Flocking to Facebook:

How local governments can build citizen engagement

By Amy Strecker

Spring 2011

E x e c u t i v e   S u m m a r y

Facebook boasts the largest online community in the world, with 624 million members and counting (Check Facebook, 2011). With 49% of the American population participating on Facebook, the platform offers local governments an opportunity to efficiently interact with and inform citizens without adding significant expense to already lean governmental budgets (Check Facebook, 2011; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This paper explores how local governments use Facebook to increase two-way interactions (engagement) with citizens and offers recommendations for jurisdictions seeking to increase citizen engagement via Facebook.

Introduction

Facebook boasts the largest online community in the world, with 624 million members and counting (Check Facebook, 2011). Since Facebook opened Fan Pages to private and public organizations in 2007, the private and public sectors have jumped to capitalize on the efficient and inexpensive power of Facebook to communicate strategically with their client base. Now, with 49% of the American population participating on Facebook, the platform offers local governments an opportunity to efficiently interact with and inform citizens in lean economic times (Check Facebook, 2011; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This paper explores how local governments use Facebook to increase two-way interaction (engagement) with citizens and offers recommendations for jurisdictions seeking to increase citizen engagement via Facebook.

Background

Facebook evolves constantly, rapidly growing its member population and adapting the site's features to serve different interests. When the site launched in 2004, only Ivy League college students could join the space. Other college students and alumni, high school students and large employee groups gradually gained access before the site opened to the public in 2006. Organizations that attempted to create a Facebook Profile—the portal that members use to access Facebook—quickly found their profiles removed by Facebook, reinforcing the policy that Facebook Profiles were limited to individuals. Organizations could create a Group, allowing members to join the communal space by invitation or search. In 2007, Facebook added the Fan Page model, allowing organizations to create a Fan Page with the same look and feel as a Facebook Profile and to generate content that would post into a Fan's newsfeed—the news-aggregating homepage for each member. Fan Pages provide organizations an opportunity to interact with Facebook members in the following ways:

- Prompting members to join a Fan Page by choosing to click "like" and demonstrate their affinity for an organization by becoming a member, or "Fan," of the specific Fan Page.

- Encouraging organizations to share information such as news stories, updates, meeting announcements, event invitations, website links, photos and videos by posting these items to the Fan Page. All of these types of information shared by the organization are called "posts."

- Allowing Fans to comment or ask a question responding to a post on a Fan Page.

- Allowing Fans to comment or ask a question of the entire organization.

- Allowing Fans to give a virtual "thumbs up" to a post on a Fan Page by choosing to click "like" on each post.

- Allowing Fans to share Fan Page content with their personal Facebook communities.

The private sector pounced on the opportunity to interact directly with their mass customer base through Fan Pages. Formulas valuating Fan Pages as marketing tools project many of them into the multi-million dollar range (Morrissey, 2010). To encourage governments to also use Fan Pages, Facebook created a "Government on Facebook" website with resources for successfully using Facebook and also amended Facebook's terms of service to accommodate governmental organizations (Facebook, 2011).

The 2008 election served as a catalyst for public engagement on Facebook. Many candidates employed the speed and breadth of Facebook communications on behalf of their campaigns. In the election's wake, analysts partially attributed large Democratic victories to youth promoting candidates through Facebook and other social media platforms (Kiyohara, 2009). However, Facebook's average user is now 40 years old, and middle-age users dominate as Facebook's fastest growing demographic (Facebook, n.d.). Visits to the site account for one out of every four American webpage views, and late in 2010, Facebook surpassed Google as the most-visited site on the Internet (Grossman, 2010).

Research Question

When Fans interact with an organization's content by either responding with a written comment/question or by showing affinity for an individual piece of content by clicking "like," these collective actions are called "Fan interactions." By measuring total Fan interactions/total number of Fans for any given organization's Fan Page, this study creates a measure for Fan engagement. This project analyzes the Fan Pages of North Carolina local government jurisdictions to answer this question: what actions influence a jurisdiction's rate of Fan engagement on Facebook?

