

How Social Media Moves New York

Part 2: Recommended Social Media Policy for Transportation Providers

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Recommended Social Media Policy for Transportation Providers

Introduction

Social media networks allow transportation providers to reach large numbers of people simultaneously and without a fee, essential factors for the millions of commuters and leisure travelers moving through the New York region every day. This report, based on earlier findings (from Part 1)¹, which analyzed local transportation providers' use of social media, and a seminar on the subject in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, recommends social media policies for transportation providers seeking to inform, engage and motivate their customers.²

The goals of social media in transportation are to inform (alert riders of a situation), motivate (to opt for an alternate route), and engage (amplify the message to their friends and neighbors). To accomplish these goals, transportation providers should be:

- **Accessible:** Easily discovered through multiple channels and targeted information campaigns
- **Informative:** Disseminating service information at rush hour and with longer-form discussions on blogs as needed
- **Engaging:** Responding directly to customers, marketing new services, and building community
- **Responsive:** Soliciting and internalizing feedback and self-evaluating in a continuous cycle

¹ Kaufman, Sarah. "How Social Media Moves New York," NYU Rudin Center, October, 2012.

² These recommendations assume a basic working knowledge of using the social media networks, focusing on their use in transportation.

Accessible

Accessible social media presences are found on a variety of networks, and reachable by a diverse audience. Transportation providers should especially consider the following accessibility aspects:

Find the right network

Different social media networks have different strengths, and should be utilized according to their reach and purpose served:

- Twitter: immediate, short-form messaging
- Facebook: non-urgent messaging with shareable content
- Flickr, YouTube and Instagram: dynamic content and illustrative information
- FourSquare: community-building and location-based information
- Blogs: long-form discussion of incidents, accomplishments and policies

The common thread among these resources is the importance of service alerts; without adequate information, customers will not be engaged in supplementary content.

If resources are insufficient to maintain multiple networks, web-based tools like Hootsuite can be used to automate and publish postings on various networks at once.

Connectivity

Accounts should be easily reachable from the agency's home page. For transportation providers with multiple accounts, specialties, like specific routes or interests, should be described. It may also be useful to cross-list social media accounts, such as links to Twitter from Facebook, for simplified navigation.

An example of strong connectivity is on San Francisco BART's website, which links to

The screenshot shows the BART website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Stations, Schedules, Tickets, Rider Guide, News, About BART, and Contact Us. Below the navigation is a 'QuickPlanner' tool with fields for 'Station' and 'Address' for both 'Departing from?' and 'Arriving at?'. There are also radio buttons for 'Departing around' and 'Arriving around', and a 'Get Schedule' button. To the right of the QuickPlanner is a 'Service Advisories' section with a notification icon and the text '60 trains: no delays reported.' Below that is a 'Real Time Departures' section for '12th St. Oakland City Center' at '7:14 am'. A table shows train arrivals for Platform 1 and Platform 2:

Platform	Train	Time	Delay
Platform 1	RICH	2, 9, 16 min	Red
	DALY	21, 25, 36 min	Yellow
Platform 2	FRMT	2, 17, 32 min	Green
	MLBR	8, 23, 38 min	Red
	MONT	10 min	Yellow

At the bottom right of the page, there is a social media connectivity bar with icons for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and RSS. These icons are circled in red. The page also features a large image of a man looking thoughtful, with text overlay: 'BART... and you're there. Whether you're headed to work or meeting friends, catching a flight or catching a game, BART brings the Bay Area together.' There are also several news snippets on the right side of the page.

social media accounts from the homepage, in tandem with service alert tools (circled, at right). This feature allows riders to comprehend urgent information in the context of social media's engagement, showing the complementary nature of the different resources.

Name

Choose a name that is recognizable, descriptive and memorable. On Twitter, choose shorter names that take up fewer characters, leaving room for more text, and use Twitter's verification tool to ensure users that the account information is legitimate. Massachusetts Dept. of Transportation's @MassDOT account exemplifies a straightforward, descriptive name.

Note that it is unnecessary to include the word "tweet" in the name, as accounts are already on Twitter.

Target the Audience

Major services, such as subway lines and essential roadways, should have their own accounts, so that the information is not broadcast unnecessarily to an overly extensive audience (which would soon tire of the information and unsubscribe from the feed).

