



## Building a connected community using social media tools

Social networking is a phrase that for many township officials brings to mind an afternoon on the golf course or a cup of coffee at the local diner. But to the more than 500 million active social media users of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and various blogs, it means spending “an average of six-plus hours per month, connecting with and expanding their online community of ‘friends.’” [Nielsen, June 2010]

Social media can be defined as the social interaction, creation and distribution of content—including text, photos, audio and video—via highly accessible Internet-based applications.

For most of recorded history, the physical town square and local “watering holes” were the social networking hotspots for information on local news and events. In the first half of the 20th century, the local newspaper was the outlet of choice for keeping people informed about the various goings on in their local government.

Newspaper readership peaked in the 1940s and has plummeted during the last five years. The meteoric rise in popularity of social media tools and the Internet presents local government with the unique challenge of reinventing the town square and building a connected community using social media tools. Reaching this goal requires a clear strategy and understanding

of available social media options—including which ones are best suited to the township’s needs and how to deploy them. As with all government expenditures, the goal should be to provide the maximum return on investment and benefit—for citizens, staff, elected officials and stakeholders.

When we talk about social media or the “social Web” as some call it, we are talking about hundreds of different applications that fall into more than a dozen categories. To simplify the discussion, we’ll organize these into three main types—publishing, social networking and collaboration—and focus on the most widely adopted social media applications.

### **PUBLISHING**

To help understand what social media is, let’s first take a look at what it’s *not*. A simple website is often considered an example of publishing. Like a printed brochure, this type of site may contain out-of-date information, which is seldom updated. Due to its static nature and lack of interactivity, this type of website is *not* considered social media.

The golden rule of publishing, as well as all other forms of social media is, “Content is king!” The goal of providing a steady stream of content gave birth to one of the first truly social media publishing applications, known as the “blog.”

## Blogs

Blogs are an online diary or journal, consisting of individual entries or “posts,” often about a similar topic or theme, which are published in reverse chronological order and typically provide readers with an opportunity to comment or rate content. Common blogging applications include **Wordpress** (wordpress.com) and **Blogger** (blogger.com).

Because blogs are easy to update and require little more than the basic skills used to create a word-processing document, with text and pictures, they can easily supplement and complement traditional websites.



Many communities, like the **Alpine Township** (Kent Co.) example above, are using their blog as a less-formal channel of communication with the community. Other uses for blogs include a monthly update by one or more township departments, or to keep residents updated on specific projects going on in the community.

No matter how a blog is used, the *interactivity* of a blog is what makes it “social.” Making a blog interactive means allowing people to post comments, know who is posting, forward posts and even rate the quality of the blog’s content.

The two biggest mistakes a community can make with a blog are not updating blog content on a regular basis, and using the blog as a one-way communication tool and not allowing interaction.

## RSS feeds

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a method of formatting and publishing Web content in a way that allows people to subscribe to it. The collection of RSS content is called a feed, and can include text, audio or video. RSS feeds allow people to automatically receive updates and read them in their favorite RSS reader, such as their Web browser, e-mail program or custom RSS reader. A visitor typically subscribes to a feed by clicking on an RSS icon (pictured above right) located near the target content.



The RSS feed typically contains only the heading and first paragraph of the syndicated content, along with a link back to the website where the rest of the content is located. This allows people to skim the content for items they are interested in and “click back” to get the rest of the story.

## Micro-blogs

**Twitter** (twitter.com) is the best and most widely used example of a micro-blog. It’s called a micro-blog because posts are limited to 140 characters. Users “tweet” about what they are doing, where they are and how they feel about whatever is on their mind at the moment.

Twitter and micro-blogging applications are similar to the text messaging applications found on most modern cell phones. Individuals and local governments, including townships, are using Twitter in exactly the same way—to broadcast breaking news, quickly share an opinion or draw attention via a Web link to a piece of information they want others to see.

Twitter bridges the gap between the publishing and social networking categories of social media by allowing people to subscribe to—or follow—other people’s or organizations’ Twitter feeds.



