

# Relationships Matter: Social Media and Internet Marketing for Blue Box P&E Programs

Community Blue Box Promotion and Education (P&E) programs can be a challenge. With so much information out there, it can be easy for your audience to “tune out” your message. Budget, specifically the lack of, can also reduce the effectiveness of your efforts as you try and stretch your P&E dollars to reach as many people as possible. Incorporating a strong social media presence supported by an attractive, informative and easy-to-use website is an important part of making the most of your investment and reaching your target audience in a new, fresh way.

## The “New” Internet – What it Means for You

In the “new” internet (Web 2.0), **relationships are king**. In the old, Web 1.0 world, information was published and read much like a digital version of a newspaper. Conversation was a one-way street from writer (you) to reader (residents). In the Web 2.0 world, the conversation becomes two-way. Everyone can now be both a reader and a writer as they actively communicate with each other, create and share new information, and combine that information in new and exciting ways. What does that mean for your P&E program? It means you have to be prepared to engage with your audience, communicate with them, listen to what they have to say and respond to them in order to get your message heard. Participating in the conversation is the key to turning your residents into partners and active participants in your programs.

## Your P&E Website: The Foundation for Online Engagement

An informative and engaging website is essential to a successful online P&E strategy. Your website is the backbone of your online strategy; providing great content for other social media which will, in turn, encourage people to visit your website. With that in mind, your website should be designed to create a positive experience for your users that encourages them to participate in the conversation with you.

Keep the following tips in mind to make sure your website delivers the punch your P&E program needs:

**Aim for efficiency.** You don’t have a lot of time to catch your audience’s attention and convince them to stay on the page. A large website with many sub-pages overloaded with text will turn off visitors and encourage them to leave the site rather than read your information.

Your site should focus on getting the information your audience needs in as tidy a package as possible. Use short sentences and paragraphs to get your message across. Minimize the amount of pages necessary to convey your information to the public and reduce the number of sub-pages on your website.

**Be user-friendly.** Using your website should be a simple, enjoyable experience for stakeholders. Make it easy for your visitors to know where they are on the site and how they can move to other areas quickly

and easily. The more work you make visitors to your site do to get the information they want, the less time they're likely to spend on your site and the less likely they are to return.

**Be consistent.** Make sure the copy and design of your website are consistent across all pages. Because people tend to scan websites rather than read them, carefully consider the amount of text you use, breaking up large blocks of text with subject headings. The look and feel of your P & E website should be consistent with your existing municipal website.

**Give visitors a reason to visit.** Provide your audience with timely information that is updated regularly. If you want them to keep coming back, you need to give them a compelling reason why your website should be a recurring stop for them online.

The best way to know what information your audience wants is to ask them. It doesn't take an expensive, time-consuming survey to decipher the information your visitors want – you can use social media to ask residents what kind of information they want, how they want to receive it and then give it to them.

**Get connected.** Your website needs to connect your users to the other communications channels you operate. Instead of relying on your target audience to stumble upon your other means of communication, make them easy to find. Post links to your Twitter feed and Facebook group on your P&E website and vice versa.

But don't stop there. Educate visitors on what kind of information they can expect to get from each of your feeds (e.g., Join our Facebook group for tips on reducing your household's solid waste). You can help your visitors by posting this information directly to your site (e.g., Showing your Twitter feed on the main page of your site).

## **Why Use Social Media for P&E?**

A strong social media presence is an important complement to your P&E website. Ensuring you have a strong online presence allows you to:

**Build credibility.** By cutting through the marketing clutter and communicating directly with current and potential program users, you can build credibility and engage with your residents. The name of the game is having real conversations which will demonstrate your expertise and get your message out.

**Get more bang for your buck.** Social media tools allow you to magnify your message without increasing your budget in resources. By producing compelling, useful information, your audience will be more likely to repeat your message to their connections both online and in person.

