Application for Communication Excellence Award

Executive Summary:
The Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District is a union municipality serving a population of 52,000. Because of the rural nature of our district, we have traditionally not reached all of our community members as well as we would have liked using analog methods such as print, telephone, and flyers. As a result, the majority of our residents have not known what we do or who we are. Once we implemented a digital and social media presence, however, we have had an explosion in positive feedback from residents across our district. Participation in our programs and events has increased, and our zero waste goals have become a known factor in the community, instead of something nobody had ever heard of. By thoughtfully accessing the free or inexpensive digital tools that abound, we have vastly improved our presence in the community, and use of our programs.

Statement of Intent

Starting in 2012, since the Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District began to embrace a coordinated effort between social and digital media, participation in our events and programs has increased, and public perception has changed from a negative (dating back to a different era with different staff) to a positive. We attribute these changes to continual outreach focused on our zero waste programming, supporting community events and reuse businesses via our social media, and constant presence promoting positive messages about reuse, recycling, and composting. Our communication tools include an array of social media, cable access television, website, e-newsletter, e-surveys, virtual communities and listservs that serve our member towns.

Social Media

website

e-newsletter

virtual communities
Research/Planning

- **The Need:** Even as late as July, 2012, CVSWMD had not yet embraced social media or fully taken advantage of the myriad ways to reach out to the community by connecting website, e-newsletter, and other digital communication. The district was just recovering from a slate of bad publicity, and entering into a new era where its programs in organics and recycling would be key to implementing a brand new Vermont solid waste law, Act 148, which bans recyclables and organics from the landfill. It was crucial that CVSWMD engage citizens, and educate and inform residents as robustly as possible in order to turn around previous perceptions of the district, and to ensure that residents have a solid and positive experience with recycling, composting, and reuse in order to be ready for the new law.

- **Materials used prior to implementing:** CVSWMD heavily relied on paper handouts and phone calls. The paper materials include brochures, handouts about various collections and programs we offer, or handouts about how to handle certain materials such as household hazardous waste. These were useful, but at odds with our zero waste implementation plan. We still accept phone calls, but prior to an active and robust coordination of digital and social media, we used much more staff time answering phone queries that now come by email, or which residents answer themselves by perusing our website and social media. We knew we had to not only embrace digital communication, but do so thoroughly, because we know that mobile technology and digital use is on the rise across all demographics. According to the Pew Research Center, As of January 2014:
  
  - 90% of American adults have a cell phone
  - 58% of American adults have a smartphone
  - 32% of American adults own an e-reader
  - 42% of American adults own a table computer

Therefore, we knew then – and now – that if we want our residents to know about us, what we do and how they can participate, we need to reach them on their mobile and digital devices. We also knew that we had to continue providing our “analogue” communication tools, but we could greatly reduce them as more and more community members accessed our information via the web, social media, or other digital means.

- **Target Audience:** Our Target Audience included:
  
  - Mobile devise users
  - Digitally savvy residents (a skill that crosses all demographic and economic lines)
  - Youth and young adults who rarely – and may never - use analog methods to communicate
o Communication Goals:
- Increase website traffic by 25% every year for three years
- Reach 500 Facebook fans by Dec 31, 2014
- Increase e-newsletter click-through rate from 19% average to 30% average
- Increase e-newsletter open rate to 30% average to 38% average (both of these exceed industry average)
- Create timeline tool for pre-loading social media using free online sources such as Hootsuite
- Use Facebook and Twitter during events to draw last minute participants in
- Social and digital media communication increases participation rate in CVSWMD events and programs by 10% per year for three years.

o Anticipated Obstacles: We faced a few anticipated obstacles prior to incorporating social media and a more robust use of digital media into our communication strategy:
- We anticipated that some residents may use our social media sites to post negative or offensive remarks about us or our goals. We dealt with this anticipation by monitoring comments daily and responding to all comments. Only one comment has had to be removed for offensive language since we began using Facebook, and a few negative comments ended up starting a good dialogue.
- We anticipated challenges relating to public records laws, because we are a municipality and all of our written records are public. We dealt with this anticipated obstacle by keeping screen shots of the Facebook page, and knowing, also that Facebook retains all material posted on it, if ever there were a public records request for those items.
- The CVSWMD Board of Supervisors voiced some concerns, in the beginning, that social media would take up too much time for the outreach coordinator. It has melded well with the outreach coordinator’s other duties, however, and has proven so effective that even the dubious on the board are now convinced we made the right decision.

