

PARK DISTRICTS CAN NO LONGER IGNORE

# social media

**By Alexander J. Barton,**  
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How do your core audiences like to communicate with your park district? Do they send a fax? Of course not. Do you require them to go to a website and fill out a form just to ask a question? Hopefully not.

Maybe people can send an email to [info@yourparkdistrict.org](mailto:info@yourparkdistrict.org)? Still not good enough.



There is a wide variety of social media platforms these days but only a few make good sense for park districts to consider. Facebook and YouTube are musts.

Modern park districts are using social media as an effective way with which to communicate with core audiences such as moms, kids, public officials, and residents of all types. It's fast and it works.

"At the Des Plaines Park District (DPPD), we have come to see that our core customers want to communicate with us mostly through Facebook," said Gene Haring, marketing and communications manager at DPPD. "For the past 5+ years, we have dedicated resources to engage with our residents and park facility users via Facebook. For some, it's the primary way they want to use to communicate and get quick, accurate answers."

"We can no longer expect people to visit a website to dig out information about programs, events and activities." Haring adds. "They generally don't want to call a front desk either."

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In addition to Facebook, park districts such as Rockford also use YouTube as an effective way to reach users of their facilities. Using video makes good sense in most social media, but certainly YouTube should be part of your social media outreach. For a good example visit: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RockfordParkDistrict>

The Niles (IL) Park District promotes the whole district in a nice video posted at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHhdRz7jqyQ>

"If you aren't using video more to attract attention to your facilities, programs and events, you are missing out. Not only is it beneficial to create a YouTube Channel showcasing videos of your facilities, past events, and teasers for upcoming events, it is also beneficial to create short 15-20 second videos that stand out on Facebook and other social media feeds. With easy-to-use video producing software programs, there is no excuse not to be creating

more videos," said Sue Kirchner, president, Brand Strong Marketing, Inc. "These days most people want to learn and gather information by watching a video. So you have to offer them to be effective."

Do you want your park district to come up in online searches? Kirchner notes that YouTube is second only to Google as a search engine. She says there are plenty of software programs available to assist in the do-it-yourself approach to videos. She warns that cheap looking videos are no longer acceptable so be careful about keeping quality in your production.

I suggest checking out these software applications for your use:

**Ripl** - <https://www.ripl.com/>

**Lumen 5** - <https://lumen5.com/>

**Animoto** - <https://animoto.com/>

You may also find it helpful to check out the step-by-step process in Orbit Media Studios' How to Make Social Media Videos in 9 Steps at <https://www.orbitmedia.com/blog/how-to-make-social-media-videos/>.

Andy Crestodina is co-founder and chief marketing officer for Orbit Media Studios, Inc. Many consider Andy one of the real gurus of social media. He advises, if there is someone specific that you'd like to connect with - a prominent member of the community, a government official, a commissioner at a neighboring park district - social media is almost certainly the first step in the conversation. Even if you call and leave a message, they're going to look you up before calling back. So why not start the conversation on social media?

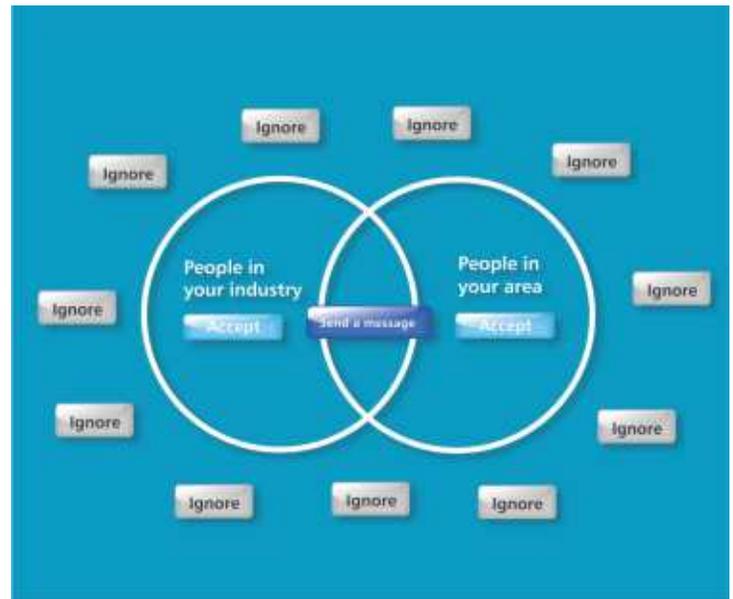
Crestodina likes to say this isn't really social media *marketing*. It's social media *networking*, and it's very effective. Engage with almost anyone on a social platform and you'll get their attention. Start by liking and

commenting, then connect, and send a short, friendly message. You're on your way to a collaborative relationship and possibly a friendship. This type of friendly conversational exchange works wonders with park users.