Methods

The majority of data for this project come directly from the Fan Pages of North Carolina counties and municipalities with populations of more than 10,000. Facebook activity for each jurisdiction was evaluated during the 61-day timeframe of October 13, 2010, through December 13, 2010. By evaluating the same period for each jurisdiction, the project controlled for external events such as holidays. Additional sources of data include each jurisdiction's website and accredited reports providing demographic information for each jurisdiction.

Studying jurisdictions with more than 10,000 people eliminated jurisdictions whose populations are so small that a few Fans highly skew the ratio of Fan interactions/total Fans. Jurisdictions' Fan Pages were located through both a search on Facebook and a search on the jurisdictions' websites. Of the 50 jurisdictions meeting the qualifications for this study, only Indian Trail was dropped from the study. Indian Trail had a 1:1 ratio of Fan interactions: total Fans, much higher than any other jurisdiction, and including them in the study skewed the data. Every jurisdictional post during the 61-day timeframe was recorded and categorized, in addition to recording the number of Fan interactions and jurisdictions' responses to Fan interactions (See Appendix B). The chart on the following page details data collected, including the research supporting each variable and the source of information.

Independent Variable	Data Source
Marketing of Facebook Page	
Links on the jurisdiction's homepage (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality website
Links farther in on the jurisdiction's website (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality website
Links multiple places on the jurisdiction's website (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality website
Page Facilitation	
Number of posts (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Frequency of posts (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Type of posts (text, photo, video, etc.) (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Use of third-party application to post (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Fan Interactions	
Number of jurisdiction responses to Fan interactions (Riely, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Ability of Fans to post directly to page (Facebook, 2010)	County/Municipality Fan Page
Community Characteristics	
Socio-economic designation (Boyd, 2007)	NC Department of Commerce
Rural or urban status (Boyd, 2007)	NC Rural Economic Development Center
High school graduation rates (Boyd, 2007)	NC Department of Public Instruction
Ethnic makeup (Boyd, 2010)	US Census Bureau
Broadband Internet accessibility (Boyd, 2007)	e-NC Authority
Age of population (Lenhart, 2009)	US Census Bureau
Tourism (Whoriskey, 2010)	NC Department of Commerce

Findings and Discussion

Analysis revealed nine significant correlations, or relationships, between Fan engagement and this study's independent variables. Findings based on these relationships include the following:

(1) **Fan engagement increases as the total number of times a jurisdiction posts to the Fan Page increases.** This finding was expected; as jurisdictions provide more content, Fans have more opportunities to respond to and interact with a jurisdiction. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should post often to their Fan Page.

In addition to posting often, the types of posts also matter in driving Fan engagement.

(2) **Engagement increases as the number of posts with external website links increases** (links to websites that do not belong to the jurisdiction). Social media theory builds upon the ideas of community and sharing across organizations and subject areas, and accordingly, Fan engagement increases as jurisdictions share information beyond news and events generated internally. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should not hesitate to share relevant information from external sources and organizations.

(3) **Engagement increases as posts consisting of text-only (no links, photos, videos or audio) increase.** Text-only posts are the most common type of post, and the simplest type to post, so this finding is expected. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should use text-only posts freely and frequently.

(4) Engagement increases as the number of photo posts increases; this relationship is stronger than any other relationship in this study. Posting photographs is the most significant way a jurisdiction can increase its Fan engagement. Photos create a visual connection between a jurisdiction and its Fans, and although it is not surprising that this would result in higher levels of engagement, the strength of this finding was surprising. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should consider how to increase the use of photos as part of their Facebook strategy.

How jurisdictions choose to respond to Fan comments and questions also relates to Fan engagement.

(5) Engagement increases as jurisdictions choose to respond to Fan comments and questions versus not responding to Fans.

(6) Engagement increases as the number of times a jurisdiction responds to Fans increases. When jurisdictions choose to respond to Fans, they create a two-way dialogue and an impression of listening and responsiveness that is highly valued in social media literature. These findings were expected and suggest that jurisdictions should frequently respond to Fan comments and questions.

Marketing of a jurisdiction's Facebook page also relates to Fan engagement.

(7) Engagement decreases when a jurisdiction provides the link to its Fan Page somewhere on the website other than the homepage. This finding was expected and supports the importance of visibility when marketing Fan Pages to citizens; website homepages often have the highest number of page views for any website. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should provide a link to Facebook on the homepage of their website.