o Anticipated Opportunities: We anticipated (and realized) a myriad of opportunities by increasing our digital and social media presence, including:
- Immediate presence in the community through a variety of channels
- Ability to control our message even if we received negative press in newspapers (we haven’t)
- Opportunity to connect with our residents by promoting their work and events on social media
- Connection with other related organizations within our region and across the globe, giving us the opportunity not only to share their successes and challenges with our own fans, but to learn (and share) all the ways other communities are dealing with the same issues that we grapple with.
- Accessing new channels with which to update residents about changes in events or programs, or to alert them of upcoming events/collections.
- Potential to – over time – decrease paid advertising as more and more of our outreach happens via free or inexpensive digital channels
- Zip-code and demographic zoning of Facebook ads and messages to target a particular audience
- An exponentially increasing audience as we get more and more engagement

**Implementation/Execution**

- **Timeline:** The execution of our digital and social media communication occurred much in the same manner that social media itself works: organically. It started out with a Facebook page and grew into an increasingly user friendly website, a TV show on cable access TV, a YouTube presence, Twitter, and Pinterest. Each channel serves a different function. Here is how the timeline developed:
  - **July 2012:** reorganize information on website to make it more user friendly
  - **August 2012:** seek board approval to create Facebook page; continue work on website
  - **September 2012:** create FB page, offer a Green Cone for the 100th fan.
  - **January 2013:** start creation of Zero Waste Central, a cable access TV show with no cost attached to it.
  - **February 2013:** create YouTube channel in order to feature Zero Waste Central episodes.
  - **March – May 2013:** create and build Pinterest and Twitter presences.
  - **Daily:** update social media, depending on type of information being disseminated.
  - **Weekly:** post on Front Porch Form (virtual community listserv that reaches 13 of our 19 towns).

- **Budget:** Because digital media marketing is free, there has been no budget line item for this communication program. We have added Facebook advertising to our paid marketing campaigns, but the cost is so minimal ($786 since we started) that we can fold it into our existing budget.

- **Collaborations:** Social and digital media in general require collaboration. There is the unspoken agreement between organizations to promote each other’s work via social media; We do this with the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources via Twitter. We use our social media to promote Casella Waste Management’s Ag Plastics Recycling pilot; or to spread the word about the national prescription drug take back day, or to let people know about the Dartmouth Medical Center’s car seat recycling collection. We have strengthened many professional relationships by sharing their messages through our social media channels and vice-versa.

- **How elements in planning phase were accomplished:** Digital and social media require daily maintenance. Planning elements were accomplished through daily tweaks to our sites; regular updates; intentional building of fans or followers; offering curated content related to our follower’s interests (eg stories about Zero Waste communities around the world, or – for Pinterest – beautiful images of reuse projects). We achieved an effective cross-referenced digital and social media by doing the following:
Creating a presence on the major social media sites
- Regularly updating the website and social media
- Revising our approach to the e-newsletter to increase our click-through rate
- Taking advantage of mobile optimization on the website
- Optimizing social media links on all our digital sites, so Facebook can send visitors back to the website, and the website can send visitors to Facebook, etc.
- Constantly studying changes in how social media is used to be current with the most effective techniques.
- Paying attention to analytics offered by all of our sites and using the information to improve our outreach.
- Cross-referencing all announcements on all channels when we have an important event to communicate.
- Keeping current with best practices for social media marketing, and using important tools and strategies in order to take advantage of this important communication opportunity. One such example is to remember that social media is social – therefore we don’t post only about ourselves, but about other people, other organizations, and give shout outs to community members whenever possible.

Elements from planning process that were not implemented include:
- We planned to create a series of 1 – 3 minute videos using the free cable access channel, and posting to YouTube and our website. We have not yet implemented that aspect of the plan.
- We have not yet fully optimized our YouTube site.

