Local Government Agencies Discovering Benefits of Online Social Networks

By: George D. Martin

Teenagers and techies are not the only people taking advantage of the benefits of social networking, according to a new study. Local governments across the country are also seeking to make connections, especially with their own citizens, via Facebook, Twitter and other social networking websites.

The study found that most local government agencies use social network websites to relay information to the public and attract participation from citizens. The results mirror those from a 2010 report by the Human Capital Institute (HCI) that concluded that among all levels of government, municipalities "lead the way in using social networking tools in providing service to the public."

Sponsored by the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE) and conducted by the Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Department of Public Administration, the project surveyed 902 managers from municipalities ranging in population from 25,000 to 250,000 in 49 states.

Local government agencies are most adept at using social networking to interact with citizens, with 51% of those surveyed responding that their government uses such internet sites to facilitate participation of constituents. The survey defined participation as "the process in which citizens and external stakeholders take part in agency decisions."

According to the UIC study, most municipalities also use social networking to relay information to the public. While nearly 30% of respondents claim their government never uses social networking for public information disclosure, the remainder answered that their organization does so at some level, with 16% saying this occurred "very often." The data echo the conclusions of HCI's 2010 report, which in one example described county governments in Texas that "have started their own Facebook and Twitter sites to make it easier for the public to access important information, such as that provided by the emergency management offices."
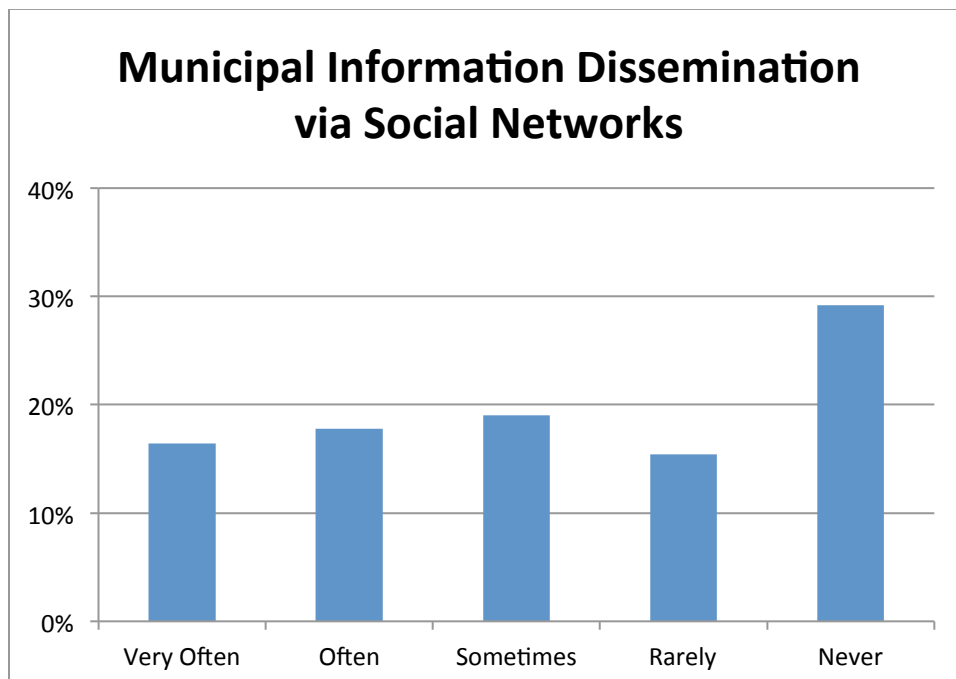
Yet the study results also raise concerns that social network websites are increasing online government-citizen interaction at the expense of traditional face-to-face engagement. While a majority of local government agencies use social networking for information and participation purposes, only one in three respondents said their organization use Twitter and Facebook to announce open public meetings.

Social network sites can certainly streamline the administration of government services to the benefit of both citizens and municipal budgets, but they could also be eliminating personal bonds of understanding that often come along with face-to-face interaction between citizens and public employees. In the October 2009 issue of *Public Management* magazine, Pamela Weaver Antil chronicled the rise of social networking in local government and the corresponding drop in face-to-face interaction: "Many public administrators have seen a decline in 'live and in person' participation at public meetings, focus groups, or other venues where we seek the public's input on important topics related to budget, planning, and public safety."

This national survey shows that local government agencies are clearly embracing the digital age, but this might be at the expense of longstanding bonds with citizens.

Sources:

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