**Reach the unreachable.** The most popular social media sites have hundreds of millions of members; including your audience. That's a huge base of people, many of whom aren't interested in or accessible by traditional communication channels. Using social media is a great way to tap into them.

**Monitor the conversation.** You can use these tools to listen what's being said, good and bad, about your P&E program(s)/activities. There's a lot of information out there and it can be valuable. By doing a quick search of sites like Facebook and Twitter every few days or on a weekly basis, you can stay aware of what's happening out there and what is being said about your recycling program.

**Put out the small fires before they grow.** The dark side of social media is the prevalence of negative, damaging and outright wrong information posted online. Dealing with comments posted online in a transparent way shows you're open to criticism and willing to work with your stakeholders to address their concerns.

**Be speedy.** Events that impact your programs can happen in a hurry (e.g. a snow storm forces a collection delay) and a lack of information can lead to frustration for both you and your audience. Social media helps you get your audience the information they need when they need it.

### **Choosing the Right Social Media Tool for the Job**

Not all social media tools are created equally. There's a right time and a right place for each. Choosing the right social media is just as important as choosing the right traditional marketing tool. Here are four highly useful social media tools that you should familiarize yourself with and possibly incorporate into your P&E mix:

**Facebook** – Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) is a massive social network. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide use the site every day to connect with people they know. The site powers millions of daily opportunities to share videos, pictures and links. Organizations, agencies and government groups are using Facebook to engage with their constituent groups and communicate with them on a more regular, direct basis. More information on how to get started using Facebook can be found here (<http://www.facebook.com/facebook>).

It is important to understand that creating a Facebook presence for your program is not the same as a personal profile. You can support your P&E program by creating a dedicated Facebook group or fan page (for an example, see: <http://www.facebook.com/cityofguelph>) that acts as a central clearinghouse for information and conversations about the program. In general when deciding whether to create a fan page or a group consider:

- Facebook groups are great for organizing on a personal level and for smaller scale interaction around a cause.
- Facebook pages are most typically used by corporations, brands, etc. to interact with their fans or customers without having them connected to a personal account, and have a need to exceed Facebook's 5,000 friend cap.

Both may be useful to you as you promote your P&E efforts. You may wish to have a fan page that provides general information to a wide list of users and a group that can collect personal information and facilitate communication.

Beyond simply posting information of your own, your job is to facilitate the conversations and connections necessary to build a community of users around your program. When using the site, the tone of your message is important. Facebook has evolved as a highly social and informal medium. As a result, your communication should reflect this reality. Use Facebook to draw out the personal side of your program. Encourage your target market to share their own stories, tips and comments about your P&E efforts. You can also use Facebook to provide updates on changes to your program and direct users to find more information through a link to your P&E website.

Using Facebook will allow you to take advantage of the site's multimedia capabilities. Any useful or interesting videos and photos produced by your program or uncovered through your best practice research can be shared to your stakeholders without placing additional demands on your information infrastructure. This is a great opportunity for residents to share (links and other interesting information) with program staff and other residents.

**Twitter** – Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) is a microblog that allows users to post news, commentary and links in short, 140-character “tweets”. The short, quick messages have become an immensely popular method of connecting people directly with other users, companies and municipalities.

The rapid-fire nature of Twitter is ideally suited for keeping your residents aware of up-to-the-minute news regarding your program, especially where producing a more formal marketing communication is not practical or timely. You can use Twitter to get people engaged by posting program updates, bits of news, and links to other information users may find useful, asking questions, and starting conversations.

Twitter has the capability to foster one-to-one communication directly with your audience. It is important to note that not all of this communication will be positive. It is helpful to prepare a Twitter “rules of engagement” document (Here's the Province of Nova Scotia's employee guidelines: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/cns/guidelines-employee-social-media.asp>) in advance to articulate to employees how to deal with negative tweets. By communicating transparently on Twitter, you can build significant credibility for your program.

