

Finding Your Voice: Social Media in Government

Research Brief



Executive Summary

Not long ago, it would have struck many agencies as strange to talk about social media as a strategic asset.

When agencies first began posting on social, they tended to see it as just one of numerous communications channels through which they could push out press releases and other information.

Over the last several years, though, agencies have come to realize that social media, if approached as a strategic initiative, can play a vital role in advancing their mission. **By enabling them to engage with constituents in ways never before possible, social can help agencies cultivate the trust of their constituents, deliver more effective services and gain new insights into the needs of the communities they serve.**

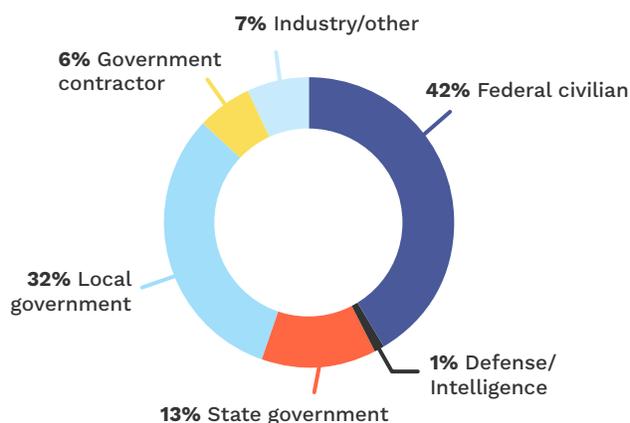
Agencies have realized that their constituents now demand such engagement. This shift became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when, **for many people, social media was the first place they looked for information. If agencies wanted to reach them, social media was a must.**

To learn more about the current state of social media in government, GovLoop partnered with Hootsuite, a social media platform provider, to survey 289 federal, state and local government employees (see Figure 1). GovLoop and Hootsuite previously collaborated on a similar survey in 2018, and this report compares both results on key points, and explores issues that have taken on increased importance in the intervening years.

The report also features insights from Bar Asherov, Account Director at Hootsuite, who shared ways agencies can strengthen their social media strategies.



FIGURE 1: I work for...



Agencies Find Their Voice Online

Very few, if any, organizations have a mission as large, complex and public-facing as the government. Add to that mix a diverse makeup of constituents — with different needs and rising expectations — and you can quickly see the conundrum agencies face.

But those that are forward-thinking have found ways to adapt their strategies to meet evolving demands. Specifically, they're putting more stock in social media, recognizing the growing range of important and sometimes even life-saving use cases for the technology.

Before we dive into the specifics, there are some common themes that emerged from our survey.

Private sector companies aren't the only ones concerned about their brand and its perception. Nearly 90% of respondents said their agency uses social media to strengthen its brand with constituents (see Figures 2). These agencies understand that building recognition and trust as a reliable source for information and services has long-term benefits — in a time of crisis, social media can become the default channel for critical

FIGURE 2a: Please rate the importance of the following goals to your organization's social media activity. (Scale of 1-5, 5 being very important, 1 being not at all)

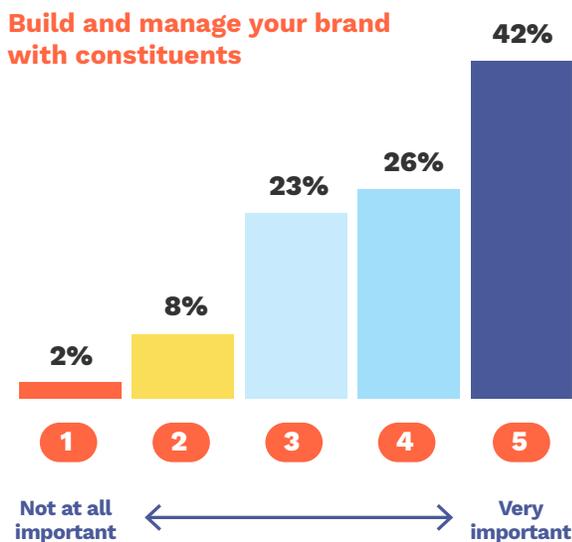
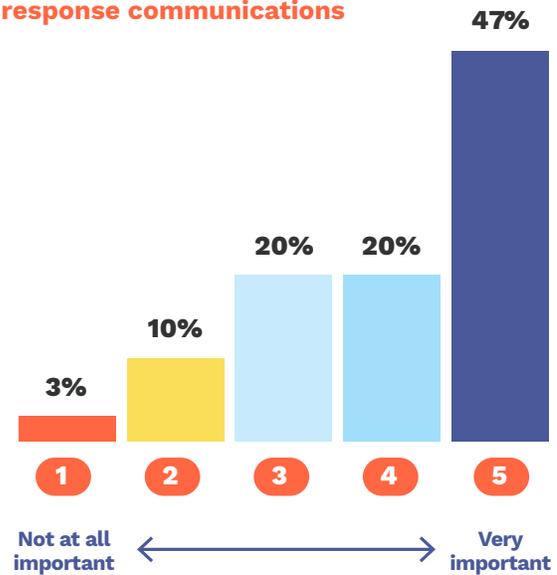


