The keys to
social media success

Engaging effectively with citizens online requires research, experimentation, creativity and flexibility

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IF AGENCIES WANT to improve their ability to engage with citizens via social media, they need to understand how people are communicating. It requires a shift in thinking, but it's often easier than agencies expect.

For example, citizens are consuming more video than ever, and almost every major social network is making video a key focus area so agencies should be prioritizing it, too. Social media users only want bite-size bits of content of 30 seconds or a couple of minutes. Expensive equipment is not necessary because even older smartphones can produce a high-quality video, and those videos are more authentic and generally resonate better with citizens.

Achieving true interaction

The other cultural shift involves understanding that social media is not about issuing press releases. It's about being genuine and trying to facilitate engagement. Agencies can encourage conversation by posting archival photos, showing videos from local events and asking followers to share their posts.

And although most government agencies are familiar with web and social media analytics tools, they should start attaching UTM tracking codes to their posts so they can see how individual ones perform. Did citizens register for an event as a result of a post? Or did they sign up for a new newsletter? Understanding those outcomes gives agencies insight into what works best on social media and offers greater understanding about how citizens want to engage.

Encouraging buy-in from the top down

Building a social media presence takes time and involves a lot of experimentation. One approach could be to encourage agency employees to be funny and creative. The Police Department in Lawrence, Kan., has become one of the most popular law enforcement handles in the nation because of its humorous tone and funny messages — an approach that must have been a challenge for a law enforcement agency to undertake.

In another example, the Transportation Security Administration has one of the most popular Instagram accounts because employees answer questions and provide a service in a funny, unique way that is helping TSA improve the public's perception of it. Similarly, the New York City Police Department encourages its leaders to be creative. A twitter handle is displayed on every one of the NYPD's squad cars identifying its precinct. Citizens can tweet at that handle, and the
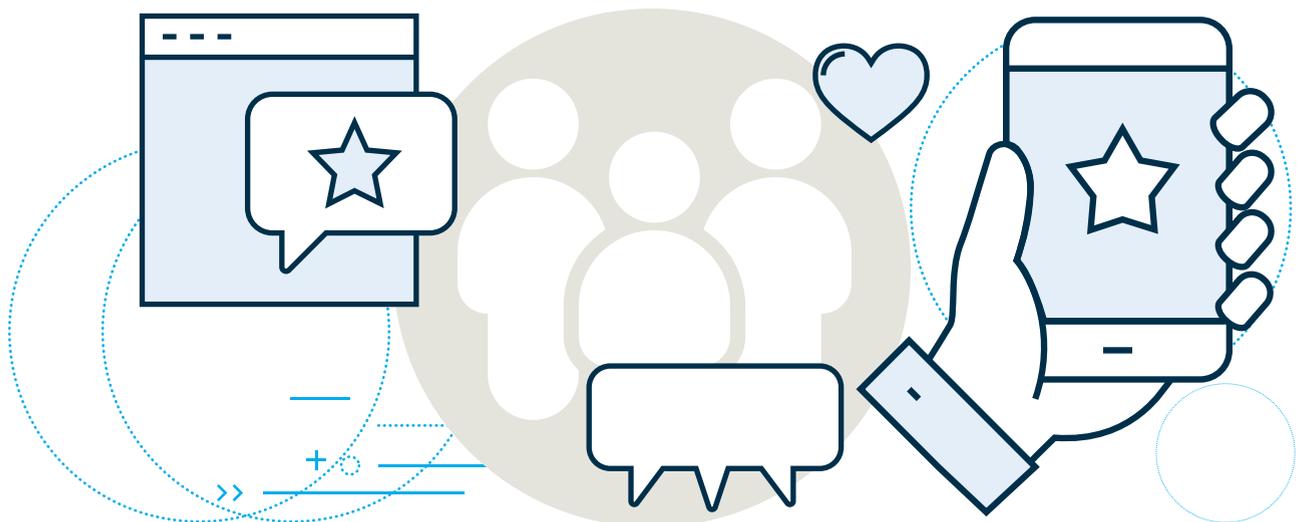
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message will be viewed by a leader in that precinct, which is encouraging adoption of social media, changing the culture and increasing positive sentiment about the NYPD.

Indeed, one of the keys to launching a successful social media strategy is having buy-in at the top of the agency. Boston Mayor Marty Walsh hosts town halls and chats with citizens via social

media. Today he has over 275,000 Twitter followers. In fact, many other city leaders have mandates for serving citizens via social media.

Another key is understanding your agency's mission and objectives and then directly linking those goals to social media metrics. For NYC 311, city officials might measure success by the number of engagements or completed assignments.

That's the type of meaningful reporting that allows a leader to say, "Our social media program served 5,000 citizens this month." And it's the type of success that gets employees excited about furthering an agency's mission by using social media. ■

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