

August 2018

STATE DOT SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
OF STATE HIGHWAY AND
TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS

AASHTO

Overview

AASHTO began polling state DOTs on their use of online new media and social tools in 2009. Each spring, 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, 44 states responded to the survey.

Summary

The AASHTO State DOT Social Media Survey has followed the shifting priorities and tools of DOT communication teams. In the latest survey, social media has become firmly established, playing a critical and foundational role in daily DOT communications.

This regular survey report reveals that the practice of using social media is not only routine, it is considered in many ways a key factor in public engagement. Despite this critical role, every DOT implements social media programs in different ways – reflective of the values, priorities and resources of each agency.

Indeed, larger agencies that have traditionally invested in communication were among the first to integrate social media into their program. But in 2018, the size of the communication department has little to do with whether an agency uses social media. A department's size, however, may determine how it monitors social media and whether it can afford to dedicate individual staff solely to social media efforts.

Despite this routinization, DOTs continue to innovate, seeking the same opportunities that seemed possible when social media revolutionized constituent communications in the 2000s – the ability to reach the right audience with the right message and the right time. In 2018, DOTs turned toward Instagram and Snapchat for their potential engaging younger audiences – teens and Millennials – even as they began to invest in social media advertising to continue their engagement with larger Facebook and Twitter audiences.

The Communication Team

In 2018, DOT communications teams averaged 15 people in size. Those communications teams include a range of specialties that could include graphic artists, media relations experts, public involvement specialists, customer relations, and videographers.

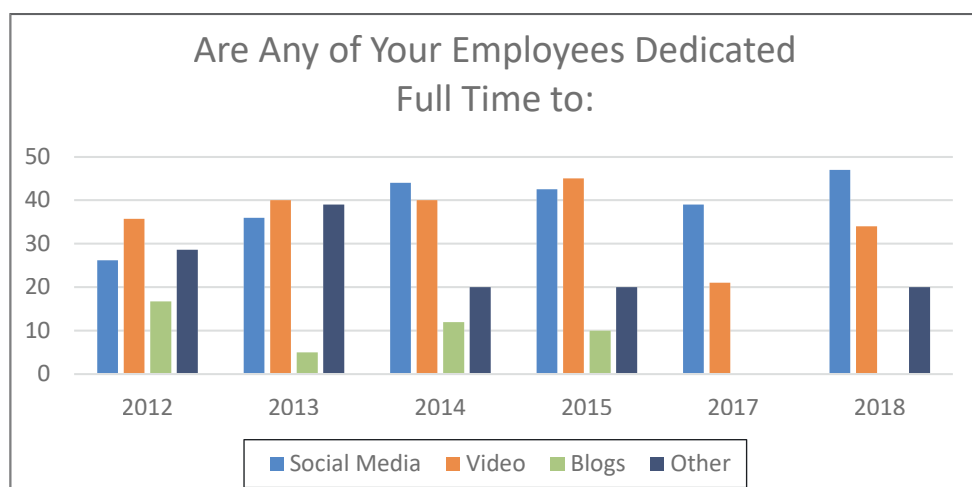
While there is no full time social media position, it is something we are considering. Currently the public information officers and communications director all have access to post on Twitter and one PIO and the director can post on Facebook.

– Survey Respondent

Nearly half of state DOTs reported that at least one member of their communications staffs are dedicated to social media work (47 percent). In 2012, the first year this question was asked, just more than a quarter of states (26 percent) said that at least one person on their team was dedicated full-time to social media work.

Of note is that while the percentage of states with a dedicated social media staff person has increased, nearly all state DOTs are using social media – often spreading the work out among several staff persons.

Meanwhile, most DOTs still do not formally allow their own employees access to their social media channels on work time. Just a quarter of DOTs said their social media policy allows em-