Be aware, that the dynamic of Twitter is fast-paced. It is not uncommon for Twitter users to post a large number of posts a day and receiving timely responses to their postings. If you are planning on incorporating Twitter into your P&E program, plan to check it several times a day to ensure you are remaining relevant. If you are planning to engage in Twitter, be prepared to Tweet at least once (if not a few times) per day. If your program doesn't generate enough information to keep you active on Twitter, consider partnering with other, related groups in your municipality to keep a consistent stream of information. In order to maintain consistency, a clear voice and a regular presence, it may be useful to designate one individual in your organization as your “Tweeter”.

**Blogs** – Blogs ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com), for example) are online journals where individuals, organizations or companies can post news, commentary on events or other material such as images, videos and music. The value of blogs to your P&E efforts is as an avenue for more substantial (but still timely) pieces of information that you can post to both your Facebook group and your Twitter feed. This means you can write larger pieces with more content than either of the other two mediums.

A corporate blog is also a valuable tool in keeping your website fresh and current and your visitors coming back. Copy on your website tends to stay the same over time and visitors tend to fall off if no new content is added. A blog on the program updated weekly or several times per week can help keep users coming back.

Remember, don't treat your blog like an online press release tool. Blogs should provide new information for the users that engage them. Your blog posts should be more than just information – take a side, have an argument or seek input. Aim at writing blogs that ask the reader to participate by sharing their comments or asking questions.

**LinkedIn** – LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)) is a similar service to Facebook except with a business slant. The site is used to post resumes, work experience and other credentials and connect with colleagues and program users. The site will allow you to tap into a community of professionals from around the world, share best practices with them and find consultants, new employees and subject matter experts.

While not technically a communication channel with your target market, LinkedIn can be an important link between your key P&E personnel and others in the field. Management and other key members should devote time on this site to building key relationships with experts in similar fields from other areas. These individuals can build credibility for themselves and your program by participating in subject matter discussions and providing their insights into ongoing topics on discussion in relevant groups. Remember, keep it professional, personal links and vacation pictures are for more personal forms of social media.

## Using Internet Marketing and Social Media Wisely

Because most online tools are free to use and quick and easy to set up, there's a tendency to underestimate the time and effort required to build an online presence that enhances your existing P&E program. Following these simple tips will help you get the most out of your online activity:

**Be committed.** Doing online engagement right requires an investment of time and effort. Users on sites like Facebook, Twitter and the blogosphere are used to frequent communication and speedy responses to their questions and comments. Be prepared to dedicate staff time on a daily and week-to-week basis to ensure that you are keeping up your end of the bargain. Remember, a poorly or seldom updated presence is just as bad as not having one at all.

**Be strategic.** What are you trying to accomplish with your communication efforts? Your first step, like any other marketing plan, is to decide on what you want to accomplish by using social media (awareness, changing behaviour, increasing participation) for your program and how you will measure success (increase in visits to your websites, X conversations per month of Facebook, increase in collection rates, etc.). It will be important to decide who will be in charge of crafting and deploying your online messaging, as well as who will be in charge of monitoring activity and responding to comments

and questions. Putting together a social media policy is a great way to keep your employees on the same page.

**Be transparent.** A large part of having an online presence is taking the good with the bad. Embrace negative comments and remember that they are an opportunity to enter the discussion. Acknowledging the comments and documenting the steps you take to address them shows the human side of your organization and demonstrates your willingness to go the extra mile to make it right.

**Be useful.** Relevancy is king. Make sure the information you publish is interesting and useful to your audience. The closer you come to these two goals, the better your audience will respond and, in turn, rebroadcast your information to the larger community; your followers pass the information to their followers who pass the information to their followers and so on, creating the potential for an exponential increase in the reach of your message.

**Be thoughtful.** Using social media has both opportunities and challenges. But remember, don't let fear of potential challenges limit your ability to connect with your audience. Know the potential pitfalls, educate your staff and keep track of your social media program. If you are open and honest (and putting forth the effort) most of your audience will forgive your growing pains.