



# A social media success framework for municipalities



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The ideal scenario: your municipality's social media marketing efforts produce positive, tangible outcomes while minimizing risk.

The reality: it's a pretty tall order in today's digital first world where staff are stretched, budgets are lean, and platforms keep evolving.

The story typically heard from directors of communication is that social media was launched years ago with one or two corporate social media channels. It was sustainable at first, but it became more difficult to manage as individual departments opened their own social channels with their own goals, content, and branding. If this scenario sounds familiar, don't worry, you're not alone.

Every communication and marketing leader wants to ensure their team's efforts are supporting departmental objectives and, ultimately, their city's strategic plan. However, if two or more years have passed since the last social media audit, then it's possible that what the team originally planned to do, and what they're actually doing, may be out of sync.

## Case Study: Two-Way Communication in Mississauga

The City of Mississauga uses social media to enhance two-way communications efforts with residents, improve transparency, and ultimately to improve residents' knowledge of municipal initiatives, services, and policy decisions.

"We were trendsetters when we opened our first social media account back in 2009. Fast forward a decade later and the number of accounts has grown to more than 30 across 15 departments," says Ivana Di Millo, director strategic communications, City

of Mississauga. "In pursuit of continuous improvement, we conducted an independent audit to obtain an understanding of where the city currently stands within the social media landscape and to identify opportunities to advance its current social media practices."

In a world where communication and marketing must demonstrate their value each day, it's imperative that teams maximize results and minimize corporate risk.

## Six Steps to Social Media Success

The Social Media Success Framework is borne out of real-world situations – social media audits conducted with government, associations, and corporations. Key themes and common challenges have been distilled and insights categorized into the following critical components, which are at the heart of successful social media strategies.

So, let's start where every smart communication plan should: with strategy.

### 1. Strategy

It's no surprise that teams strive to implement social media in a strategic and planned way, because it saves time and resources while increasing the benefit to stakeholders – a win-win scenario. Unfortunately, social media planning often falls into the "important but not urgent" category, especially when teams are operating at maximum capacity in a reactive rather than proactive environment.

Social media's low barrier to entry shouldn't demote its role as a key communication channel. Social media may be free, but it's "free like a free puppy." It may be

free to open an account, but you still need to feed, maintain, and nurture it.

Following a recognized formula for communication and marketing planning from associations such as the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) or the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) is recommended, but you can start immediately by simply asking some pertinent questions. The following three questions can be used to assess where you are with social media strategic planning:

- Are S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound) objectives in place for social media accounts and campaigns?
- Is our social media strategy documented, approved, and shared with and understood by staff?
- Is social media integrated into our broader communication and marketing initiatives?

If you only have time to ask one question, ask about the S.M.A.R.T. objectives, as this is often the weakest link in the chain, but can significantly change the outcome. Staff are rarely formally taught how to develop S.M.A.R.T. objectives, yet they impact everything from implementation to evaluation.

## 2. Audience

Now that we have refined our strategy, we need to clearly describe our target audience. Establishing the target audience will help determine if and where they reside on social media and what text and images will resonate. In the context of municipal communication, it means going deeper than simply defining the audience as “residents.”

The City of Markham recently launched Your Voice Markham, the city’s online engagement platform that empowers residents, partners, and businesses to actively participate in shaping its future. Social media plays a big part in promoting new initiatives.

“As Canada’s most diverse city, producing social content that is aligned to our detailed audience personas maximizes engagement with the people who matter most,” says Andrea Berry, senior manager, corporate communications and community engagement, City of Markham. “Having a clear understanding of the overlap between our key messages and our audience’s needs helps

our lean team create high-performing content.”

When defining your target audience, ask yourself these three questions:

- Are your target audience insights based on formal or informal research? (Hint: ideally, use both.)
- Do audience characteristics go beyond basic demographics and include psychographics, attitudes, preferences, and motivations?
- Are target audiences represented by detailed personas?

If your team intimately understands the target audience, it will be easier to produce and curate content that nourishes and serves – all within your budget and time allocation.

## 3. Content

You’ve probably heard the expression “content is king.” When it comes to social media, “consumption is king” (coined by author Michael Port) is more accurate. This subtle difference shifts the focus from simply creating and distributing content to an audience-centric mindset of whether the content is resonating with your audience. Value for residents and businesses – and the municipality – is not derived from creating content (output), but rather from the audience understanding it and taking the desired action (outcome). With this in mind, let’s look at the top three questions to evaluate your social media content:

- Are audience personas the basis for content creation?
- What content performs best, and why? (Hint: benchmark against past performance.)
- Does content reflect best practices for driving engagement?

Answering these three fundamental questions helps refocus content creation and curation efforts so that audience insights and needs, rather than just corporate key messages, drive content decisions.

## 4. Community

Social media shouldn’t be considered a broadcasting tool – it is a means of building community through transparent, two-way dialogue with residents and businesses. Despite their efforts, teams are often faced with two challenges that prevent them from achieving this success:

- Pressure to produce a constant stream of content to promote programs and

announce news, leaving no time left to monitor and listen for conversations worthy of participation.

- Decline of organic reach, requiring teams to embrace paid advertising. Hoping to transform a complex advertising process by simply clicking one “promote” or “boost” button may be easy, but it’s not a strategy. Social allows you to target your audience like never before, but achieving a high-performing campaign is an involved process and requires significant understanding of the advertising platform.

When planning to improve your online social engagement, consider these three questions:

- Is listening in place and are insights informing content strategy?
- Is two-way communication and responsiveness the goal for social posts?
- Are paid campaigns configured correctly and yielding the maximum positive outcome?

## 5. Evaluation

Demonstrating your return on investment by tying back results to the stated communication and marketing objectives is the right process, but the value is contingent on what is being measured. Plan for success by including these three questions to help unearth more value in your evaluation process:

- Is continuous improvement fuelled by measurement and evaluation?
- Are key performance indicators appropriate – outcomes versus outputs?
- Is the measurement framework consistent across the organization?

Methodically moving through the process of measuring, evaluating, and then extracting the right insights from the data to create a report are critical for future social success.

## 6. Operations & governance

The last component of successful and sustainable social media in your municipality is operations and governance. The premise is that teams need to operate efficiently but also minimize human error and risk. But, because of the emphasis to keep up with the fast pace of social media, the policies, guidelines, and playbooks that set expectations and govern staff behaviour often quickly become outdated. Policies need to be established,

shared, and understood for all staff to operate with the same goals and assumptions. Even developing simple policies around limiting permissions to accounts, password security, and content creation and approvals can mitigate some of the most common risks.

### **Bring Focus to Social Media**

Although each one of these components in the Social Media Success Framework could be a week-long course, answering the critical questions in each area will help bring new focus to your municipality's social media efforts.

Since you're already spending budget on social media, you might as well ensure the resources are achieving the greatest impact possible with the least amount of risk. Now is the time – before a crisis occurs – to conduct an audit. **MW**

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