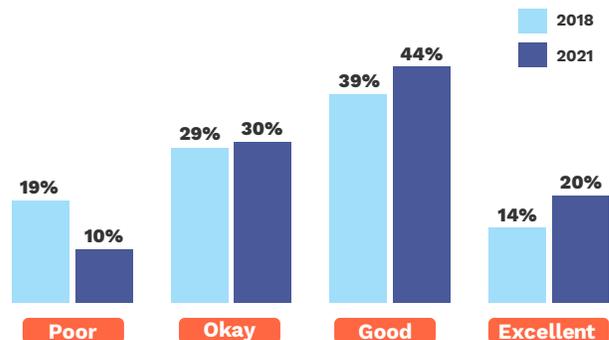
FIGURE 2b: Manage critical response communications



information and actions that need to be taken. This use case was widely recognized by our survey respondents, with more than 65% saying social media was very important or important for critical response communications.

Overall, most respondents rated their agency's use of social media as good (44%), with 20% rating it as excellent (see Figure 3). Only 10% said social media usage was poor at their agency, which is a significant decrease from 19% in 2018.

FIGURE 3: How would you rate your agency's use of social media?



Taking a Proactive Approach to Social

Agencies are tapping into the power and versatility of social media. In an effort to empower constituents with timely updates and accurate information, they're using it to address and respond to important issues, from the coronavirus pandemic to everyday citizen services.

The goal is always to meet the needs of the public and drive particular outcomes, but success is tough to gauge based on likes and retweets alone. While these types of engagement metrics are widely used and have their place, agencies are also shifting their sights to richer data points to truly understand the impact of social.

They want to know what effect social has on mission results, and questions like "Can I measure the impact of things that I'm doing on social media and whether they are leading to actions and outcomes somewhere else in the digital sphere?" are common, said Asherov.

Let's say you want to cut costs by encouraging more constituents to renew their driver's license online rather than coming into the local office. Even if the online option isn't necessarily new, it's still necessary to regularly communicate its availability.

"If you don't communicate that, and constantly have that channel open, you can't connect," Asherov said. Rather than viewing a social post about license renewals online as a separate action from driving traffic to the website, start viewing them as an integrated effort.

And communications don't have to be stuffy just because they're coming from an official government account. New Jersey is a great example of humanizing an agency's voice.

It's not just outbound social media messages that are being prioritized. There's also an uptick in social listening, Asherov said. "Social listening is more than just social engagement. It's really about understanding what people are saying about you as an agency, you as an elected official."



Social listening can help you gain near real-time feedback from the public and avoid PR landmines. You don't have to wait until conversations bubble up from Reddit to other social channels and then to national news outlets. Instead, you can actively listen and catch issues early based on social media chatter, giving you the opportunity to address potential headaches before they gain traction and go viral.

Using Social Media to Advance the Mission

Regardless of your agency's mission, the goal is the same: Provide something to the people you serve, such as a service or benefit. But what if people don't know how to receive that benefit, which website to visit or what number to call? How can your agency proactively share that information with those who need it the most?

In this area, social media is a game-changer. Rather than waiting for people to find services, agencies are proactively using social media channels to disseminate information. That information can then be re-shared across networks and to people an agency otherwise would not have made contact with.