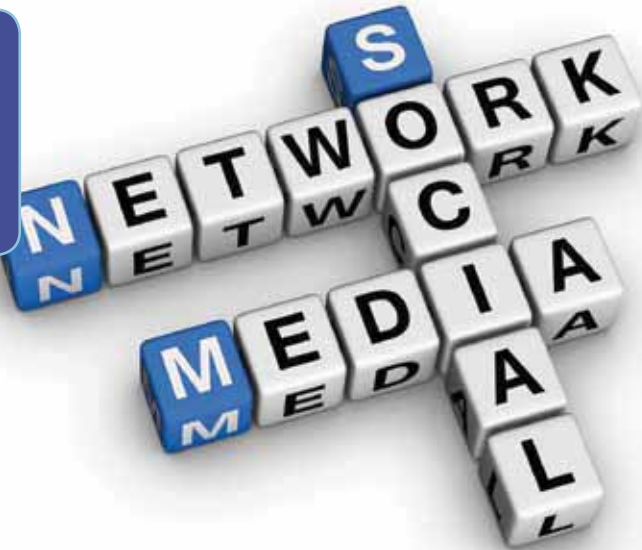
Here are a couple of example tweets by **DeWitt Charter Township** (Clinton Co.):

- Accident at Business 27 & Webb Road. Please use caution. 1:44 PM Jul 13th via Facebook
- Don't forget to schedule time on this Friday the 16th for the Grangers Meadows Event! 11:38 AM Jul 12th via Facebook

If you look closely, you will notice a couple of things about DeWitt Charter Township’s use of Twitter. First, the township is using it to communicate two distinct types of information. The first tweet is a public safety message. The second is a community service announcement. Both of these tweets are excellent examples of information that is time-sensitive, and cannot be effectively or affordably delivered by newspapers, TV, radio or a community website.

Twitter feeds can also be published on a township website or blog, which serves as an up-to-the-minute “ticker” and recent history of what’s going on. Local media outlets and reporters often use a Twitter feed as a resource for keeping their finger on the pulse of the community.

Remember those RSS feeds? You can set up an RSS feed to automatically send out a tweet when new content is posted to your township’s website. Whether you send them out manually or automatically, consider including a “hashtag” (#xyztownship) with each tweet. Including a hashtag with your tweets allows people to easily search for and find related tweets. For example, I use the hashtag “#ILUVADA,” to alert people who follow me on Twitter about comments I make related to my role as township trustee.



## Your social media strategy

- A successful social media strategy depends on everyone in the township taking part.
- If your township doesn't have a social media use policy, the township board needs to put one in place.
- Before beginning township social media efforts, make sure everyone understands:
  - Who will maintain the social networking sites
  - How much time will be invested in creating, editing and posting content
- Create realistic, measurable goals. Decide what the township wants to accomplish before starting. What type of dialog do you want to establish with the community?
- Get ready to listen to citizens, staff and stakeholders, as they provide feedback, opinions, constructive criticism and suggestions. Social media is a two-way street—your goal is to use social media to interact with people, not just talk at them!

A recurring theme for this article is the importance of listening. Sending out updates via Twitter is great, but you need to also pay attention to what people are saying to (and about!) you. If your township decides to use Twitter, assign at least one staff member to monitor the township's Twitter account for inbound messages. You'll want to reply ASAP. Less than two hours is ideal. Encouraging all staff members and elected officials to monitor the township's Twitter feed is a great way to keep everyone up-to-speed.

**YouTube** (youtube.com) started another social media publishing phenomenon that is impossible to overlook. People are currently watching two billion social videos a day on YouTube! That's not counting all social video consumed on other sites. Your community can host its own free YouTube channel and use it to broadcast videos of your meetings, events or video tours of your community. Videos can easily be placed on your

township website, included in e-mails and Facebook posts, and linked via Twitter. Many people don't realize that YouTube was purchased by Google. This means that video content hosted on YouTube is some of the easiest to find on the Web.

Placing interesting video content on your township's website helps keep visitors coming back and also aids in search engine ranking. If the township chooses to allow members of the community (with moderation) to create and post their favorite community videos, it's like having an entire team of marketers working to promote your community.