In addition, social media accounts should be advertised within their own space; for example, a train line's Twitter feed should be part of an advertisement on that train car's walls. Users will quickly learn how to find out about service information and interact with the provider.

Cater to Diverse Audiences

In Part 1 of this report, it was found that only two New York-area public transportation providers tweeted in languages other than English. In cities as diverse as New York, it is absolutely essential to provide information in multiple languages, as well as ensuring that websites meet the requirements of tools to assist the vision and hearing impaired.

Transportation providers in the New York region should set up secondary accounts to replicate information in Spanish, at a minimum, and other major languages where possible. If staff resources are insufficient for this effort, agencies should partner with ethnic newspapers and community groups to ensure that important information reaches constituents.

Use Internally

Transportation staff should use social media internally, as well. Studies have shown that advanced collaboration tools improve workflow productivity³; important tools to consider for internal use are:

- Wikis, to assist in group project planning and shared corporate knowledge
- LinkedIn, to recruit qualified candidates for open positions
- GovLoop, to connect with peer public agencies and collaborate on shared issues
- Instagram and other photo applications, to allow field staff to document their work

These tools will improve the internal coordination necessary for better transportation services and the information required by their users.

³ Chui, Michael, James Manyika, Jacques Bughin, Richard Dobbs, Charles Roxburgh, Hugo Sarrazin, Geoffrey Sands and Magdalena Westergren. "The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies," McKinsey Global Institute, July 2012.

Informative

Informing the public of irregular service is the most important function of social media in transportation. It is likewise advisable to use the dynamic content sharing provided by these networks, like maps, photos and videos, to illustrate the information more fully.

Service information should always be written clearly, and with specificity like train stations or highway exits, and link longer explanations on the agency's website when necessary.

Urgency: Timely travel information, like delays, belongs on the instantaneous networks of Twitter and Facebook, while longer-form, non-urgent discussions, like policy explanations, belong on a blog. Photo and video content, which can enhance any platform, should be posted anytime they can help illustrate a situation, and are not required to be of utmost quality, as long as they are informative, as voiced by the MTA:⁴

*During Hurricane Sandy, "Timeliness [of photos] was more important than quality,"
according to MTA Press Officer Aaron Donovan*

During rush hours and other peak travel times, messages should be posted frequently: incidents and service updates, as needed. Non-urgent information should be held off until off-peak travel times, when customers will be looking for current service information and ignoring impertinent chatter.

