

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2018

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, www.bjaleader.org, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Nancy McKeon.

Police Chief/ Sheriff Communication: A New Game

by
Darrel W. Stephens

In the effort to keep their communities safe, today's police chiefs and sheriffs require a well-developed set of executive skills. Among the most important skills is communication. The ongoing proliferation of news and information outlets and platforms makes keeping track of your options a challenge. We all know, for example, that print newspaper circulation has declined significantly, but few of us may know that digital newspaper circulation declined by an estimated 9% in 2017. (Pew 2018) Communicating effectively is a new game for today's executives.

I have given police executive communication a lot of thought over the years as I served as chief in four different cities. I have also written about various aspects of leadership communication. The purpose of this commentary is to share some thoughts and observations with police leaders on the current landscape in the hope that it will be of value in improving the effectiveness of their communication.

Developing a Strategy That Promotes Transparency

One of the most important steps a chief or sheriff can take is to develop a communication strategy (Stephens, Hill, Greenberg 2011). Developing communication goals are critical in this complex environment. Mine included how to effectively share my vision of policing, provide direction and information in crisis situations, manage change and encourage the community to accept some of the responsibility for their safety. The need for speed and flexibility is a constant factor. Chiefs and sheriffs work in a nonstop, 24/7 world where one incident can quickly evolve into a major crisis. Bad news travels at breakneck speed across the digital landscape.

Today's strategy should begin with a plan that takes full advantage of what we know about communications and the tools that are now available at a relatively low cost. A plan helps identify and use the best ways to reach the targeted audience – the evening news works pretty well with the baby boomers but not so much with the millennials. A plan provides guidance and direction for the department's overall approach to communication and an opportunity to reinforce the commitment to transparency. A number of police departments have developed strategies that make them the source of news about policing issues in their cities. Embracing the full range of options offers the opportunity to take charge of information and to increase transparency.

*The single biggest problem
in communication
is the illusion
that it has taken place.*

George Bernard Shaw

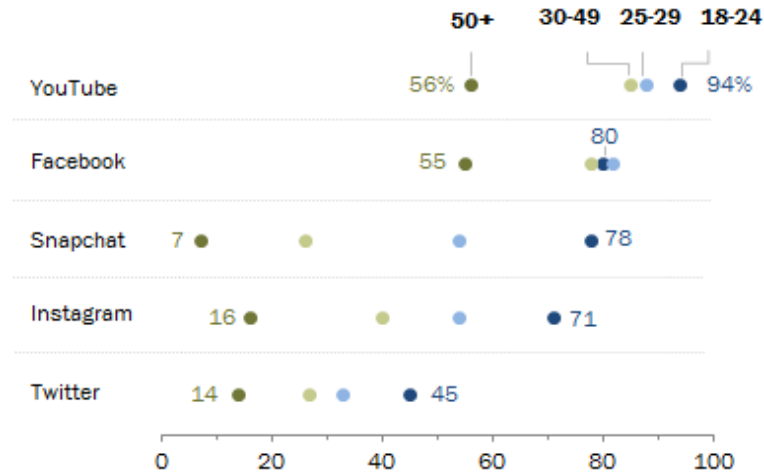
Thinking Strategically About Media Platforms

Even though large segments of the population no longer routinely access traditional media sources, it is important that the communication strategy include them. Police executives should take advantage of the opportunities that local newspapers, television and radio offer. However, communications through these outlets are filtered – often reduced to a quote or soundbite that fits in the framework of the story but may not clearly convey the intended message. A press release for example, should be made available in full on the department's website or Facebook page. A complete interview or statement can be shown on YouTube, so the public has complete information available to them.

The growth of social media has been nothing short of astonishing. Founded in 2004 Facebook has 2.25 billion users around the world (Zephoria 2018). Twitter has 330 million monthly active users, YouTube has 1.8 billion and Nextdoor has 114,000 active neighborhoods (DMR 2018). The table below provides some insight into the age of social media users. Platforms like Snapchat and Instagram are particularly attractive to the 18-24 age group with 78% using Snapchat more than once daily (Pew Research Center 2018). These and other platforms offer an inexpensive way for police executives and departments to connect directly with members of their community.

Social platforms like Snapchat and Instagram are especially popular among those ages 18 to 24

% of U.S. adults in each age group who say they use ...



Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018.
 "Social Media Use in 2018"

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A communication strategy helps the department decide where to target messages to specific audiences on various social media platforms, traditional news outlets or both. It will also help determine which platforms are best suited for the department’s needs.

Considering Leader Sociability: Personal Media

The chief or sheriff must also decide if they want a personal presence on social media in addition to their department’s account. Twitter provides an opportunity for direct brief communication to followers who may “retweet” the message to their followers. Although many “tweets” are simply providing information, they have been called “microblogs” because the chief/sheriff can make statements about current issues or events. These statements provide followers with the chief or sheriff’s point of view and can be used to influence opinions. Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo is a daily user of Twitter with over 55,000 followers. His tweets range from providing information, to praising officers for work well done to questioning national gun and immigration policies.

