SOCIAL MEDIA UPDATE

Support Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

4 March 2013

INTRODUCTION

Social networks provide extraordinary opportunities to communicate in ways that were impossible a few years ago. They are developing rapidly and are now part of everyday life for millions of people. In the UK there are 41 million Facebook users and 10 million using Twitter.

50 per cent of UK adults use social networking sites at home, according to Ofcom, and over half the population are now using smartphones.

This provides huge potential for organisations to use social networks to engage in two-way conversations with individuals and groups on subjects that matter most to them.

Rather than waiting for individuals or groups to approach the Council, social media offers the opportunity of being able to connect to the community, listen to what people are saying and engage with them. It enables local residents to speak up about their needs and influence decision-making.

There are also big reputational implications for organisations as social networks provide a platform for networks and groups to air issues and grievances. People are using these networks to talk about us whether we want them to or not.

Successful organisations use social media as part of the overall communications mix and to complement traditional methods of speaking to the public. Used appropriately – to a targeted audience, with clear messages, and as part of a planned campaign – social media can be a powerful, cost-effective tool.

Social media channels are generally free but using them properly can be time consuming and resource intensive. Social media is two-way and using it raises customer expectations about how they can contact you. Failing to allocate resources or to manage expectations is likely to have a negative impact on your reputation.

OUR SOCIAL MEDIA OBJECTIVES

We need to be clear about why we are using social media. Our key reasons are to:

- Keep residents and partners informed about the Council's services and how to access them
- Develop awareness of the Council's and city's priorities
- Encourage feedback about our services and what residents want
- Drive traffic to the Council's website and promote online transactions to help deliver financial savings
- Encourage reuse and wider spreading of Council news and information through blogs, re-tweets, Facebook likes etc
- Encourage support for Council and city campaigns
- Help manage the Council's reputation by correcting misinformation or inaccuracies on social media networks and by providing an authoritative voice on Council related issues in online discussions.

WHAT WE USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR

Listening

Social media can help us be more responsive to, and engaged with, the local community.

If we listen to what is being said through online communities and forums we can better reflect the needs of our customers.

In many cases we can prompt discussions and comment on issues as part of a wider consultation exercise. The ease of using social media means people can quickly provide ideas, information and comments.

Conversations are taking place about us on social media whether we like it or not and we need to be aware of what is being said. Otherwise we have no way of influencing what is being said or reacting to local concerns that are increasingly being aired first on social networks.

Not monitoring – and acting on – what is being said about us on social media is as irresponsible as it once would have been to not read what was written about us in local newspapers.

Engaging

Social networks are built for two-way communication and if you use them you need to be prepared to engage with people who want to talk to you.

Social media offers huge potential for us to have conversations with people who were previously difficult to reach. However, this requires a significant resource to do properly and we need to be prepared to make this a priority if we are to succeed.

While it is possible to reach large numbers of people through social media, it is vital that it is used as part of a wider communications strategy that also gives people not using social media an opportunity to be heard.

Managing our reputation

A tweet or Facebook post can be shared instantly with thousands of people and, as many organisations have found to their cost, shared grievances can quickly become a powerful online campaign. Journalists are increasingly picking up stories on social media, often much more quickly than they would have done previously.

If we are not aware of these conversations about us or engaging in them at an early stage, we have no chance to correct misleading or inaccurate information and our reputation will suffer.

Customer transactions

Having a presence on social networks raises expectations. While once it was acceptable to send a written response within five working days, now customers posting queries on Twitter or Facebook often expect a response within hours, regardless of the time of day. Unless we manage these expectations by spelling out what level of response to expect, social media could damage our reputation rather than enhance it.

We are currently not ready to use social networks as a full customer access channel though we do aim to respond quickly to issues raised through social media.

Our official social media channels will clearly set out when the sites are monitored and when we are likely to be able to reply.

HOW WE ARE CURRENTLY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Effective use of social media is now a priority for the Council and since May 2012 the use of the existing corporate channels has been expanded and new ones have been set up.

The official corporate channels now include:

TWITTER

We have the following official Plymouth City Council Twitter accounts –

- @plymouthcc
- @plymleader
- @plymccplanning
- @plymoutharchive
- @PlymouthMuseum
- @plymlibraries

The Council has more than doubled the number of Twitter followers on its main @plymouthcc account since May 2012.