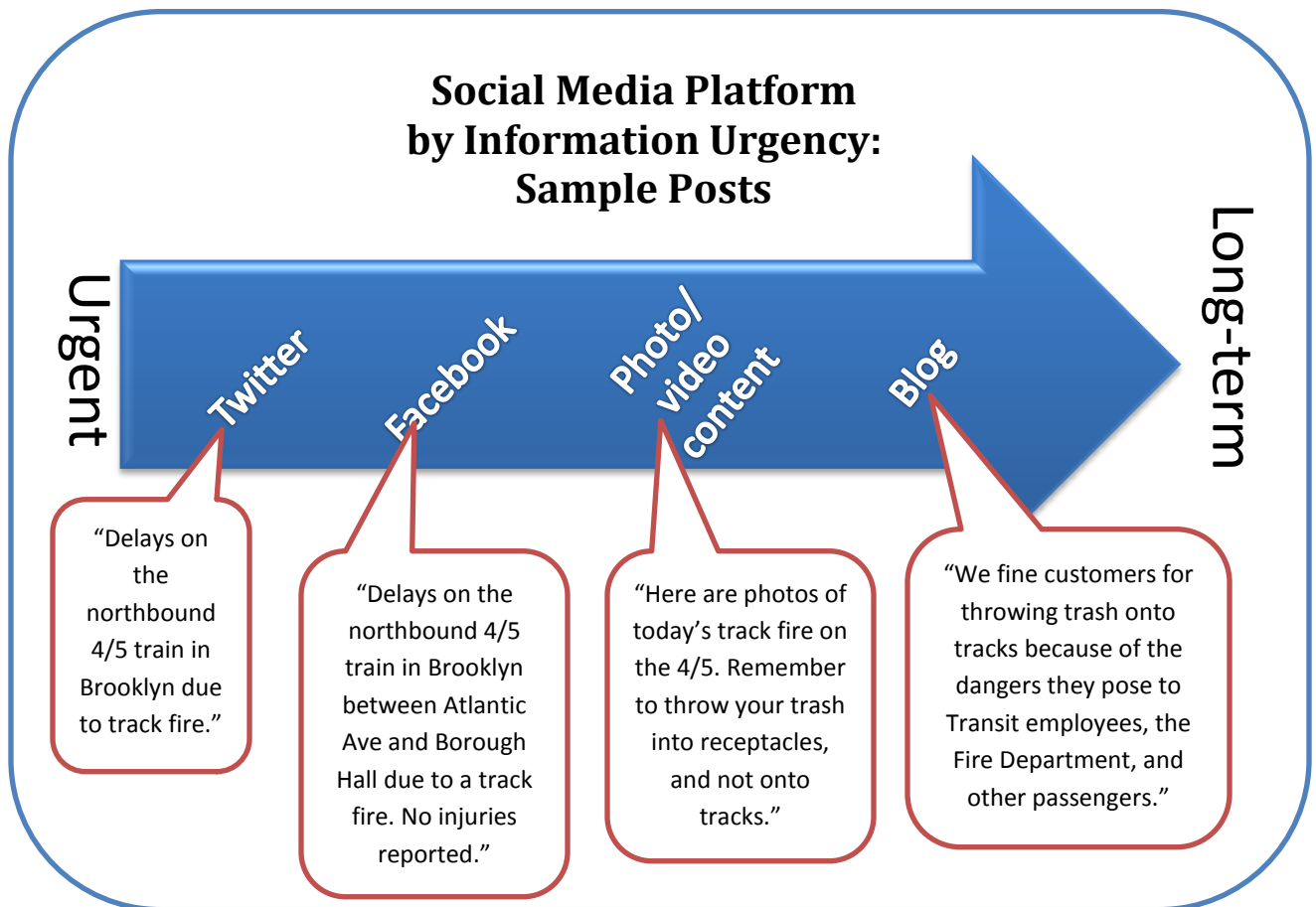
Blog: Transportation providers should maintain blogs to explain service information and policies in-depth, allowing for discussions, which will help educate customers and build communities of users. With free tools, such as Tumblr, Blogger and Wordpress, transportation providers can maintain blogs with a more casual tone than that of press releases and official statements. The Transportation Security Administration maintains a



⁴ NYU Rudin Center for Transportation Event: Social Media and Hurricane Sandy; November 27, 2012.

popular blog to explain policies and respond to incidents in the media (shown at right). Los Angeles County MTA maintains five blogs to accommodate users of different interests (developers, planners, Spanish-speakers, and so on).⁵ Through audience attention and participation across a variety of channels, LACMTA ensures a better understanding of their policies.

Most importantly, it should be easy for customers to access information pertaining to them, on the appropriate platform, and, whenever possible, in their language.



⁵ "Metro Blogs," <http://www.metro.net/news/metro-web/>

Engaging

Customer engagement takes many forms: re-posting news from others, responding to customer needs, asking questions, and appealing to the broader group. Engagement leads to more “likes,” “fans,” “followers” and “subscribers” – the numbers of which are important for perpetuating important messaging. When more travelers are informed about potential service changes, they will be motivated to change their plans as needed and amplify the message to other affected travelers, overall ensuring that as many travelers as possible are moving efficiently and safely through the system.

However, as noted in Part 1, more riders do not mean more followers; for example, for every 1,000 subway passengers NYCT receives a single Facebook “Like,” while for every 1 JetBlue passenger, there are 7.58 Likes. Similarly, while PATH has approximately 1 Twitter follow for every 20 riders, American Airlines has more than three times that ratio. The large fan numbers acquired by the airlines were earned through engagement, making customers feel that they are heard and understood.

Respond

Customer questions posed during rush hours are often from customers needing on-the-go assistance, and should be responded to as soon as possible. Tweets from PATH are particularly useful to passengers needing en-route assistance, for example:

“@brittanygh The elevators are working at WTC. There is currently no elevator service at Exchange Place. <http://ow.ly/fBROI ^RJ>” - PATH Rail System @PATHTweet

Throughout customer engagement practices, the tone should be casual and warm, even though customers may be hostile, particularly during delays. Needlessly hostile tweets will not necessarily warrant a response. Many transportation providers cannot guarantee 24-hour responses, so profiles should include hours of availability to answer questions.

