Social Media for Social Services: Can Traditional Social Media Communication Policies Be Applied to Public Service Agencies? An Examination of the Social Media Presence of the Charlotte Housing Authority

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Introduction

Advances in technology are slow to catch on in government agencies and the provision of social services (Dunleavy, 1994). Opportunity exists to improve engagement with constituents using innovative applications of social media communications. Leveraging new technologies in the delivery of services requires new consumer policies that govern the execution of online communications and protection of consumer (or constituent) information (OECD, 2010). Public housing agencies serve a population that is often transient, and hard to reach using traditional communication. Formalized social media communications policies can aid housing agencies in efforts to improve the quality of life and well-being of their residents and constituents. This study examines how the Charlotte Housing Authority leverages its social media presence day-to-day, in communications, marketing, and promotion of programming. Findings show there is no visible interaction with the agency's constituency; suggesting the need for a comprehensive overhaul of social media strategy to increase constituent, stakeholder, and service partner engagement.

The provision of social services can be a delicate balancing act. Public policy and public interest can both influence the distribution and allocation of services. Consumption of social service programming can vary widely, with demand for some programs outpacing their supply, while others go largely underutilized. In public housing, for instance, traditional housing aid subsidies have long waiting lists and high demand. Yet, specialized housing programs like those for veterans, or supplemental program offerings, often have vacancies. Characteristics of the intended target populations of benefits may also add to the ease or difficulty of administration of social services. This is particularly true in the provision of affordable housing subsidies and services where target populations often include indigent or transient households. Online technology and social media marketing communications offer new ways to reach and engage with target populations and constituents. As government agencies and social service organizations increase their usage and understanding of technology, these tools can help overcome accessibility issues and limitations. Through social media content analysis, this study examines the online and social media facilitated communications practices of a local housing authority. The study focuses on the Charlotte Housing Authority social media outlets for the examination. By doing so, this study adds to literature by providing empirical evidence that the formal inclusion of strategic social media marketing technologies into public housing operating policies may contribute to increased efficacy in the communication and delivery of available program services and achievement of higher engagement of constituents and service recipients.

Technology in Government Agencies and Social Service

As businesses experiment and build best practices with technology and mobile platforms, much of the activity is in branding, marketing, promotions, and other advertising and spread-the-word campaigns (Harris & Rae, 2009). The greater the number of impressions gained from these activities, the wider the reach; This can lead to anticipated increases in incremental revenues from online media marketing and advertising activities for firms that are using these strategies. Technology tools are gaining in popularity among public sector agencies. While their private sector counterparts are revenue focused, public sector organizations are typically mission, vision, and statute driven to serve a particular purpose. For these types of agencies, online and mobile technologies present a new way to engage with their equivalent of _

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customers – constituents, populations served, state, local, and federal agencies, regulators and policy makers.

Reed Hundt, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, once stated that "The central lesson of technology in our time is this: The Internet Changes Everything." (Kamarck & Nye Jr, 2001). The increased use of information technology in government agencies and service organizations has created something called e-government (West, 2004). E-government refers to the delivery of government information and services online through the Internet or other digital means. Historically, dissemination of information within government agencies has been characterized by hierarchical, bureaucratic, and time-consuming processes (West, 2004). By contrast, highly technical methods of providing information and services remove hierarchy and make information available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Providing information via the Internet enables target populations to seek information at their convenience. The interactive aspects of e-government allow both citizens and bureaucrats to send and receive information (West, 2004). By facilitating two-way interaction, electronic governance has been hailed as a way to improve service delivery and responsiveness to citizens (Gore, 1994; Raney, 2000).

Current research in mobile and online technology usage in the public sector focuses mainly on innovations in health care provision and public health applications through mobile devices. Researchers have found that developments in wireless communication technologies and the move to hand-held mobile devices are forcing a re-evaluation of existing technology infrastructures within healthcare (Moore, 2001). In some cases, the literature includes studies that specifically investigate technology, healthcare services, and special populations like the homeless. One such study found that among an observed homeless population, mobile phone ownership ranged from 44% to 62%, computer ownership ranged from 24% to 40%, computer access and use ranged from 47% to 55%, and Internet use ranged from 19% to 84%.

