

# Law enforcement agencies board the social media train

Posted At : January 18, 2011 7:35 AM | Posted By : Kyle Ridley

Related Categories: Technology Trends, Justice/Public Safety & Homeland Security, State & Local, Community Development, Business Development Tools

Think about the amount of time you spend reading missing person or most wanted flyers on storefront bulletin boards. Then think of how often you read through the morning paper's headlines. What about watching an entire newscast? Now, take all that time and compare it with that spent checking Facebook or Twitter. For many, there's no competition. Just as radio conquered newspapers, and television overtook radio, the Internet continues to dominate as a one-stop shop for news, networking, entertainment, and even solving crime. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) recently conducted a survey on law enforcement's use of social media, and it's no wonder a whopping majority (81%) of agencies reported frequent use.

Last year, GovWin [reported](#) on social media's rise in public safety, and the IACP's survey [results](#) further support our initial findings. The report outlines results of an electronic survey sent to 728 law enforcement agencies – mostly municipal police departments – from 48 states and the District of Columbia. The agencies reported use of social media for a variety of tasks, including crime and emergency notifications, soliciting tips, background investigations, and community outreach (all in the 37-44% range). The most widely reported use of social media was for crime investigations (62.3%).

Facebook buries its competitors when it comes to social media tools, with nearly 67 percent of agencies reporting use. Twitter and Nixle come a distant second at just under 30 percent, while MySpace, YouTube and LinkedIn fall in the minority. Facebook's reign is no surprise. With more than 500 million users worldwide, why wouldn't law enforcement agencies get in on the action and heighten visibility? Instead of relying on newspapers and TV, agencies can increase coverage through quick posts that filter to hundreds of their followers' news feeds. The AMBER Alert Program recently launched a Facebook [page](#) where users can "like" certain states and receive alerts regarding child-abduction cases.

A random search on police Twitter accounts brought up a [feed](#) for the Milwaukee Police Department with updates on a homicide investigation, a firearm offender, the city's 10 most wanted criminals, and new police officer graduates. With each bit of news condensed to 140 characters or less, readers get a swift rundown of events without having to sort through lengthy articles or wait for the six o'clock news. Posting missing person photos, surveillance videos, fugitive mug shots, or the latest crime and emergency reports all on one page is efficient and timely, especially with so many people opting to scroll through social media during a break instead of opening a paper. These sites also allow users to quickly respond to inquiries, message their own leads on investigations, and report area incidents.

Though not every agency has boarded the social media train, many are close to buying a ticket. Nearly 65 percent of the agencies surveyed started using social media in the last two years. Of the agencies not currently utilizing social media tools, 61.6 percent are considering it, and most of those agencies (52.4%) plan to establish a presence within the next year. Resource constraints on time and personnel are the reported main obstacles in launching social media practices, followed by security and privacy concerns.

Although still in the early adoption stage, a majority of agencies (45.3%) have already reported social media as a successful component in solving crimes. Nearly 32 percent of agencies reported no success, and 23.1 percent are still unsure. In addition to assisting in investigations, 42.5 percent of agencies reported social media tools as helpful in improving police/community relations.

A surprising result of the survey was that despite its popularity, the majority of agencies (41.7 %) do not currently have a social media policy. However, 23.2 percent reported they are in the process of developing one.

## GovWin's Take

The use of social media in public safety not only heightens news coverage and community awareness, it also cuts costs for many departments forced to drastically crunch budgets. Whether you're on board or not, it's safe to say there's no stopping social media's global influence. Several companies are in the early stages of developing software to track social media feeds and provide data analytics on reported emergencies in attempts to improve response time. Some agencies are even getting in on the mobile phone application craze. The San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District recently launched an [iPhone app](#) that provides real-time access to reported emergencies. What started as a social networking outlet has branched to a common business device,

and is now becoming an everyday tool for increasing public safety.