This has been through taking a more proactive approach to tweeting information rather than simply tweeting links to press releases. The 2012 election results were the first to have been tweeted officially by the Council as they were declared. The expectation is that any significant event or news is immediately tweeted without waiting for websites to be updated. We also aim where possible to be the first to communicate important council information rather than waiting for third parties to share it.

What we tweet about:

- Council news
- Job vacancies
- News about what is to be discussed at Council meetings
- Dates and venues of neighbourhood meetings
- Consultation opportunities
- Events and what's on information
- Weather alerts
- Road/traffic disruption information
- Flood information
- School closures

The @plymouthcc account gained a significant number of new followers during the poor weather and flooding in December 2012.

Information about road closures and flood was tweeted by the Communications Team from early morning into late evening and throughout the weekend. Information about new instances of flooding tweeted by residents and drivers was passed on for investigation by Transport and Highways. Plymouth City Council was highlighted in a Local Government Association press release for its proactive approach to using social media during the bad weather.

Growth in @plymouthcc followers on Twitter

Plymouth City Council - @plymouthcc Following People 2012
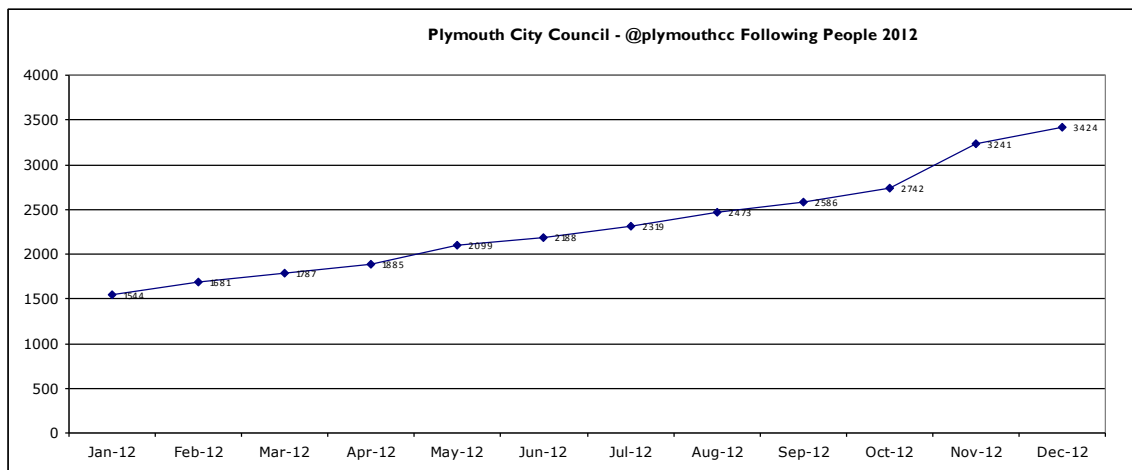
By way of a comparison, as of 13 February the other Twitter accounts had the following number of followers:

ACCOUNT	FOLLOWERS
@plymouthcc	3,751 people
@plymleader	535 people
@plymccplanning	295 people
@plymoutharchive	1,046 people
@PlymouthMuseum	1,263 people
@plymlibraries	2,426 people
Total	9,316 people

Comparisons

- Devon County Council — 10,190 people
- Cornwall Council — 8,505 people
- South Hams District — 2,620 people
- Torbay Council — 3,389 people
- PCC (main) — 3,751 people

FACEBOOK

We currently have the following official Plymouth City Council Facebook accounts:

Plymouth City Council	922 Likes
Plymouth West Devon Records Office	188 Likes
Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery	954 Likes
Plymouth Libraries	234 Likes
Total	2,298 people

The Youth Service is in the process of setting up a Facebook page aimed at young people, with the support of the Communications Team

Visits to the main Plymouth City Council account has grown as content has been improved. Picture stories are posted during or as soon after an event as possible.

The use of pictures significantly increases traffic to our Facebook site and the sharing of our information. The highest surge in use came when pictures were posted of flooding at Tinside in summer 2012 and during Armed Forces Day and the Olympic Torch Relay.

Significantly more people now read news items on the Council's Facebook page than they do the main Council website.