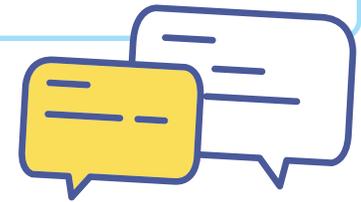
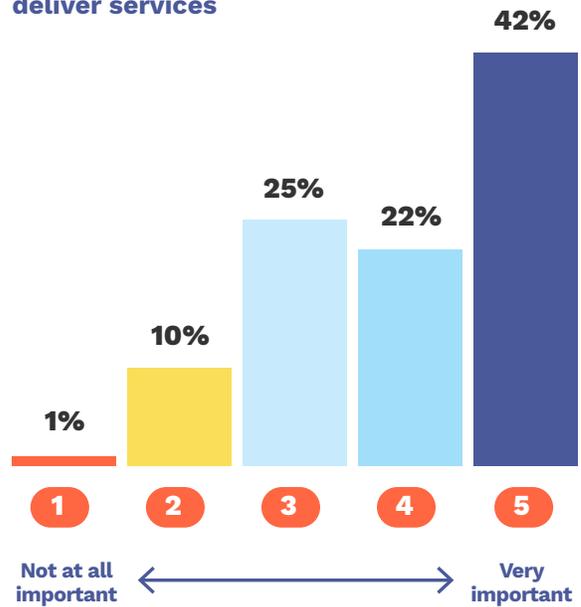
In our survey, more than 60% of respondents said that engaging citizens and delivering services is a very important part of their social media strategy (see Figure 4).

Today, government agencies have options, and they can use an expanded toolkit to reimagine constituent engagement and service. Interactions don't always have to be transactional and one on one. With the right tools, agency representatives can engage with multiple individuals at the same time.

When you think about communicating across government, this ability to reach the masses is critical for cutting through misinformation. Addressing false and inaccurate information has been a targeted focus for government agencies over the past few years, especially in the midst of COVID-19 response efforts and the vaccination rollout.

Agencies don't have to respond to every troll or negative comment — rather, they have the power to shape the narrative, provide clarity and break down issues of mistrust between the public and government.

FIGURE 4: Engage citizens and deliver services



Three ways government social media strategies will continue to evolve:



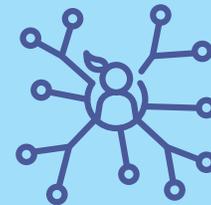
1. Better integration.

As agencies continue to evolve their social media strategies, expect to see that work increasingly integrated with customer service efforts. The goal will be to create opportunities across multiple departments to humanize interactions with the public, proactively communicate and share information more effectively.



2. Citizens compelled to act.

Often, agencies aren't just looking to provide information: They need constituents to take action. This won't happen through dry, official content but through ongoing conversations that enhance government-public relationships.



3. Agencywide collaboration.

To truly maximize the value of social media, agencies need to prioritize the coordination of efforts across departments and offices. One respondent put it this way: "We do not use social media as an organizationwide tool. Each department is left to its own devices to post and share content."

Social Media Security Tips

Just as social media can help agencies cultivate the trust of their constituents, a security incident on social can undermine that trust. Potential threats include misinformation, spam comments, imposter accounts and scams targeting constituents (see Figure 5).

Hootsuite recommends the following tips to mitigate the risks:

1. Create a social media policy.

A social media policy, developed and enforced from the top down, will help protect you from both security threats and PR trouble. Keep it simple and easy to follow, with key elements like:

- Guidelines that explain how to talk about your agency on social
- Assigned departments or team members that are responsible for each social media account
- Guidelines on how to create an effective password and how often to change passwords
- A designated person to notify and instructions for responding to social media security concerns

2. Train your staff on social media security issues.

Once you have a social media policy in place, make sure your team understands it. Training is also an opportunity to update the team on the latest social media threats they should be aware of.

3. Limit access to increase social media data security.

Treat account passwords as the security assets that they are. That means limiting the number of people who can manage your accounts, and requiring everyone who does to have a unique password.

4. Set up a system of approvals for social posts.

You might have multiple people who draft messages for different platforms, but you should have a much smaller number who actually post them. With a platform like Hootsuite, you can set up highly efficient, permissions-based workflows.

