Self-Assessment



Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), a credentialing program offered through MTA, may obtain 2.0 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "Texting, tweeting and town hall meetings: Townships are reaching out to build community relations," beginning on page 16.

There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit. Completed quizzes should be sent to: MTA Education Center, 512 Westshire Drive, Lansing, MI 48917, or faxed to (517) 321-8908. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder.

Township officials interested in enrolling in TGA may call Shelley Tucker, MTA education specialist, at (517) 321-6467, ext. 251, or for more information, visit [www.michigantownships.org/tga.asp](http://www.michigantownships.org/tga.asp).

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## TGA Continuing Education—January/February 2010

### Texting, tweeting and town hall meetings: Townships are reaching out to build community relations 2.0 Elective Credits

*(To receive credit, this quiz must be completed by Jan. 1, 2014.)*

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **TOWNSHIP & COUNTY:** \_\_\_\_\_

**ADDRESS:** \_\_\_\_\_ **CITY/ZIP:** \_\_\_\_\_

**E-MAIL ADDRESS:** \_\_\_\_\_

- 1. Which of the following is becoming increasingly critical to integrate into township community relations strategies:**
  - a. Newsletters and public surveys
  - b. Face-to-face meetings and social media
  - c. Public comment period during board meetings
  - d. Community coffee breaks and fireside chats
- 2. Which of the following BEST describes residents' expectation when it comes to social networking communications?**
  - a. The expectation for transparent government increases
  - b. Information should be in real-time and easily accessible
  - c. It is the fastest way to communicate directly with residents
  - d. It is the best way to communicate with the business community and those outside your township
- 3. What is the most effective method to engage citizens through technology, according to the article?**
  - a. Facebook
  - b. E-mail
  - c. Twitter
  - d. No single method
- 4. Which of the following BEST describes one of the standards of community outreach in the virtual world:**
  - a. Officials should represent each other to provide one unified voice
  - b. Officials should project to their audience
  - c. Officials should listen, not just pronounce their message
  - d. Officials should change their message with each medium
- 5. Community relations provides support to which of the following groups in order to provide residents with quality services and enhance the township's image:**
  - a. Elected officials and department heads
  - b. Elected officials and county administrators
  - c. The public and the Legislature
  - d. Press and news media
- 6. A strong community relations program:**
  - a. Is dependent upon a strong relationship with the media
  - b. Is an effective tool for building dialogue with citizens as well as a positive image
  - c. Will ensure public trust and understanding
  - d. Eliminates miscommunication or misunderstanding
- 7. Implementing a community relations program requires:**
  - a. A large budget and large staff
  - b. Involvement of officials, department heads and staff
  - c. Involvement of people, businesses and organizations within the township
  - d. A commitment to engage a specific township audience
- 8. When using the Internet and social media for community outreach, townships need:**
  - a. Someone to handle the tasks of issuing status updates and adding content into the social media stream
  - b. To hire additional staff to handle the frequent status and content updates
  - c. An elected official to handle the tasks of issuing status updates and adding content
  - d. To outsource for oversight and continual status and content updates
- 9. Once a township steps into the online social networking arena to enhance community relations:**
  - a. It should incorporate blogging and online bulletin boards
  - b. It should discontinue traditional face-to-face meetings
  - c. It should discontinue expensive newsletter outreach
  - d. It should integrate both face-to-face meetings and social media
- 10. Which of the following statements BEST describes the benefits of an improved community relations program?**
  - a. Townships can save money by eliminating newsletter printing and mailing costs
  - b. A social media presence allows officials the flexibility to actually be less accessible to their community
  - c. Townships could miss the payoff if they fail to tell people about their efforts
  - d. Officials will recognize significant time savings in online social media outreach and eliminate the need to write press releases and opinion-editorials