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Social Media for Law Enforcement, Lt. Doug Nolte

New Course Spotlight

Each month we'll focus this section on a new course and instructor.

This month's featured course is Social Media for Law Enforcement taught by Lt. Doug Nolte.

“Police Officer's Facebook Posts Prompt Investigation”, “Police officer resigns over Facebook comments”. Headlines like these show something's missing. Headlines like these indicate that law enforcement agencies aren't effectively using social media. Doug Nolte, Lt., Information Services Unit Commander, Wichita (KS) Police Department, wants to change this. He's successfully guided his own department's social media use and now as one of Police Technical's newest instructors he's set to assist agencies across the country, with his course Social Media for Law Enforcement.

How it all started

Social media usage in the US has exploded in the past 5 years. Virtually everybody capable of using a computer (including law enforcement personnel) has a social media account (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, Twitter, or similar). But because they are easy to set up and “run”, virtually no one has received training to use these online services. A few agencies now warn their people to stay off these services, but very few have been proactive with training. How did we get to a point where some personnel spend hours using services (yes, on the job) without any training? And more importantly, what can be done?

Facebook (started 2004), Youtube (started 2005) and Twitter (started 2006), may be familiar names today, but only a few years ago none of them existed. Facebook went from one million users in 2004 to 750 million users only a few years later. Youtube, started as an add-on to the now greatly diminished MySpace, began with 3 employees in 2005 and now shows 3 billion videos a day.

With such explosive industry growth there clearly hasn't been enough time for officers and their departments to learn to use these tools effectively. This point is regularly made clear when law enforcement personnel are sited in news accounts for misuse of social media sites. Personnel from agencies large and small have been administratively disciplined, encouraged to resign, and even fired for their online social media conduct. To “solve” these problems, some industry liability professionals have advised their clients to limit or greatly reduce their officers' exposure to social media sites. Doug Nolte, on the contrary, believes that instead of denying the problem, or warning against its use, departments should leverage these free tools for staying in contact with the public, and train and guide their officers proactively on social media.

As a 19 year law enforcement veteran, Doug's resume/career reads like many others, steadily moving up and advancing in rank and responsibility. But it was during his duties as a PIO that he began to adjust his perspective on ways an agency can interact with the public. The internet offers so many new ways to reach out to the public. Many people think it must be expensive or difficult; but sometimes it's easy and free.

An example helps make this point: Several years ago (before their use of social media) the Wichita Police Department organized a large public gathering; an event designed to share agency information and processes with the public. In support of the event, ads in newspapers were taken out and flyers were printed and distributed. After weeks of planning and work, the event attendance fell far short of the hoped for projections. Simply put, nobody showed up. It could have been the marketing, perhaps the topic, or even the day of the week, but the bottom line was the department didn't get its message to the public. The actual cost of the effort was high, but the failure to engage the public was potentially more expensive.

Today, things are different. After heavily engaging in social media, the Wichita Police Department enjoys some of the highest online stats of public interaction. Instead of print marketing, or email lists, the department can now share information with thousands of people in the community an instant through Facebook and twitter gaining feedback nearly as quickly. Now when the department posts stories or article online, members of the public respond immediately and are able to further spread the word to their friends, relatives, and contacts.

Moving from Traditional Media to Social Media

Many departments acknowledged a social media learning gap between what they know and what they feel they ought to know. Many have tasked an officer or two to work on a Facebook, or upload department videos. But most would also acknowledge they are only scratching the surface of what they would like to do.

Social Media for Law Enforcement isn't just a course about what has and hasn't worked for a single Kansas agency. The attendees of this course receive not only a better understanding of what social media is, but how they can apply the course lessons in *their own departments*, for *their own personnel*, and for *themselves*. Additionally, a portion of the class deals with individual case studies from personnel *in class* so their perspectives can be added to the course. Social media is an evolving process, and law enforcement's use of that medium is evolving too.

Whether you are a new officer concerned about what to do (and not to do online), a supervisor tasked with creating a YouTube account for your agency, an experienced online developer looking for the next step to enhance your departments image...this course is for you. Regardless of your social media goals, Doug Nolte's experience, both as an officer and supervisor, a teacher, and as online media manger, will help your department.

If you'd like to better understand social media, learn how to use it more effectively (for both officers and departments), and learn how to better prepare yourself and your agency for the next wave of social media changes, please make arrangements to attend Doug Nolte's Social Media for Law Enforcement from Police Technical.

For class scheduling contact Julie Manson, at jmanson@policetechnical.com