Social media allows the Lima Police Department to engage citizens online and build offline relationships.

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Social Media on the Front Lines

For the Lima Police Department, building an online community improves in-person citizen interactions.

In 2013, the Lima Police Department in Ohio used social media to identify two individuals suspected of stealing money from a donation jar at a gas station. In September 2014, social media was used again to update the community about a local prison break — reaching 1.1 million people through a single post. And in 2016, the department used social media to locate a missing child with special needs and safely return him home. Since launching its first Facebook page in 2012, the department has also taken to Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and NextDoor to help highlight officer engagement in the community, solicit tips from residents and aid in fighting crime.

"What we really wanted to do was get our positive story out and show the public that we are human — we're not just robots writing traffic citations and making arrests for misdemeanors," says Lt. Andy Green, social media manager for the Lima Police Department. "We show the lighter side of law enforcement when we're able to, and the positive things that officers are doing in the community."

Lt. Green says residents will often communicate directly with the police department through social media, which is an opportunity that doesn't usually present itself outside of these platforms. Residents inquire about local policies and ordinances, express opinions about regional events and even submit crime tips through private messages.

Monitoring Social Media Conversations

Since multiple people manage the Lima Police Department's social media accounts, a clear social media policy helps ensure all administrators respond to posts and comments in a uniform fashion. It also helps mitigate hate speech, harassment and digital threats, creating a safe space for community conversation.

The Lima Police Department's social media policy is available on its Facebook page, and is often linked to other platforms. By posting or commenting on the department's platform, participants agree to adhere to the terms. The terms of the agreement prohibit the use of profanity,

threats, off-topic posts, comments that may interfere with an investigation and racial slurs, to name a few. When users violate these terms, the department removes the post — even if it is in support of police activity.

"We've got pretty thick skin, so if someone talks negatively about the police department but keeps it within the confines of our terms of use, we leave it. We only remove it if violates our terms of use," says Lt. Green.

Archiving Content and Deleted Posts

As many organizations across the country have experienced, deleting or removing a post — no matter how clearly it violates the terms of use — can cause a negative reaction from the public. At the government level, it can prompt citizens to file a request for information, with which police departments must comply.

In an effort to prepare for these requests and comply with public records law, the Lima Police Department began archiving social media data manually, but that had its challenges. For one, it was hard to capture complete data — if a post was removed without a screen shot, it was lost forever. Additionally, manually saving and backing up the data was extremely time consuming. To streamline the archiving process, the department implemented ArchiveSocial, an automated social media archiving solution.

ArchiveSocial saves social media activity, including private messages, across most of the department's social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

"If we didn't have the archive solution and we were just relying on Facebook or Twitter to store that data for us, it would be very difficult for us to get in and retrieve the information requested," says Lt. Green.

The department uses the archived data for other purposes as well. Recently, during a homicide investigation, the department received a large number of comments that violated the social media policy and had to be removed. However, detectives working the case asked for access to the removed comments and archived data to make connections with potential witnesses, suspects and friends of suspects.

Lessons Learned

The Lima Police Department has found success with social media, and has implemented best practices along the way to maintain a transparent, safe communications platform. Best practices include:

Develop a social media policy. Lt. Green suggests modeling social media policies after a partnering jurisdiction's policy, with a thorough review from the legal team.

Remove comments when necessary. It's okay to remove comments that violate your social media policy, just ensure the policy is enforced fairly and consistently.

Respond quickly and honestly. Apply the social media policy to determine how to respond and when to remove comments. If you say you'll look into something, do it. "It's not just lip service where we say we'll do something and then we don't," says Lt. Green. "That really hurts our credibility."

Automate social media archiving. Avoid manually saving and backing up social media activity. Automate the archiving of your social media activity to uphold your department's legal obligation to maintain public records, ensure complete information and improve transparency.

Leverage data. Use archived data to aid in other areas of operations, whether that's assisting in a case or using data in court as evidence.

Obtain buy-in at all levels. Lt. Green received approval from the chief of police to implement the police department's first social media page, but buy-in is needed at all levels. "Sometimes the line officers or other supervisors didn't necessarily see the value in social media," says Lt. Green. "It was important for me to go around and show them how it could help them."

Taking the Work Out of Archiving

"If your agency is not already using social media, it should be," says Lt. Green. The reach, improved transparency and ability to communicate with citizens in real time makes social media an invaluable tool for police and public safety departments. However, before launching any sort of social media plan, think about the archiving process: Do you have a plan to archive? What will you archive? How will you archive?

"Going with a company such as ArchiveSocial has been very helpful to us because it takes all of the work out of it," says Lt. Green. "When we actually set up ArchiveSocial, it took me probably 15 minutes to connect all of the accounts. Having that information readily available will take a lot of stress off of your plate and allow you to work on other things that are more important."

Sample an archive of your own social media at
archivesocial.com

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