A survey of 630 executives in the private sector indicated CEO sociability¹ increased from 36% in 2010 to 66% in 2012 (Weber Shandwick 2013). The research found that employees favor their CEO having a presence on social media. Fifty-two percent feel inspired, 46% technologically advanced and 73% search to see what their CEO is saying (Weber Shandwick 2013). Social CEOs are viewed as forward-looking, good communicators, open, accessible, and good listeners (Weber Shandwick 2013). Although social

¹ Sociability is the degree to which CEOs use social media, company intranet and website to tell the company story. It allows them to exert influence over discussion about the company, internally and externally and engage the workforce and public.

CEOs use social media to reach customers, stockholders and the general public, 71% indicated their intended audience is company employees.

Does this research translate to the police executive? Do police employees view the chief or sheriff's presence on social media the same way as the private sector? Research in policing on social media use has not looked specifically at police executive use of these platforms. Social media has clearly been embraced by police agencies. A 2015 survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) indicated that 96% of the 553 agencies that responded to the survey use social media in some capacity (IACP 2015). That does not mean the chief/sheriff has a personal account – there are a few active large city chiefs in addition to Art Acevedo – Arlington TX Chief Will Johnson – 7200 followers, Seattle Chief Carmen Best – 2400 followers, Dallas Chief U Renee Hall – 3800 followers and retired Dallas Chief David Brown with 64,000 followers. There is no doubt many others that use Twitter and other social media platforms, but police executives generally do not seem to have taken full advantage of the opportunity to use them to communicate with external and internal audiences.

“2013 will bring a greater focus on social reputation, be it for companies or CEOs. Companies that are truly social and engage their employees and customers in genuine conversation will be recognized as the new corporate leaders. CEOs who are social will be the next new thing.”

*Leslie Gaines-Ross
Chief Reputation Strategist,
(Weber Shandwick 2013)*

Recognizing the Collapse of Internal/External

Effective executive communication requires the chief/sheriff to use of all of the opportunities to connect with the community and employees. External and internal communication are the traditional way to talk about communicating with different audiences, but today all messages are likely to be heard by many audiences. Public statements, interviews, quotes in the media will be heard by both external and internal audiences so it is important to think carefully about the message. In the same way, one should not be surprised if internal communications, such as email, find their way out into the public forum. All communications should reflect the values of respect, candor, transparency and timeliness.²

Underused Options: Websites and Blogs

In addition to the traditional and social media, police executives have other methods to reach the public that should not be overlooked. The department's website is an important tool for informing the public about department activities. It should be current, easy to navigate, interactive and professional in appearance. It is very difficult to find information on many police websites. A recent search for use of force policies on the websites for the 68 Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA) departments found that 37% were either difficult to find (12%) or not on the website at all (25%) (Kuhn 2018).

² Timeliness means the chief/sheriff communicate on important issues in a reasonable proximity to the event or issue. Officer involved shootings, for example, are events of great interest to the public and police officers alike and in recent years have been the source of considerable debate about what is said about them and when. Releasing body worn camera footage has been a big part of that debate.

Blogs can also be an effective way of communicating although there are few chiefs/sheriffs that have a personal blog. There are no chiefs/sheriffs on the top 50 law enforcement officer blogs list by the criminal justice degree school's website. The former Lincoln, NE Chief Tom Cassidy (now the Public Safety Director) has been blogging for over 10 years on a wide range of policing and public safety issues - <http://lpd304.blogspot.com>. And, Kansas City MO Chief Rick Smith is a frequent blogger. One of his recent blogs addressed the issue of traffic tickets and race in response to an article in the local newspaper - <http://kcpdchief.blogspot.com/2018/05/>.

Preserving the Power of Face-to-Face

Speeches and community meetings are good ways for chiefs/sheriffs to connect directly with members of the public. Although these settings do not have the reach of other forms of communications, they provide the best opportunity for the community to have personal interaction and for building relationships.

Chiefs/Sheriffs need to give a lot of thought about the best way to approach internal communications. Keeping in mind that social media posts, public speeches and news stories are also consumed by internal audiences, the chief/sheriff should focus on developing an approach aimed at department employees. Email and video statements are frequently used when there is an important message that needs to go to everyone in the organization. However, in the same way it is important to participate in community meetings, the chief/sheriff must also connect with employees in a personal way. They need to have an opportunity for face-to-face interaction, to ask questions and express their opinions directly to the chief/sheriff. Attending roll call briefings, in-service training sessions, riding with officers and holding regular employee meetings are all helpful in providing personal contact. Chiefs/Sheriffs should also take advantage of the brief one on one encounter with an employee in the hallway or in the community to spend a minute or two to ask how they are doing. These brief conversations make a difference in how the chief/sheriff is perceived by employees and quite often provides useful insight into how things are going in the department. Employees certainly remember the chief/sheriff passing them by in the hallway without any acknowledgment of their presence.

Chiefs/sheriffs should also remember that behavior is a critical part of communication. Both employees and the public want to see that behavior is consistent with what is said – if it is not – trust will be diminished as will the impact of the message.

Effective communication is the key to success for a police chief or sheriff. It is a demanding process that requires a strategy and a personal investment of time. The chief/sheriff needs the support of both the public and employees to accomplish organizational goals. That support will not be there if they don't understand the goals and they won't understand them without ongoing communications from the chief/sheriff.

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