○ How our Communication Program is an improvement over past practice: CVSWMD had improved its website and created a uniform style guide prior to July 2012, but it had not taken advantage of the many free options online to maximize website traffic, and reach out to our residents using social media. The CVSWMD e-newsletter and other written materials were overly wordy, and not optimized to funnel interested readers to our website or other digital channels (which had not previously existed).
- Opting in to a fully robust digital presence has increased recognition of the CVSWMD name (which is a difficult name to get people to remember); it has provided an easy and inexpensive way to communicate with our residents on a regular basis; and it has demonstrated that we are current in the ways that we communicate in the world. It has also increased participation in our programs.

Results/Evaluation
- How target audience reacted: We have had overwhelmingly positive response from visitors to our website and to our digital media presence in general. Simply connecting with the virtual community “Front Porch Forum,” (which provides something like a contemporary, interactive listserv to most of our member towns) has created a solid, consistent and positive presence in our region. We get
comments regularly that people hear about our events “everywhere” – which could mean they saw it on Front Porch Forum, glanced at a status update or tweet online, received a short e-newsletter reminder, or checked out our website for more information.

- **How success was measured:** We measured our success by analyzing our intake forms from all of our collection events, and using the analytics available through each social media site. We also account for the anecdotal evidence we find in conversations that we regularly have around town with people who have heard of us or our programs via one of our digital channels. Specific evidences of our success are as follows:

  - We currently have 391 Facebook fans and 233 Twitter followers. While these are not enormous numbers compared to corporate social media profiles; they far exceed those of the Chittenden Solid Waste District, the largest comparable organization in Vermont, which has 181 Facebook fans and 97 Twitter followers.
  - Our e-newsletter open rate increased from 26.5% in August 2011, to 30.7% in April, 2013. And our click-through rate, which is much more important, increased from a low of 3.9 percent in August 2011 to 24.2% in April, 2013. The click-through rate is the number that tells us how many people are clicking our links, which usually lead to our website or Facebook page, so this number is a measure of success for us.
  - In the fall of 2012, after having had a Facebook page for just one month, and using digital advertising for the first time in the district’s history, we held our largest household hazardous waste collection that we have ever had with 311 households participating. That same year, since starting the increase in our digital presence, we had 102% more users of our special collections than in 2010 and a 20% increase over 2011. We also saw nearly half (48%) of our participants were new in 2012.

- **How program can be improved:** We can always improve upon our use of digital and social media. Here are some of the plans for improvement:

  - Using a social media planning website such as Hootsuite to plan status updates, tweets, pins, etc ahead of time as much as possible.
  - Increase our use of video and YouTube.
  - Redesign the look of our website to continue to increase user friendliness.
  - Take advantage of app use and potentially create an app designed to help residents find the best sources for their discards.

- **How can the program be replicated in other communities:** Social media can be replicated anywhere because it is so easy to zone in on specific interests, demographics or zipcodes for target audiences. It allows even small rural communities like ours to have a presence locally, but also on the international stage. Indeed, our social media and digital communication has garnered us much media attention, because our message is so pervasive. As a result, not only have we had a regular presence on WCAX TV and WGDR radio station, but in March, Al Jazeera English did a 2.5 minute TV
segment on our program which ran in 180 countries. They were able to find out about us via our videos posted on YouTube, our stories posted on Facebook, our Tweets, and our website presence.

Replication is not the only important factor for similar communities. Anyone can create a website or a Facebook page. Digital and social media has to be approached with thought for what the user wants, how the user will react. Rather than our usual “let me tell you about me” approach to outreach, we must now tell our users about themselves, and gauge what they want to know, and provide useful content. It’s a much more engaging process, and really does provide quantifiable results that anyone willing to put in the time and effort to reap.
Supplement Section

The Facebook ad ran for just a few hours prior to submitting this application and resulted in 5 new “likes” on our page:
Optimized e-newsletter:

By always training and following industry trends, we have learned to optimize our e-newsletter to send readers back to our website and social media. Studies show that the most clicked on links in emails are video, so we now incorporate more video in our digital outreach.
Our website use has been up 25% since we started managing it more effectively.
We make use of the analytics and insights offered by all of our social media and digital sites in order to make decisions about when to post, what to post, what gets the most engagement, and which posts bring people back to our website.