The number of people visiting the Council's website after clicking on an item on Facebook has doubled in a year.
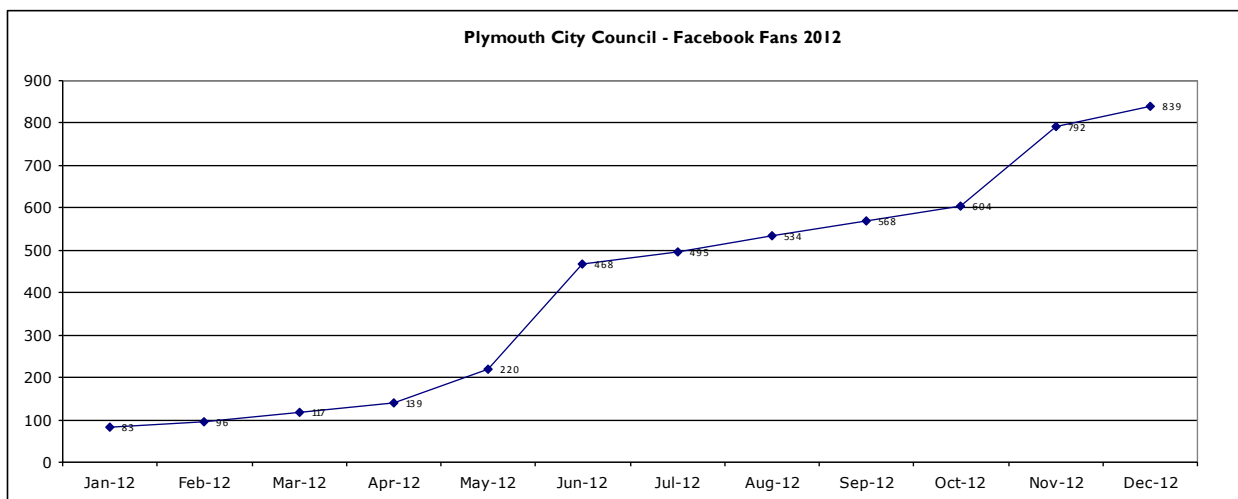
2011

Direct views	17,520 hits
Referrals	6,524 visits

2012

Direct views	160,593 hits
Referrals	12,935 visits

Growth in Facebook fans

Plymouth City Council - Facebook Fans 2012

Jan-12: 83, Feb-12: 96, Mar-12: 117, Apr-12: 139, May-12: 220, Jun-12: 468, Jul-12: 495, Aug-12: 534, Sep-12: 568, Oct-12: 604, Nov-12: 792, Dec-12: 839

Comparisons (Facebook likes)

Devon County Council	487
Cornwall Council	1,652
South Hams District Council	40
Torbay Council	1,392
Plymouth City Council (main)	992

Flickr

Flickr is an online photo sharing facility currently used by:

- Plymouth and West Devon Record Office
- Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery
- Plymouth Libraries
- Schools Library Service

You Tube

The main Plymouth City Council You Tube channel includes a small number of videos, including films promoting the city, archives material for social care recruitment and America's Cup footage.

Blogs

These sites currently enable people to submit comments and feedback about specific topics.

- Plymotion
- Plymouth Arts and Heritage
- Plymouth History Festival 2013

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

We need to take a structured approach to the development of our use of social media.

For social media to work effectively it is vital that it is used as part of the overall communications mix. Up to date information about the Council, its services and engagement activities must also be posted on the corporate website. Social media must also be connected to the use of e-alerts and other digital communications, as well as printed publications and campaign materials such as posters and advertisements.

Website

Social media can be a powerful way of directing people to web content and online transactions, reducing the need for phone calls to the Council, so it is essential that all web content is up to date and simple to use. Our website currently promotes our social media channels. A current limitation for using social media to drive more traffic to our website is the time delay in information appearing on our site after being posted. Twitter messages and Facebook updates appear instantly while our website posts can take an hour or more to appear. This problem will be resolved when we launch a new website as part of the transformation programme. In the meantime our website will carry a Twitter feed with live updates.

Customer transactions

At present we do not actively encourage residents to make requests or report problems through social media. If they do, we pass them on to the relevant department, as we would an email or phone call. Most councils are currently not using social media as a full customer access channel, enabling people to request services through Twitter or Facebook, as this requires a dedicated resource and it is more efficient to use a system that captures all the essential information. However, as technology enables these requests to be integrated with customer management systems this is more likely to be possible. This is an area that will be explored as part of the customer transformation project.