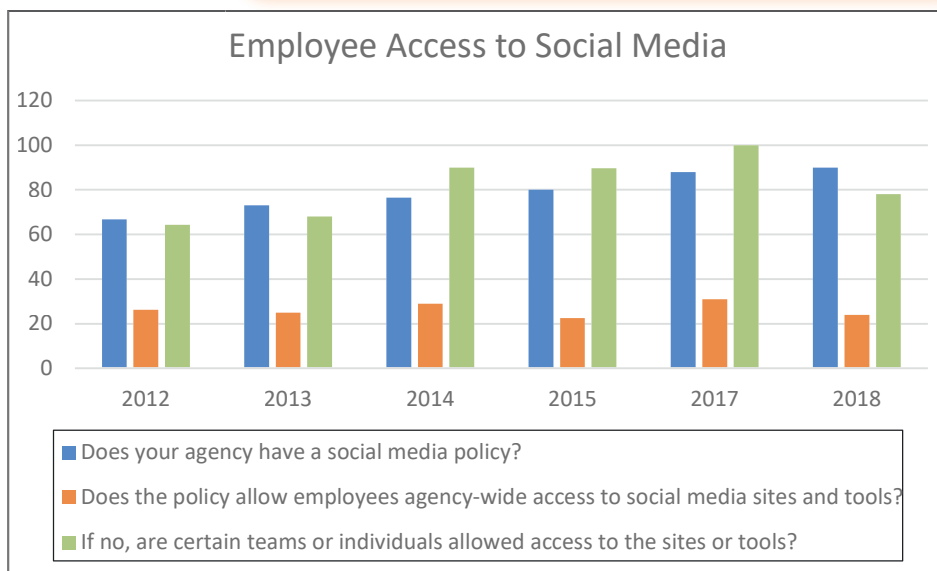


employees agency-wide access to social media sites, despite the reality that much of social media content is consumed via smartphones. The Pew Research Center estimates that 77 percent of U.S. adults own a smartphone, suggesting that employees barred from accessing social media on work equipment are quite able to access that same information on their personal smartphones.

Some state DOTs are investing in a unique hybrid communication specialty that features social media staff as content managers. Their digital media focus often includes a combination of brief social updates on sites such as Twitter or Facebook, along with video or still photos for updates on Snapchat or Instagram. These digital-focused staff also often have responsibility for updating a blog or similar longer-form narrative digital channel. These new content creators focus on telling compelling stories that combine the narrative power of integrated digital media channels. (See Georgia DOT sidebar)

Each of us monitors social media among our other work activities and use Meltwater to catch coverage and conversations. We do not have an on-call designated person 24/7 social media watch, but we are very vigilant on what is being said and talked about on all of our platforms.

– Survey Respondent



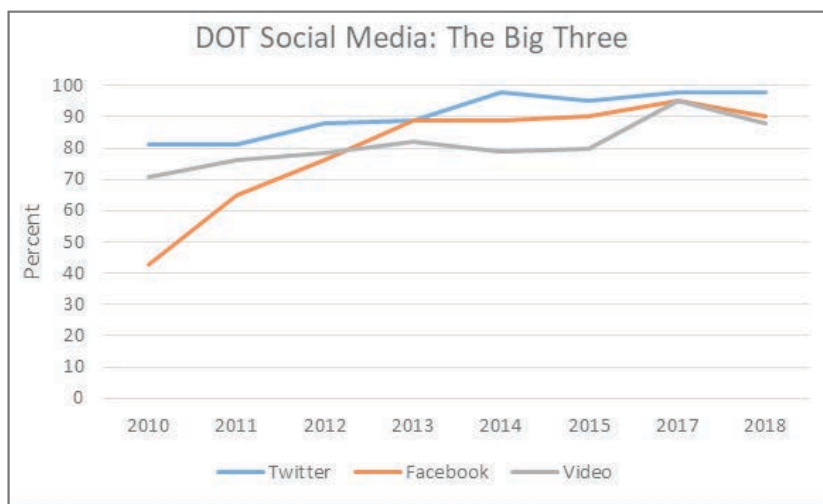
Despite the additional emphasis on content creation, just 1 in 5 DOTs report formally monitoring social media channels beyond expanded business hours. In some cases, communication officers are checking social media feeds first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening, but not in a formal way. The exception is during major incidents, such as extreme weather, when DOTs report dramatic increases in social media activity

Social Media Tools

While the social media landscape continues to evolve at a surprisingly fast rate, DOTs in 2018 continued to rely primarily on three social media tools over all the others – Twitter (98 percent), Facebook (90 percent), and online video channels YouTube and Vimeo (88 percent).

Of interest in 2018 is how DOTs are attempting to tie together not only the big three social media channels, but also some of the emerging platforms as well.

In the latest survey, 70 percent of state DOTs reported that they engage online directly with individuals if asked a direct question. And, 70 percent said that they actively encourage engagement with individuals, although that effort is somewhat dictated by the media itself. For instance, one state said that it pushes out information on Twitter, but seeks to engage in conversations on Facebook.



