



# You've Got Jail

CONNIE CLEM

**Because the public cares how tax dollars are spent, today, more than ever, it is important for jails to share information with funders, justice system decision-makers, and the public. Sharing data on real-life public safety costs can build support for a jail's funding priorities. To help officials and community residents understand the role and value of the jail, jail leaders need to use all available tools to explain what jail funding buys. One excellent, low-cost tool for making your agency's case is online communications.**

When voters and taxpayers want to know more, they need to find that information from the most authoritative source—your agency. It is your responsibility to give your community the right impression: that your facility is a forward-thinking, safe, valuable community resource, and a good steward of public funds.

Creating a strong online presence, however, is more than just posting information on the agency's website (though this is also important). The growing use of social media is moving information in new and faster ways, whereas print and broadcast media continue to lose ground. When correctional agencies adopt these social media tools, they can move accurate, insightful content quickly into the public stream. This information will not only flow from agency to constituents, but it will then flow to a network of constituents who share similar concerns.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (Smith, 2010) found that, as of December 2009:

- About 40 percent of adult Internet users “have gone online for raw data about government spending and activities.”
- Among online adults, 31 percent “have used social tools such as blogs, social networking sites, and online video as well as e-mail and text alerts to keep informed about government activities.”
- Almost half of adult Internet users (48%) “have looked for information about a public policy or issue online with their local, State or Federal government.”

The shift to seeking online information has been quickest among wealthier and more highly educated people. However, the Pew study found that “minority Internet users are just as likely as whites to get information about government agencies using tools such as e-mail, blogs, online video, or social networking sites.” In fact, members of minority groups are more likely than whites to strongly agree that online outreach “helps people be more informed about what the government is doing” and “makes government agencies and officials more accessible.”

The study also showed that taking an agency's message online is a smart way to reach the wide range of people who care about civic issues. With tools available at little or no cost, many agencies are considering how to expand their online communications.

### The Focus Is Information

Is your agency using online communications to the best advantage? Many public safety agencies are making their voices heard online not only on their websites, but also on blogs, Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube™, and other social media. They are sharing news on topics such as facility construction and policy, events such as charity barbecues and public input sessions, and operational posts such as public safety alerts and job openings. In

reality, jails have many potential audiences, each of whom is interested in a different type of information:

- Taxpayers and voters.
- Justice system partners (courts, pretrial, etc.).
- County commissioners and other local officials.
- Social services providers and allies.
- Potential correctional officer applicants, volunteers, and other job seekers.
- Families of inmates.
- Crime victims and victim advocates.

In addition, effective messages express the professionalism of the jail, the dedication of its staff, and the value it delivers. This information can include:

- Admissions data, which shows the volume of work needed to keep communities safe.
- Data on jail bed usage and alternatives help explain who is in the jail and why.
- Data on costs per housing unit show the scope of population cuts needed for significant savings.
- Program outcome information explains what works to keep people from returning to jail.
- Partnership information demonstrates efficient use of public resources and shows how the community pulls together to deal with social problems, such as public health and underemployment.
- Population profiles can show how many intoxicated drivers are being removed from the roadways, as well as highlighting the need for more treatment slots.
- Restitution and community service reports show how jail program workers are paying their debt to society with tangible benefits.
- Data on incidents and incident response illustrate the degree of training and professionalism needed to run a safe and secure facility.
- Reports on issues of local concern—such as the jail's role in the response to a natural disaster—emphasize the jail's availability as a resource to the community.

### The Website

An agency's website is the primary location for sharing its values. There are good reasons for this: it's familiar, it's established, and the agency has processes in place to develop and update the content. An agency's home page is a good place to share what's new and changing, such as:

- Press releases.
- Events/calendars.
- Recruitment announcements.
- Blog posts from jail leadership.
- Twitter feeds from the public information officer.

Annual reports and statistical snapshots also fit well on a website. However, any website that is several years old may be due for a review. Agency websites need to be designed (or redesigned) with the user's needs and behavior in mind. Try outlining who visits the agency's website and why. Will each visitor be able to easily find the performance data, self-service information, or online services they need?

Unfortunately, agency websites often read like an online brochure that is rarely updated. They may share mission and goals but exclude the interesting and human side of the agency. The "where are we headed, how are we getting there, and what makes us tick" are missing. Sometimes a simple rewrite can emphasize key performance indicators, giving them more spark and energy. Sometimes a more extensive rework may be needed that looks at why different kinds of information or a different site design or spatial arrangement would work better to meet the agency's current needs. In going online, jail administrators need to:

- Explore and understand what people want to know and what information will help make their agency's case.
- Decide which tools they will use to share that information.
- Decide who will be responsible for managing online communications—and create a timeline for getting started.