Other research has anecdotally looked at technology usage among populations likely to be in need of public housing program offerings. A study involving 28 adult homeless individuals in a major city found similar evidence. These researchers found a significant importance of technology, especially mobile access, for homeless persons in maintaining social networks, communicating with case workers and service providers, and information and identity management (Le Dantec & Edwards, 2008). This study seeks to fill a void in the literature by investigating the impact of online, social media technologies, not limited solely to a mobile platform, in the affordable housing public service sector.

The Charlotte Housing Authority

The Charlotte Housing Authority (CHA) was founded in 1939 and serves Charlotte, NC and Mecklenberg County as its local public housing agency. The CHA operates multiple traditional public housing facilities along with project-based and tenant-based voucher programs, providing housing subsidies and services for more than 2000 families. In addition to housing, the agency also provides supplemental self-sufficiency and life skills programming. In 2014 the Charlotte Housing Authority completely overhauled their internal information technology capabilities to support the facilitation of its Housing Choice Voucher waiting list opening, which took place entirely online. The investment of resources, infrastructure, and talent for this type of technological enhancement makes the agency an excellent subject for this research study.

Traditionally, public housing agencies, like the Charlotte Housing Authority (CHA), do not engage in traditional marketing activities. This is common in public service organizations. The general adage is that the organizations are not profit seeking, serve constituents not customers, and therefore do not need a traditional marketing function. Likewise, the public relations function is often replaced by a public affairs function focused primarily on intergovernmental agency relations and communication efforts. Without traditional marketing, advertising, and promotional functions, the agency relies primarily on guidance delivered via Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) communications policies. These policies provide detail on announcements and communication of programs and benefits using newspaper ads, radio spots, press releases, and posters hung in agency owned properties. Newspaper ads and radio spots are reserved for specific announcements like waiting list openings for the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. A preliminary analysis of agency communication methods found that the agency

is primarily defaulting to these methods. Aside from the HUD provided communications policy, CHA uses its website to communicate information on programs, activities, and resources. Surprisingly, this reliance on traditional methods persists, despite the fact that the agency operates Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr accounts. The CHA can be found as @CHA_Today on Twitter (changed from @CLTHousingAuth), @CharlotteHousingAuthority on Facebook, CHAToday on YouTube, and Charlotte Housing Authority on Flickr. Facebook is their largest audience with 765 total likes, followed by Twitter with 680 followers. The Facebook likes represent point of time interactions, while Twitter suggests followers who continue to consume (or at least receive) their regular content. The CHA YouTube channel has a total of 77 subscribers, followed by Flickr with 2 followers. It appears that Flickr is being used more as a repository of pictures than true interactive content.

Discussion

Ultimately, through a case study methodology and content analysis, the study finds that despite a broad collection of social media assets, the agency has extremely low engagement and rarely disseminates information relevant to current offerings, programs, or initiatives. Leveraging current social media engagement practices, we propose the Charlotte Housing Authority adopt a broad social media policy based upon a social communication strategy predicated upon two-communication with constituents and an intense focus on relevant content development. The final assessment and social media policy proposal includes an overall social communication strategy, business and operational objectives, and key performance indicators for ongoing maintenance and improvements. The proposed policy follows the six consumer policy making steps proposed in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2010 Consumer Policy Toolkit), potentially expandable to broader HUD communication policies. Recognizing demographic, and location-based infrastructure limitations, the strategies proposed are best suited for housing agencies in urban, suburban, or small-town locales serving majority young adult to middle-aged constituents.

