

Fourth Annual State DOT Social Media Survey

September 2013



Photo Courtesy: Pennsylvania DOT

Overview

*Consistent Growth in Social Media Adoption
Hampered by Lack of Resources*

Nearly every state department of transportation is actively engaging the public through social media communication channels. The fourth annual American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials State DOT Social Media Survey found that 90 percent of state DOTs use both Twitter and Facebook to help share information about traffic incidents, construction projects, safety initiatives, and public involvement opportunities.

This year 43 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey, which asked state DOT communication teams about their social media programs, including the types of tools being used, social media measurement, staffing, agency policies and the development of mobile smartphone apps.

This year's survey results revealed consistent growth in the adoption of social media as standard communication tools. However, state DOTs also reported ongoing challenges in keeping up with public expectations that they maintain a nearly constant stream of information.

About the Survey

This is the fourth annual American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) survey of states' social media usage and implementation. Each June, state department of transportation communication staffs are asked to complete an online survey designed to track the adoption of social media tools, the impact of social media on the state agencies and the influence social media has had on the relationship between the transportation department and its customers. This year, 43 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey.

When asked to describe their biggest challenge, many state DOTs mentioned a lack of resources to support their growing communication programs.

One respondent said, “Shrinking resources (we’re reducing our workforce by 10 percent) vs. need to stay on top of new media. Rising costs of (social media) monitoring software.”

Many state DOTs also said that staffing—assigning the right staff and dedicating staff time to monitor and support social media—is another major challenge. More than a third of state DOTs reported assigning staff to exclusively manage and maintain their social media activities, an increase of 10 percent since 2012.

But perhaps the most cited challenge for state DOTs was creating fresh content that meets public expectations.

One respondent said, “Our challenge will be using these sites appropriately in an increasingly compressed news cycle and continuing to stay active.”

Another respondent described the challenge this way, “Timely response to posts and inquiries—particularly during off-hours, weekends, and holidays. We have 24/7 staff in our traffic management but they are not authorized to post. We retain the re-

“Just not sure what will be the next helpful tool and what will be the next pointless flop”

— Survey Comment

“Social media has become as equally important as traditional media.”

— Survey Comment

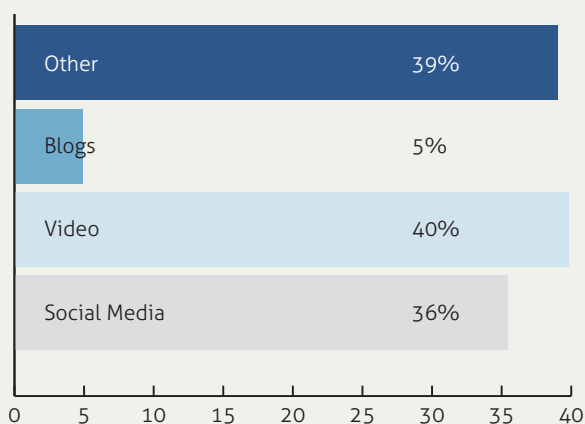
sponsibility of social media within the Communications office.”

These kinds of institutional adjustments are not surprising given that social media tools have only recently become standard practice within the communication industry broadly and transportation departments specifically. In 2010, less than half of state DOTs used Facebook and only 26 states had Twitter accounts.

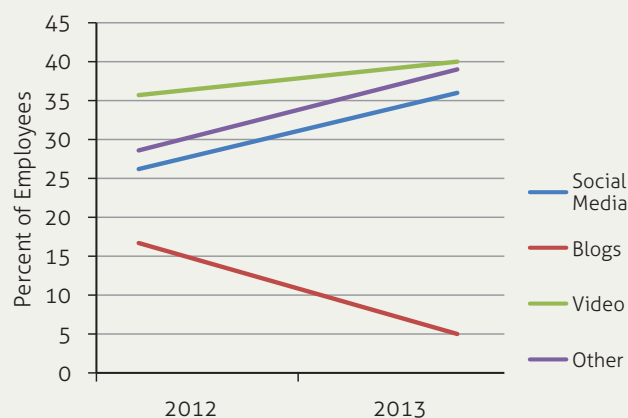
It is easy to see why state DOTs and most public information organizations have turned to social media as legitimate outreach channels—the proliferation of portable devices, constantly connected to the internet.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (<http://pewinternet.org>), a non-partisan, non-profit “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America, in 2009, roughly 80 percent of U.S. adults owned a cell phone and few owned smart phones or tablet computers. In May 2013, more than 90 percent of adults own a cell phone and 56 percent of those cell phones are considered smart phones. More than third of U.S. adults own a tablet computer.

Are any of your employees dedicated full time to:



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Communication Staffs

How many people are on your communications team?

