Overview
AASHTO began polling state DOTs on their use of online new media and social tools in 2009. Each spring, state DOTs are asked a series of questions related to the adoption of social media tools, the impact of social media on the state agencies and the influence social media has had on the relationship between the transportation department and its customers. This year, 40 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey.

Summary
The 2017 State DOT Social Media Survey indicates that the use of some kind of online social media tools has become standard business practice for state departments of transportation. However, while the use of these online tools is generally accepted, the ways in which state DOTs use the tools varies greatly, as does the types of tools each state uses.

For instance, some state DOTs have chosen to hire social media managers to lead their online outreach strategies while other states train all of their communications officers to handle aspects of online engagement. And, while 98 percent of state DOTs responding to the survey reported using Twitter, just four states said they used Snapchat. Both tools provide instant messaging—Twitter has been widely used by state DOTs for years in a variety of ways, while Snapchat has remained largely a mobile application that is favored by a younger demographic.

Only a few state DOTs even reported plans to develop new social media tools in the coming year, preferring to invest staff time and energy in improving how their respective programs are leveraging their existing social media presence.

Perhaps among the most interesting of findings is that state DOTs report more than ever an interest and emphasis in tracking their social media outreach, but fewer states this year said they archive and preserve their online social media messages for public records purposes.

Ultimately, there appears to be wide consensus among state DOTs that use social media that the public expects to find their transportation agencies in the social spaces, putting increasing pressure on state DOT communication teams to generate content—especially photos and video—that is preferred by social media audiences and that help tell state DOTs’ stories most effectively.
The Impact of Social Media
State DOTs reported a stronger investment in the use of social media to achieve overall agency communication goals. More than 80 percent of state DOTs reported they measure their social media efforts, showing a growing focus on return on investment for communications efforts. However, some states admitted they spent little time on measurement, and some suggested it was a topic on which they needed more training.

When asked about trends in social media usage, state DOTs said they saw a growing level of participation and engagement on Facebook. State DOTs also report that Twitter followers grow significantly during major incidents and weather events.
Several states reported that social media has allowed their programs to target specific audiences and to be more effective in delivering information directly to the public that needs it.

We’re using more social media channels to engage the younger audience. Our mobile 511 app is designed for those on the go and who don’t sit at their computers all day long. We’re targeting people who want continuous information in a nontraditional news format.

~ Survey Respondent

Our strategy is more integrated. Additionally, I feel it gives us a greater ability to tell our story. It’s driving coverage in traditional media as well as giving us the ability to go directly to our audience.

~ Survey Respondent

States reported that there is more demand for posting information on social platforms with greater frequency, for many that means multiple times a day. Additionally, there is a greater demand, according to states, for photos and video. States that utilize photos and video in their social feeds report a higher engagement rate with their target audiences.

The growing volume of content required to support social media accounts has prompted states to use material on multiple platforms, extending the reach of information and unifying communication strategies across media.

“The need for continually pushing out content has led the agency to be more efficient in how we produce content for social media. We now look at ways to produce multiple pieces of content before, during and after events, site visits, campaigns, etc., in order to extend the shelf life of the team’s efforts producing content.”

~ Survey Respondent

“Being more engaged with the public, trying to use language that the general public would understand and appreciate, being more active and responsive.”

~ Survey Respondent
Similar to the 2015 survey, states reported that if they could only use one social media tool, either Facebook (54 percent) or Twitter (41 percent) would be their pick. The ability to engage in multiple ways gives Facebook an advantage over other tools, according to survey respondents.

“Facebook gets our largest response. Our posts are often shared; at times, to very large audiences. Twitter is a close second.”

~ Survey Respondent

“Most bang for the buck in terms of ability to tell our story and shape messaging. Engagement is higher with Facebook than with other platforms.”

~ Survey Respondent

Those who chose Twitter cited its ability to communicate timely information succinctly (“It’s real time and it’s instant.”).

“It allows us to easily and quickly disseminate critical information which is our primary purpose.”

~ Survey Respondent

Both Snapchat and Periscope, a live-streaming video service provided by Twitter, were also cited by a few state DOTs that said the tools provided the opportunity to connect with younger audiences.