Accountability

PATH is also a role model for engagement on Twitter for ‘signing’ tweets with the personnel who respond. This effort shows accountability for activities, allows the agency to track actions by customer service agent, and attaches a human persona to the note. PATH furthers its accountability by apologizing frequently for service issues, more than any other provider in this study. In fact, “sorry” was prevalent in the tweets of private transportation carriers, but mostly

absent from public agencies' vocabulary. It is essential to show accountability by apologizing for mishaps, for example:

"@kehvt We're sorry about what you've been through. Hoping you enjoy your flight and can get some rest while in MCO." - JetBlue

Outgoing

Additional forms of customer engagement include following other agencies, to remain informed about incidents or activities, and engaging a larger group through contests, open-ended questions and user photos, as American Airlines features on its Facebook profile:



Market

Marketing educates transportation customers about new services or recent accomplishments, and is an essential tool for informing customers about using different services, new policies, or traveling safely.

Timing: Marketing messages should be pushed throughout the day (outside of rush hours), to reach large numbers of customers at different times. However, they should be posted no less than ninety minutes apart to avoid being perceived as spam by users.

Priority: If urgent service messages are being pushed out at the moment, marketing messages should be delayed until the situation is resolved.

Tone: Use a casual and informative tone, as it will be perceived as information rather than advertising. A sample marketing tweet from New York City Transit Subways effectively educates transit customers to use the system better. The casual, amiable tone is more likely to capture attention than an explicit advertisement for the service.

“Need to know what subway work is planned for the weekend? There's an app for that. The Weekender. <http://bit.ly/LH1lms>” - NYCT Subway Service @NYCTSubwayScoop

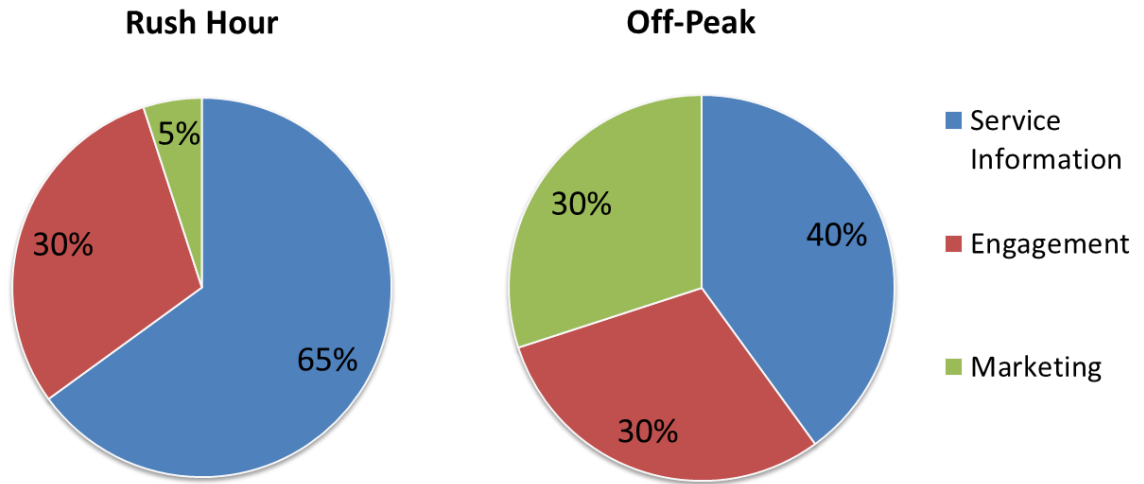
Balance

A healthy balance of information, engagement and marketing is vital. Based on analysis in Part 1 of this report, the ideal proportions for social media by public transportation agencies are:

Rush Hour: 65% service information, 30% engagement, 5% marketing

Off-Peak: 40% service information, 30% engagement, 30% marketing

Recommended Proportions of Social Media Posts



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Build Community

Developing relationships both with and among customers will help disseminate information, build goodwill for the transportation provider, and establish central points of contact for large groups of people.