Alabama	5	Nebraska	7
Alaska	7	Nevada	12
Arizona	65	New Hampshire	2
Arkansas	10	New Mexico	10
California	60	New York	14
D.C.	4	North Carolina	30
Delaware	8	North Dakota	7
Florida	30	Ohio	9
Georgia	18	Oklahoma	7
Hawaii	3	Oregon	12
Illinois	20	Pennsylvania	5
Indiana	27	Rhode Island	8
Iowa	11	South Carolina	11
Kansas	4	South Dakota	1
Kentucky	7	Tennessee	12
Louisiana	7	Texas	100
Maine	1	Utah	5
Maryland	6	Vermont	2
Massachusetts	7	Washington	30
Michigan	15	West Virginia	11
Minnesota	10	Wisconsin	8
Missouri	40	Wyoming	7

“Keeping pace as new trends; tools and technologies develop. It will also be a challenge to integrate employees to do this on a large scale”

— Survey Comment

Evolving the Tools

While many state DOTs have used Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for more than four years, the ways in which those tools are deployed has shifted significantly.

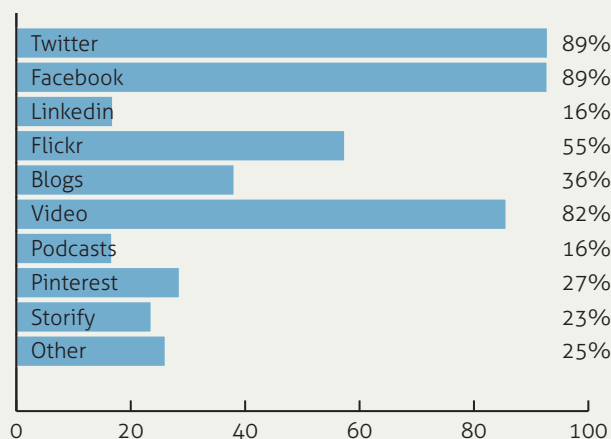
Nearly 60 percent of respondents reported using Twitter for emergency notifications and 93 percent use Twitter for sending traffic updates to their followers. It is through these types of posts that states report receiving the most engagement and audience growth. Meanwhile, 70 percent use Facebook for emergency notifications and just 63 percent use Facebook for traffic alerts.

According to one respondent, “Both Facebook and Twitter increase month over month in usage. We seek big spikes in usage during critical events affecting transportation and travel. This may include heavy snow storms, tropical storms, or serious crashes resulting in road closures.”

One state reported, “Any time we add a photo to a Twitter or Facebook that post gets at least 50 percent more engagement than posts without photos. We’re also seeing more and more people asking us questions via Twitter and Facebook. It’s up by about 70 percent vs. last year at this time.”

Twitter and Facebook are both resources for states sharing information about public meetings and public involvement opportunities (70 and 73 percent, respectively).

Is your organization using one or more of the following tools?



YouTube also is used primarily for public involvement outreach (75 percent) and overall agency branding and messaging (78 percent). Again, the integration of the three tools is likely leading to their use in this way.

"Increased interaction (on Facebook and Twitter) is leading to increased questions (how funded, major projects, etc.), which is challenging us to think of creative ways to answer/reach constituents... we are beginning to offer more video release and strongly considering live webinars/podcasts."

Last year's new tools—Pinterest and Storify—saw broader adoption by state DOTs. Pinterest is now used by 27 percent, an increase of 11 percent over the past year. Storify is used by 23 percent of state DOTs, up from 9.5 percent in 2012. Neither tool was in use by state DOTs in 2011. A few states reported experimenting with even new tools, including Vine and Snapchat.

A few states reported a shift away from the photo sharing site, Flickr, in favor of a growing interest in the relatively nascent image-based social media app Instagram, which made its debut in October 2010. The integration of Instagram with Twitter and Facebook is likely driving this shift.

Mobile

Clearly one area that continues to grow in importance is mobile apps, and making information more accessible to mobile devices like smart phones and tablet computers. One state DOT reported adding 100,000 mobile app users in just six months. State DOTs that make their information available in mobile formats this year grew by 5 percent (68 to 73 percent). Half of those states offer mobile apps and 73 percent have mobile-friendly web sites.

But the shift toward mobile is not without questions for transportation agencies.

One respondent put it this way, "Because people are so reliant on smart phones we feel somewhat conflicted in providing our information via that platform. On one hand, we are communicating in the manner that increasing numbers of people prefer. But we're doing it in a way that can be a cause in distracted driving crashes."

Looking Ahead

State DOTs will continue to experiment and evolve the use of social media tools, especially as transportation system users shift their preferences for how they want to receive information. Several states said that keeping up with the rapid changes was a major concern.

One emerging trend based on this year's survey is likely to be an increased emphasis on measurement and formally tracking engagement. While 73 percent of state DOTs reported using some kind of measurement tool to track social media efforts, there was seemingly little consistency in the types of tools or the types of measurement. Most track the number of followers and friends on Twitter and Facebook, respectively. But few reported using more sophisticated monitoring tools such as Radian6 or Sprout Social.

And, using social media to directly gather information directly from a mobile audience may be another area of growth in the coming year. One state DOT responded that it plans to contract with an internet-based service that collects information from residents on non-emergency issues such as pothole locations or guardrail that needs repaired.

What mobile media do you offer?



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