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Waltham police embrace social media to close cases

Posted by Jaclyn Reiss July 28, 2011 03:34 PM

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By Jaclyn Reiss, Town Correspondent

Facebook and Twitter are no longer just for playing Farmville and updating what you ate for breakfast. According to Waltham police, it's quite the contrary - social media is becoming #majorlyimportant.

The Waltham police department is shifting to embrace wireless communication and social media to both inform citizens about community goings-on and listen to anonymous tips to help solve cases.

In the past few months, the department has created a Facebook page, signed up for Twitter, and launched a smartphone application to update residents on traffic patterns, emergency parking bans, Amber alerts, and other public safety issues.

"We're just shy of 1,000 fans now, so I'm pleased with the growth of our Facebook page," said Waltham police officer Robert Williams, Jr., who helped spearhead the initiative. "Off of Facebook, we went to Twitter, which has grown tremendously. Twitter feeds itself. I'm amazed at the number of followers retweeting. I practically don't have to do anything, which is great."

The idea of using social media to send public group alerts came to Williams after he tried driving to his Waltham gym during the early spring floods, only to find the road leading to his fitness center too waterlogged and shut down.

"I thought, 'It would have been nice to hear the road was closed,'" Williams said.

Additionally, the department has partnered with Citizen Observer/tip411, a company that offers group alerting and anonymous tip tools, to establish unidentifiable tiplines via text, Facebook and the police website.

Any resident who submits a tip through these mediums is issued a unique source code through Citizen Observer, which strips of all identifying features, and allows the police to text or email back to ask for additional information, Williams said.

Williams said the two-way communication improves the department's availability and access to citizens, and vice versa.

"In many years past, there's a stereotype of the police department having a wall or veil of mystery. That's not how policing works these days. We need citizen involvement," he said. "The days of the beat cop who walks down the street

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getting information from people... it's done differently now. [Social media] shows people that we're there, listening to their concerns. I guess social media is the beat cop of the 21st century."

Williams assures citizens that all tips are anonymous.

"It's unbelievably technologically difficult to get an identification or address from someone who submits a tip," he said. "Citizen Observer serves as the middle man, and strips any identifying information."

Giving citizens the option of supplying information without face-to-face or voice contact increases the amount of tips the Waltham police receives because digital contact is the standard of today's communication, Williams said.

"People are less inclined to pick up the phone or come down to the station, particularly when it comes to giving anonymous tips, because they're uncomfortable being seen with a police officer or have the mentality of 'I don't want to get involved,'" he said. "This way is easier to get people involved safely."

Terry Halsch, president of Citizen Observer, a company that produces public alerting systems and anonymous tip tools, said the majority of American police departments are using some type of social media to reach out to the public.

"Last fall, a survey of law enforcement agencies around the country found that 81 percent are using social media, and 45 percent of those said the sites had helped them solve crimes, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police Center for Social Media," Halsch said in an email. "Among agencies that aren't using social media, nearly 62 percent said they are considering doing so."

According to the survey, 67 percent of agencies have a Facebook page. The majority of agencies use social media for crime investigations (62 percent), as well as notifying the public of crimes and emergencies, and soliciting helpful tips.

"All our customers [law enforcement agencies] are embracing the concept of social media publishing," Halsch said, noting that these platforms grew popular around 2009.

Halsch said of his 1,000 clients, each agency receives an average of five to 10 tips per day through Citizen Observer's platforms.

While less than a dozen tips per day may not seem like much, both Halsch and Williams said the tips are quality over quantity.

"I had a member of drug force come up to me and say that the anonymous tip line is working out," Williams said. "He said several of the tips they received is stuff they knew about, or had an inkling about or were working on already. So people are sending real, valid tips."

Three months ago, police in Virginia posted information on a burglary to social media sites. The cops caught the perpetrator after receiving a tip through Citizen Observer, Halsch said.

"The thing resulting in closed cases is integration," Halsch said. "It's not just a matter of putting information in front of the public – because people are on information overload already – but giving people the support to provide information back to the police departments about suspicious activity or information relating to crime."

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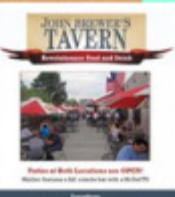
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