



# Social Media for Law Enforcement: *Crafting the Right Content*

by Lauri Stevens

## About the Author



Lauri Stevens is the principal consultant and founder of LAWS Communications. She is also the creator and producer of the SMILE Conference® and the creator of the award winning ConnectedCOPS™ blog and social media awards program. She is an interactive media professional with over 25 years of media experience, including 12 years in higher education as a Department Chair of Interactive Media.

## Social Media for Law Enforcement: Crafting the Right Content

We are living at a time with intense changes in how we communicate, but make no mistake, these changes are not fleeting. Whether Twitter or Facebook is around tomorrow is not the argument. Rather, what we *must* accept is the fact that communication is undergoing a significant and intense shift. Police are not immune to these changes.

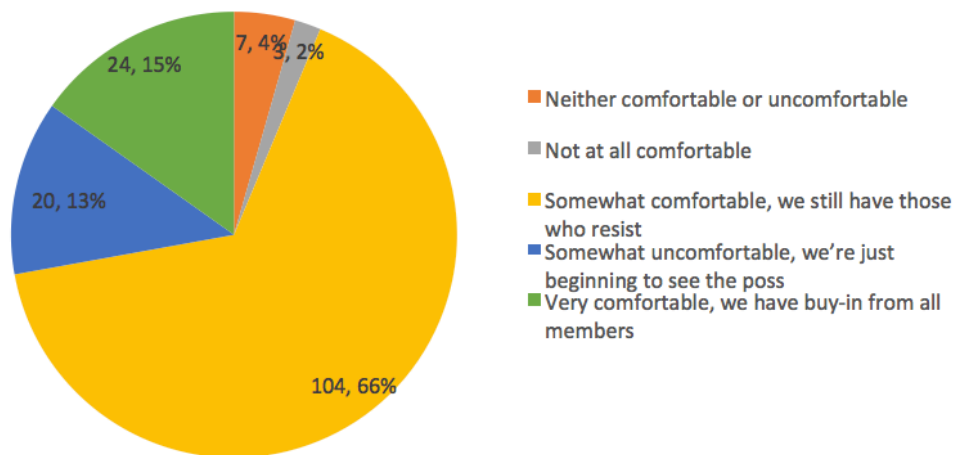
Some people saw it coming. Few, if any, of those people wear a police uniform. That's neither here nor there. What matters now is how police handle this reality; and some have done very well. Early police adopters have made it easier on themselves because there are many agencies who realized these changes in communication early, adopted them even if slowly, and today are reaping the many benefits of their foresight.

Most of these early adopters have achieved success due to their acute understanding of the power of story-telling. Just like the stories told by visionaries in technology may have birthed technological advances, story-telling by police professionals has the potential to profoundly affect change. If you accept the challenge, the only question is - what stories to you tell?

Story-telling is at the heart of [community engagement](#). During a recent webinar by LAW S Communications and Everbridge covering [community engagement](#), we asked our audience three poll questions.

The first was, **“When it comes to community engagement in social media, how comfortable is your agency?”** This is a fairly high-level question and one could argue that comfort-level doesn't equate to doing a good or bad job. But first, we must have buy-in at all levels. **Only 15% said they feel they have buy-in from all levels.**

## When it comes to community engagement in social media, how comfortable is your agency?



Of 237 attendees, 158 answered this poll question. 15% of the 158 respondents gave the highest comfort rating (green). 13% reported the second highest comfort level (blue) and full 2/3 of all respondents were right in the middle (gold).

Only 6% of respondents reported a low comfortable level with community engagement using social media.

What kind of change should the policing profession attempt to facilitate? The answers to this question can (and should) vary greatly. You might say you want more people to wear seatbelts and move over when approaching emergency vehicles on the road. These types of topics are endless in number and are the types of “ever-green” topics for which agencies can plan well in advance.

However, given the law enforcement climate faced by police today, the stories they choose to tell should be made with great deliberation and care. Officers are going to work never knowing what kind of assaults they’ll have to endure whether physical or verbal.

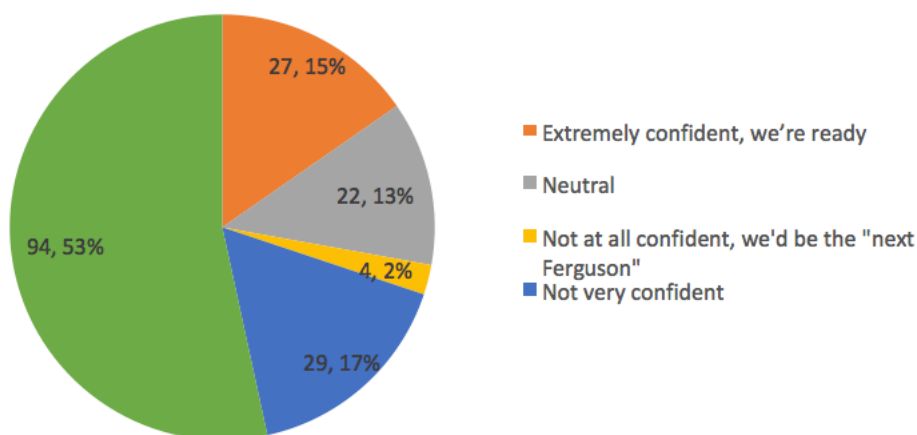
Unfortunately, the types of events that end up going viral on social media usually are not for positive reasons. However, these events typically can be planned for. Through brainstorming and learning from past experiences, messaging should be created in

advance of any potential event. So when it happens, there’s no panic. The media team already has buy-in for the messaging and with a couple quick approvals, the process is

put into place. Without a plan, too much time is wasted because the commanders don't have time to think about what and when to say.

