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HELPING AGENCIES MEET GOALS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Research offers recommendations for public transit agencies to capture meaningful performance measures about their social media use.

The Issue

Revolutionary changes have occurred in the communications landscape, and there has been a rapid diffusion of social media use as a means of communicating transit information to the public. Significant resources are being directed to the use of social media in communication, yet little effort exists that measures the impacts of these popular vehicles of communication. Rarely studied is the role of social media in achieving the overarching goals of advancing the mission of transit agencies through increasing recruitment and retention of transit riders; increasing resources and customer satisfaction; addressing system issues, performance efficiency and effectiveness; and improving employee productivity and morale.

There is a need to measure the impacts of social media and account for the cost effectiveness of its wide use as a means of communication in public transit agencies. This project is designed to extend understanding about whether investments in social media tools effectively achieve their intended purposes through both quantitative and qualitative performance measures.

The Research

Jenny Liu of Portland State University led this NITC research project to better understand recent trends in social media usage in public transit agencies, and to develop a framework for evaluating its effectiveness. The report, "Measuring the Impacts of Social Media on Advancing Public Transit," offers a performance metric framework that measures social media reach, insights, engagement and efficiency. Liu and co-investigator (Jeff) Xuegang Ban of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute sought to examine which agencies use what

THE ISSUE

Significant resources are devoted to the use of social media by transit agencies, but there is little evidence as to how this impacts the goals of the agencies in advancing public transit.

THE RESEARCH

This research sought to measure how social media impacts agency goals like:

- Recruiting and retaining more transit riders;
- Increasing resources and customer satisfaction;
- Addressing system performance efficiency.

IMPLICATIONS

This research recommends a performance metric framework that measures social media reach, insights, engagement and efficiency.

Photo: Woman using cell phone while waiting for the MAX train in Portland, Oregon

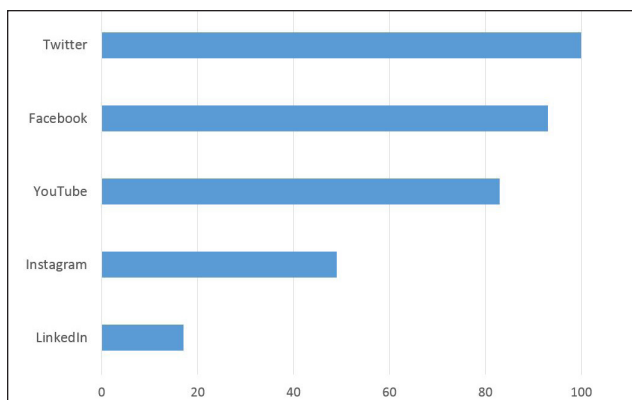
kind of social media programs for what purposes, and how they measure and evaluate their programs. They also wanted to explore the types of performance measures that could be valuable in assessing whether investments in social media tools effectively achieve their intended purposes.

A survey of 27 public transportation providers across the country found that although 94% of those surveyed agencies used some form of social media, only 28% had a social media plan or strategy prior to implementation. In surveying agencies, the researchers found that most agencies currently measure social media effectiveness through built-in metrics such as the number of friends and followers or “likes,” or by using third-party applications such as Google analytics. The study found that agencies place higher value on less-frequently used metrics that measure perceptions, sentiments and overall satisfaction.

Through this survey, the researchers gained a better understanding of the types of communications and messages that are sent through social media, as well as the types of measurements that are currently used and the types that could be potentially valuable for the agencies. They also conducted a case study assessment of public websites of top transit agencies to gauge their social media presence. They paid attention to available policy descriptions and documentation, incorporation with other agency plans (such as strategic or communications plans), and performance measures.

Implications

The survey results showed that current social media performance metrics, for most transit agencies, focus on tracking the number of subscribers and shares. While most transit agencies indicate goals of increasing ridership and building livable communities through social media engagement, it is clear that the current set of performance measures does not directly correspond to



Major Use of Social Media Platforms

All responding public transit agencies use social media. Nearly all use multiple platforms, with Twitter, Facebook and YouTube being the most common. 100% of the agencies surveyed use Twitter.

these goals. The researchers recommend a social media performance metric framework that measures reach, insights, engagement and efficiency. “Reach” mainly measures the number of people who are engaged or who are interacting with the agency via social media programs. The “Insights” metric emphasizes consumer or community perception: beyond simply collecting subscriber and re-post numbers, this metric focuses more on measuring the quality of social media messages and feedback loops. “Engagement” measures the culminating outcomes that link to actions, such as ridership increase, activity participation, and other measures that are central to transit agency missions and goals. Finally, “Efficiency” focuses on the cost-effectiveness aspect of social media usage, evaluating the return on investment for the benefits achieved.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Measuring the Impacts of Social Media on Advancing Public Transit

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MORE INFORMATION
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