It is important to note that new communications strategies do not replace an agency's established media relationships and public information systems. They simply supplement them by putting the agency's content directly in the eyes and ears of the public.

### **Beyond the Website**

It is important to engage with the online world beyond the website. Ideally, agencies should have an integrated web presence through links with social media. Handy tools make it easy to post the same content on different social media at the same time. This creates consistent messaging and maximizes the reach of the agency across popular online spaces. When the agency is an active member of the online community, everyone benefits. Agencies can include the public in decisions and invite their understanding and participation.

A jail needs to find the best means for providing information that supports its mission, announces positive outcomes, demonstrates valid needs, and answers questions from its varied audience segments—answers to questions such as:

- How many people were booked into the jail in the last 24 hours? How does this compare to the same time last year?

- How have failure-to-appear rates changed since the jail began releasing more detainees on their own recognizance to reduce the bed count?
- How many inmates were on fire crews this month, and what is the value of property they saved?
- How many community service hours have jail inmates provided this month, and where are they headed next week?
- What changes has the jail made to cut costs, and how have the changes affected staff and inmates?

### **Blogs**

A blog (the name was derived from "web log") is an excellent tool for an agency to establish an online voice, share its performance metrics, explain needs and constraints, and provide up-to-date news with a human angle. Blogs are commonly, but not always, integrated into an agency's website. Some blogs in the public safety sphere represent an elected official rather than the agency itself. Blogs can share a leader's vision for the agency, good news about the agency's achievements, and week-to-week progress on major initiatives.

Who writes the blog is decided by the agency. Sometimes it may be the sheriff or other official; sometimes it may be ghostwritten by public information staff. Blog posts can be short or long, daily or less frequent. They are usually best when the content is expressive and personal rather than full of dry facts and data.

Blogs are an excellent tool for explaining a position, a rationale, or a response to an issue. Residents appreciate the opportunity to be heard, so blogs should be constructed to allow comments from readers (usually readers register with the system, which deters abusive and spam posts). It is important to note that writing a regular blog can be a significant time commitment. An alternative is contributing from time to time as a guest blogger for a local newspaper, Chamber of Commerce, or other organization.

### **Facebook**

Facebook is a platform for sharing news and media with the community, and is currently the most popular social media service. Many public safety organizations are developing Facebook pages to share news with drop-in visitors and with people who "like" the page.

Facebook started as a social platform for college students but has become much more, expanding beyond campuses and into personal, professional, and business uses. It offers two modes for organizations to create online presence: the "group mode" that people join, which is like joining a fan club, and the "page mode," which allows people to "like" the organization.

The page mode works well for most organizational communications. An agency can post items such as news alerts, reports, event invitations, as well as links to men-

tions of the agency in other media, such as newspapers and television. People who “like” the page receive these agency’s updates and can pass them along. This news can then go “viral” when large numbers of people share posts with their own networks of friends and professional acquaintances, who in turn pass them along.

On Facebook privacy controls are important. By State or local policy, some agencies cannot allow comments to be posted by people other than site managers. This limits the potential for two-way engagement on this platform. However, Facebook may still be useful as a way to share information with the public and to point interested readers to a different online location where the agency does provide a channel for two-way communication and citizen engagement. Examples of public safety uses of Facebook include:

- The Canyon County Sheriff’s Office in Idaho, which uses its Facebook page to share news and photos on public meetings, a proposed jail bond, POST graduations, etc. The site is located at [www.facebook.com/pages/Caldwell-ID/Canyon-County-Sheriffs-Office/102232009816945](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Caldwell-ID/Canyon-County-Sheriffs-Office/102232009816945).
- The Oklahoma County (Oklahoma) Sheriff’s Office, whose well-visited Facebook page sports more than 2,400 fans. It can be found at [www.facebook.com/OCSO911](http://www.facebook.com/OCSO911).

Agencies need to be wary of Facebook, however. In spring 2010, Facebook launched a system that began automatically creating “community pages” for organizations that Facebook members mention. This could include government agencies. If this practice continues, agencies may want to monitor Facebook and decide how to respond if pages are created to represent them (Hampton, 2010; Scola, 2010). Monitoring the social media for mentions of an agency is good cautionary practice.

## Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that allows account holders to share information in messages of 140 characters or less. Professionals use Twitter to share news bites in an easily scanned format.

