Orange County Internet Strategy Analysis

A Brief Assessment of City Internet Strategies and How they Embrace Social Media, Transparency and Citizen Access

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Version 1.0

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About Tripepi Smith & Associates

Tripepi Smith is a boutique consulting firm based in Orange County, California. Tripepi Smith provides technology and marketing advisory services to small to mid-sized businesses and government.

The Technology practice is led by Ryder Todd Smith, a 14 year veteran of the technology and government relations arena. Ryder is a graduate of Claremont McKenna College and former research associate with the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

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Executive Summary

This analysis is a follow up to a July 2010 analysis that had similar questions and criteria. The Executive Summary and key points remain the same from the previous version.

The Internet is a powerful component of the public's communication with each other and social institutions. City websites are likely the most common interaction that the average citizen has with their municipal government, making the website the primary communications tool for cities to communicate with the public.

Tripepi Smith set out to analyze city websites across Orange County (34 city websites were included in the analysis) to determine their use of certain features that Tripepi Smith believes are a best practice for city websites. The criteria focused on three areas:

1. Access and ease of use of the website
2. Use of social media.
3. Enabling greater transparency and citizen engagement.

Here were the 11 simple tests that were used to conduct this analysis:

1. Does the city have a friendly URL (i.e. http://www.ci.laguna-niguel.ca.us/ versus tustinca.org)?
2. Does a search for the city result in enhanced search results?
3. Does the city have a Twitter account?
4. Has the city updated the Twitter account in the last 7 days?
5. Does the city have a Facebook page?
6. Has the city updated the Facebook page in the last 7 days?
7. Does the city have video and audio of council meetings online?
8. Is there a search function on the site?
9. Is an email for the mayor (including a generic email for the whole council) available on the website?
10. Did the mayor or mayor's staff respond to a test email?
11. Is the city's budget online?

The simply yes/no questions were designed to ensure clarity in the facts (as opposed to asking: "Is the website nice to look at?")

Certain questions were given a greater weight. For example, 5 points were given for having a Twitter account, but 10 points were given for updating it in the last 7 days. Reasons for the scale of awarding points are identified in the detailed section on best practices.

This October 2010 version of the results follows the first analysis conducted by Tripepi Smith in July 2010. Given the speed of change on the Internet, returning to update previous results on a quarterly versus yearly basis seemed appropriate.

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Based upon the data and the question weighting criteria, the following cities best adhere to the tests executed in this analysis of the 34 cities that were reviewed (listed in alphabetical order):

Brea
Buena Park
Dana Point
Fullerton
Irvine
Newport Beach
Tustin

It must be noted that analysis is subject to human error and based on criteria developed by Tripepi Smith. As such the inclusion or exclusion of a website from the list of top performing city websites can not lead one to conclude that the site is "great" or the site is "horrible." Rather, review of these results and the best practices identified in this analysis should encourage cities to engage in a discussion of best practices and contribute their feedback to the future versions of this analysis.

The raw data that was collected for this analysis took place from October 15, 2010 to October 27, 2010

Other Observations

Since the data was gathered by a single individual, there are certain consistent observations that were made which warrant notation here.

- Most cities have official social media accounts (Twitter username or Facebook Page), but city websites rarely link to the official social media accounts (Twitter.com/username or Facebook.com/cityname). Further, cities are even less likely to feature a link to their official social media accounts on the city website homepage.
- Some cities seem to have avoided securing any official accounts in the social media realm. This has created a vacuum of identity where private citizens

Figure 1 - Note here how two others have registered similar City of Irvine accounts with Twitter.

