

Sex offender registries branch to social media

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Over the last few years, social networking – particularly Facebook – has shifted from a forum for college students to keep in touch, to a worldwide community with participants of all ages. The capabilities of social media tools are seemingly endless as users are no longer limited to simply messaging each other. Many businesses and nonprofits now use these pages to let “friends” know about sales and to drum up business support. Numerous government entities use Facebook to promote events taking place around town. This often includes more than just updates on local concerts and festivals; information is also posted to help keep citizens safe.

One of the more recent Facebook trends is creating groups advertising sex offender registries. Interested parties can “like” the group to view the registry, or in cases like the [Jackson County, Ala. Sheriff's Office's](#) page, the list is openly available to all. The number of people concerned enough about sex offenders to actually find the registry through the use of a search engine or through scanning state websites is limited, and public safety departments fear this could leave many people unaware of sex offenders in their area. By putting the list on Facebook, sheriff offices and other public safety departments are hoping to leverage citizens' need for quick results and community awareness while increasing registry viewership.

Many of these pages include pictures of the offenders, brief descriptions of their crime, their location (regardless of whether it took place in that jurisdiction), and the offender's address. Some locations are even creating an app for their registries to download to mobile devices. Through these efforts, public safety officials are able to reach a wider audience and capitalize on the more than 800 million active Facebook users, 50 percent of whom log on daily. Not only does this make the registry lists more widely accessible, it also helps promote the spread of information; when someone “likes” the page, that information will spread to their friends' pages.

Sex offender registries are not the only items public safety departments have begun posting on Facebook. Some departments regularly post crime updates and even surveillance photos/videos of suspects in an effort to increase public safety and catch criminals. The Westbrook, Maine Police Department's [Facebook page](#) provides weekly statistics on the number of service calls made, vehicle accidents, theft and other complaints. The department also posts a regular “Weekend Update” that provides pictures of arrested individuals and information on their charges.

Analyst's Take:

The advances in social media and the increasing trend of individuals “going mobile” could provide significant opportunities for vendors. More than 350 million Facebook users access the site on their mobile devices, and more than 475 mobile operators deploy Facebook on mobile products. While posting sex offender registries and other arrest information on social networking sites is still a relatively new trend, it is expected to grow in popularity. Though these sites are specifically designed to be extremely user-friendly and are usually updated in-house, vendors should take into account the implication of this increasing market and consider developing products to work with free Facebook pages. It is likely that mobile applications will continue to grow in popularity, and vendors should focus on apps that provide a list of the offenders (much like the Facebook page) or even mapping applications that pull information from the online registries and pinpoint the location of sex offenders' homes within a certain radius. This would allow concerned citizens to open the app anywhere and find out whether any previously convicted offenders are living nearby.

While Facebook is currently a cheap alternative to more sophisticated products on the market, it does have its limitations and, in many cases, may be used in conjunction with a product provided by a vendor who can be linked to the Facebook page. Vendors should consider speaking with statewide agencies and larger localities about their products, and work to market them as a serious competitor. They should make sure to highlight their product's successes and advanced features as well as how it can be connected to social networking sites.