It works when a person with a Twitter account follows (subscribes to) the messages posted by another member. Member A can follow the posts of a few, dozens, or hundreds of other members. Their posts are displayed when Member A logs into Twitter. Member A can pass along (“retweet”) high-value posts to his/her own followers. Topical “hashtags” enable readers to find posts on a particular topic. Users can also reply to posts or send a private message to another member.

Twitter is gaining popularity in public safety agencies for sharing crime alerts, emergency or public meeting notifications, mug shots, job postings, and links to the day’s news releases, reports, or blog posts. Examples of public safety agencies using Twitter:

- Ada County (Idaho) Sheriff—[@adacosheriff](https://twitter.com/adacosheriff).
- Sheriff Leo McGuire, Bergen County (New Jersey)—[@BergenSheriff](https://twitter.com/BergenSheriff).
- Boston (Massachusetts) Police Department—[@boston\\_police](https://twitter.com/boston_police).
- Collier County (Florida) Sheriff—[@CollierCountySheriff](https://twitter.com/CollierCountySheriff).
- El Paso (Texas) Sheriff Public Affairs—[@EPCSO](https://twitter.com/EPCSO).
- Oklahoma County (Oklahoma) Sheriff—[@OkCountySheriff](https://twitter.com/OkCountySheriff).

[To view these examples, go to <http://twitter.com>, plus the account name (minus the “@” sign)—e.g., <http://twitter.com/OkCountySheriff>.]

Jails can use Twitter to report granular information, such as daily or weekly admissions, or to report interim progress toward goals. A jail’s community service work program could use Twitter to announce sites where crews are working and get public input on sites where crews are needed. In San Francisco, [@sf311](https://twitter.com/sf311) is being used to receive 311 communications from city residents.

More examples of Twitter users working in or concerned with justice and public safety are listed at <http://twitter.com/ConnieInfo/justicepubsafety>.

## YouTube

Video is engaging, appeals to viewers more than text, is effective for people with limited reading skills, and can pack a lot of meaning into a short message. All these factors make video a good method for sharing government information.

Many government agencies are establishing “channels” on the popular YouTube platform. The service tracks the number of times each video is viewed. In addition, viewers can subscribe to receive notifications when new videos are uploaded, as well as comment on the videos they view. Once an agency’s videos are posted, they can be viewed in windows within the agency’s own website. Video can serve several purposes, such as:

- Share recordings of public meetings on jail and justice issues for people who are unable to attend. (Live-streaming meetings as they happen is another option.)
- Recruit new officers and staff.
- Orient inmates’ families to jail policies.
- Share the vision statement of a new sheriff on taking office.
- Share apologies made by inmates as part of a restorative justice program.

Some examples of agencies utilizing YouTube are:

- The Johnson County Sheriff’s Office in Johnson County, Kansas, has a YouTube page at [www.youtube.com/jocosherriff#p/c/00902BBF76D8A8C0](http://www.youtube.com/jocosherriff#p/c/00902BBF76D8A8C0) that includes local news media coverage plus content developed by the agency.

- The Denver Police Department YouTube channel includes a series of video shorts on the history of law enforcement from the city's early days. A June 2010 video features a Prohibition-era "bandit chaser" vehicle and is viewable at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChyeOD\\_CJjQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChyeOD_CJjQ).
- The Oklahoma County (Oklahoma) Sheriff YouTube site has had more than 2,500 video views.

### Flickr®

*Flickr.com* is a well-known platform where people, organizations, and agencies share photographs online. Images can convey information about jail needs, challenges, and successes. Jails might post photos of a newly expanded medical facility within the jail, community events and job fairs, or employees recognized for their achievements and performance. Examples of agencies using Flickr include:

- The Jefferson County (Colorado) Sheriff's Office page, which includes academy graduation photos, safety fair photos, and fundraiser shots at [www.flickr.com/photos/jeffcosheriff/sets/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/jeffcosheriff/sets/).
- Photos posted by the Johnson County (Kansas) Sheriff's Office that include shots of the New Century Jail addition, at [www.flickr.com/photos/jocosherriff](http://www.flickr.com/photos/jocosherriff).

### Policy

Launching any new communication tool requires involving the right people in the planning. Agencies must be clear about what they want to achieve. They need to establish effective teams, invest the right level of time and skills for their particular aims, and choose the right tools.

Online and social media communications need to become part of the agency's policy on communications and public information. Policies need to address who has the authority to speak for the agency. Policies also need to define the circumstances when content may be posted routinely or will need direct approval from a superior. Crisis communications require special attention and clarity. Because the social media carries an expectation of responsiveness, agencies need to be ready before going public in the social media.

