

What I learned from a panel of social media experts

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I had the opportunity to attend the 2024 ACI conference, which was held in Arlington, Virginia. As the social media coordinator for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, I couldn't wait to dive into the deep end of the conservation-communications pool. I was also looking forward to chatting with other conservation-focused professionals and hearing their thoughts on the wild world of social media for natural resource agencies.

Despite its constantly evolving landscape, social media gives us, as government agencies, a unique avenue to directly communicate with the public about important and up-to-date information. With that said, the most effective strategies to do this aren't always the most clear-cut. That's why I'm always eager to hear what the best and brightest minds on government comms teams are thinking when it comes to social media outreach and how these platforms can be used to share valuable information in an easy-to-digest way.

This year's conference panel on social media trends was exactly my cup of tea. Dubbed "A Spoonful of sugar: Entertainment versus education in social media", this session gave conference attendees the chance to hear from Erin Huggins with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Matt Turner with the National Parks Service and Jessie Brown with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Here are my biggest takeaways:

Fun messaging is important messaging

Don't let anyone tell you that important information can't come in a fun package. The members of this panel highlighted the value of how a fun or humorous social media post can be a great way to make information memorable.

Erin Huggins mentioned that [this hilarious post](#), featuring laser-blasting fish, was an effective way to educate their audience on the National Fish Passage Program and its upcoming projects to address barriers fragmenting the nation's rivers and streams.

The panelists also mentioned that, for people to digest the more serious information, the public needs to trust your brand and agency on social media. The fun stuff can help build trust. I especially liked how Matt Turner put it: This kind of content is "safety with a smile."

Use analytics

Each month, I compile analytics on top-performing posts for my agency, but am I using this data to its full extent? The panel members had some great suggestions on using social media stats to create better content, improve workflow and get approval from leadership.

They recommended using social media analytics to show your agency's leadership that fun posts are effective ways to get the public's attention. Make sure to pass along insights that can

support and showcase how humorous or even silly posts can also help people pay attention and learn a thing or two.

The panelists also mentioned that social media analytics can represent times when you need help as a social media professional. Yeah, I'm talking about those posts that completely blow up with comments and questions, and that one person can't possibly moderate on their own — you know the ones. Beyond the cold hard numbers, anecdotal evidence can be useful to help your team track what content is being noticed by local media, important social media personalities or even leadership themselves. Don't forget to file away the posts that get reposted and paired with laughing emojis by the cool local news anchor.

Be chronically online

As if I needed another excuse to stay up late scrolling through Instagram Reels. As a social media professional, my personal social media use can range from productive and helpful to my job to somewhat deranged in its intensity. But hey, that's okay! Being "chronically online" (as the kids say these days) can be a great way to notice trends, new slang words or even what's not so cool on social media anymore. We can all agree that we do not need anyone calling our agencies "cheugy" in the comment section. (If you had to look up the definition of cheugy, thank your social media manager for being in the know so you don't have to worry about those things.)

Don't be afraid to push the envelope

Toward the end of the panel discussion, I just had to ask Erin about [a post](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shared on Instagram earlier that week. Its caption began with the sentence, "Show me what that tongue do ??." It went on to discuss some interesting information about white-lined sphinx moths and how they use their long tongues to sip nectar from flowers. The post received many comments. Some commenters shared some alarm about the chosen phrasing, but other people seemed pretty entertained seeing a federal agency use a little light innuendo to highlight a moth fun fact!

When I asked the panel how they decide when and how to toe the line between what's safe and typical and what's more on the PG-13 side of things, Erin Huggins let me know that sometimes it's okay and even helpful to your outreach goals to push the envelope, just a little. She noted that some followers (and even internal staff members) might not be fans of this strategy. But most people will learn something because that content caught their attention. Jessie Brown added that sometimes the posts she's been most nervous about are the ones that do the best.

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