A Case Study in Building Trust and Legitimacy through Social Media in Westland

In response to increased public scrutiny of law enforcement and the need for more transparency, the Westland, Michigan Police Department made a concerted effort to establish two-way communication with the public and promote police-community relations through the use of social media. This effort started in November of 2014 via the Westland Police Department Community Partnership Facebook page.

The Police Department has maintained a Facebook page since early 2013. When the page was first established, it was not heavily advertised and the Department was not active in posting information. The page was used mostly for one-way communication, that is, the Department posted information for the public, but the page was not used to interact with the public. In November 2014, when the outreach effort began, the page had 898 followers. As of December 2015, the page has grown to over 4,300 followers. The Police Department is now active in posting information and has had great success with establishing two-way communication with the public.

The effort to grow our Facebook page started with the appointment of a Public Information Officer (PIO). The appointment of a PIO has proven to be the most important factor in the success of our social media outreach. With the amount of time and effort it takes to maintain and promote the department on social media, it is imperative that any department wishing to use social media effectively must choose the right person for the position. The PIO must be in tune with what is happening in the community and communicate the public’s concerns to the appropriate personnel within the department. To streamline the communication process, the PIO can communicate directly with the appropriate personnel to address any community concerns, regardless of chain of command or protocol. This includes communicating directly with the Chief when the PIO feels that it is necessary. Forgoing the normal chain of command protocol has made the Westland Police Department much more responsive to its citizens.

The Westland Police Department is also mindful of comments that are critical of it. These types of posts are difficult to handle, since we do not want to be baited into a back-and-forth with the public. In instances where the citizen is critical of the Police Department, the PIO will usually direct the citizen to contact the Department directly so that we can address their concerns. We use these opportunities to let these citizens know that all complaints are taken seriously and that they will be addressed. Any offensive, racist, or otherwise inappropriate posts are deleted from the page immediately.

There are posts that do require a public response; these usually involve untruths and misinformation regarding the Department. Responses are limited to one per issue; there are no further responses, as these may escalate, rather than de-escalate the situation. After the response is posted, many citizens will join in to defend the Department.

In addition to selecting the right person to oversee its social media accounts, it is important that a department properly train the PIO. The Westland Police Department’s PIO has attended a 40-hour Public Information Officer training class dealing with all aspects of the position, including
dealing with social media. As with all law enforcement roles, on-going training is critical to ensuring that the PIO has the most up-to-date knowledge, skills, and tools.

As part of the rollout of the social media engagement strategy, the Department partnered with local government leaders to help spread the word. Mayor William Wild and his office were critically important in this effort. The Mayor’s Office was instrumental in advertising our Facebook page through events such as “Mornings with the Mayor” and the television show, “The Westland Report,” which airs on the city government cable channel. The Mayor’s office also maintains the City of Westland’s official Facebook page, which currently has over 6,300 followers. The Department and the Mayor’s Office have coordinated to ensure that stories are shared with both groups of followers.

The Department has found that some of its most popular Facebook posts have been those requesting the public’s help to identifying subjects wanted in a crime. These posts are especially useful when all other leads have been exhausted. When detectives request such a post, Department protocol requires consultation with the Chief and the commander of the Detective Bureau. So far in 2015, such posts have led to the identification and/or arrest of 10 individuals wanted for crimes ranging from aggravated assault to breaking and entering. One post requesting help in identifying a subject who was taking “up-skirt” photos of a young lady at an ice cream stand reached more than 134,000 people on Facebook.

If a department is interested in using Facebook to assist in identifying individuals, it is important to keep the public updated when someone is identified. The PIO is responsible for coordinating with the detectives assigned to the case so posts can be updated when an arrest is made. These updates always generate a pro-law-enforcement response.

The Westland Police Department is confident that its efforts to promote police-community relations via Facebook are paying off. The Department has found that citizens who are familiar with social media are comfortable communicating with police via the private messaging on Facebook. Using privates, citizens have given the Department crime tips, reported traffic issues or concerns, and reported drug activity in their neighborhoods. The Department has also been able to arrange police appearances at community events based on requests sent via Facebook.

After reviewing our social media campaign one year into the process, the Westland Police Department can confidently say that the use of Facebook has helped to strengthen police/community relations and build trust in the community, and that it will continue to use Facebook to maintain two-way communication and address community concerns.

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