

Follow @wmpolice – how West Midlands Police engages with communities

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Organisation: West Midlands Police

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Local government

Sector: Public order and safety

Type: Communication

Launched in: 2008

Overall development time: 3 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

West Midlands Police has become a national champion in using social media to engage with communities. Its pro-active social media policy has not only allowed it to respond effectively to rumours and misinformation during the riots in 2011 but also to prevent crime and to catch criminals by harnessing the knowledge of communities.

Social media has made the work of the 'bobby on the beat' a lot more effective. Follow @wmpolice on Twitter to learn how the West Midlands Police does modern community policing through social media.

Why the innovation was developed

- West Midlands Police (WMP) has always had a strong tradition of community engagement. While face-to-face contacts remain important, the Communications Department has recognised social media as an opportunity to connect to communities who do not access traditional media such as local newspapers.
 - Obviously, the proportion using social media will increase over time. WMP therefore decided to engage actively in social media.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- To provide the public with information about crime prevention, appeals and neighbourhood issues;
 - To consult and inform the public about the priorities and services of the police;
 - To consult and inform the communities of the West Midlands about crime and 'anti-social behaviour';
 - To provide the public with a feedback forum for commenting about policing in the West Midlands;
 - To increase trust and confidence in the police.
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population

- West Midlands residents
 - West Midlands Police department
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Existing similar practices

Policing and Social Media

In other countries' public administrations

The Reykjavík Metropolitan Police, Iceland

This innovation increases the safety and feeling of safety of the population who the Reykjavík metropolitan police (RMP) serves. One of the tools used is social media in policing; using social media to establish a connection between the public and the police to create a dialogue. This enables the police to create a medium where direct communication with the public is possible, especially with regard to the dissemination of information and public engagement.

<https://www.oecd.org/governance/observatory-public-sector-innovation/innovations/page/policingandsocialmedia.htm>

Results

Efficiency

- While social media have brought no cashable savings, they have meant that WMP can reach a huge number of individuals at low cost and induce behaviour change which creates savings.
 - For example, in the UK there is a 999 emergency number and a 101 non-emergency number through which the police can be contacted. On 1 February 2013 WMP held a tweetathon to document the 999 calls it receives on an average day. This highlighted how it often received inappropriate calls to the 999 number, wasting police time and money.
 - The campaign was picked up by celebrity Peter Schofield (who has 2,200,888 followers) and he retweeted many of most shocking tweets - and also sent the tweet below. This meant that the tweets by West Midlands Police were able to reach over 2 million people. The campaign had an impact on decreasing the number of calls received by the 999 number and encouraged more people to call the 101 number.
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Effectiveness

- These new forms of communication have created a new intelligence gathering resource. For example, issues or complaints can be captured, using an online form that go directly to the Professional Standards Department, allowing trends to be captured and issues to be dealt with appropriately. Furthermore, the 'Rate Your Police' website provides the police with information about concerns raised by the public.
 - The new tools have also helped with investigations. The information and evidence that investigators can gather in the immediate aftermath of an incident are often crucial to successfully solving a crime. People are able to send photos and videos, and a commentary on events as they happen. These can now be transmitted quickly to the police, for possible use in investigations.
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Service quality

Accessibility:

- Social media are increasingly being used by members of the public and media to assist the force. Most tweets sent out by officers are retweeted (forwarded by followers onto their contacts) and regularly result in follow-up queries from journalists asking for more information about incidents.

Responsiveness:

- The use of social media has helped the force to engage with communities to a greater extent. It has provided the force with an opportunity to talk to people in ways that are not possible through other media. In particular, YouTube and Flickr provide the force with an opportunity to create more visual communication avenues that may appeal to a new audience.

Development

Design

The online presence of WMP began in June 1998 when it launched its website www.west-midlands.police.uk. As internet usage and access has expanded - by 2013 over 52 million internet users in the UK and over 80% of the population regularly use the internet - the force has developed the website further. It underwent a major redesign in April 2010, and again in June 2011.

However, the journey into social media only started in 2008 when WMP launched a YouTube channel to showcase videos produced by the force. The trigger was an individual posting a video about the force that shed it in a negative light. WMP, because it didn't have a social media presence at the time, couldn't respond to this video, refute inaccuracies or explain its work. It then realised that conversations about the force were taking place online and that it had to create a presence in order to join in this conversation. The following year WMP launched a Facebook account - facebook.com/westmidlandspolice and, shortly afterwards, a Twitter account - twitter.com/wmpolice.

As the use of social media increased there was a growing interest amongst officers and staff about using these tools themselves. You might think it would be younger members of the force who would be most interested in using social media. However, the Corporate Communications team found that staff of all ages were interested - and as more and more officers looked to use social media, the Corporate Communications Department worked with them as 'champions' to train others new to the technology.