5. Put someone in charge.

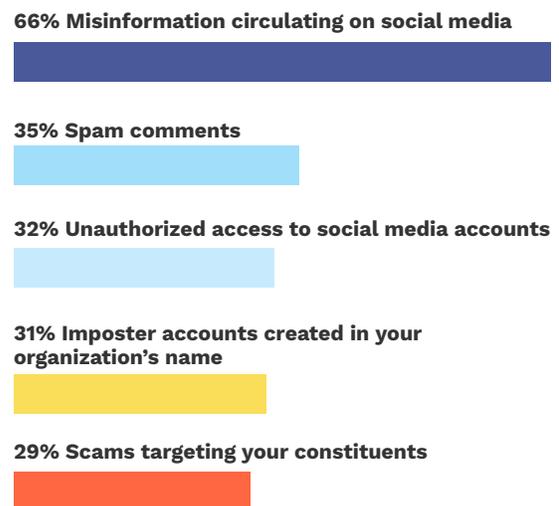
Assigning a key person as the eyes and ears of your social presence can go a long way toward mitigating risks. This person should:

- Own your social media policy
- Monitor your agency's social presence
- Determine who has publishing access
- Be a key player in the development of your social media strategy

6. Set up an early warning system.

Assign someone to check that all the posts on your accounts are legitimate. That includes the ones you use every day and the ones you've registered but never used at all. It's also important this person monitors for any imposter accounts.

FIGURE 5: What do you see as the most common security threats? Select up to 3.

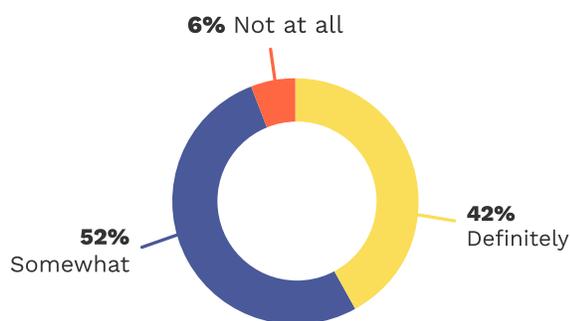


Leading Strategically With Social Media

In the last three years, social media in government has gained support from a vital group of stakeholders: agency leaders.

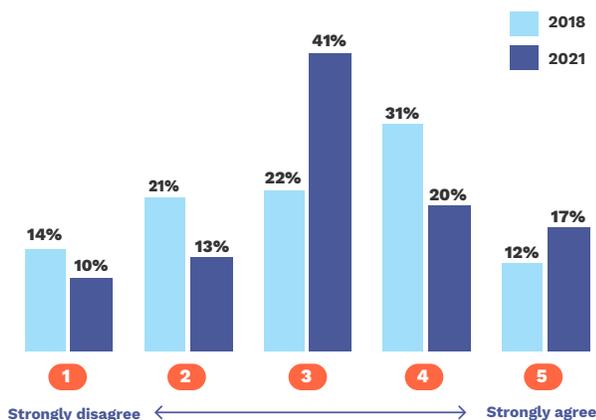
The vast majority of respondents — 94% — said their leaders now definitely or somewhat see the value of investing in social media tools (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: Do your organizations leaders see the value in investing in social media tools?



Skepticism at the leadership level has waned since our 2018 survey, as agency leaders have realized the strategic importance of social. In Figure 7, the number of respondents who don't believe that their executive team views social media as a strategic focus has decreased. Those in the neutral category nearly doubled since 2018.

FIGURE 7: Our executive team views social media as an executive area of focus.



The main driver behind this change can be summed up simply: COVID-19 (see sidebar). In many ways, the pandemic created a tipping point for social media in government, as an influx of requests, questions and comments flooded agency leaders and their communications staff. It was a wake-up call that social media required investment to become a key outlet for proactively sharing information with the public. This could be in the form of dedicated resources, specialist tools or more staff to support spikes in engagement.

“Strategic is a very big word; everyone loves to use it because it sounds good,” Asherov said. “But what it ultimately means is that agencies now need to view social media as a dedicated channel for providing services to constituents. People have come to expect to communicate on the channels where they already spend their time, and with 4.2 billion people now on social media worldwide, it’s the place to be.”

Strategically using social media means more than having a Twitter account or garnering likes on a Facebook page. Leaders should play an active role to ensure social media feeds into the larger funnel of interactions between their agency and the people it serves.