Mississippi was among the first state DOTs to use Snapchat. In 2016, Mississippi DOT used a photo prop to help safety fair attendees connect with its Snapchat account.

If your state could use only one tool...
Employees/Staffing

States reported an average of 15 staff members per communications team. Two-fifths (39 percent) have staff dedicated solely to social media. Another 22 percent have staff dedicated solely to video production. One state said it has created a unique “backpack reporter” position to help the DOT better tell its story on social media.

“One of our public information officers coordinates our social media and our videographer specializes in video production. Although they aren’t dedicated full time to these duties, they do take up the majority of their time.”
~ Survey Respondent

“Nobody is 100% anything. We all do some of each.”
~ Survey Respondent

Nebraska’s Backpack Journalist

The adoption of social media as a key suite of communication tools has tremendously affected the traditional department of transportation communication team in various ways, including the types of skill sets that are highly sought after.

The Nebraska transportation department last year created a unique position within its communications team, described as a “backpack journalist and photographer,” in an effort to generate more visual content that will help the department better tell its transportation stories.

According to Nebraska, its communication team has recently emphasized creating its own content that can be shared through various media channels, including social media. Following the retirement of a long-time photographer in 2015, the position was upgraded. Last year that position was converted from a public information officer category to “backpack journalist.”

“With our multimedia team, we are really working to drive our own content as much as possible to stay proactive in our approach,” said Jeni Lautenschlager, Nebraska DOT’s communications service manager.

The Nebraska backpack journalist helps cover stories for the DOT website and for social media and newsletters. The backpacker also manages the Nebraska Instagram account, while another staff videographer creates similar, but longer, video and commercial-based content. Additional content is created by the Nebraska graphic design staff and its web master.

Lautenschlager said that Nebraska is working strategically with its small communications staff to maintain a consistent message through all media—including online social media.

“We have been feeding (content) to social media and teasing out stories to our local media as well with the content we have been producing,” said Lautenschlager. “We want to be able to tell our story, but we also want to help our field folks by providing resources so they can point back to a singular message.”
More than half of states (53 percent) reported a shift in communications duties due to social media in the past year. States reported hiring for specific social media expertise, and organizing staff so that they can be more deliberate about their social media efforts, with more focus on strategic messaging and visual content.

“We have increased our use of social media to reach different audiences through the addition of new platforms and by bringing paid ads in-house.”
~ Survey Respondent

“We are focusing significantly more on visual (graphic design and photography) and video for use in both internal and external communications.”
~ Survey Respondent

“We now have a social media strategy, policy and plan ahead with a content calendar. We often produce week-long campaigns and no longer just post at random times. We meet monthly and brainstorm ideas.”
~ Survey Respondent
Social Media Monitoring

Almost all state DOTs utilize more than one social media account, across multiple platforms. Nearly 70 percent of state DOTs use a tool to monitor their multiple social media accounts.

The most popular tool for monitoring multiple social media accounts is Hootsuite.

However, just a third of states (32 percent) monitor their accounts 24 hours a day. Most states monitor during regular business hours, with a few extending their social media coverage to cover morning and evening commutes. Special situations, including major weather events and traffic incidents, also prompt most to extend social media coverage.

"We monitor during normal business hours, however we do update and post to our accounts as needed at all hours."

~ Survey Respondent

"Because we do have a 24/7 presence on social media, there is a weekly on-call schedule established for monitoring media requests and social media posting outside of normal business hours. This schedule includes a nine-member team so that each person is on-call less than six times a year."

~ Survey Respondent

During those times that social media activity is needed outside of normal business hours, states have assigned on-call staff persons—often the same person who also works with media. However, a few states report that they do not have the resources to manage social media outside of regular business hours, and instead work to manage public expectations.
Nearly 83 percent of states said that they respond to social media messages if someone asks a direct question. A slightly lower number (75 percent) said that they actively encourage engagement with their social media audience.

Most states said that they respond to social media comments, and most states said they try to respond quickly—ranging from minutes, to an hour, to within a business day.

“We have set the expectation that we will respond within normal business hours. Outside of these hours, we have automatic replies set up to respond to Facebook messages.”