**USTREAM** (ustream.tv) is another popular social video provider. USTREAM has been a pioneer in both free and low-cost video broadcasting. Combine this type of tool with a decent laptop, one or more webcams and a broadband Internet connection, and your community can record, broadcast and create a streaming video library of township meetings and events. Township Public, Education and Government (PEG) channel dollars can even go toward paying for the required equipment and Internet service.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING

**Facebook** (facebook.com) is the number one social networking site on the planet. In fact, by the time you are reading this, Facebook will have exceeded 500 million users worldwide. All of these people have one thing in common: they are engaged in sharing information about themselves and their community with a network of hundreds or even thousands of others.

Townships, like businesses, need to realize Facebook is the Yellow Pages of the 21st century. If you're not "in the book," you're going to miss out. But what if your township already has a website? Does it still need a Facebook page? The answer is yes.

A frequent mistake made by both businesses and government agencies is creating the wrong type of Facebook page. The page you create should be an "official page" specifically for a "government" organization, *not* a "profile" page, which is personal. If your township has already created a personal profile page by mistake, don't worry. You can abandon the page and have it removed by Facebook *after* you create your official page.

You can reach the Facebook "Create a Page" page by pointing your browser to: [www.facebook.com/pages/create.php](http://www.facebook.com/pages/create.php) (see below).





Officials may discover that their township already has a “community page.” These “community pages” are *not* the same as “official pages” and were created automatically by Facebook from data found in **Wikipedia** (Wikipedia.org). These pages are owned by Facebook. Once your township’s official page is set up, you can tell Facebook what it is, and they will remove or link to the auto-generated page for you.

There are a number of best practices for creating a Facebook page, but among the most important is to make sure your township has both a primary and backup administrator. This same practice should also apply to the township’s website and all township social media accounts. Keep a copy of all related passwords in a sealed envelope in a fireproof safe.

Creating the ideal Facebook township page will take a similar amount of effort to creating a basic website. A variety of third-party tools can enhance the content of your Facebook page, making it look and feel more like an actual website. While the scope of this article doesn’t permit us to engage in the technical aspects of this process, if you are the brave, do-it-yourself type, Google “How to: Build a Facebook Landing Page.”

**A properly executed social media communications strategy could save a community thousands of dollars annually in postage, materials and labor, while generating a significantly greater impact and level of community engagement.**

#### Private & Semi-Private Social Networks

Public social networks aren’t the only option for social networking within your community. Some communities have embraced social networking tools like **Ning** (www.ning.com) or custom solutions, like the one used to create the Michigan Townships Association’s **Community Connection** (community.michigantownships.org/).

These tools can provide additional functionality and privacy controls. Using these custom tools allows an organization to create a more unique and exclusive social networking environment. Among the challenges faced by private social networks, however, are exposure and retention. Unlike Facebook, with its 500-plus million users and corresponding word-of-mouth popularity, private social networks often rely on external marketing and promotional efforts to draw users to them. Once people join, they may forget about the private network.

**LinkedIn** (linkedin.com) is an example of a semi-private social network that, for many professionals, may offer some of the best of both worlds. LinkedIn started as a kind of online resumé site. What has made it the number one professional social networking destination are the tools it provides to help people connect with and share their professional relationships

and networks. Like Facebook, each LinkedIn user has a profile, which typically contains information about a person’s education, work experience and professional interests. Unlike Facebook, LinkedIn also offers the chance to give and receive professional recommendations. Each user has the choice to share as much or as little information with the general public as they want. The potential that LinkedIn offers organizations is the ability to create custom private or semi-private groups and sub-groups. These groups offer members additional tools, such as threaded discussion forums and classifieds.

The benefit of using LinkedIn or Facebook groups, which can also be private, is that it may enhance exposure and increase retention, which can be a problem with private social media solutions. Because people will likely use LinkedIn and Facebook for more than just group participation, groups hosted on these platforms may get much more initial and ongoing traffic.



#### COLLABORATION

Online discussion forums are among the most common forms of social media collaboration tools. These forums are typically set up within a community’s own website, such as the one (pictured above) used by **Ada Township** (Kent Co.).

Most organizations set up their discussion forums to mirror the different functional and interest areas within their community. All discussion is publicly accessible and open to study and comment by citizens 24/7/365. In Ada Township, there are sections for each department, including parks, utilities, assessing, planning & zoning, etc. There are also sections for discussing specific topics, including cemeteries and trails.