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Table 1. **Charlotte Housing Authority social media audit 8/22/2016 – 9/9/2016**

Charlotte Housing Authority			
Social Media	**Twitter** *(Identical content posts to both Twitter and Facebook)*		
Date	**Type of Communication**	**Sentiment/Objective of Content**	
8/22/2016	Image/Meme only	Motivational post about goals	
8/24/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Change Your Dream Into a Plan!"	Motivational Post about plans
8/25/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Would you try this idea for Back-2-School?"	Pictoral instructions for creating a paper sorter out of ceral boxes
8/30/2016	Image/Meme only	Flyer for diversity conference for students interested in law school held by another organization	
8/31/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Have a great Wednesday!"	Motivational Post about hard work and positivity
9/1/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Thought of The Day…"	Motivational post about not being afraid to try and fail
9/2/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"CHA will be Closed Monday, September 5, 2016 in observation of Labor Day"	Informational post about holiday hours
9/6/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Happy Tuesday!!!"	Motivational Post about Tuesday and enjoying the beauty of each day
9/6/2016	Text + links	Retweet of EAH Housing including link to article on nationwide shortage of affordable housing	
9/8/2016	Text only	Retweet of Carolina Panthers statement "#KeepPounding"	
9/9/2016	Image/Meme + Text	"Enjoyr Your Weekend!!!"	Motivational post about happy Friday

Traditional Media	Website News Feed		
Date	**Type of Communication**	**Sentiment/Objective of Content**	
8/29/2016	Press Release + Flyer	Announcement of 2016 Housing Provider Symposium being held by the agency. Encouraging local housing providers to register and attend.	

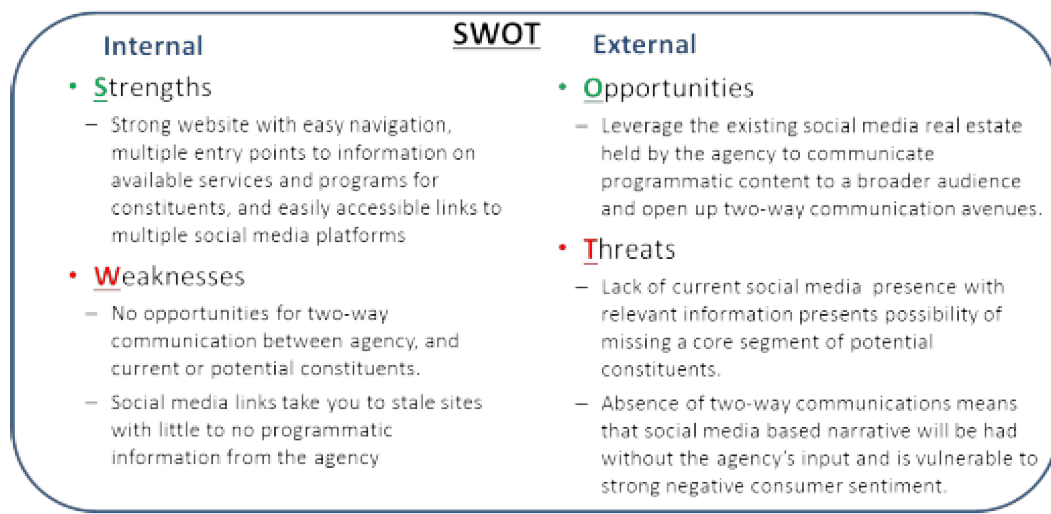Figure 1. **Charlotte Housing Authority SWOT analysis**

Table 2. **Proposed KPIs/Metrics for Charlotte Housing Authority Social Media Policy**

Objective	Key Performance Indicator/Metric	Relevant Platform
Engagement	Clicks Likes Shares Comments Brand Mentions (or agency in this case) Profile Visits Time on Site Active Followers	Twitter Facebook YouTube Flickr Bookmarking Sites
Reach	Followers Impressions Traffic Data	Twitter Facebook YouTube Flickr Bookmarking Sites
Responsiveness	Develop standard response times for different types of consumer communication requests (by service, urgency, etc.)	Twitter Facebook YouTube Bookmarking Sites
Conversion Rate	How many visitors to the various social media assets convert to actual offline engagement? (apply for benefits, attend a workshop or event, become a service provider partner)	Twitter Facebook YouTube Bookmarking Sites
Sentiment Analysis	Monitor the sentiment of residents, community stakeholders, and partners to the content provided and overall impression of the agency	Twitter Facebook YouTube Bookmarking Sites

Figure 2. **OECD Consumer policy making steps**