

Social Media Platform Evaluation Framework

This framework is intended to ensure that the City's use of social media platforms is strategic, sustainable, and aligned with organizational priorities. It provides guidance for evaluating whether the City of Cambridge should establish a presence on a new social media platform or continue operating an existing account. This tool is meant to assist staff with decision making process, and we have intentionally avoided creating a score card model.

1. Strategic Purpose

Before the City chooses a platform or evaluates whether to continue using one, the City should first clarify the purpose of the account.

Key Questions

- What communications or operational objective would the platform support?
- How does the platform align with the City's overall organizational social media strategy?
- What would success look like?
- Is there an existing City platform where this information could be shared instead?

Examples

- Providing public information
- Reaching specific audiences
- Supporting community engagement
- Publishing critical communications, including emergencies
- Driving interest to City services or programs
- Reaching audiences not effectively served through existing channels

Key Metric

- Alignment with measurable goals (reach, engagement, traffic to City services, customer service response, or reaching a specific audience)

Guidance

If a platform cannot clearly support a strategic goal, set measurable objectives, or align with the overall organizational social media strategy, the City should hold off on creating an account or consider sunseting existing accounts.

The City's Communications Office encourages all departments, who operate and don't operate platforms, to share ideas and content for publishing consideration on the City's primary accounts.

2. Audience Presence and Demographics

A platform's value is largely determined by whether the City's intended audience is active there.

Key Question

- Do platform users match the City's intended target audience (for example: age distribution, geographic location, interests, and behavioral patterns)?

Metrics to Examine

- Percentage of the target audience using the platform
- Active users in the City's geographic region
- Engagement rates among relevant audience segments
- Average time users spend on the platform
- Website traffic to key program or service-based pages.

Guidance

If the intended audience is not active on the platform or engagement is limited, it will likely have low strategic value. In those cases, the City should withhold in creating an account or consider sunsetting existing accounts.

3. Content Fit

Different platforms reward different types of content. The City should evaluate whether it can effectively produce content that aligns with the platform's format, expectations, and posting cadence.

Key Questions

- Can the City consistently produce content that performs well on this platform?
- Can administrators develop an initial set of proposed content (e.g., at least 10 posts) prior to establishing the account?
- Can the City produce a mix of content formats required for the platform (e.g., static posts, short-form video, photography, and branded graphics)

Metrics

- Engagement rates by content format
- Reach
- Website traffic from a platform
- Production cost by content type (e.g., text, images, graphics, video)
- Ability to maintain a regular posting cadence and respond to valid questions/concerns and to correct misinformation.

- Established benchmarks and growth targets (weekly, monthly and quarterly)

Guidance

If the City cannot consistently produce platform-appropriate content, manage engagement, and evaluate performance, it should hold off on creating an account or consider sunseting existing accounts.

4. Peer Use Landscape

Understanding how peer communities use a platform can provide insight into its potential value.

Key Questions

- Are peer cities or comparable communities active on the platform?
- How are they using the platform?
- What type of content are they posting (subject matter and format)?
- Are they achieving meaningful engagement?

Metrics

- Peer community follower growth
- Average engagement per post
- Content formats performing well for peer organizations
- Relative visibility or share of voice

Guidance

If peer communities demonstrate strong engagement on a platform, the City may consider pursuing the platform, if it aligns with the City's overall strategy and other evaluation criteria are met.

If peer communities experience low engagement or are leaving a platform, the City should carefully evaluate whether it still aligns with other considerations.

5. Resource Capacity

Operating a social media account requires ongoing staff capacity. The City should evaluate whether sufficient resources exist to manage the account effectively.

Activities to Consider

- Staff training
- Content creation and workflows
- Posting and scheduling
- Monitoring comments and feedback

- Responding to messages
- Reviewing analytics and performance
- Occasional evening and weekend coverage

Metrics

- Estimated staff hours required per week
- Staff availability
- Content production costs
- Ability to maintain consistent posting and visibility into comments

Guidance

If staff cannot maintain consistent activity, the City should hold off on creating an account or consider sunsetting existing accounts. Dormant accounts can negatively impact credibility and public trust.

6. Platform Algorithm and Discoverability

Platforms vary in how easily content is discovered by new audiences.

Evaluation Factors

- Organic reach potential
- Content ranking and delivery
- Algorithm-driven discovery
- Search and hashtag behavior
- Availability and cost of paid promotion (if the platform prioritizes paid promotion).
- Ability to leverage available platform features and tools

Metrics

- Average organic reach
- Discovery versus. follower engagement
- Viral potential
- Advertising cost metrics (e.g., the cost to read 1,000 advertisement impressions - CPM)

7. Risk and Brand Considerations

Some platforms present higher reputational or operational risks.

Evaluation Factors

- Comment moderation requirements
- Platform toxicity or harassment levels
- Brand safety concerns
- Regulation, ownership, or governance risks
- Potential for misinformation or misuse
- Public record retention

Guidance

The City should consider whether these risks can be effectively managed before establishing or continuing a presence on a platform.

8. Overall Measurement and Return on Effort

The City should evaluate whether meaningful performance metrics can be collected.

Key Metrics

- Engagement rate
- Reach
- Follower growth
- Click-through rate
- Conversion to City services or information

Guidance

If a platform cannot reasonably connect to measurable outcomes, it may not represent an effective use of City resources.

9. Opportunity Cost

Every additional platform requires time and resources.

Key Question

- Would improving performance on existing platforms produce greater impact than launching a new account?

Guidance

In many cases, focusing resources on a smaller number of well-managed platforms produces better results than maintaining many low-activity accounts, particularly when there are more established platforms with significant followers and consistent engagement. Resident feedback also indicates a preference for receiving information in fewer, more centralized locations.

General Guidance for Platform Decisions

The City (or a Department) should generally **avoid launching or consider retiring a platform when:**

- The platform does not align with the City's overall social media strategy
- The platform lacks a clear content strategy
- Administrators cannot maintain consistent posting and engagement
- The City's target audience is not active on the platform
- Content formats do not translate well to the platform
- Staff or production resources are limited
- Measurable objectives cannot be established or monitored
- Platform risks outweigh potential benefits

Departments proposing a new social media account may be asked to provide a brief justification demonstrating alignment with the criteria outlined in this framework for review by the Communications Office.