Agencies also need to be clear with the public about any limitations on its use of a particular tool. For example, an agency may create a Facebook page to share news, but policy may prevent the agency from allowing readers to comment. In this case, explain the policy to the users within the Facebook page or profile. Ideally the agency can direct users to another location where they can submit their questions and comments and the agency can respond as appropriate.

As another example, some public safety agencies using Twitter have specifically stated that the Twitter account cannot accept 911 messages and should not

be used for reporting emergencies. Websites such as *Munigov.org* and *Govloop.org* link people with shared interests in online government and provide access to examples of social media policies from large and small agencies.

Agencies that adopt more than one social media tool will find it easier to address all tools in one policy document, rather than developing separate policies for each tool. This makes policy updating much easier in a rapidly changing environment.

Regarding personal use of social media by staff, many agencies already have policies that state whether and how staff may refer to the agencies for which they work. Photographs of staff in uniform are commonly against regulations. The reality is that all staff represent the agency unofficially in their online conduct, just as they do whenever they are in the public eye off-duty. Given the popularity of the social media and the speed that content can travel, agencies need to be more careful than ever. Staff need clear guidelines on not discussing controversial jail matters online—even with a personal friend. There is no way to absolutely control where a post may travel online.

### Practice

Authenticity is the keyword for participating in the social media. Different tools and different skills are needed if the intent is to create an online citizen dialogue on a controversial issue, as compared with simply publishing information online.

Staff who will represent the agency online need a good sense of what to communicate and how to convey it with a human, honest, authentic voice. That voice may come from one or many agency representatives, from an administrator and/or a public information officer, or from leaders or staff in programs or other areas of operation. Spokespersons need to know their sphere of authority for representing their agencies with reasonable speed and interactivity. Some staff may provide content, with the Public Information Officer shaping the final message for release. The content provider may also directly post the messages.

Agencies can consider a team approach for developing online content. Teams may include not only tech-savvy younger staff, but also veteran staff, whose perspectives and knowledge of agency history may be very valuable. A team approach also mobilizes some of the agency's best information. Staff who are in the thick of a project or program may not realize the positive interest it would generate if shared with the public. Also, they may be too busy working on their projects to share what they are doing. The public information staff or another staff designee can do a quick interview over coffee and write up the key points to keep information moving to those who want to know more.



## Beyond the Big Names

There are too many social media tools to list more than a handful here. Each social media tool offers a way to share a message about an agency, to engage with agency stakeholders online, or to collaborate with internal or multi-agency teams.

- Agencies can provide for mobile and geographically targeted communications through services such as *Nixle.com*, a service of Nlets, The International Justice and Public Safety Network.
- Agencies can use services such as *Uservoice.com* or *Ideascale.com* to collect ideas from the public that are then voted up or down by people who visit the site. An example is the Open Austin project, created to collect ideas for improving the City of Austin website, at <http://openaustin.ideascale.com>.
- An agency can post data sets on its website or in a shared public location to make them available for analysis by interested researchers. Sharing data is the essence of open government and is a focus of attention from the Federal to the local level. Agencies that are reluctant to share data may find the benefits of having their data analyzed for free outweigh their initial concerns. The Apps for Democracy project in the District of Columbia sparked the creation of dozens of tools that are turning government data into useful services for local residents, including some with a public safety slant. According to *AppsForDemocracy.org*, the first year's contest generated a "\$2,300,000 value to the city at a cost of \$50,000."
- Agencies can post presentation files on the Slideshare site to share data, knowledge, and professional expertise. The Hampden County Correctional Center has posted "Value and Policy Implications: Jail Health Care in Public Health," a presentation by Thomas Lincoln.
- Agencies can develop "widgets" (web gadgets) that anyone with a website can post to help distribute the agency's information.
  - Examples of widgets from the FBI, FEMA, and other agencies can be seen at [www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference\\_Shelf/Libraries/Gadget\\_Gallery/Public\\_Safety.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/Libraries/Gadget_Gallery/Public_Safety.shtml).
  - The Commonwealth of Virginia provides a variety of informational widgets at [www.virginia.gov/cmsportal3/widget.html](http://www.virginia.gov/cmsportal3/widget.html).
  - The U.S. Courts shares links to its latest publications via widgets available at [www.uscourts.gov/Common/widgets.aspx](http://www.uscourts.gov/Common/widgets.aspx).
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is participating in V-gov ([www.ocio.usda.gov/vgov/index.html](http://www.ocio.usda.gov/vgov/index.html)), a secure virtual world where people meet and interact online via representational avatars who participate in meetings, training, and other events.