have secured accounts appearing as if they are the city. In one case, it was observed that someone was squatting on a city name hoping to sell it (a likely violation of Twitter policy).
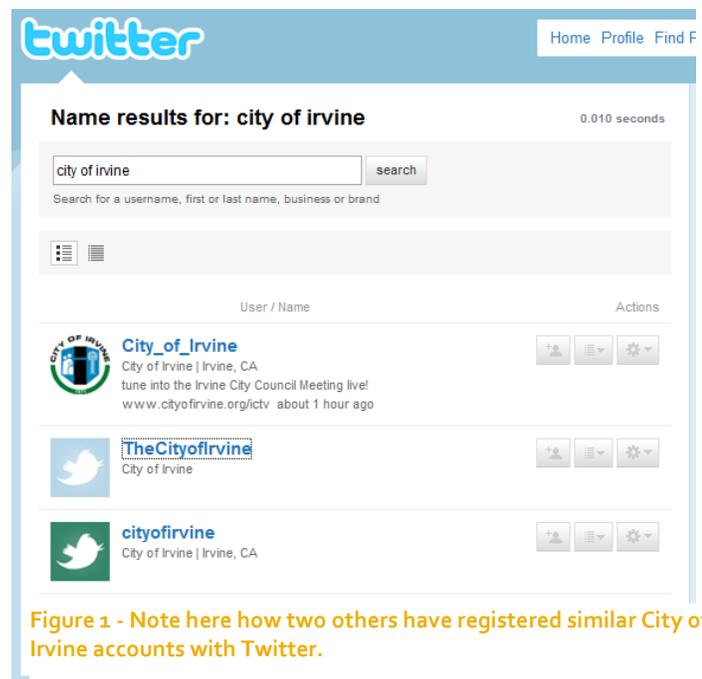
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- The majority of cities in Orange County have webcasting for their council meetings provided by Granicus. This could represent an opportunity to for cities to combine contracting power to secure better pricing for the service.
- The city with the greatest Twitter following in Orange County is Tustin, while the most communicative (highest tweeting) City is Lake Forest.
- The City of Fullerton has the most "Liked" Facebook Page of any city in Orange County with over 5,300 people "Liking" it.

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Analysis Background

Since its early days in the 1990's to today, the Internet has exploded as a communications tool. Email and websites have dominated this brief history of the Internet as the primary methods of interacting with people, but a wave of new sites and tools that some have declared Web 2.0 are quickly gaining favor with the public. Underlying these changes is a simple fact: more people use the Internet today than ever before, and they use it is more ways than ever before.

Cities have responded to the growth of the Internet by building websites to engage and inform their communities. Citizens in some cities can now watch city council meetings on their laptops, receive traffic updates on local road closures via Twitter or register for parks and recreation events online. Cities – the closest form of the government to the people – are engaging with their citizens in important and valuable ways.

This City Website Analysis intends to inform city staff, elected-officials and the public about how cities are evolving their websites and general Internet efforts to inform their citizens, ensure transparency in their local government and evolve their communication to the new medium of social networks.

Analysis Execution

Data was gathered by using a computer, Google Search and digging through individual city websites. All the research was conducted by Ryder Todd Smith. Since much of this was manual work, it is possible that errors were made in gathering the data or results were overlooked. When errors are identified, any feedback related to correcting the error will be welcomed.

Questions/Criteria Explanation

Does the city have a friendly URL (i.e. http://www.ci.laguna-niguel.ca.us/ versus tustinca.org)?
Reason for Question: Easily remembered URL's are faster for citizens to recollect and easier to promote with the public. Purchase of individual domain name is relatively inexpensive given the additional branding value for cities. The standard .us extension is an older more tedious URL for citizens to recall.

Question Weight: 5 points

Does a search for the city result in enhanced search results?
Reason for Question: Website can be optimized so that when a search is conducted on a standard search engine such as Google or Bing, a series or results from within the cities website are returned. This allows faster citizen access to relevant information and provides an indicator of the sites optimization for search engines.

Question Weight: 5 points

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Does the city have a Twitter account?

Reason for Question: Registering an account is free and should be done if for no other reason than to future proof access to a name. Twitter usernames today are similar to simple domain name registration in the mid-90's. Having a Twitter account also demonstrates that a city is engaging in social media communications. Additionally, cities need to be concerned about others who spoof the city name to gain unsuspecting follows who do not realize the spoofed name is not the official city account.

Question Weight: 5 points

Has the city updated the Twitter account in the last 7 days?