Testing

- The growing interest in using new media also led to a clarifying order being issued in 2009 to outline how officers should use various social media, distinguish between professional and personal usage and ensure that personnel would not publish legally sensitive information. In the summer of 2012 this order was replaced by a comprehensive social media policy. The emerging nature of social media means that policies are regularly reviewed and updated. The current social media policy of West Midlands Police can be accessed by [clicking here](#).
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Implementation

Tools used:

- Websites: The main websites of WMP provide latest news, crime prevention advice, and a search facility to find local neighbourhood teams. Each of the 10 Local Policing Units (LPU) in the West Midlands has its own local website also.
- Twitter: Alongside the force's main Twitter account there are accounts for the 10 LPUs, the Neighbourhood Teams, accounts for particular activities, and individual officers and staff.
- Facebook: The main Facebook site of WMP has a discussion board that is used mainly for questions about reporting crime and neighbourhood issues. Additionally, cities and towns such as Birmingham, Wolverhampton, and Coventry each have their own local Facebook site that is managed by communications officers.
- YouTube: WMP regularly produces publicity videos to promote crime prevention, and interviews connected with operations.
- Rate Your Local Police: In July 2010, WMP launched 'Rate Your Local Police'. This website allows people to give their opinions on police issues.
- Live web chats: New technologies have also created opportunities to extend the reach of traditional meetings.
- Flickr: In 2011, WMP launched its own page on the photo sharing social network Flickr. The page allows the force to give the public an insight into the variety of activities and projects being carried out across the force.
- To reduce the likelihood of counterproductive activity, the Corporate Communications Department also monitors social media accounts to ensure conformance to the corporate social media policy and guidance. A tool called CrowdControl HQ is used to facilitate this.

Resources used:

- The use of social media has not meant a reduction in traditional press work – in fact, quite the opposite. As journalists pick up more information through social media, the Corporate Communications Department now receives more requests for information. At the same time, the use of social media has not required recruitment of new staff, who would be dedicated to communicating on social media all day - often a concern to public agencies with no experience in social media. In fact, staff have undertaken social media activities as part of their daily work.
 - There is no cash budget for this work – staff time on social media forms a core part of the role of everyone in the Corporate Communications Department. Individual's dedication to their social media responsibility will effect the amount of time they contribute.
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Diffusion

- The success of the West Midlands e-communications strategy has been recognised nationally and internationally. For example, WMP has hosted visits by other police forces to demonstrate its practices and it has been invited to conferences in the UK and abroad to talk about its use of social media.

Lessons Learned

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- The key message is: “Feel the fear BUT do it! It’s a bigger risk for an organisation NOT to use social media and miss out on the conversations that go on in their community”.
 - The experience of WMP is that social media can be scary but, if risks are managed and there is a clear policy to ensure that personnel act appropriately, there are lots of benefits. As Hilary tends to advise new social media users “A good rule of thumb is: if you wouldn’t say that to a member of the public face-to-face or give that information to a traditional media outlet, then don’t publish it on social media”.
 - Social media tends to ‘police itself’, as inappropriate behaviour by an organisation is noticed and commented on. You quickly learn! Social media is a medium to create trust and, where a police force has greater levels of trust, it is more likely to be able to gather intelligence, which is particularly important when major incidents occur.
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Other information

The disorder across the West Midlands during August 2011 provides a clear example of the benefits that new electronic media can provide. On the 8th August, news of potential disorder spread on social media sites. As a result, communications managers and the multi-media team monitored these sites throughout the morning and sought to counter rumours. Without having established a trusted digital presence, it would not have been possible for the teams to counter rumours from which further trouble could have escalated. For example, the force used social media to repudiate false rumours that a mosque had been petrol bombed in Coventry and that Birmingham New Street Station had caught fire. Alongside dealing with rumours, Twitter proved to be an invaluable source of community intelligence that enabled appropriate responses to potential threats and addressing of concerns and tensions. Monitoring by WMP indicated that each time a tweet was sent from the police account, it was instantly retweeted by hundreds of followers, helping to spread messages the force wanted to disseminate. Following the disorder, the force received hundreds of messages from its followers on Twitter expressing thanks for its efforts.

Before the August 2011 disorder, WMP had around 8,000 followers on Twitter. By 17 August this had increased to 24,722. During the same period the WMP Facebook account grew from just over 6,000 followers to 9,129 on 17 August. The local police sites affected by the disorder saw similar increases in followers. These increases demonstrate that communities turn to social media to find accurate information quickly and they reflect the success of the force’s social media communications strategy during the disorder, with their accounts providing trustworthy and timely updates.