(Facebook) is our largest and most engaging audience. They respond to our safety messages, branding messages, videos as well as traffic and weather alerts.

– Survey Respondent

Yet several states reported that actually connecting with individuals organically is becoming a greater challenge due to how Facebook, Twitter and YouTube prioritize DOT information for potential DOT audiences.

While the focus remains on organically growing audiences, state DOTs are clearly turning toward supplementing their efforts with paid mentions on social media. More than half (54 percent) of DOTs said that they had paid for some kind of advertising on Facebook in the last year. Roughly 20 percent of DOTs also paid for Twitter ads and about 12 percent purchased advertising on Instagram and YouTube, respectively.

The DOTs gave the social media advertising high praise, with a surprising 82 percent saying the investment met expectations and another 17 percent saying the advertising exceeded expectations.

It is probably not surprising that Facebook led in advertising among DOTs. Again in 2018, when states were asked "If your state could use only one social media service, which would it use?" just more than half (52 percent) favored Facebook over Twitter (43 percent). According to Facebook, its active monthly user population topped 2.4 billion in December 2017. Meanwhile, Twitter reported in April 2018 that it had 336 million active monthly users, a fraction of Facebook's population.

A few social media channels that had initially shown rapid adoption by DOTs saw big declines in 2018. Like Vine a few years earlier, Storify, which was used by 10 percent of DOTs in 2018, has ceased operation. Periscope, which just a few years ago showed promise for its streaming video potential, has dropped from a high of 24 percent in 2017 to just 10 percent in 2018.

However, the largest social media platform shift among DOTs was toward Instagram, which reported in fall 2017 that its active monthly user population had topped 800 million. In this year's survey, 67 percent of DOTs said they had an Instagram account, a significant jump from 17 percent in 2014. Photo-sharing platform Flickr had been the preferred photo platform among DOTs since at least 2013 with roughly half DOTs using the service.

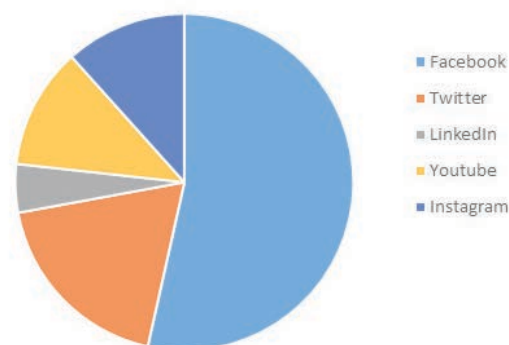
Engagement totally depends on content. Some posts go viral, while others go nowhere. We play to a tough audience daily.

– Survey Respondent

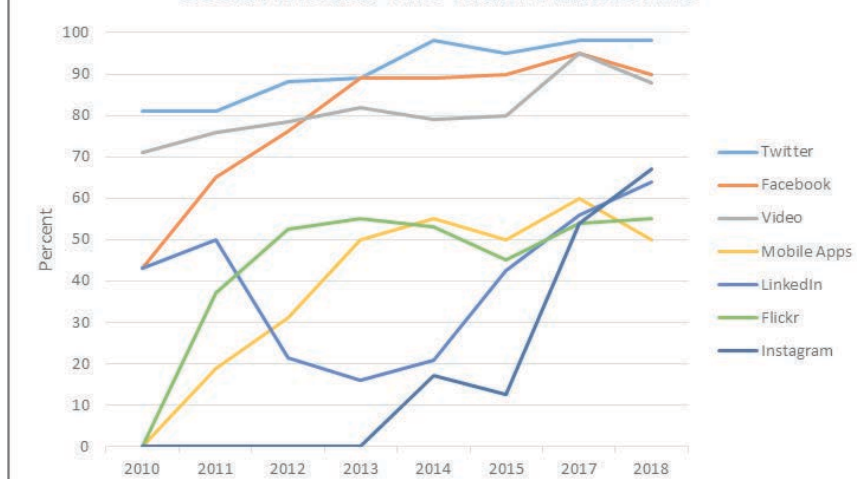
Recent changes to Facebook's algorithm have made it much more challenging for government agencies to reach people, which has led to adjustments in when/how we post things. It's also increased the importance of paying to boost posts.

– Survey Respondent

In the past year, has your DOT purchased advertising on one or more social media networks?



