



Sara Katz

The New Media Movement

Online opportunities, and determining what's right for your group

To tweet or not to tweet—or blog, Facebook or otherwise delve into the growing world of electronic outreach mechanisms—that is the question. Some storm water organizations have embraced new media fully, others are just getting started, and still more are holding off, questioning whether these tools are right for them. To get the scoop on 21st century communications options, SWS Managing Editor Caitlin Cunningham turned to Sara Katz, a community relations/public involvement specialist for water and wastewater projects nationwide.

Caitlin Cunningham: Online media, especially social networking sites, have exploded recently. How involved are storm water utilities with these tools?

Sara Katz: It appears that public agencies are all over the map when it comes to using social media. The larger agencies seem to be enamored with its application and are “testing the waters” to see how strategically to apply the various possible applications to their communications portfolio. Some smaller agencies are still exploring at what level, if any, social media can be incorporated into their communication platforms.

Cunningham: As for the active groups, which tools are you seeing them utilize?

Katz: From a general external information perspective—and by that I mean pushing information out the door—certainly many have invested heavily in their websites and endeavoring to drive ratepayers and/or interested stakeholders to their websites.

In addition, many have set up Facebook accounts and are looking at Twitter as another application, specifically for concise, one-themed messages. Finally, I see several are working on social blogs and network postings—chat room environments.

Cunningham: What advantages and drawbacks might blogging, tweeting, etc. present for a host group?

Katz: Social media and the many applications within that realm provide new opportunities to educate and inform constituents, stakeholders—interested parties. There also is a perception that the costs are minimal to do so, but to really host these various sites, you must ensure that you have crisp, fresh information that ideally fits into and supports your communications platform.

Having said that, I strongly subscribe that all communications should go to support the strategic goals and objectives of your organization. Agencies should closely monitor all forms of communication and how they are distributed, whether that's print, electronic or using social applications. My concern with the various new technologies is that the excitement about using them might cloud the actual strategic content of the message.

Cunningham: Do you think the new media movement is a fad or here to stay?

Katz: I definitely think it's here to stay, but I expect we will see a few applications come online that will begin to overtake and replace the applications we see today.

Cunningham: What suggestions for success would you offer storm water groups for encouraging public dialogue?

Katz: Social media potentially can complement a public participation

program, but at the end of the day, I'm still a strong believer that nothing really replaces the face-to-face kind of dialogue that often is needed to build consensus.

If you were just looking for a quick snapshot of public opinion on an issue, I think electronic means could accomplish that. But if you were truly looking at trying to resolve some complex environmental, technical or public policy issue, I would not be comfortable at this juncture putting all my eggs in the social media basket to accomplish that. **[SWS]**

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