Reason for Question: Having a Twitter username is really only part of the process. Once you have that account, it must be used. To the users of social media, an idle account is worse than having no account at all because having the account raises the expectation that you will have content, leaving the reader disappointed when there is none. Further, in the era of social media, the conversation is ongoing and fast, meaning more than 7 days between communications is simply too long.

Question Weight: 10 points

Does the city have a Facebook page?

Reason for Question: Securing a Facebook page is free and easy to do. Facebook's services have evolved over time and the concept of the Facebook Page was introduced two years ago and represents the best method for a city to engage with its citizens through Facebook (versus using a personal account with a city name or a Facebook Group). Having the account does indicate a cities progressive use of social media to reach citizens. Finally, similar to Twitter, securing a page and vanity URL for the city is important to give citizens a valid page to follow. Otherwise, unsuspecting citizens may follow non-official city pages assuming they are the city's.

Question Weight: 5 points

Has the city updated the Facebook page in the last 7 days?

Reason for Question: Having a Facebook Page is really only part of the process. Once you have that Page, it must be used. To the users of social media, an idle account is worse than having no account at all because having the account raises the expectation that you will have content, leaving the reader disappointed when there is none. Further, in the era of social media, the conversation is ongoing and fast, meaning more than 7 days between communications is simply too long.

Question Weight: 10 points

Does the city have video and audio of council meetings online?

Reason for Question: The public is expecting video content more than ever before. The expansion of high speed Internet access and services like YouTube and Hulu have set the expectation that all content can be delivered via the Internet. Access to council meetings online (audio or video) provides a clear record of past and current debates and activities of the city council and makes it easier for citizens to follow the words of their elected leaders and hold them accountable.

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Question Weight: 10 points

Is there a search function on the site?

Reason for Question: As websites have grown more complicated with more data on them, the irony becomes that finding the data you want is harder. The effect is called "data smog." To counteract that, search functionality on sites makes it much easier for a person to find the right data on the site.

Question Weight: 5 points

Is an email for the mayor (including a generic email for the whole council) available on the website?

Reason for Question: The Internet has helped bring government closer to the people. We can now interact with our elected officials in various ways and reach out to them quickly and efficiently. This is particularly true at the city government level where the government is closest to the people and seeing your elected official at the local coffee shop or deli may be common. As such, citizens should expect to be able to email their mayor via an email address provided on the city's website.

Emails to a general council email address were acceptable. As were emails to either personal or city accounts.

Email forms that submitted emails to council were not accepted for points, though if they resulted in a contact back from the City (none automated) then 10 points were awarded in the response category below.

Question Weight: 5 points

Did the mayor or mayor's staff respond to a test email?

Reason for Question: Having emailed their mayor or a group email to the whole council, the expectation is that a response of some form should come back. Having an email on the website creates an expectation that a response will come back. Of note here is the possibility that spam filters or other technologies may intervene in the communications. Regardless of technical interventions, the expectation is that some form or response will be received by a citizen if they take the time to engage their government via email.

Responses from city staff were counted as responses in this analysis.

Question Weight: 10 points

Is the city's budget online?

Reason for Question: The city budget is a key document that in simple numbers explains the priorities of the city. It is a starting point for all citizens to understand their government and how tax dollars are spent. Making it easily available to citizens is important.

Question Weight: 10 points

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Top 9 City Results

	Friendly URL	Expanded Search Results	Twitter Account	Twitter Last 7 Days	Facebook Page	Update in last 7 days	Meeting Video/Audio Online	Search on Site	Email for Elected On Site	Response to Email	Budget Online	Total Score
Newport Beach	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	10	10	80
Tustin	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	10	10	80
Dana Point	5	5	0	10	5	10	10	5	5	10	10	75
Brea	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	0	10	70
Buena Park	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	0	10	70
Fullerton	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	0	10	70
Irvine	5	5	5	10	5	10	10	5	5	0	10	70
Placentia	5	5	5	10	5	10	0	5	0	10	10	65

Results for the 25 other Orange County cities included in the analysis are available by request for other city representatives.