A wiki is another type of collaboration tool worth exploring. Wikis are databases of information, accessed using a Web browser, that can include text, pictures, audio and video content. What makes a typical wiki different from the databases many of us are familiar with is that wiki content is maintained by the *users*, rather than some central administrative authority. One of the best examples of a wiki is **Wikipedia.org**.

Wikis are ideal for storing organizational intelligence on almost any subject. Common content that might be found in an township’s wiki includes:

- Policies
- Procedures

- Project planning & management
- Special event planning & management
- Public relations information
- Manuals
- Historical information
- Disaster preparedness

Wiki software comes in a number of different forms, and can run on a local file server or as part of a hosted Internet or Intranet website. Your township's information technology provider can help you identify the best wiki solution for your township's needs.

### SPREADING THE TOWNSHIP CONNECTION

One of the best reasons for a township to use social media tools is the viral nature of the medium. By viral, I'm referring to the way information and the tools used to share it are spread from one social media user to their connections in an ever-widening social Web.

A properly executed social media communications strategy could save a community thousands of dollars annually in postage, materials and labor, while generating a significantly greater impact and level of community engagement. Even if 30 percent of your community is not using the Internet on a daily basis (which is 8 percent below the national average), the savings associated with switching from paper to electronic communication can be substantial. Coupled with the compelling benefits of faster delivery and rich content, and you have a value proposition that is hard to ignore.

As previously mentioned, there are literally hundreds of quality social media tools and solutions to choose from. Those discussed in this article are the most well-known, widely used and supported tools in their respective categories.

Most leading social media tools now offer both desktop and mobile versions. Designed to run on smartphones like the Blackberry, iPhone and Android-powered devices, these mobile apps include features like geo-coding and mobile picture/video upload or even video conferencing, which can save countless hours—and dollars—in the hands of assessors, planners, zoning administrators, public safety persons or any township official or employee who regularly works in the field.

No matter the size, the best social media strategy and tool set for *your* community is the one you start using on a regular basis. ■

**John Westra**, Director of Government Solutions, NuWave Government Solutions, Grand Rapids, and Ada Township (Kent Co.) Trustee





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## About [www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org) Do you have a username and password?

Beginning July 1, several sections of the MTA website became password-protected. MTA member township board members and their staff, MTA member county officials and Allied Service Providers have access to the password-protected pages of the website, as well as MTA's social networking site, *Community Connection*.



To view password-protected Web pages and to access *Community Connection*, you are required to log in with your e-mail address (or username) and password.



If you are not logged in and are attempting to access a password-protected page, you will be prompted to log in or complete an online form requesting a username and password. Or you can e-mail [tammie@michigantownships.org](mailto:tammie@michigantownships.org) to request a password.

### "Why is being part of an online community important to you?"

*"Community Connection is a great way for officials to share community issues and solutions with both professionalism and camaraderie. Our community can benefit from the experiences of others we might not otherwise discover because we are geographically far apart. It always feels good when we can help make things easier for other communities as well."*

—**Sharon E. Vreeland**, Manager  
**Acme Township** (Grand Traverse Co.)

*"One of the greatest benefits of having a social media site dedicated to local officials is that you can stay ahead of potential problems by getting the pulse of what is happening statewide on a township level."*

—**John Gaudette**, Trustee  
**Breitung Charter Township**  
(Dickinson Co.)

*"I especially like the opportunity for special interest groups to be able to share ideas, documents and more. Often, our best practices come from suggestions given by other township leaders in similar circumstances. If used regularly and wisely, this site could prove as popular as Facebook."*

—**Bonnie Blackledge**, CMC, Clerk  
**Cannon Township** (Kent Co.)

*"I look forward to reading the questions, answers and comments. Having a networking site is one of the best things offered by MTA."*

—**Kevin Beeson**, Supervisor  
**Pine River Township** (Gratiot Co.)