In all online interactions, it is important to avoid sounding defensive. Confidence in the agency's actions and performance underlies good messaging. Whatever the agency is doing, or not doing, there is a good reason. The agency can disclose what that reason is, control the message by explaining the agency's policies, actions, and responses, and appreciate the opportunity to explain the realities of jail operations. Government transparency is increasingly valued, though increasing an agency's own transparency may not be easy when there are issues and challenges to be faced.

If a situation does reflect a need for change in the agency, finding a constructive tone is essential. Social media communications are relatively new, but they are here to stay, and being silent on issues of public concern is not a good long-term strategy.

### Leadership's Role

Ultimately, agency leaders are responsible for adopting these new forms of communication and initiating the process. Agency leaders need to use online tools as the central piece of their agency's inclusive communications strategy.

Web-based communications have sometimes received only peripheral attention, compared with active news media relations. At this time, when all types of people are increasingly getting their information online, agencies should not miss the new potentials. Top agency leaders may need persuading on the value of the effort, but one of the points of the new communications culture is that anyone can be a leader and a voice. If staff members want to adopt new communications tools, agency leadership can authorize them to propose a plan for doing so. Asking around the agency's divisions may reveal staff who are enthusiastic about making this happen. What potentials do they see? Implementation can follow, after concepts have been expanded with

careful planning, policy review, process development, and selection of tools.

Agencies should not, of course, establish themselves online just to be “current.” An agency’s purposes and goals for online communications must be clear and linked to its mission. In particular, an agency should not launch an interactive social media presence before it is ready for two-way interaction. This is especially true if a critical event occurs that prompts the agency to seek new communication channels as quickly as possible. In such a situation, a safer way to proceed is to launch a Facebook page (for example) that points to the agency’s website or blog and identifies it as the authoritative source for updates. This approach allows the agency and its message to be more accessible without adding interactivity for which the agency is unprepared. Although becoming visible online involves accepting some risks, jails are doing so because it:

- Furthers an agency’s community-centric approach.
- Helps the community understand jail issues and appreciate the jail’s performance.
- Engages the community in a dialogue about civic issues that matter, including the wise use of public safety resources.
- Helps the agency appear more human and less bureaucratic.
- Expresses the agency’s forward-thinking attitude.
- Uses free tools to get the agency’s message to all segments of the community.

It is time for jails to put their message where the people are—online. Agencies that do not take advantage of new online opportunities risk falling behind on a major shift in how society communicates. By choosing to reach people through social media, agencies can get more mileage out of their information and gain more support.

Goodwill, appreciation, and better understanding are the tangible benefits. Online governance is taking hold, and people increasingly are expecting a strong online

presence from their government agencies. New tools make it easier than ever to share the agency’s mission of performance, cost-effective services, and public engagement. Developing a well thought-out business case for online communications is a good first step. ■

## References

- Hampton, A. (2010). Facebook Hijacks U.S. Government Pages. *Wired to Share* (blog), posted May 17, 2010. <http://adrielhampton.wordpress.com/2010/05/17/facebook-hijacks-u-s-government-pages/>.
- Lincoln, T. (2006). *Value and Policy Implications: Jail Health Care in Public Health*. Springfield, Massachusetts: Hampden County Correctional Center. [www.slideshare.net/brighteyes/health-care-continuity-in-jail-prison-and-community](http://www.slideshare.net/brighteyes/health-care-continuity-in-jail-prison-and-community).
- Scola N. (2010). Facebook’s Manifest Destiny Runs Into Open Government. *TechPresident* (blog), posted May 26, 2010. <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/facebook-manifest-destiny-runs-open-government>.
- Smith, A. (2010). *Government Online: The internet gives citizens new paths to government services and information*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project. [http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP\\_Government\\_Online\\_2010.pdf](http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Government_Online_2010.pdf). Report and additional background on the research available at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Government-Online.aspx>.
- Wilkinson, K. (2010). Study: 8 Essential Elements for an Effective Government Social Media Policy. *Government Technology*, May 25, 2010. [www.govtech.com/gt/764427](http://www.govtech.com/gt/764427).

---

**Connie Clem** is Principal of Clem Information Strategies in Longmont, Colorado, where she consults with clients in the nonprofit and government sectors on strategic communications. She is author of *Government Online: Improving Service and Engaging Communities*. A long-time corrections information analyst, Ms. Clem was the lead researcher and web manager at the National Institute of Correction’s Information Center. Contact her at [connie@cleminfostrategies.com](mailto:connie@cleminfostrategies.com) or 303-242-6278, follow her at <http://twitter.com/ConniInfo>, or learn more at [www.cleminfostrategies.com](http://www.cleminfostrategies.com).