



Archiving Social Media – Not All Archives Are Created Equal

Situated between Houston and Galveston, Texas, League City's proximity to coastal waters makes it a natural draw for tourists and fishermen alike, who then fall for its affordable Gulf Coast lifestyle. That allure has contributed to its population nearly doubling in the last 15 years to more than 88,000 — a surge that has led to a greater need for community services and encumbrance on local government. Like many municipalities with small budgets, the staff of League City's government agencies wear many hats.

As director of communications for League City, Kristi Wyatt sports a good number of those. She oversees incoming and outward-facing communications for the city government and police department, including social media.

In the past, when inappropriate social media comments received from the public had to be deleted, the content would be saved manually as snapshots in a folder in an attempt to comply with Texas state regulations around public information. She hoped that Facebook and Twitter would maintain all of the other content for her forever — but had no assurances given the ever-changing policies of social media companies. She also had no indication if citizens were ever deleting the comments and messages they had sent to the city.

"As we developed our social media presence, other departments started their own accounts and we ventured into different types of social media," Wyatt says. "It got to be overwhelming. The library and police department and other agencies had staff handling social media with their own systems. We couldn't always go back and easily find things, and just didn't have a good central location for everything. It was cumbersome and frustrating."

In 2013, Wyatt connected with ArchiveSocial, a social media archiving company with expertise in the public sector, which she had learned about from counterparts in other jurisdictions. "They seemed to be a really good fit for the challenges we were facing," she says.

In a digital era, citizens tend to express their opinions online rather than show up at public meetings or go to City Hall for a sit-down with officials. This makes saving their online public commentary valuable to city leadership wanting to take citizens' temperatures on key issues. ArchiveSocial was able to go back and archive all social media content the city had ever generated from day one — allowing Wyatt to search and aggregate social media commentary to plug into reports and PowerPoints and effectively convey public opinion to mayors, city managers, police chiefs and other leadership. She could also rest easy knowing that ArchiveSocial was automatically retaining all of the city's incoming and outgoing social media communications in accordance with the Texas Public Information Act.

Get it in Writing

Though League City was happy with the services provided by ArchiveSocial, the municipality was approached by another social media management company claiming to offer a press clipping service and social media analytics capabilities in addition to social media archiving for government. With the promise of multiple services for the same price, Wyatt was tempted.

"We have a small budget and use taxpayer funding," Wyatt says. "Every dollar counts for us. So if I'm told I can get twice the product, I'm going to jump at the chance."

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Kristi Wyatt, Director of Communications, League City, Texas

When she informed ArchiveSocial that she couldn't resist the other vendor's additional services — services that ArchiveSocial didn't offer at the time — ArchiveSocial staff understood, but advised her to seek written confirmation with the new vendor around its ability to comprehensively archive public records. As Wyatt began working with the new vendor's technician to activate the account, she quickly grasped that the sales representative had overstated the archiving capabilities and could not assure compliance with Texas laws.

“They really didn't offer all those things that made us feel protected as a municipality,” Wyatt says. “We didn't have the confidence that we were in complete compliance — and we weren't going to get the history of everything we'd ever had on social media. It doesn't do me any good to search from today forward if I can't look at my past.”

Wyatt called ArchiveSocial again, and spoke with CEO Anil Chawla. “He welcomed us back with open arms. He even said they wanted to look at what they might do with us in the future to meet those other needs that had led us away in the first place. I was ecstatic, because those are the kinds of relationships I want to have.”

“I would recommend ArchiveSocial to any of my counterparts,” she adds, “or else I would warn them to make sure other companies are specifically built to work with municipalities. Get assurances in writing, and make sure your contract is specific.”

An Ally for the City

League City now has a presence on eight separate social media sites, with hundreds of comments each day. It's not possible for Wyatt to keep track of each comment — so when she needs to take the pulse of a particular topic, she taps into ArchiveSocial.

“When there is a topic on which we are interested in learning public sentiment, ArchiveSocial lets me enter a keyword search through one account or all of our accounts at once,” Wyatt says. “That has been extremely helpful for me and is a great asset for the city.”

She has also been able to persuade city leadership, which is sometimes hesitant to venture into social media, that not only is social media an excellent tool for citizen engagement — using it can also influence public opinion.

THE SAFETY NET OF PROFESSIONAL ARCHIVING

As social media increasingly dominates as the forum for conversation between citizens and the public sector, keeping track of that conversation is growing more challenging — especially when public commentary on social media is subject to Public Information Act requests, similar to documents and email. Utilizing professional archiving services like ArchiveSocial — particularly those built for public sector needs — can provide agencies with peace of mind that regulatory compliance is being met and staff needn't babysit social media every moment.

Factors to consider:

- Without an archiving solution, social media content can reside in complicated, non-standardized formats not always easily translatable to reports and presentations.
- Content on social media can vanish in an instant, depending on the whims of social media companies and third parties who post the content. Don't allow your agency to base long-term record-keeping on systems you don't control.
- Manual archives are time-consuming to maintain and don't allow for swift, easy searching.
- It is best to capture social media on a continual basis in an authentic format, with complete metadata, and to use an archive that can replay the content the way it appears online.

Case in point: On League City's Facebook page, a citizen accused the city government of throwing its garbage away instead of recycling. Despite the fact that the city did have an effective recycling program, the accusations continued — very publicly. Finally, Wyatt went back and tracked all the woman's postings and made a plan to combat the problem. On Facebook, she invited the citizen to tour the city's recycling plant and see for herself how well it was working. The woman did so — and came away from that tour with an abrupt change of heart. Both on video and social media, the citizen became League City's greatest advocate, singing the city's praises for its sustainable recycling practices. Once the city implemented ArchiveSocial technologies, Wyatt was able to go back in time, track the commentary thread, and use it to create a presentation for classes and trainings that illuminates how social media can powerfully affect public perception.

“Without ArchiveSocial, I wouldn't have been able to easily find all that information from her past postings, collect, review and share them, and really make an impact by changing her mind in a public forum,” Wyatt says.

Although Wyatt doesn't look at ArchiveSocial records every day, the peace of mind and security it provides is of high value to her. “ArchiveSocial understands our needs and legal requirements,” Wyatt says. “I like to think of them as an ally for our city.”

Sample an archive of your own social media at archivesocial.com

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