Social Networking for Law Enforcement

*S*earching for ways to improve community relations and expedite information to the public, law enforcement agencies are turning to social networking sites.

Police departments use the sites to rapidly communicate directly to citizens, providing such information as suspect descriptions, crime alerts, road closings, missing child and person alerts, dangerous weather conditions and traffic accidents.

People voluntarily reveal details of their lives on social networking sites, which can serve law enforcement well. Sites such as Facebook® and MySpace™ can be used by law enforcement to obtain information about suspects, for example, involvement in gang activity. Photos or videos of suspects can be posted as well. Sites such as You-Tube™ are being used to foster police recruitment.

Citizen subscribers to sites such as Twitter™ and Nixle can automatically receive police department information via text message, e-mail or by logging on to those sites.

Law enforcement agencies of all sizes are using the technology. Described below is how three diverse police departments — Baltimore and Mt. Rainier in Maryland and Modesto, Calif. — are using the sites to their advantage.

For descriptions of various networking sites and useful Web sites, see the sidebar, "Networking Sampler."

Baltimore, Md.

The Baltimore Police Department, with 4,000 civilian and sworn personnel, is the eighth largest municipal police force in the United States, serving a city population of 641,000. The department is embracing the use of social networking sites in a variety of ways to enhance information flow and community relations.

The department began using Facebook® and Twitter™ in March 2009, and is experimenting with Nixle. Baltimore has nine police districts and has implemented Nixle in the southeastern and northwestern districts. The goal is to implement Nixle citywide in addition to Facebook® and Twitter™, according to Anthony Guglielmi, director of public affairs for the department.

"Part of the police commissioner's crime fighting plan includes community engagement and involving the community, and part of that is sharing of information," Guglielmi says. "Residents have a right to know if a homicide or a violent crime has occurred in their neighborhood when it occurs, and not have to wait. That's what we use Twitter™ and Facebook® for. We use them as an extension of the local news media because the media can't cover everything that happens and involves the department."

Baltimore also uses YouTube™ to foster police recruitment. An in-house video production unit rides along with officers on patrol and records police academy graduations, then edits the results and prepares a video package to post to YouTube™.

Networking Sampler

Below are descriptions of various networking sites, "how-to" links and samples of police departments using these services. Description information is taken from http://www.wikipedia.org.

Twitter™. Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers.

http://help.twitter.com/portal

http://twitter.com/BaltimorePolice

http://twitter.com/Boston_Police

http://twitter.com/portsmouthpd

How to Set Up a Twitter Account
http://www.twitip.com/how-to-set-up-a-twitter-account/

Nixle. Nixle is a community information service provider and built exclusively to provide secure and

Guglielmi says Facebook® is useful for posting information on wanted suspects, department news and links to video. Police have received photos of accident scenes via Facebook®. Also, officers have their own Facebook® pages, allowing the community to interact with individual officers.

"It's about getting people engaged," he says. "What we really like about [social networking sites] is they engage people in a dialog to talk about crime. If people are talking about it and keeping abreast of what is going on, they're going to hopefully take part in crime fighting through partnering with the police and participating in community groups. Even things like littering that affect life in a community — we want to solicit feedback as much as we can."

Although Baltimore uses Twitter™ to inform the public, the department does not encourage users to submit tips through Twitter™ because of security concerns; anyone could view the information. If police are seeking information, they will include a contact number with the post. The department is working on establishing a secure text message tipline so people can send text messages from Twitter™ that no one else can view. Also, given that the department has almost 4,000 followers on Twitter™, it would be impossible for staff to keep up a constant two-way discussion on everything the department posts, and so the department uses it as a broadcasting tool rather than a discussion tool.

One challenge is verifying and maintaining accuracy of information. The department receives large amounts of information, which must be verified before notifying the public on Twitter™ or another site. For example, an incident call came in as a shooting, which turned out to be an individual who had fallen on the sidewalk. "You don't want to put out information that causes unnecessary concern," Guglielmi says. Once an event is confirmed, police can use Twitter™ to notify the public and provide running updates as a situation evolves.

Police need to ensure that information they distribute is accurate and head off false information that may circulate in the community as an event unfolds. Guglielmi explains that during one hostage barricade situation, citizens were communicating live on Twitter™.

"Officers used tear gas and residents were twittering that it was gunshots, which created hysteria, so we need to be vigilant on the police side and constantly update the Twitter™ page to make sure that the information and the chatter is accurate. We don't want bad information getting out there and people panicking."

Keeping the sites up to date requires manpower. Officers ensure Twitter™ and Facebook® are updated within 20 minutes after a confirmed major incident occurs. Officers can also post to Twitter™ and Facebook® from their BlackBerrys.

"It's as close to realtime as possible," Guglielmi says. "It's been an incredibly successful tool for us. The community seems to really like it. They are really good tools for us and have a lot of possibilities. I think in two years from now it will be a standard for law enforcement."

Nixle offers a secure communication platform tailored for police departments and municipalities. User applicants have to go through a vetting process before being accepted. Also, Nixle can target an alert to a specific geographic area or neighborhood.

