# Rural Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) Toolkit

## Social Media

**TTI 5**



Photo: Courtesy of National Center for Rural Road Safety

**Description:** Social media includes interactive websites and mobile applications through which users interact with each other, at a personal or professional level, to share information, ideas, stories, opinions, and pictures/videos. Social media has grown incredibly fast and now influences the day-to-day life of millions of people, having been adopted by individuals, groups, private and public-sector companies and agencies.  Examples of social media include: blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Periscope and YouTube. Social media can be used by transportation agencies to engage the public and provide real-time traffic updates and transit delays, information on upcoming road closures, and updates on construction or planning projects.

Social media can be used to market social norming campaigns which promote positive messages about healthy behaviors that are common among a group of people. Research has shown that individuals tend to overestimate the number of their peers who engage in high-risk behaviors and underestimate healthy and positive behaviors. Social norming works to correct misconceptions by providing accurate information on the numbers of people who engage in healthy behaviors and has been used in coordination with social media to market the actual prevalence of drinking and driving in the state of Montana. For more information about this study, click here.

| Rural Transportation Critical Needs | Issues Addressed | Strategies Achieved |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ Crash Countermeasures | ☑ Pre-trip Information | ☑ Road User |
| ☐ Emergency Services | ☑ En-route Information | ☐ Road |
| ☐ Operations & Maintenance | ☑ Public Data Collection | ☐ Vehicle |
| ☑ Rural Transit & Mobility | ☑ Public's Ability to Communicate to Transportation Agency or Emergency Services | ☐ Safety Culture |
| ☑ Surface Transportation & Weather | | ☐ Engineering |
| ☑ Tourism & Travel Information | | ☐ Emergency Response |
| ☑ Traffic Management | | ☐ Enforcement |
| | | ☑ Education |

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## Applicability

- Social media is a low-cost option for agencies that want to provide and receive information quickly to/from a large number of people. Social media allows the public to feel connected even in the most rural of locations and can be used to provide safety information and real-time updates for traffic incidents, dangerous travel conditions, transit service updates, construction project updates, and information about upcoming events and alternative routes to use.

## Partnerships

- Applications benefit from collaboration among numerous agencies, which may include:
  - Departments of Transportation (Federal, State, Local)
  - Law Enforcement
  - First Responders
  - Transit Agencies

## Key Components

- Smartphone or Computer
- Trained Personnel
- Information Collection
- Company Branding

## Examples of Implementation

- **North Central Regional Transit District – New Mexico**

North Central Regional Transit District in New Mexico (Santa Fe, Taos and Española) maintains both a Facebook page and a Twitter feed to provide riders with route updates.

- **Montana Department of Transportation (MDT)**

MDT maintains a Facebook page where it shares information on upcoming traffic safety campaigns and project updates, and engages public feedback. MDT also maintains a Twitter feed that updates users on traffic conditions and incidents all across the state of Montana.

- **Alaska Department of Transportation**

The Alaska Department of Transportation maintains an Instagram page where it shares photos to highlight its employees and to provide information on project updates.

## Useful Tip

Already have social media? Some agencies use different types of social media for different purposes. For instance, in Massachusetts, the state police use their Twitter feed to provide real-time updates of crashes in the state; however, they use their Facebook for stories that help the public relate to the state police officers as people. For example, Facebook has focused on personal interest stories, such as an officer sharing lunch with a homeless man or providing information about one of the canines. Another idea is to use social media to improve the safety culture in your area, such as when the MA State Police posted a picture to Twitter of an officer putting on his seat belt before driving and asking the public to post their own photos.

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## Implementation Considerations (General)

- An agency should consider developing social media guidelines and performance measures to determine the value of these tools. These guidelines should include information on who may access the company social media sites and what they may post.
- When selecting a specific social media platform, agencies should consider what type of information they wish to disseminate to the public. Facebook can be used for blogging, photos, and video. Twitter is for microblogging, photos, and video. Instagram and Snapchat are used to share photos and videos. YouTube is used to share video. Periscope is used to share livestreaming video.
- An agency must consider its audience and only post information that would be relevant or it will be ignored.
- An agency may also want to consider how to engage the public. Options include providing a pre-scripted, automatic response with information on how to contact the agency for further information, or taking the time to provide a unique response to each question or comment.

## Implementation Considerations (Pro)

- Social media is widely used.
- It is the most common form of communication for Millennials and Generation X.
- Sites may be accessed by both a computer and a mobile phone.
- Social media can expand relationship with the public.
- It facilitates direct communication with the public.
- Some social media tools offer real-time information to travelers.
- Agencies can increase public participation/feedback.
- Agencies can customize information for specific audiences.
- Disseminating information is less expensive than using traditional media.
- Sharing information (or re-tweeting) can create relationships among local agencies.

## Implementation Considerations (Con)

- Usage may require additional staff.
- Sites need to be continuously updated for information to be relevant.
- Agencies need to consider what types of information and photographs get posted.
- Agencies need to consider how to respond to public criticism.
- Use of social media while driving is an issue for public safety.
- Usage may increase an agency's exposure to cyber security threats.

## Opportunities for Future Expansion

An agency may wish to use traditional media (print/TV advertising) to promote social media. In the future, connected vehicles and social media can be married to provide each other with additional information. For example, a connected vehicle could automatically update an agency's social media about a crash that occurred or social media can be used to provide information to drivers via in-vehicle systems such as a radio.

## Additional Resources

- TCRP Synthesis 99 – *Uses of Social Media in Public Transportation*, found here: http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_syn_99.pdf
- Washington State Department of Transportation: *An Employee Guide to Social Media Best Practices*, found here: http://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/DOT_SocialMediaPolicy_2014.pdf
- *Routes to New Networks: A Guide to Social Media for the Public Transportation Industry*, found here: http://www.nctr.usf.edu/pdf/77810guidebook.pdf
- *Social Media Use by State Departments of Transportation and Other Government Agencies*, found here: https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/36590
- USDOT Intelligent Transportation Systems Joint Program Office, *Next Generation Traveler Information – Agency Social Media Webinar Recording*, found here: https://www.pcb.its.dot.gov/t3/s160928_Next_Generation_Traveler_Information_Agency_Social_Media.aspx
- *Communications Guide for State Departments of Transportation*, found here: https://fundingfinance.transportation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/11/Communications-Guide-for-State-DOTs-NCHRP-2017.pdf

## Cost Range

*(Cost/financial information, where noted, is based on 2016 dollars (unless otherwise specified). Cost/financial information is estimated, and will vary based on size and scope of project, number of units, etc. In general, capital costs include initial purchase costs of hardware, software, and other required equipment. Maintenance and operations costs include staff time to operate, monitor and maintain systems; data collection; system upgrades; evaluation; etc.)*

**Capital Costs:** Total capital costs for this tool are low (less than $50,000). Social media sites are free but agencies need to consider optional costs that enhance presence, such as eliminating advertising and boosting visibility on followers' feeds.

**Operations Costs:** Total operations and maintenance costs are estimated as ranging from low (less than $50,000) to medium ($50,000 to $100,000). They include staffing time and resources to create and maintain social media. These costs can vary greatly depending on the amount of time and effort devoted to creating the initial site, how often new information is posted, and strategies used to engage followers.

**National Center for Rural Road Safety**

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