### MTA website member resources include:

- Time-saving searches
- Sample ordinances, job descriptions and policies
- Contracts and agreements
- Resource toolkits
- Information on all facets of township operations
- Updates on state and federal legislation impacting local government
- RSS feed for *MTA Headline News*
- Online registration for MTA workshops and events
- Online purchase of MTA publications and products
- Online request for salary comparison reports

## Community Connection

Benefits of participating in MTA's social networking site—*Community Connection*—include:

- Networking with township officials from across the state
- Learning best practices in carrying out your day-to-day statutory duties
- Obtaining sample documents, such as ordinances, agreements and policies
- Accessing information from the comfort of your home or workplace, 24/7/365

PLUS...

- MTA County Chapter engagement—create a website and discussion forum for your county chapter
- Special interest forums—you decide what you want to talk about!



# How are Michigan townships using social media?

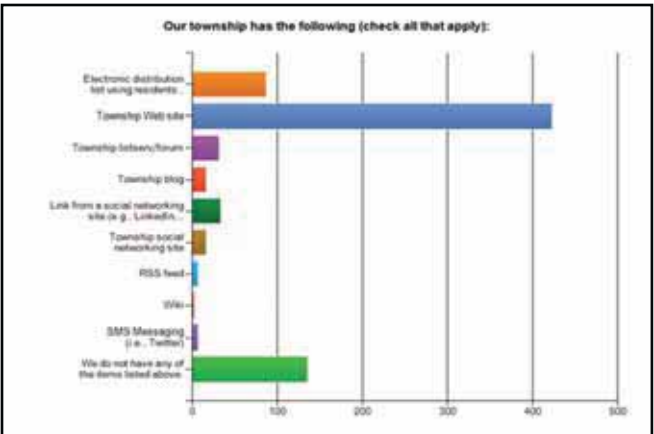
This past winter, MTA polled its members to ascertain how the Internet and social media were impacting their townships and the ways that they carry out their responsibilities. Some 602 township officials completed the survey, with 75 percent of respondents indicating that they were from a “rural” township.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Two out of every three respondents said that they were from a township with a population less than 10,000. The overwhelming majority—80 percent of respondents—indicated that they were born *before* 1961. Exactly half of respondents indicated that the *majority of their board* has been in office six or less years, with 41 percent indicating that the majority of their board members have served between 7-15 years.

## USE PATTERNS

When asked if their township is involved in using social media, only 24 percent said “yes,” with 49 percent saying “no” and 27 percent indicating that they were “unsure.” Of those using the Internet, 75 percent indicated that their township has a website. However, usage of social media tools (Chart 1) was 15 percent or less.



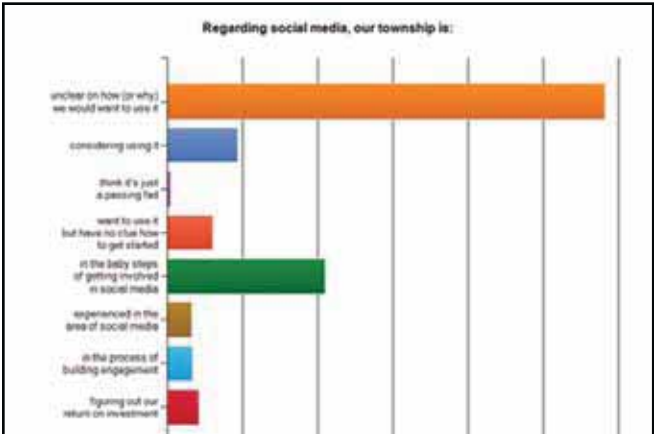
**Chart 1. Townships’ use of the Internet and social media (by type)**

Despite a low usage rate of social media tools amongst respondent townships, a significant number of townships expressed an interest in adding to their Web 2.0 mix, including 113 townships that did not currently have a website but were interested in creating one. In addition, 21 percent of respondents noted that they were interested in creating an electronic distribution list using residents’ e-mail addresses for newsletters, township updates or urgent messages impacting residents. The next most popular tool that townships expressed interest in creating was a township social networking site (18 percent), followed by establishing a link from a social networking site (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) to the township’s

website (16 percent); generating a township Listserv/forum (16 percent); and producing a township blog (14 percent). Less than 5 percent of township officials indicated an interest in creating an RSS feed, SMS messaging (e.g., Twitter) or a wiki.

## KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

When it comes to township officials’ opinions on the subject itself, 55 percent of survey respondents told MTA that they were “unclear” as to how—or why—they would want to use social media (Chart 2).



**Chart 2. Townships’ opinions and involvement**

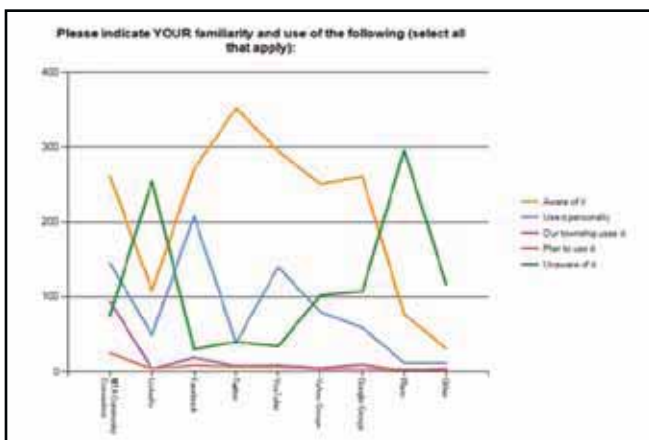
Another 6 percent indicated that they “want to use it, but have no clue on how to get started.” Only two out of 602 respondents said that they thought social media was “just a passing fad.” Based on this information, a class (*All Atwitter: Activate Your Community Through Social Networking*) was offered at the 2010 MTA Annual Educational Conference & Expo to shed some light on the topic and provide greater understanding of how social media can be used as a tool to help achieve a township’s larger goals. In addition, this month’s cover story (“Building a connected community using social media tools”) was added to the *Michigan Township News’* editorial schedule.

According to a study conducted by Cone LLC in fall 2008, 93 percent of social media users believe an organization should have a presence in social media, while 85 percent believe an organization should not only be present but also *interact with its consumers via social media*. In fact, 56 percent of users feel both a stronger connection with and better served by organizations when they can interact with them in a social media environment. Since one-third of respondents in the MTA survey either were considering using social media, involved in the baby steps of getting started or actively building engagement on the Web, interest in social media amongst township officials *does* exist. Unfortunately, since only 3 percent of respondents indicated that they were experienced in the area of social media, there is a definite need for townships to increase their knowledge and understanding about these newer forms of interactive communication. To that end,



supplemental training will continue to be offered through the MTA Education Center as well as via communications vehicles, such as *Michigan Township News* and online.

In terms of types of social media tools with which township officials are familiar, the greatest awareness exists with Twitter, at 81 percent. However, awareness does not necessarily equate to use, as Twitter only commands a 9 percent personal use rate and 2 percent township use rate (Chart 3). The most popular social media site *used by townships*, according to the survey, was *MTA Community Connection* (see related sidebar on page 19), with an 18 percent township usage rate (with 28 percent indicating that they use it personally). Facebook, which had a 55 percent awareness rate, was the most frequently used personal social media tool with a 43 percent *personal use rate*, but only with a 4 percent *township use rate*.



**Chart 3. Townships' familiarity and use of social media (by type)**

## RESOURCES ALLOCATION

When asked if their township has a plan and/or a line item in the budget for social media during the upcoming fiscal year, 80 percent indicated that they had neither. Approximately 6 percent indicated that they had a social media plan, while 7 percent indicated they had allocated funds. Some 7 percent said that they had both a plan as well as dedicated funds targeted to use for social media purposes.

For those who have a social media site or presence, 24 percent of respondents indicated that the clerk was responsible for administration and monitoring of the site, while 23 percent said that township staff did so. In 12 percent of cases, the supervisor carried out this responsibility, while the treasurer did so 5 percent of the time. In only 2 percent of respondent townships, a trustee held this responsibility, and in 4 percent of townships, administration and monitoring of the site was maintained by the board as a whole. In the remainder of cases—approximately 30 percent of the time—respondents indicated that consultants, technical companies or volunteers assisted with carrying out the responsibilities of their township's presence on the Web. ■

—Debra McGuire, MTA Director of Communications and Education