Social Media: The Main Platforms



Georgia DOT Takes Viewers “Behind the Scenes”

The modern state department of transportation is a highly technical environment filled with highly trained, specialized experts. The Georgia Department of Transportation’s strategic communication team chose to leverage the storytelling capabilities of social media to give the average state resident a peek inside the department.

Georgia DOT last year launched a series of Facebook video posts called “Behind the Scenes” that features various department employees engaged in unique and interesting activities – from interviews with a GDOT archaeologist discussing curation of artifacts, to environmental sound testing on projects, interviews with subject matter experts detailing what their role is with the department, to under bridge inspections and more. These interviews are short and compelling looks into what occurs on a daily basis inside and outside the department and we continue to look for interesting topics and ways to highlight those.

“We’re moving away from just pushing out information to the public and now we’re encouraging engagement from the public,” said Bre Kirkpatrick, a Georgia DOT social media specialist. “We understand that there are so many areas we are dealing with here that people really don’t know about.”

In addition to Facebook, Georgia DOT is producing “stories” on Instagram and often provides project updates on YouTube.

On June 26, Georgia DOT used their YouTube to explain the details of a fallen retaining wall panel on a currently under construction, not opened to traffic portion of the project, part of a large and ongoing regional project set to open to traffic soon. The video received a number of comments including one person who wrote, “Thank you for keeping us well informed instead of trying to bury things away. It’s greatly appreciated. Truth is always best!!!”

According to Kirkpatrick, Georgia DOT’s social media strategy – and the “Behind the Scenes” series specifically – is an effort to humanize the department.

“It’s great when I post some of the videos, and people actually know some of the (GDOT) people on there,” said Kirkpatrick. She noted one video featuring a project engineer garnered 2,400 views on Facebook once the engineer’s friends and family began sharing the link.

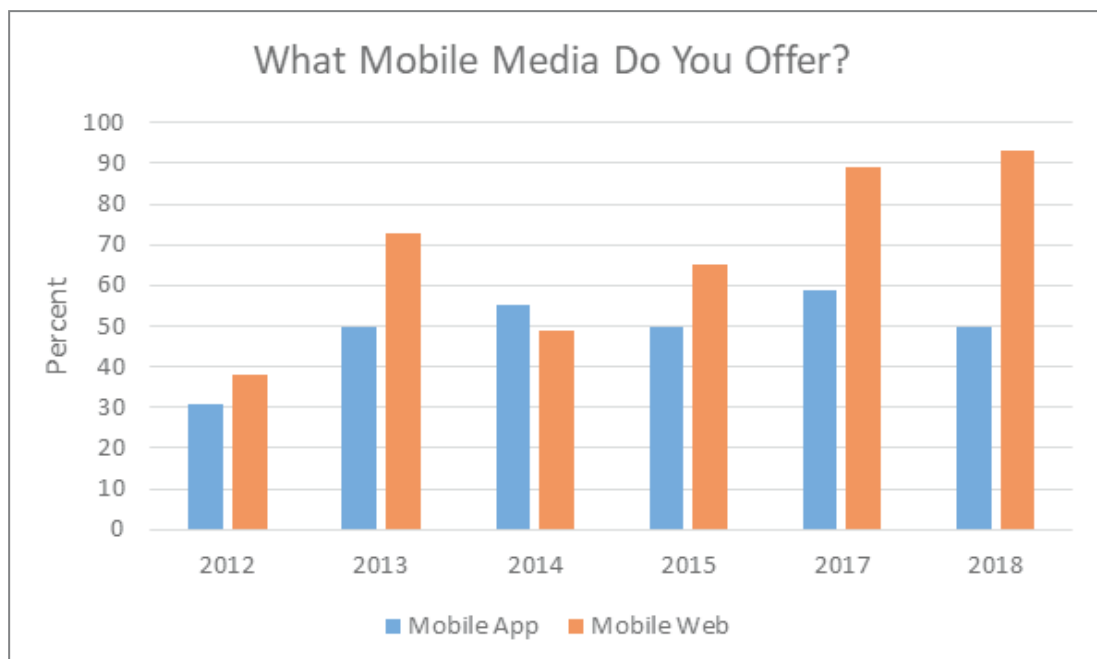


But while Flickr is similar to an online photo album helping states share literally thousands of photos, Instagram's photo features have evolved beyond unique filter offerings to include live video streaming, "story" features, and other functions designed to increase time spent on the platform.