Meet Your Constituents Where They Are

As mentioned, more than half the world’s population is now on social media. That gives them direct access to the largest brands and companies in the world. Many now expect the same level of access to and responsiveness from their government leaders. This can feel overwhelming, but leaders can begin shaping and nurturing these relationships by telling the public how they’re meeting needs, what services they’re providing and showing that they’re making it easy for everyday people to engage with them.

In 2018, social media was also a critical tool for addressing what was coined as “fake news”

reports about a number of issues around the world. The difference in 2021 is that many agency leaders have now joined social media, including Cabinet-level secretaries, elected and appointed officials at all levels of government, hiring managers and more. This has given them a new level of insight into social media’s potential and led to it becoming more important across organizations (see Figure 8).

For example, Miami Mayor Francis Suarez skillfully uses his Twitter account to court tech leaders and entrepreneurs to put down roots and invest in the city. He believes that every elected official should have a social media account. Not necessarily on every platform, but each official should choose a platform they are comfortable using and committed to embracing as a means of connecting with their communities.



New-School Ways of Thinking

Historically, social media was viewed as a subset of traditional communications work in government. That came with limitations. “The leadership of government agencies didn’t always understand how to harness it,” Asherov said. “Some felt like social media was something they had to do, similar to issuing press releases.”

But social media doesn’t follow the old-school model of publishing a press release, fielding questions from journalists and waiting for constituents to call or email with their questions. “Now that process is happening entirely on social media, and it’s immediate,” Asherov said. “There’s no delay.”

This new model of public-government interactions puts social media at the intersection of communications, community engagement and customer service. The case could be made for reimagining social media as its own office, one that unites different entities across an agency. Even if this isn’t a path agencies have yet embarked on, they should consider how social media can directly drive positive behavior.

“The data shows that there is an overwhelming correlation between constituents who will ... pay taxes on time, be more open, be more transparent, do what the government asks them to do, if you’re conversing with them,” Asherov said.

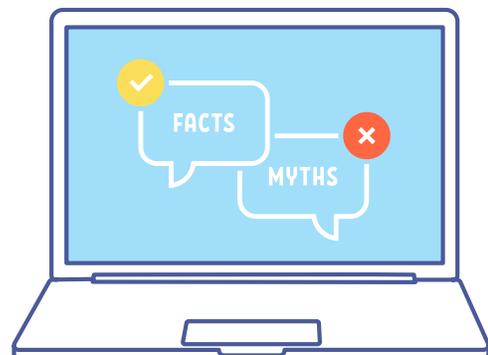


FIGURE 8: Social media has become more important to our organization over the past year.

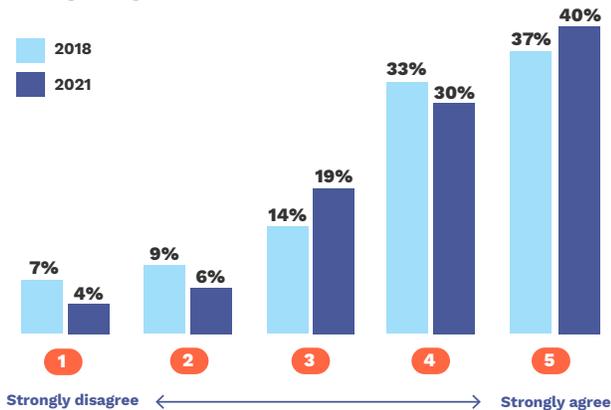
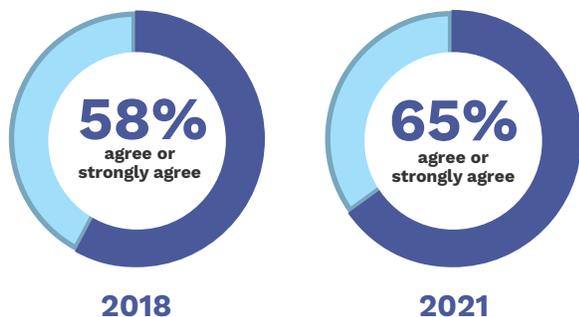


FIGURE 9: Our organization’s leaders are active on social media.