Online: Building an online community of riders can be as simple as developing train station pages on Facebook, which users can opt into for up-to-date service, maintenance and safety information. Transit agencies can also partner with FourSquare to develop “badges,” or in-software rewards, for checking in at appropriate stations. FourSquare and similar tools should also be used to push real-time, location-based service statuses (including user-generated information, like elevator outages) to users’ mobile phones as they approach transit facilities.

In-person: Community-building efforts may take transportation providers offline, where they can interact face-to-face with customers and hold longer discussions. These meetings can take place in the form of visible station agents, meet-and-greets with transit officials, or question-and-answer sessions with personnel. For example, PATH frequently posts to Twitter a version of the following: “We'll have management staff at World Trade Center Station on PATHursday, 8/23, 7:30-9:30 a.m. to answer your service questions.” This regular meetup lets PATH customers take their online conversations to the next level, humanizes the agency and reminds transportation officials of their overall mission.

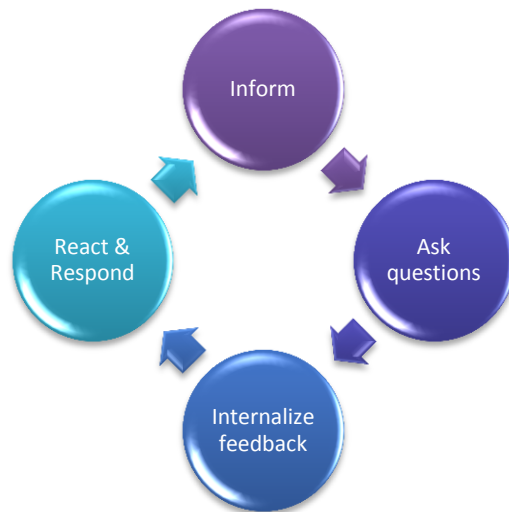
Collaborate: Both online and in-person, transportation providers should collaborate with the public on future developments. Using social media tools including blogs, Facebook and Twitter, customers can provide feedback on everything from proposed schedules to new technologies. Their input is important for both developing new resources that will be used widely and helping them understand the obstacles and costs of transportation work.

For instance, Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority recently requested customer feedback on several proposed revised bus maps. Noting on their blog, “Feel free to give us your feedback, and note that these maps will be revised based on feedback from customers.” By requesting feedback and regularly responding in the blog comments, WMATA showed a commitment to making a usable tool based on collaborations with the public, which benefits all parties involved.⁶

⁶ “Metrobus System Map Redesign,” PlanItMetro: Metro’s Planning Blog, September 19, 2012. <http://planitmetro.com/2012/09/19/metrobus-system-map-redesign/>

Responsive

Transportation providers' responsiveness involves the two-way exchange of information between their official feed and customers' input. Public feedback can point out customer needs and field conditions to the agency. Feedback and responsiveness is an ongoing process of information, dialogue and incremental improvements:



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Listening is an Active Process

Internalize Feedback

Data received via social media, whether a complaint about a bus driver or accolades for a new service, must be internalized to the agency. This information cannot stop with the public affairs officers who manage the social media account; it should be quantified, evaluated, and passed on to appropriate organization members. Frequent complaints can pinpoint a reckless train conductor, an especially friendly bus driver, or bring to light an incident that has not yet been reported by management. Using incoming feedback for improvement is a major step in social media success.

San Francisco's BART distributes weekly comment roundups to staff, considering it to be an informal evaluation of the week's activities.⁷ This method of receiving customer feedback is an authentic evaluation, nearly in real-time, that can be used for long-range analysis and improvement.

⁷ Jordan, Melissa. "Transit 2.0 at BART.gov," Presentation at O'Reilly Gov 2.0 Summit, September, 2010. <http://en.oreilly.com/gov2fall09/public/schedule/detail/11271>

React and Respond

Use customer feedback for change as needed: reward a great employee, hone customer information, or amend a policy. Workflows should be designed to deliver the action item to the responsible person, follow-through on its changes (or respond about its infeasibility), then follow up with the public user who made the suggestion.

A popular tool for acting on user requests is SeeClickFix.com, which allows the public to submit problem areas, tag by location, and prioritize others' submissions. Government agencies acknowledge, act on, and close out these issues. Although they may not rank highly for public officials, these action items are often major safety and quality of life issues for local residents. In the New York region, only the NYC Department of Transportation seems to have used this tool (concerning Greenway safety). However, SeeClickFix and its competitors are worthwhile tools for internalizing and acting on customers' priorities.