Like Instagram, Snapchat saw a large increase in adoption by DOTs in 2018 jumping from 5 percent to 21 percent. Both Instagram and Snapchat feature storytelling that combines photos and brief videos and both are favored by younger people.

States are finding that the chase for younger audiences is not an easy one. According to one DOT, "One of our biggest challenges is in the Snapchat market. The Millennial and teen market require a different type of engaging content. We will have to craft content that is appealing to this audience."

Mobile Media



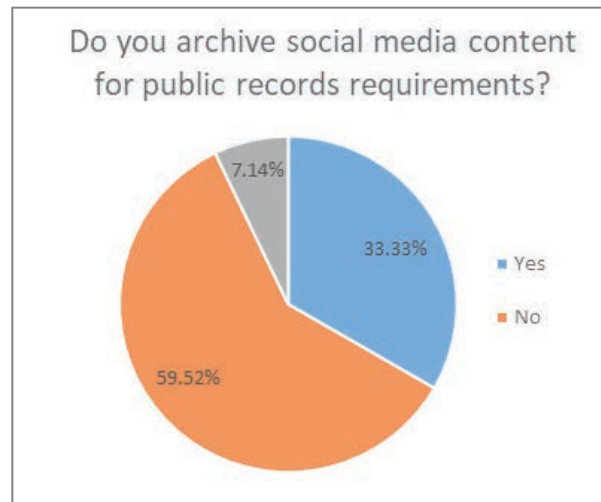
One of the hallmarks of social media is its reliance on smartphones and other mobile devices. In 2018, more than 90 percent of DOTs reported that their web site was mobile-friendly, up from less than 40 percent in 2012. Half of states said they make their information available in a mobile app, an increase of 30 percent since 2012.

Archiving

While the use of social media has become a normal, if not expected, component of a modern state DOT communication program, there does not seem to be a consistent best practice for archiving social media information.

Roughly a third of state DOTs said that their social media messages are archived and preserved as public records. Of those states archiving their messages, a few noted that their messages are saved on the various platforms. One DOT said that it manually copies information from online sites when requested. Another DOT said that the state library agency archives social media content.

However, a few DOTs use paid services such as Archive Social and Smarsh.



Looking ahead

Even as a few DOTs lead the way in exploring the use of newer social media channels, most DOTs are focused on making the best use of Twitter, Facebook and online video.

When asked to describe how social media has influenced their overall communication strategy in the previous year, DOTs described various ways that social media is in most cases their first and most important go-to communication tool. But that reliance comes with specific challenges.

Social media provides an immediate platform for fresh information – something the public, public officials and media crave during major events that disrupt transportation. There is often praise for DOTs that manage these tools well. And for those that do not, the criticism is sharp.

That is why DOT communication staffs describe routinely monitoring their agency's social channels first and last thing each day. Not only has social become the most immediate way that DOTs share information, it is also the most common and immediate way that they identify public problems and concerns. This is one major reason why states closely follow changes in how Facebook, Twitter and YouTube prioritize information. If DOTs are not ranking high enough to reach their critical audience, they could be faced with having to buy that access – further stretching limited communication resources.

We continue to use social media as our primary outreach directly to the public. Several years ago we significantly reduced the number of news releases we produce and moved our message directly to the public through social media.

– Survey Respondent

States in the coming year will also focus energies on trying to customize their information to the unique strengths of each social platform. Social media experts understand that the typical Snapchat user has different expectations for how information is presented than the typical Facebook user. Neither wants to read a traditional, old school news release. This opens up new possibilities for DOTs but poses significant hurdles as well. A key example of the latter can be readily seen in the Snapchat channel, which puts greater emphasis on casual storytelling through photos and videos; not all DOTs have the ability to tell stories in that way.

Ultimately, the states responding to the 2018 social media survey remain concerned about resources – not only budgets, but human capital. As one state said, “The more platforms we sign up for the more workload we are signing up for.” The push to gain relevance in the social media world has tasked state DOT communication teams to do more even as the overall understanding of the social media platforms and audiences continues to evolve.

In a world where “fake news” has become such a big thing, reaching people and having them trust your information will continue to be a big challenge.

– Survey Respondent



Prepared by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials with support and participation by the AASHTO Committee on Transportation Communications (TransComm). Previous survey results are available at <http://communications.transportation.org>.

For more information, contact Lloyd D. Brown, AASHTO Director of Communications, at (202) 624-5802 or via email at lbrown@aaashto.org.