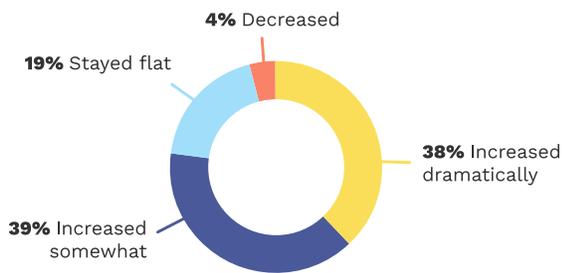


Constituents Bring Great (and Greater) Expectations

Here’s a common challenge for agencies: **Whatever you’re doing on social media, your constituents are looking for more.**

In our survey, 38% of respondents said constituent engagement through social media increased dramatically over the last two years, and another 39% said it increased somewhat (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10: During the last two years, what changes have you seen in constituent engagement through social media?



These numbers reflect a significant shift in public expectations. Agencies recognize this, and 20% of respondents said their agencies find increased expectations from constituents to be a real challenge – up from 13% in 2018 (see Figure 11).

So, yes, the pressure is on.

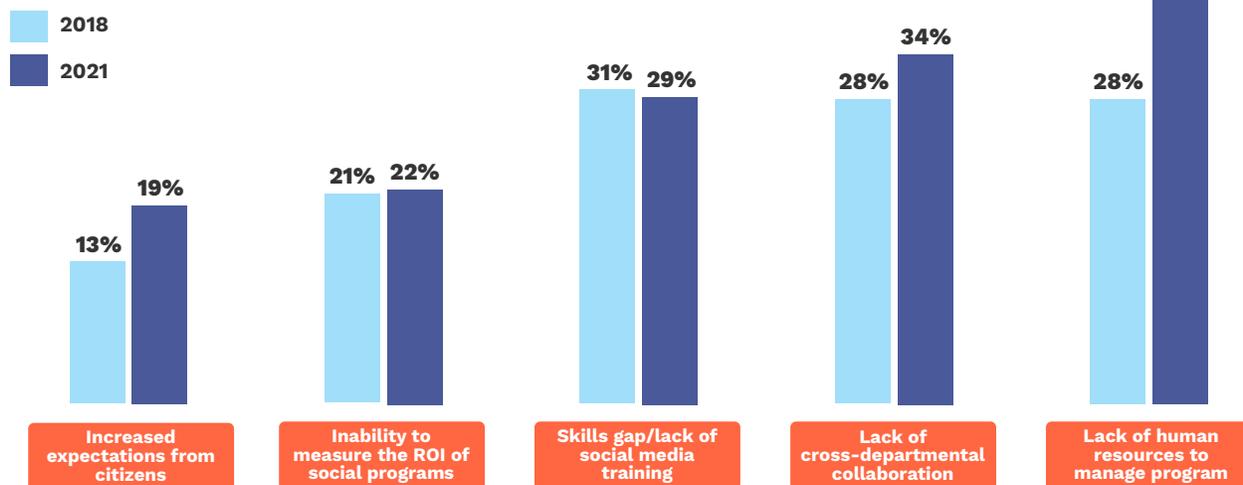
This shouldn’t come as a surprise. Social media isn’t a new or unproven technology. Many of us have been using social to engage with retailers, schools and a wide variety of other organizations for years. Why should government agencies be any different?

That’s not to say that agencies should feel compelled to mimic the snarky or witty tone of major commercial brands. “What government should be about is being open and communicative. It’s about relationship-building, and building community,” Asherov said.

At a fundamental level, it’s about trust. For commercial brands, trust makes it more likely that consumers will buy their products and stay loyal. For government agencies, trust helps gain “the consent of the governed,” that is, it helps build support for government policies, programs and mandates.

Trust can pay off at the most pressing times, such as during the response to the spread of COVID-19. “When you need people to wear a mask or be vaccinated, there’s a level of trust that’s already been built. You’re not starting from scratch,” Asherov said. (See page 11.)

FIGURE 11: What are the top challenges you face with social media that inhibit your success? Select up to 3.

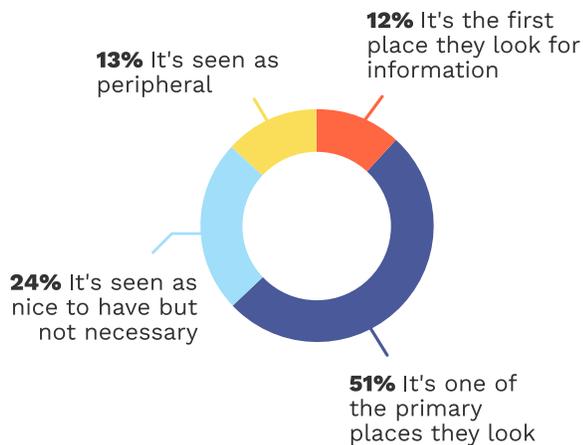


The Virtue of Transparency

Social media can help build trust by providing the public with more transparency into how the government works. Rather than just posting reports or press releases online and waiting for people to discover them, agencies can push them out via social platforms. Increasingly, that is what people expect.