Email alerts and newsletters

The Council has a new feature on its website that allows residents to sign up for e-alerts (emails) on a range of subjects. The alerts can also link people to further information on the Council's website, including news, forms and videos.

The e-alerts will significantly reduce the need for printed publications, though these publications remain important for those residents without access to the internet.

The e-alerts are more inclusive than social media as they can be read by anyone with access to the internet. Social media channels such as Facebook generally require people to set up an account to access information. While e-alerts are simpler to manage, they are a one-way communication channel and social media is more effective for when we want to receive feedback and engage people in a conversation.

E-alerts and social media complement each other. E-alerts can be set up to alert people to changes on social media sites and on specified Council web pages, while Twitter and Facebook can promote the availability of e-alerts.

Priorities

The aim is to expand the number of authorised social media accounts to those services that can demonstrate a clear communications need to use social media and that have the skills and resources to maintain and monitor sites.

Facebook sites are suitable for a limited number of subjects while Twitter is likely to be the most suitable social media channel for use by Council services.

Social media sites require constant attention and while free to set up, they are resource intensive to maintain. It is also important not to duplicate information with other council channels and potentially cause confusion. This makes it important for Corporate Communications to oversee all authorised use of social media.

Before new sites are authorised, the following questions will be asked:

- What's the need? What do you need to communicate and to whom?
- What resources do you have (including knowledge, skills and time)?
- What feedback do you want and what will you do with it?
- What website information do you currently have and how frequently is it updated?
- How will you respond to questions and requests made over social media?
- Have you been using the existing corporate social media channels?

New channels

One of the strengths of social media is that it enables people to interact and communicate about issues that matter most to them. This means social media channels focused on specific service areas are likely to become as popular as general channels.

Potential areas for expansion over the next six months include:

- Facebook site for young people (in development)
- School meals – tweeting daily menus
- Highways updates – tweeting significant works/disruption on the highways
- Promoting Council decision-making and opportunities to get involved – dedicated tweets about Council meetings and agendas and what meetings are open to the public
- Twitter sites for specific campaigns

Social networks are evolving rapidly. We will continually monitor emerging social media sites to assess whether we should be using them to reach more people.

Use of social media by elected members

Some elected members already have access to social media sites (those who have requested it from ICT). The aim is to ensure all members have automatic access to social media, as well as appropriate guidance and training.

Staff access to social media

As is common in many councils, access to social media sites remains blocked for most employees. The aim is to remove the filters on these sites to enable staff to:

- Look at social media sites for work purposes during work hours. For example, to see feedback about a service or relevant breaking news on Twitter.
- Look at work related videos on YouTube.
- Take part in professional online forums relevant to their work where they identify who you they and what their position is. However, they must remember that the views expressed are their own and not those of the Council. Corporate Communications will be responsible for posting information to represent the Council's official stance on a controversial issue.
- Use professional networking sites such as LinkedIn to network with peers.

Staff will not be allowed to:

- Use social media for personal reasons during work hours. This includes tweeting and updating a personal Facebook page.
- Watch non-work related videos on YouTube or other sites. Line manager can determine what is work related and what is not.
- Set up any social media channels to represent a Council service, or tweet or post Facebook messages on behalf of the Council (unless a team has been authorised to set up an official presence).
- Release any confidential or sensitive Council information on any social media channel, whether it is an authorised work site or a personal one.

Policies and guidance

The Council's existing Code of Conduct and the appraisals process cover behaviour on social media.

Specific guidance will be made available to all members and staff as part of the Communications Toolkit.

HOW WE WILL MEASURE OUR ACTIVITIES

Outputs can be easily measured but it is important that we place most emphasis on the outcomes of using social media.

Measures will include:

- Retweets on Twitter (people forwarding our messages to other users of the site).
- Conversations about us online, negative, positive or neutral.
- Followers on Twitter, fans and likes on Facebook, members of our groups or forums.
- Traffic generated to our website - time spent on key pages of our websites, and on the site in general.
- Comments on forums and blog posts (both on our sites and third party sites).
- Forum topics and blog posts submitted by users.
- Reviews posted and rated by users.
- Views of our videos and photos.
- Uploads of videos and photos by users.
- Social media sharing and participation - activity on bookmarking sites, sharing with friends on social networks etc.

More sophisticated measures will be introduced as our use of social media expands.