Municipalities stay connected with social websites

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As social media sites become essential avenues of information, a growing number of municipalities are using them to put their cities on the map.

Cities from Coral Springs to Miami Beach are using social networking websites such as Facebook to promote projects quickly and save on advertising dollars.

"My idea of Facebook is just to have an avenue to get information out at a cheaper cost instead of brochures and so on,'' said Miami Springs Mayor Billy Bain, who plans to set up an event page for the city. ``It's free advertising.''

Aside from serving as an advertising and promotions channel, social media sites have morphed into something of an independent news agency for cities, which post alerts, crime information, public safety announcements and videos on sites.

In Doral and Miami Lakes, several residents and organizations are using Facebook pages to keep people informed, but either government does not have an official presence yet. Hialeah uses "cityofhialeah" name to blast information about upcoming events on Twitter, a social messaging utility that allows people to stay connected in real time. "CityofMiami" often updates its Twitter page, amassing 340 followers as of Thursday.

"We use tweets as a mechanism to network,'' said Lauren Cortinas, program coordinator for Miami's information technology department. ``We're just trying to capitalize on the different opportunities available to us for free.''

Miami Beach was one of the first municipalities in the county to use social media sites, starting with MySpace and graduating to YouTube, Facebook, and more recently, Twitter.

'We're like the news agency for the city so messages can vary from a traffic alert to an event or a commission item or public hearing or `hey the roads closed.' How else can you get that type of information out there fast?'' said Miami Beach public information's officer Nanette Rodriguez.

Because it's unfamiliar territory, two questions arose from municipal use of these sites: whether it lacked control over third party profanities and whether it violated the Florida Sunshine Law, which was designed to guarantee the public records of government activities.

Recently, Coral Springs sought advice from the attorney general to ensure the Facebook page it has in the works complies with state laws.

Some cities, including Miami Springs, are waiting for the attorney general's response to Coral Springs before

proceeding in their own Facebook endeavor.

"Our city attorney requested an opinion from the attorney general on us having a Facebook page and the two parameters were records retention and making sure everything would be available as public record," said Christine Verdi-Sarwar, Director of communications and marketing for Coral Springs.

However, she said the site content only becomes public record if government officials respond to any of the user comments on the site.

Currently, the city has a page on Twitter used solely to push information out without third party interaction. Officials hope to have a Facebook page come early June.

"The city has about 25 channels for communicating with our residents, but social media is really at the forefront," Verdi-Sarwar said.

In Miami Gardens, problems arose when a few city employees set up a city page unbeknownst to city officials.

"The reason we didn't want a site is because anyone can post anything they want on the site, pictures and profanity and people could associate that with the city," Miami Gardens city manager Danny Crew said.

Still, after a look at the page, he said the employees will not be asked to remove it.

The inability to control content also came up at a council meeting in Miami Springs on May 11, when Bain brought up the possible use of the Facebook site.

Miami Springs city council member Dan Espino responded, "Here's one thing, once you have this discussion, if you go to miamisprings.com, or some of the comments on anybody's Facebook, they can be derogatory comments that we receive," said Espino, referring to a current resident-run Miami Springs website, which is known to outwardly insult certain city officials.

But in Miami Beach, Rodriguez said they have only once had an issue with obscene content.

Even still, she kept the account, and quickly corrected the problem by changing the website settings to forbid third-party content.

And as municipal sites grow by sometimes hundreds of followers each week, the trend does not seem to be fading.

According to Ronald Gorland, assistant to the Miami Springs city manager: ``You can have millions of people or hundreds of people sign up to receive whatever you put out and it can automatically come up on your phone that's what the magic of it is."