In May 2009 police received a solid lead on a homicide via Facebook®. The tip was originally posted as a "wall post" that anyone could see, but police quickly removed it. "We don't want to show our hands before an arrest is made and we never would want to increase the exposure or risk for people providing the information," Guglielmi says.

For more information about the Baltimore Police Department's use of social networking sites, contact Anthony Guglielmi at (410) 396-2012 or e-mail Anthony.guglielmi@baltimorepolice.org.

Modesto, Calif.

Use of social networking sites boosts police/citizen relationships and flow of information to the public, but overuse can result in too much of a good thing, cautions Sgt. Brian Findlen, public information officer for the Modesto Police Department.

The department has about 370 total personnel, 250 of which are sworn officers. Serving a population of 205,000, the department uses Nixle and Twitter™ to communicate with the public.

"It has to be necessary, pertinent information that makes a difference in people's lives at that point in time," Findlen says. "We need to be careful because if we provide information to people that is not pertinent, we can cause them to unsubscribe. We need to choose the information carefully and not just put it out because we have the ability to do so.

"You can overdo it and blast out too much information. You can annoy people to the point that they turn you off, and that is counterproductive."

The department began using Twitter™ in 2008 and Nixle in 2009. The department uses Nixle as its primary site, automatically posting crime and public safety information to Twitter™ through an interface with Nixle. Nixle allows the posting of more lengthy information. Citizens who subscribe to Twitter™ will be routed to Nixle if they choose to read the full details. A checkbox on the Nixle screen allows a portion of the message to be posted to the department's Twitter™ site. Twitter™ subscribers can view the message, which includes a link to Nixle if the user chooses to read the full text.

Twitter™ has had at least one instance of people setting up a bogus police site. Findlen says Nixle, which is tailored specifically for law enforcement and municipalities, is more secure. It has an extensive verification process for site applicants and allows targeting of information to specific geographic areas, from a quarter-mile radius of an incident to as far as 20 miles.

"It's exactly what we needed," Findlen says. "We can put as much or as little information as we want and can tailor it to specific neighborhoods, the entire city or the county, so we know the information is hitting who it is supposed to hit."

Nixle has templates for posting different types of information, for example, missing persons. "It makes it so simple, anybody without training could use Nixle and post a message and understand it," he says.

"Since Twitter™ generates the user base quicker, my suggestion to law enforcement agencies is that if they are comfortable creating a Twitter™ account, they

create one along with a Nixle account, but enter information into Nixle, which can download to Twitter™." The department's Twitter™ site has more than 1,500 followers.

In late August 2009, police chased a vehicle containing suspects in a double homicide. The armed suspects abandoned the vehicle and fled on foot. During the subsequent manhunt in a residential neighborhood, Findlen used Twitter™ to keep citizens updated through when arrests were made and the neighborhood police perimeter lifted.

"We were dealing with a serious situation, the public was in danger and we needed them to have information. It was an avenue through which at least some people were getting the information.

"I find use of the sites to be a positive experience. There is no maintenance on our end. It's an easy means to distribute information from our patrol cars or laptop computers. We can put information out with no delay, with no middleman at no cost," Findlen says.

For more information about the Modesto Police Department's use of social networking sites, contact Sgt. Brian Findlen at (209) 652-1386 or e-mail findlenb@modestopd.com.

Mt. Rainier, Md.

Even small law enforcement agencies are implementing blogging and social networking technology as a way to better connect with the communities they serve.

Michael E. Scott, chief of the 17-officer Mt. Rainier Police Department, runs the department blog himself, updating it daily for the past three years to keep the community up to date on criminal activity.

"It's there to provide information to the community," Scott says. "It helps keep the public informed about what is going on and it gives them the opportunity to respond in cases where they have information about the crime or the incident.

"It also helps dispel a lot of rumors and myths and tells people what really happened. They get the facts before they have to ask."

Everything posted to the blog cross-publishes to the Mt. Rainier Yahoo® group, and discussion comes

through the Yahoo group. Scott continues publishing the blog because out-of-state people read it.

Mt. Rainier, with an approximate population of 10,000, borders Washington, D.C. "In Mt. Rainier, the police chief can get directly involved. People can pick up the phone and call the chief of police here. They get to know the police officers."

The department is registered with Twitter™, but rarely posts to it, and plans to use Nixle. Scott notes that Nixle's servers are housed on NLETS (International Justice and Public Safety Network), a secure information sharing system for state and local law enforcement agencies. When police departments publish on Nixle, the public knows the information comes from police. Nixle is a one-way service; citizens cannot post comments on it. It's used to push information out to the public.

"I believe that we have to use every tool in the tool box to get information out to the public," Scott says. "It gets emergency information out quickly, dispels myths and keeps the public informed. The more information is released ahead of time, the better the relationships between police and the community."

In addition to garnering citizen tips about crimes, the blog has helped police in forming neighborhood watch groups. "The value is community relations, and the information that flows out breaks down the traditional barriers between police and the community and gives police a face to the community."

For more information about the Mt. Rainier Police Department's use of social networking sites, contact Chief Michael E. Scott, at (301) 985-6580 or mscott@ mountrainiermd.org.