In our survey, 51% of respondents said that social media is one of the primary places their constituents look for information about the agency and its services, and 12% said it was the first place they look (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 12: How do the majority of your constituents view social media as a source of information about your agency and its services?



The connection between transparency and trust is subtle but important.

In a [report](#) on open government, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), noted that trust in public institutions is based not just on the outcomes of government policies but also on “the process through which policies are designed and implemented.” It is key that the process is transparent, the report states.

The perception of transparency is not tied to individual programs or initiatives but is built over time through a disciplined approach. This was highlighted by Asherov: “It’s very important

for government agencies to be transparent on a continuous basis to build that trust.”

A Lighter Touch

Social media can also help agencies establish trust and transparency by engaging with constituents in more personal ways, as commercial brands do.

There is an opportunity to “humanize” the more formal voice many agencies use on other platforms. Agencies can bring a lighter touch, or even a little humor, to help attract followers and keep them engaged.

Asherov cited the Lawrence, Kansas, police department as a good example: “Lawrence does an incredible job of putting out funny, informational content that I want to follow.”

For example, after Twitter followers helped the department identify suspects from photos, the team posted this tweet:



Managing the Brand

Agencies are likely to find that public expectations will only grow in the coming years.

In part, this reflects a generational shift. [Research conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite](#) found that people ages 16-24 are more likely to use social than search to learn about brands and other organizations. They then expect to engage on social media — and it’s where they go to air their complaints. Such complaints can go viral and do real damage to an organization’s reputation.

The cause-and-effect is more apparent in the commercial world, where a bad reputation for service, for example, can sink a restaurant’s business.

But governments also need to think in terms of brand, because many people — especially young professionals, who might not have put down roots yet — do have a choice about where to live.

Just think about the families you know who have moved to be in a better school district. Such mobility is more likely in the wake of the pandemic, as companies continue remote work policies that give people the flexibility to choose where to live and work.

“If you don’t communicate the good things that you are doing and the services that you are providing that will impact constituents’ lives, they will be more likely to move somewhere else,” Asherov said.

Our survey found that agencies have received the message. As noted earlier, 40% of respondents said that building and managing their brand with constituents is a very important goal (see Figure 2, Page 3).

COVID-19: A Case Study in Crisis Communications

For government agencies, the case for social media in crisis communications is simple. Asherov put it clearly: “If people are turning to social media during a crisis, agencies need to be there.”

One concern is what has been defined as the infodemic: the deluge of information about all aspects of the pandemic, from basic science about the cause, spread and treatment of the virus to debates around public policies.

Typically, people have a handful of sources they turn to for information, as well as a circle of family and friends. During the pandemic, however, those “circles of trust” broke down as people began consuming as much information as they could find, with little sense of which sources could be trusted and which could not.

That environment made it more likely that people would buy into bad information.

“If you get your news from social media, you are more likely to believe misinformation about coronavirus conspiracies, risk factors and preventative treatments,” according to a [study](#) published in September 2020 by five universities.



Unfortunately, agencies can’t fight the infodemic simply by pushing more information to the public. Instead, they should play the long game on social media, building up trust with the public over time so that when a crisis occurs, people know where to look.

“If you didn’t invest the time in gaining trust from your audience, you can’t expect them now to suddenly say, ‘OK, I’m going to do X, Y, Z because you’re telling me to,’” Asherov said.



How to Keep Social Media Manageable

As social media has become a communications priority, agencies are realizing the challenges it can involve.

Most notably, more than 39% of respondents said their agencies lacked the staff needed to manage social media, up from 28% in 2018 (see Figure 13). Likewise, nearly 36% expressed concern about a lack of cross-departmental collaboration, also up from 28% in 2018.

FIGURE 13: What are the top challenges you face with social media that inhibit your success? Select your top 3.

