



ARE WE
THERE
YET?

**Communications Brief: State Departments
of Transportation
Lead the Way
Using New Media**



State Departments of Transportation Lead the Way Using New Media

State departments of transportation are actively using Twitter, Facebook and a variety of other social media tools to reach the public, according to a new survey released today by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). Thirty-one states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey. Among the findings of the latest survey of public information and communications officers from 32 state departments of transportation (DOT) are:

- 81% use Twitter (26 states)*
- Of those states using Twitter:
 - 83% relay traffic incidents
 - 80% relay road closings
 - 63% relay emergencies such as hurricanes and tornados
- 45% have an active Facebook page (14 states)
- 74% have video on their website (23 states); 4 states have a news channel or weekly news update
- 64% have a YouTube channel (18 states)
- 10% have a MySpace page (3 states)
- 7% of DOTs have a blog (7 states)
- 45% offer RSS feeds from their website (14)
- 33% offer podcasts on their website (10 states)
- 45% participate as a member of LinkedIn (14 states)



* Note: Since the survey was completed, at least three other states have begun to use Twitter.

Overall, state DOTs are finding that social media are decidedly more efficient in reaching the public with time-sensitive traffic and travel information. Among the various new social media tools, respondents found Twitter (65%), RSS feeds (56%), podcasts (18%) and Facebook (13%) to be the most effective in reaching their primary audiences.

Despite using these new tools, 100% of respondents still rely on the traditional media to get their messages out to the public. Most effective are news releases (58%), followed by one-on-one calls with reporters (45%). Using events and news conferences (36%) and radio and television outreach (32%) to spread their messages were also cited as effective.

In responding to the survey, DOT communications officials agreed that they first determine their target audience for their messages and then decide which tool to use to reach that audience.

"In a rural area of my state, we have families who do not have (cell) phones or computers and rely on the traditional media to get the information out by newspaper or through events," wrote one official from Mississippi. As a result, in order to reach across the state, Mississippi uses both traditional and social media to announce key transportation information. In addition to using radio and television to broadcast messages, Mississippi was the first state DOT to develop a Twitter account specifically for hurricane evacuations.

Twitter allows for targeted communications in specific traffic areas

Among the information released by state DOTs through Twitter are:

- Referrals to Tripcheck and new video updates
- Fires
- Accidents
- Construction projects, construction delays
- Press releases
- State responses to the Recovery Act
- Air quality
- Transit information
- Changes in traffic patterns due to construction or accidents
- Hurricane-related road closures, traffic information, fuel availability and contraflow information
- 511 information



Several states, including Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas and California, use several Twitter accounts depending on highways or geographic locations. As a result, their followers can drill down and receive specific information according to their route.

Most, if not all, state DOTs warn the public against reading Twitter texts while driving. Idaho's slogan is "Call 511 B 4 U GO", and urges drivers to pull off at a safe location to access information.

In Arizona, the state DOT does not provide crash-by-crash information to avoid distracted driving and relies on local radio and television to relay this information. "Driver safety and welfare are our guiding principles and we weigh the concerns against these prevailing benefits," an official said.

Tennessee offers Twitter feeds by roadway and location. "Twitter is one more tool we can use to get information to those traveling our interstates and state roads. TDOT strongly encourages motorists to refrain from texting, tweeting or calling from a vehicle you are operating. Do not call or text while operating a motor vehicle. Have your passenger get the information or 'Know before you go!'."

Facebook skews to younger audiences

State DOT Facebook pages are targeted to specific audiences, primarily teens and young drivers. Texas finds that the majority of their "fans" are educated professionals, ages 25-44. Arizona targets its messages to drivers 16 to 35. Another state targets its Facebook page to "transportation geeks, people who are interested in what DDOT is doing." Travelers, tourists, elected officials, and "staycationers" are also among the targeted audiences.

Among the information found on state DOT Facebook pages are:

- News
- Job postings
- Events and meeting announcements
- Safety messages
- "Don't Trash Arizona"
- Contests and Polls/Surveys
- Teen driver safety information
- Links to public service announcements
- Video news updates
- Hours of operation



Blogs offer unfiltered DOT perspectives

Although relatively few state DOTs offer blogs on their websites (7 states), three states also actively read and post comments on others' blogs, primarily to correct erroneous information. Several states said they were considering blogs to push out information to constituents, policymakers and others interested in transportation.

A little more than half (54%) of respondents measure their social media tools on a regular basis. Despite the additional time and resources needed to use social media, only two respondents said they had reduced other activities—specifically by reducing or eliminating their podcast schedules. Said one DOT communications expert from Iowa: "We haven't stopped doing things; however, by using these social media tools, we have saved time (by distributing information in multiple ways with one posting) and reached a larger audience."

For more information on AASHTO communications and to see a complete list of Twitter accounts, go to: www.publicaffairs-ntpaw.transportation.org

AASHTO is now on Twitter. Become a follower at twitter.com/aashtospeaks