Additionally, this study included both counties and cities, and found the following:

(8) Engagement increases when cities use Fan Pages compared to counties using Fan Pages. This finding was not expected and suggests that citizens might have a stronger affiliation or connection with their city compared to their county, or that they might be more aware of city services than county services.

(9) The newer the Fan Page, the higher the engagement. This finding was unexpected, and contradicts the logical assumption that the longer a jurisdiction has been on Facebook, the more engaged its Fans would be. This finding suggests that jurisdictions should not be discouraged at the prospect of starting a new Fan Page, and that being a newcomer to Facebook does not limit a jurisdiction's ability to engage Fans.

Limitations

Multiple limitations impact this study. Only 50 jurisdictions met the parameters of this study, limiting the analysis to descriptive statistics and preventing more robust statistical analysis.

Facebook provides poor metrics for outside evaluation, forcing this study to rely on the Fan counts as a part of the measure of Fan engagement. Fan counts are problematic because an individual does not have to be a citizen within a jurisdiction to become a Fan on Facebook. This study incorporated tourism spending as an independent variable in an effort to account for popular tourist destinations

that might be more likely to have out-of-town Fans than other locations. However, the level of tourism spending did not influence a jurisdiction's Fan count.

Some jurisdictions delete all Fan interactions as part of their local social media policy. If a jurisdiction deletes all these interactions, the collected data may be skewed.

Individual Fans can be very enthusiastic supporters of a jurisdiction's posts. In some jurisdictions, a single Fan would "like" every post, potentially skewing the Fan interaction data. Also, this study incorporated no way to weed out spam postings on Facebook. Fan Pages allowing public postings often had self-promoting or spam comments from their Fans. Some jurisdictions obviously monitored and deleted these posts, while others did not, potentially skewing the Fan interaction data.

Marketing literature suggests that quality matters more than quantity when posting to Facebook. However, this study had no tool to evaluate the quality of one post over another. As a result, this study did not account for the difference between a timely, informative post that sparked a 17-comment discussion among the jurisdiction and its Fans and a generic "Happy Thanksgiving!" post that 17 Fans "liked."

Recommendations

Although Facebook does not charge users to create a Fan Page, the site is not free: attention and personnel hours are required to generate content and respond to Fan comments and questions. In order to maximize the effectiveness of their Facebook Fan Pages, local governments should consider these suggestions:

- Post often to the Fan Page
- Share relevant information from external sources and organizations
- Use text-only posts freely and frequently
- Increase use of photos as part of a Facebook strategy
- Respond to Fan comments and questions, and respond often
- Link to the Fan Page from the homepage of the jurisdiction's website
- Be aware that cities might experience higher Fan engagement than counties
- Do not hesitate to create a Fan Page; being a newcomer to Facebook does not limit a jurisdiction's ability to engage Fans

Conclusion

Local governments should continue to pursue Facebook as a communication and engagement tool. Facebook membership constantly expands and increases the potential reach of local governments. Facebook also continues to refine its options for jurisdictions using Fan Pages to provide additional metrics to Fan Page Administrators. During these increasingly lean economic times, Facebook provides a valuable tool for engaging citizens, and the recommendations provided in this paper can assist jurisdictions in increasing citizen engagement via Facebook.

Bibliography

American Society for Public Administrators. (2010 November/December). Local Government IT Budgets Continue to Suffer Due to Current Economic Climate. *PA Times* , p. 17.

Anderson, J., & Rainie, L. (2010 9-July). *Millennials will make online sharing in networks a lifelong habit.* Retrieved 2010 йил 10-September from Pew Internet & American Life Project: http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Future-of-Millennials.aspx

Boyd, D. (2007 24-June). *Apophenia Blog.* Retrieved 2010 йил 15-August from Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace: http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html

Boyd, D. (2010 December). *White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook.* Retrieved 2011 йил 5-January from www.danah.org: http://www.danah.org/papers/2009/WhiteFlightDraft3.pdf

Check Facebook. (2011 20-February). *Check Facebook.* Retrieved 2011 йил 20-February from http://www.checkfacebook.com

Cole, R. (2009). Social Media: What does it mean for public managers? *Public Management* , 8-13.