The Des Plaines Park District has found that many of its 3,000 followers on Facebook will also engage with each other and help answer questions. "These followers also help create awareness among themselves and boost attendance at events and participation in programs," Haring said. "For example, a mom may say that she is taking her kids to an activity. Others see this and decide to join in. It's great!"

Not all social media platforms make sense for all park districts. Some park districts don't engage with residents via Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn for a variety of reasons. Mostly it has to do with the ease of having a conversation. However, Facebook has a good messaging template and just about any post by the district or a resident can get "Likes" and comments which lead to others joining in.

One of the primary objections most managers have to getting started on social media is the time commitment. Time is money because someone has to develop the posts, monitor activity, plan for launches of new programs or events, and generally stay engaged. In the case of DPPD, they have hired a part-time social media coordinator who spends about 15 hours a week on this most valuable pursuit.



Here is a simple graph by Andy Crestodina that illustrates with whom you should engage with when it comes to accepting Friend Requests, Invitations to Connect.

So how do you get started or choose which social media to pursue? I advise our clients that when considering which social media channels to use you must research your intended target audience. For example, SnapChat targets those under 20 years old. Pinterest is good when looking to reach women, especially moms. Note: Pinterest is the #3 most used search engine. Pinterest is good to use when promoting cooking classes, child care options or pre-school programs. On Pinterest, you can create a category "Fun Things to Do with Kids" and promote park district birthday parties, swim lessons, martial arts classes, etc.

Another facet of social media is a hashtag. The use of hashtags (**#yourparkdistrict**) has been around for a while. Hashtags are good to use to help people find your district information but use caution because they can be overused and become ineffective. The use of hashtags is still valid but limit the use to five or less per posting. I advise clients that the best practice is to use 2-3 branded hashtags such as **#ABCparkdistrict** and then one or two related to the event or program such as **#fallfestival**.

Are you already using social media but want more user engagement? Here's a tip for improved user engagement: try asking district residents to submit photos of themselves using your park district facilities. They submit the photos to a website page or via social media using a standard hashtag. Then, select the best each week or month as "Highlighted Post of the Week/Month". The highlighted winner can be provided with a prize such as a free daily swim pass or gift certificate. The Des Plaines Park District runs an online quiz using five questions. A winner is selected via a drawing from all those who submitted correct answers to the quiz. The prizes can be tickets to an event or gift certificates from local merchants or restaurants.

Tip: A park district's social media can be co-branded with a local business such as a bank or restaurant. For example, have a business sponsor the "Post of the Week" contest or other online activity.

As I mentioned, using LinkedIn isn't for every park district. It does have an enormous audience in the millions, but is generally considered to be more business focused. Crestodina does say that park management should take a few minutes every day to grow your LinkedIn network, and you'll eventually have access to a much wider network. Of course, you don't need to accept every random invitation you get. I recommend connecting with anyone in your industry and anyone in your geographic area. Why not? When you do have something to say, you'll be able to say it to a larger audience. LinkedIn postings do get plenty of attention!

So, what are the pitfalls of a park district using Facebook or Twitter?

*Problem #1: Government agencies such as park districts tend to delegate social media to an intern... Intern posts something inaccurate... Constituents get confused or even angry... News media picks up the mistake... Government agency/park district is embarrassed.*

No filter. This is less common than it used to be, but it still happens. The fix is training, documentation and

technology. There are low cost tools that will let the social media manager write informational posts far in advance, letting the marketing manager review them before they are posted (i.e. Buffer, Hootsuite, etc.)

*Problem #2: Government agency/park district is afraid to make a mistake on social media... so they post nothing and don't engage with their audience.*

This is the opposite problem: too much filter. The agency is stifled by fear and misses the chance to tell their story, share the best of what they do, answer questions and engage with the audience. The fix is to remember that social media is a bit like a party line phone. Say hello, chat with people, and let them know what's going on in a friendly, considerate way. It's just another way to communicate.

So what is the bottom line in all this? I suggest that if your park district isn't already actively engaged in social media to make plans soon to do so. It makes good sense to take advantage of social media, enjoy the benefits for your district, and have some fun!

**About the Author:** Alexander J. Barton is president of Barton Event Management which also consults with park districts, other governmental units, companies and non-profits about marketing, publicity, social media and all types of events, large and small. He can be reached at 847.720.4495 or [abarton@bartonchicago.com](mailto:abarton@bartonchicago.com) to address any reader questions.

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