~ Survey Respondent

“No one - we have a disclaimer on our social media pages stating the hours”

~ Survey Respondent

“Facebook says we have a 19-minute average response time. We try to respond as quickly as possible.”

~ Survey Respondent

On social media does your state DOT...

- push out messages only?
- engage if someone asks a direct question?
- actively encourage engagement?
Social Media and Employee Access
Nearly all states (88 percent) reported that their agency has some kind of social media usage policy in place. However, just 32 percent said that their social media policy allows all state employees to access social media sites and tools.

Archiving Social Media Posts and Text Messages
At this time, just 1 in 5 survey respondents are archiving their social media messages for public records requests purposes. Those eight states use a variety of tools to manage their archiving, including Meltwater, Backupify, Nuvi, Archive Social, Hootsuite and a custom internal tool. Just one state reported archiving text messages for public records purposes, but said they were not sure how those messages were preserved.

“Right now we are just not deleting content—but it is not archived.”
~ Survey Respondent

“In Twitter, copy and paste into Word document.”
~ Survey Respondent

“We just stopped; previously we used Smarsh.”
~ Survey Respondent
The Tools: Twitter, Facebook, Photos, and Video

The most dominate social media platforms continued to be Twitter (98 percent), Facebook (95 percent) and online video—either YouTube or Vimeo (95 percent). Other platforms showed growth in usage. Nearly half of states use Flickr (54 percent) and Instagram (56 percent), showing a growing interest in visual content.

LinkedIn, primarily a business networking and recruitment platform, is now used by nearly 3 in 5 states (58 percent) and mobile apps are used by 60 percent of states.

Twitter continues to be a favorite of states, which report using it primarily for communicating emergency notifications, traffic alerts and construction and maintenance updates. Of the states using Twitter, 85 percent said that they update Twitter multiple times a day.

Facebook has steadily increased in popularity among state DOTs. While Facebook is increasingly used for emergency notifications and traffic alerts, more than 87 percent of states using Facebook said they used it for public involvement and branding (77 percent) purposes. Like Twitter, most states said they updated Facebook multiple times a day (80 percent), with just 10 percent saying they update Facebook once a day.
Social Media: The Main Platforms

Social Media: The Rest

*2017 is the first year for Snapchat in this survey
Mobile
States have embraced mobile with 90 percent saying their information is available in either a mobile app or mobile-friendly web site. Nearly 60 percent of states use a mobile app, and 89 percent have a mobile-friendly web site. Just less than half of states (46 percent) have both a mobile app and mobile-friendly web site.

Of those states that use a mobile app, just less than 60 percent used an outside vendor to create the mobile application. Nearly all of the mobile applications provide traffic alerts. Just three states reported using mobile applications for special campaigns.
Conclusion

Social media has proven to be an area of constant change and evolution. A few states said they planned to develop strategies to utilize new tools in the coming year for platforms including Waze, Snapchat, Storify, Instagram and podcasts. However several states also reported no interest in exploring new tools, preferring to invest time and energy in growing audiences for their existing tools.

When asked to describe the biggest challenge with social media in the coming year, some states expressed concerns about having to rely so much on Twitter and Facebook for outreach and communications.

One state simply wrote, “Hopefully Facebook or Twitter will not change its user policy and start charging fees.” Another said that “They change the way their platforms perform so often that it’s a struggle to keep up with what works and what doesn’t.”

Several states echoed the concern about staying current and meeting customer expectations. Specifically, the demand for social media content has shifted how staffing is deployed and making sure that staff is properly trained to meet public expectations.

Ultimately, the major concerns for social media tools echo those of the pre-social media days of 10 and 20 years ago—“How can a state best leverage limited resources to reach the most people with the information it needs to utilize the transportation system safely and efficiently?”

“The biggest challenge will be ensuring that the messaging is consistent across all platforms; and that we are able to reach everyone where they need to be reached.”

~ Survey Respondent
States Responding to the 2017 State DOT Social Media Survey

Alabama
Alaska
Arizona
Arkansas
California
District of Columbia
Florida
Hawaii
Idaho
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Kentucky
Louisiana
Maine
Maryland
Michigan
Minnesota
Mississippi
Missouri
Montana
Nebraska
Nevada
New Hampshire
New York
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Vermont
Virginia
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming
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