Self-Evaluate

By regularly monitoring and seeking to improve their online reputations, transportation providers will increasingly be regarded as trusted sources for information and likeable sources of engagement. Performance should be evaluated on:

- numbers of followers and likes and their trends upwards/downwards
- mentions of the organization, and whether they were positive or negative
- responses to posts (shows level of clarity and/or positivity)
- how often people clicked on posted links (shows a lead-in to important information)
- who re-posted what information (shows an authoritative voice)
- most shared content (shows interesting content)

Metrics tools like Facebook Insights, Hootsuite and Bit.ly can measure the impacts of social media efforts, and where there is room for improvement. The importance of these metrics is to comprehend the success of these tools for informing, motivating and engaging customers, resulting in safer and more efficient travel.

Social Media Challenges

Investing in social media is not without its challenges for transportation providers.

Recommendations to address some common concerns are:

Staff resources: Automated tools to double-post to multiple social networks and pre-program marketing messages and planned service notifications, like Hootsuite and built-in Twitter and Facebook integration, save time and resources. In addition, staff presently allocated to call centers can also provide support via social media, using tools that allow employees to write draft messages, pending managers' approval, can distribute the workload. Finally, managing audience expectations by posting 'office hours' can help mitigate off-hours requests.

Archiving/Retention requirements: Many U.S. states require retention of social media records, at least for a specific period of time. New York's laws are still indeterminate on this subject, but it is likely that records can be requested through the Freedom of information Act.⁸ So social media posts, comments and dialogue should be maintained, and can be automatically recorded using one of many popular tools for this purpose, like Arkovi, Smarsh and Global Relay. Other social media management tools, like Hootsuite, have optional archiving built in, and Twitter is currently deploying a function for users to download all sent tweets.^{9,10}

Digital divide: While a lack of smartphones by lower-income portions of the population is often seen as reason to avoid a heavy focus on social media, the divide is not dramatic in this setting. Because social media networks are free and open to the public, they are less restrictive than other sources of information, like cable news. Furthermore, Twitter provides the option to receive certain messages by text, which is used widely on all variety of phones.¹¹

The technological divide exists in New York City infrastructure, where a lack of underground mobile phone service limits subway passengers' awareness of service changes. As more stations become wired (happening gradually, now¹²) and passengers become connected, they will travel more easily through the system, re-routing as necessary while on the go.

⁸ "Records Advisory: Preliminary Guidance on Social Media," New York State Archives, May 24, 2010.

⁹ Holmes, Ryan. "Social Media Compliance Isn't Fun, But It's Necessary," *Harvard Business Review* Blog, August 23, 2012. blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/08/social_media_compliance_isnt.html

¹⁰ Bryant, Martin. "Twitter has started rolling out the option to download all your tweets," *The Next Web*, December 16, 2012.

¹¹ "How to Get SMS Notifications for Tweets and Interactions," <http://support.twitter.com/articles/20169920-how-to-get-sms-notifications-for-tweets-and-interactions#>

¹² Flegenheimer, Matt. "Cellphone and Wireless Service Coming to More Subway Stations," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2012.

Conclusion

Transportation providers in the New York region are already providing information to riders through service alerts and other services, but should be doing more in the realm of social media, including:

- More listening, leading to action and response: customers' experiences in the field can be educational to managers, especially in terms of unsafe conditions
- More languages: Urban populations are increasingly speakers of English as a second language. Transportation information, especially during major events, should be provided in multiple languages.
- More accountability: Apologizing for delays or other service interruptions is essential in customer service in order to build rapport with transportation users
- Timed marketing: Although marketing is essential to build an audience base, it should be timed appropriately to avoid interfering with service information, and infrequently enough to avoid irritating readers.

By following social media best practices, transportation providers can build ridership, the trust of their audience, and use their limited communications resources efficiently. In the future, the so-called "internet of things" will empower infrastructure and devices to broadcast their own status without human interference, so issues can be known and resolved with less human intervention.

The more immediate future of social media lay in crowdsourcing, which will allow transportation providers to harness the wisdom of crowds to learn about field conditions and potentially improve system management. To reach the point of productive crowdsourcing, managers need to listen actively on social media now, and implement the best practices of being accessible, informative, engaging and responsive.