Cumber, C. G. (2010 16-April). Sheriff's Office on Facebook. *The Frederick News-Post* .

Curtis, L., Edwards, C., Fraser, K. L., Gudelsky, S., Holmquist, J., Thornton, K., et al. (2009). Adoption of social media for public relations by nonprofit organizations. *Public Relations Review* , 90-92.

eGov. (2009 27-July). Web 2.0 enabling government to engage and empower citizens: Accenture. *eGov* .

Facebook. (n.d.). *Connecting to your Constituents with Facebook.* Retrieved 2010 15-November from Government on Facebook: http://www.box.net/shared/idnp0hs026

Facebook. (2011). *Government Terms.* Retrieved 2011 йил 15-January from Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/terms_pages_gov.php

Fifer, J. (2009 29-October). Government @you. *The Roanoke Times* , p. A1.

Government Technology. (2010 28-September). *Survey: Despite Social Media Mania, Some States Lag Behind.* Retrieved 2010 йил 1-October from Government Technology: http://www.govtech.com/e-government/social-media-some-states-lag-behind

Grossman, L. (2011 3-January). 2010 Person of the Year Mark Zuckerberg. *Time Magazine* , pp. 44-74.

Gulati, C. B. (2009). Facebook Grows Up: An Empirical Assessment of its Role in the 2008 Congressional Elections. *Midwest Polotical Science Association*, (pp. 1-27). Chicago.

Lenhart, A. (2009). *Adults and social network websites.* Washington D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Levy, J. R. (2010). *Facebook Marketing: Designing Your Next Marketing Campaign.* Indianapolis: QUE.

Mergel, I. (2010 30-July). *Social Media in the Public Sector*. Retrieved 2010 йил 20-August from From Zero to 2.0: How social media can change collaboration in government : http://inesmergel.wordpress.com/2010/07/30/from-zero-to-2-0-how-social-media-can-change-collaboration-in-government-video/

Morrissey, B. (2010 13-April). *Value of a 'Fan' on Social Media: $3.60*. Retrieved 2011 йил 15-January from AdWeek: http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/digital/e3iaf69ea67183512325a8feefb9f969530

Perego, M. (2010). The Two Faces of Social Media. *Public Management* .

Rainie, L. (2010 22-August). *The Future of Public Relations.* Retrieved 2010 йил 12-September from Pew Internet & American Life Project: http://pewinternet.org/Presentations/2010/Aug/Syracuse.aspx

Riely, K. (2010 18-March). Facebook Latest form of Town Forum Social Sites Offer Instant Exchange. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* , p. N1.

Schrier, B. (2009 22-March). *Notes from a City CIO*. Retrieved 2010 йил 12-September from Twitter, Facebook not ready for Government 2.0?: http://www.digitalcommunitiesblogs.com/CCIO/2009/03/twitter-facebook-not-ready-for.php

Shaw, G. (2010 15-September). Facebook, Twitter okay on the job, government tells employees. *The Vancouver Sun* , p. A5.

Smith, A. (2009 10-December). *Online participation in the social media era.* Retrieved 2010 йил 10-September from Pew Internet & American Life Project: http://pewinternet.org/Presentations/2009/RTIP-Social-Media.aspx

Stengel, R. (2010 27-December). Only Connect. *Time* , pp. 43-76.

Targeted News Service. (2010 31-March). Metro Government Goes on Facebook to Increase Communication with Public. *Targeted News Service* .

The road to e-democracy. (2008 16-February). *The Economist* .

Towns, S. (2010 August). Social Networks go to Work. *Governing Magazine* , p. 48.

Towns, S. (2010 January). Tweeting for the Public Good. *Governing Magazine* , p. 46.

Trenkner, T. (2010 January). "Friend" or Foe? *Governing Magazine* , p. 40.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2011 20-February). *U.S. & World Population Clocks.* Retrieved 2011 йил 20-
February from http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html

Wakeman, S. (2009 25-February). *Public Sector Communications and Marketing.* Retrieved 2010
йил 12-September from Why local government shouldn't be on Facebook:
http://www.simonwakeman.com/2009/02/25/why-local-government-shouldnt-be-on-
facebook/

Whoriskey, Y. Q. (2010 31-December). Facebook cements No. 1 status. *Washington Post* .