

Using Social Media to Reach Environmental Justice Communities

Executive Order 12898 requires Federal Agencies to identify and address as appropriate disproportionately high and adverse effects of the agency's programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations, often referred to as Environmental Justice (EJ) communities. Social media can be used as one of many methods to reach out to and engage EJ communities. In an effort to ensure that efforts to engage EJ communities through social media are effective, state DOTs and MPOs work to identify and develop the most appropriate social media strategy to reach and target EJ populations.

Overview

According to [Pew Research Center](#), approximately 7 in 10 American adults use social media. The use of at least one social media site continues to grow steadily across all demographics regardless of race, ethnicity, income, age, or gender. For example, Pew research by race shows that 69 percent of people who are African American and 72 percent of those who are of Hispanic origin use at least one social media site. Seventy-four percent of the population who make under \$50,000 also use at least one social media site. Most young adults age 18–29 (88 percent) use social media. From a gender perspective, a higher percentage of women (73 percent) social media than men (65 percent).

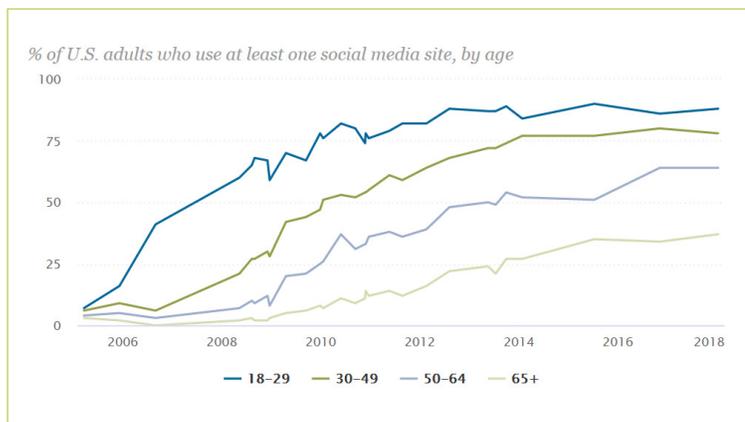
Social Media can be used as an outreach tool to:

- Advertise upcoming community meetings or events.
- Provide timely information and resources about transportation plans and projects.
- Solicit input, monitor feedback, and collect reactions about upcoming or existing transportation plans and projects.

Social media data analytics tools and resources offer agencies additional insight on EJ populations to assist with future public outreach

strategies that evaluate and address EJ as part of transportation planning and development. They help to provide meaningful insights and additional details about comfortable engagement practices for particular populations that can be used to reach people who may not participate in traditional outreach and engagement efforts such as in-person meetings, helping to form a successful social media strategy. Social media guides and plans can include details and research on best practices such as tone, content, and tips on engaging with EJ communities with minority or low-income individuals. Just as with in-person interactions, social media accounts will need to fully understand how to communicate in a culturally appropriate and effective manner.

Community leaders are a key asset in understanding the cultural nuances and serving as conduits in EJ communities. For example, the Buford Highway Pedestrian Improvement project at the [Georgia Department of Transportation](#) (GDOT) focused efforts on high school involvement by creating a public service announcement competition. GDOT used Facebook and Twitter to spread the PSA competition information and to reach a specific audience. Along with the use of



According to The Pew Center, social media use can vary by race/ethnicity, gender, community, and age—with 88 percent of users between the ages of 18 to 29. Pew Center Research

social media, GDOT also utilized more traditional outreach efforts to reach high school students. These efforts included in-person community outreach efforts in supermarkets that catered to both language and cultural preferences.

While social media can be used as a tool for community outreach and engagement, it can also be a successful tool to build peer networks within an agency and to help facilitate and foster inter-agency collaboration. Social media development allows for agencies to participate in trends to learn more about user interest, coordinate with partners, interact with audiences, and highlight meetings and community events. These are all areas highlighted in the [Practitioners Peer Exchange Environmental Justice Roadmap](#).

North Central Texas Council of Governments

In 2017, the [North Central Texas Council of Governments](#) (NCTCOG) transportation department developed a social media design guide that provided in-depth details on graphic dimensions, typography, watermarks, layouts, design trends, and photos. NCTCOG also developed a strategic plan and style guide to modernize the tone of social media. The additional resources NCTCOG placed on social media were used to target outreach and advertising for the transportation department.

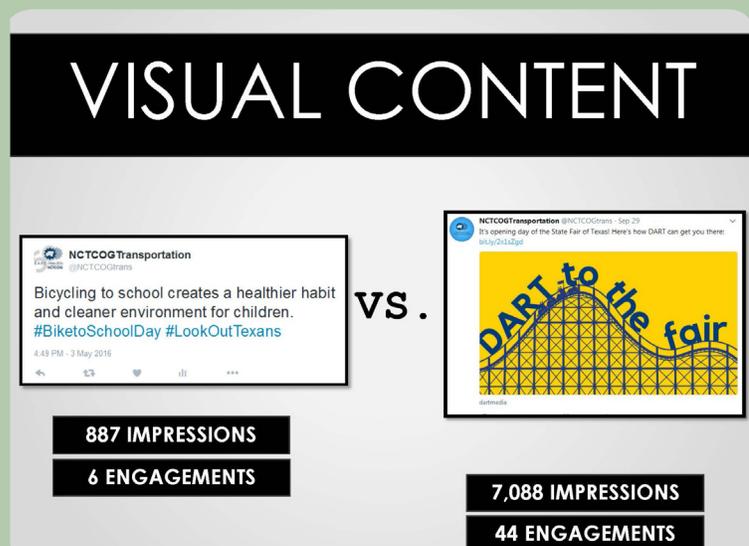
Using a variety of communication platforms, NCTCOG identified six types of posts for engagement:

- 1) Transportation Related News
- 2) Project and program specific information
- 3) Holiday and event graphics
- 4) Video
- 5) Just for Fun
- 6) Safety

NCTCOG's social media strategy studied the impact of hashtags and found that posts with hashtags received two times more engagement than posts without hashtags. They also found that the time of day and the visual content made a difference in impressions and engagement. NCTCOG's manager of public involvement, Amanda Wilson, noted, "It is extremely difficult to get the attention of social media users between busy news feeds and algorithms that don't show an organization's posts to all followers. We analyzed what works and doesn't work to reach our audience and focused on changes we can make, like when we post and using visually appealing graphics, to achieve greater engagement and impressions."

What Are Impressions?

Impressions are the number of times a social media post has been seen. Social media platforms use algorithms to determine which users to show certain content and not all of an organization's followers will see each post. Impressions can be higher if you post at correct times, use graphics that attract attention, get "likes" or other reactions, or if people share an organization's post. The reactions, comments or shares are especially important because it amplifies the impressions—getting the message out even to people who don't directly follow the organization.



An example of NCTCOG's "visual content" from multiple social media campaigns.

NCTCOG experienced a 25 percent higher engagement rate when social media used:

- Human tone—communicating in a way that is more personable and conversational
- Fun, light-hearted content
- Content and voice mirror pages followed by staff at NCTCOG
- Strategic plan, style guide, and design guide

NCTCOG used these strategies for the [AirCheckTexas](#), a program that assists low- and moderate-income individuals repair or replace vehicles that don't pass a state emissions inspection. Program interest and shares have increased significantly in the program since it started advertising on Facebook. The Facebook advertising uses visually appealing graphics and a call to action with the message "ACT NOW!" Geotargeting, which is tailoring an ad based on demographics and key words, has helped to "zero in" on individuals who are more likely to qualify for the program versus advertising that is not targeted. An additional way the reach of these ads has been expanded is when people "tag" their friends who may not have seen advertising uses visually appealing graphics and a call to action with the message "ACT NOW!" Geotargeting, which is tailoring an ad based on demographics and key words, has helped to "zero in" on individuals who are more likely to qualify for the program versus advertising that is not targeted. An additional way the reach of these ads has been expanded is when people "tag" their friends who may not have seen the advertisement. This type of word-of-mouth marketing can increase the effectiveness of paid advertising.

NCTCOG also invested in paid advertising on Facebook that linked to a transportation planning survey (Mobility 2045). The paid ads targeted EJ communities, specifically African-Americans and Latinos, including ads produced in Spanish that targeted persons of Hispanic origin. In addition to expanding the reach of the survey in hopes of getting a higher number of completions, the paid advertising allowed NCTCOG to gather analytic data that showed which type of advertising was most effective. NCTCOG tested two types of ads, one using general professional language, and the other using more colloquial informal language.

The highest survey response rate came from those developed using general professional language and targeted to a general population. However, ads in Spanish targeted to the Hispanic community also had a higher response rate. For those that responded to the survey in Spanish, 90 percent were directed from Facebook advertising, showing that the advertising did help push a higher response. This was the first time social media advertising was used to specifically promote an MTP survey, but it will likely be used again in the future.

Peer Exchange Discussions

In a peer exchange discussion between Minnesota, Ohio, and Massachusetts a [Transportation Planning Capacity Building \(TPCB\) Peer Program](#) report highlighted the use of social media and public outreach. During the discussion representatives from state DOTs provided specific examples of public involvement strategies for their respective states. Strategies to maximize public participation included public meetings as well a full use of social media tools and efforts. Ohio Department of Transportation, Office of Environmental Services administrator, Timothy Hill adds, "In Ohio's project example, social media was (and continues to be) a vital tool in reaching Ohio's public. Long gone are the days where a state DOT would post an advertisement in the paper for a meeting and people would come. Today's world requires a full use of the social media palate and state DOTs should be flexible and know when (and how) to apply to best tools for their specific project's needs."

Resources:

- [AASHTO Resources](#)
- [Federal Administrative Orders and Guidance](#)
- [Federal Highway Administration](#)
- [Federal Transit Administration](#)
- [Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [National Academy of Sciences, Transportation Research Board, NCHRP, TCRP](#)

Additional Resources:

- [2017 AASHTO State DOT Social Media Survey](#)
- [2018 AASHTO State DOT Social Media Survey](#)



For more information on The Center for Environmental Excellence by AASHTO, please visit environment.transportation.org or contact the Director of the Center for Environmental Excellence, **Melissa Savage** at msavage@aaashto.org.