Please contact Tripepi Smith at 626.536.2173 or ryder@tripepismith.com

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Cities Included in Analysis

- Aliso Viejo
- Anaheim
- Brea
- Buena Park
- Costa Mesa
- Cypress
- Dana Point
- Fountain Valley
- Fullerton
- Garden Grove
- Huntington Beach
- Irvine
- La Habra
- La Palma
- Laguna Beach
- Laguna Hills
- Laguna Niguel
- Laguna Woods
- Lake Forest
- Los Alamitos
- Mission Viejo
- Newport Beach
- Orange
- Placentia
- Rancho Santa Margarita
- San Clemente
- San Juan Capistrano
- Santa Ana
- Seal Beach
- Stanton
- Tustin
- Villa Park
- Westminster
- Yorba Linda

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City Twitter Stats

City	Twitter Name	JULY - - 2010		OCTOBER - - 2010			
		Tweets	Followers	Tweets	Following	Followers	Last 7
Aliso Viejo	@ctyofav	74	258	99	78	329	1
Anaheim	@anaheim311	10	305	10	311	320	0
Brea	@cityofbrea	114	411	136	14	504	1
Buena Park	@BuenaParkCA	99	102	211	18	140	1
Costa Mesa	@CityofCostaMesa	70	143	70	63	202	0
Cypress	NONE						
Dana Point	@CityofDanaPoint	426	1007	567	1623	1378	1
Fountain Valley	None						
Fullerton	@FullertonCA	0	6	227	2	264	1
Garden Grove	*@citygardengrove *gardengroveca???						
Huntington Beach	*@surfcityinfo & HBPD_PIO						
Irvine	@City_of_Irvine	354	1316	534	461	1752	1
La Habra	@LaHabraCA	105	279	122	17	323	1
La Palma	None						
Laguna Beach	@lagunabeachgov	1	67	1	0	119	0
Laguna Hills	@CityLagunaHills	6	34	13	0	55	1
Laguna Niguel	@LagunaNiguelCA	159	953	159	737	1049	0
Laguna Woods	@lagunawoodscity	91	66	108	46	95	0
Lake Forest	@LakeForestCA	2502	308	3581	139	405	1
Los Alamitos	None						
Mission Viejo	@MissionViejoCA	1165	1176	1663	836	1360	1
Newport Beach	@newportbeachgov	105	57	146	10	70	1
Orange	*@cityoforange						
Placentia	@PlacentiaCA	31	9	51	0	33	1
Rancho Santa Margarita	None						
San Clemente	None						
San Juan Capistrano	@cityofsjc	107	275	145	158	320	1
Santa Ana	None						
Seal Beach	*@cityofsealbeach *sealbeachpolice, @sealbeachrec						
Stanton	None						
Tustin	@CityofTustin	212	1843	290	1908	2006	1
Villa Park	None						
Westminster	@WestminsterCA	52	11	65	0	19	0
Yorba Linda	@CityofYL	1	21	11	0	50	0

Data Gathered 10/18/2010

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City Facebook Stats

City	July - - 2010 Likes	October - - 2010 Likes	7 Day Update
Aliso Viejo			
Anaheim	1382	1685	1
Brea	1482	1696	1
Buena Park	328	422	1
Costa Mesa		-	-
Cypress		-	-
Dana Point	394	461	1
Fountain Valley		-	-
Fullerton	4463	5276	1
Garden Grove	1151	1349	1
Huntington Beach	322	409	0
Irvine	287	463	1
La Habra		-	-
La Palma		-	-
Laguna Beach		-	-
Laguna Hills	22	20	0
Laguna Niguel	220	235	0
Laguna Woods		-	-
Lake Forest		-	-
Los Alamitos		-	-
Mission Viejo	835	889	0
Newport Beach	1090	1209	1
Orange		-	-
Placentia	30	80	1
Rancho Santa Margarita		-	-
San Clemente		-	-
San Juan Capistrano		-	-
Santa Ana		-	-
Seal Beach		-	-
Stanton		-	-
Tustin	2323	2639	1
Villa Park	1632	1724	1
Westminster	101	119	1
Yorba Linda		47	0

Data gathered 10/18/2010

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