	2021	2018	Change
Lack of human resources to manage program	39.1%	27.7%	11.4
Lack of cross-departmental collaboration	35.5%	27.7%	7.8
Skills gap/lack of social media training	29.0%	31.3%	-2.3
Approval processes	21.3%	13.3%	8
Trolls	19.5%	12.7%	6.8
Increased expectations from citizens	18.9%	13.3%	5.6

With that in mind, here are four guidelines for making social media more manageable:

1. Keep it simple.

Not every agency needs to have a presence on every social platform. Teams should think about social both in terms of the constituent's perspective and the agency's goal.

"Is a mother who's trying to figure out where to register her son for school going to get value out of a TikTok video?" Asherov said. "Or is it better for me to open a Twitter account and tie that to the online registration system so that it's a holistic digital experience?"

2. Don't think about social in a silo.

Think about how it can support specific initiatives or areas of operation across the agency. For example, how can an agency use data from social media platforms to assess the quality of its customer service in different departments? How can social help connect constituents with digital services, such as an online school registration system, or help publicize new initiatives?

3. Don't stress over trolls.

Concern about trolls (people sharing abusive posts or comments to intentionally upset others) is on the rise. Nearly 20% of respondents cited trolls as a challenge in 2021, compared with 12.7% in 2018. And agencies generally can't block trolls, because of concerns about freedom of speech.

But while trolls can be disconcerting, few have the kind of impact that warrants a response. The comments of a random troll are less important, for example, than a journalist or social influencer. "Sometimes, very loud voices make a lot of noise, but they're actually not very meaningful," Asherov said.

4. But don't ignore them, either.

In some cases, people begin trolling because of legitimate complaints about services or policies. It all goes back to social listening. "While a troll's posts or comments might not be constructive, they can help an agency identify and address problems that might be affecting other people," Asherov said.

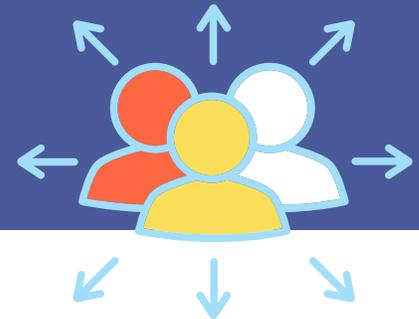
How Hootsuite Helps

Hootsuite’s platform enables agencies to manage constituent engagement across multiple social channels — not only publishing content but also engaging with constituents, conducting real-time social listening, analyzing performance, tracking compliance, and securing and archiving content. The platform integrates with leading applications in the digital experience ecosystem, such as Adobe and Google Analytics.

“We centralize and streamline all of your social media needs in one place,” Asherov said.

In March 2021, Hootsuite announced its Hootsuite Enterprise offering had achieved the Federal Risk and Authorization Management

Program-authorized (FedRAMP) designation. FedRAMP designations translate to greater confidence in security due to rigorous, government-specific standards that create the foundations for standardized security and compliance. Government agencies can now easily work with Hootsuite, confident that this global leader in social media management is constantly improving its security practices.



Conclusion

Social media has redefined the way government agencies communicate and interact with the public. From crisis management to community updates, there’s a newfound sense of urgency, transparency and trust that government leaders can tap into by embracing social media.

Since our last survey in 2018, the evolution of governments on social media has accelerated. Leaders are more open to using social media as a strategic communications tool, and are also embracing it as a way to understand and meet increased expectations from the communities they serve. They’re finding ways to humanize their online interactions, better understand their constituents through social listening and use that knowledge to proactively speak to the issues that matter most.

Just like a business, the ability to remain authentic and honest with your audience is crucial to building a good relationship with them. Social media provides a perfect avenue for agencies to remain as transparent and clear with their constituents as possible.

Social media isn’t just a good way to share memes and keep up with what’s trending. Ultimately, it’s a powerful way for government agencies to create community, deliver on their mission and engage with the public in meaningful ways.



About Hootsuite

Hootsuite is trusted by more than 18 million customers and employees at more than 80% of the Fortune 1000. Our unparalleled expertise, customer insights at scale, and collaborative ecosystem help people and organizations succeed with social.

For more information, please visit hootsuite.com/industries/government.



About GovLoop

GovLoop's mission is to inspire public sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to the public sector.

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