The second poll question we asked our webinar audience was, **“Thinking of the Ferguson incident, if it happened in your town, how confident are you that your PD would handle it well [with social media]”?** Again, just **15% answered with the highest degree of assuredness.**

Thinking of the Ferguson incident, if it happened in your town,  
how confident are you that your PD would handle it well?



Of 237 attendees, 176 answered this poll question. 15% of the 158 respondents gave the highest confidence rating (orange). 53% reported the second highest comfort level (green) and full 13% of all respondents were right in the middle (gray).

A total of 19% of respondents (blue and gold) reported a low confidence level with their PD handling a Ferguson-like event well.

Tips to consider when “telling stories” on social media:

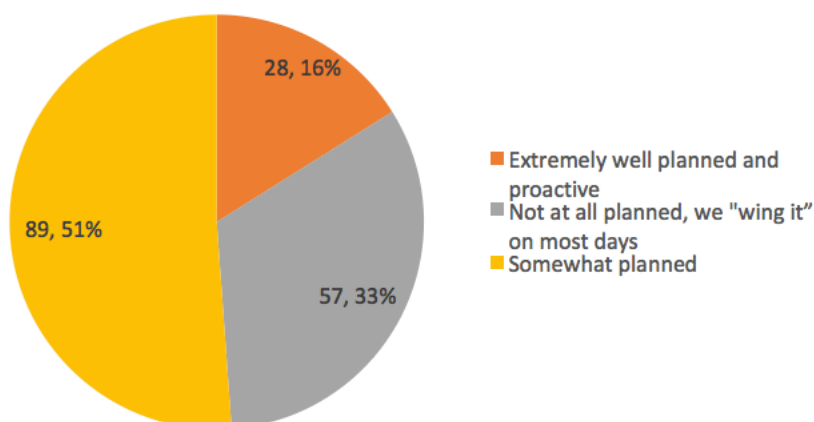
- **Post high quality consistent content.** The fundamental key to success on social media is consistency and quality. You cannot employ a 9 to 5, Monday through Friday approach.
- **Share more than just the happy stories.** If you only tell people how awesome you are, they will see right through it and any benefits will be very short lived. When mistakes are made, share that too. If you're authentic and proactive when you do it, the trust you build is real and the support you receive will be too.

- **Before posting, ask yourself if your messages add value.** If you're not sure, ask yourself what your desired outcome is. If you can't state it, the answer is probably 'no'. If you can state a desired outcome, you'll know if what you're about to post will serve you well or not.
- **Tell people who you are and how you do your jobs.** There's a reason the Cops television show is one of the longest shows on television. People are interested in what you do. Tell them and show them. If the policing profession as a whole did this more, perhaps police would get more support.
- **Use humor, if you're funny.** We've all see cops have fun on social media and when it comes off well, it usually has great results. But if it doesn't come naturally, I wouldn't go there.
- **Adhere to culture of department and community.** This one goes hand-in-hand with the use of humor. The things that work for one police department may not work for the next. Nothing should be forced and agency culture should never be sacrificed.
- **Get creative with the types of content.** Studies have shown over and over again that the type of posts that resonate the most with people are often those that include photos and videos. If your skills and resources can support it, include them more often.
- **Answer / reply to people.** If you don't plan to actually interact with people, social media could really backfire on you. Talk *with* people. The word 'social' is in there for a reason.
- **Tell stories backed up by facts and data.** If you're in possession of supporting facts and data, use it when you can to give people extra reasons to trust in what you have to say.

And the third poll question we asked our audience was **“Thinking of your social media program, how proactive and well-planned would you say your messaging is?”**

Similar to the first two questions, just **16% answered at the highest level.**

Thinking of your social media program, how proactive and well-planned would you say your messaging is?



Of 237 attendees, 174 answered this poll question. 16% of the 174 respondents gave the highest proactivity rating (orange). 51% reported the mid-level proactivity level (gold), but 1/3 of all respondents said they "wing it".

Not until every police agency can answer these types of simple questions at the highest level of confidence can the police profession claim it's doing all it can do to tell its stories well, defend its honor and relate to the community it serves in a compassionate way.

It's certainly not what a lot of officers thought they would be doing when they signed-up to be a cop. But it is the reality in which we live. It just takes a little strategy, some creativity and of course, a command structure that supports it all. Combine all that with the passion cops bring to their jobs, it is sure to bring success.



## About Nixle Community Engagement, by Everbridge

Engaged and active communities are built on a commitment to transparency and safety. Our Community Engagement application helps public safety and emergency management agencies to easily create a resident opt-in database, while providing you with control over authoring and publishing your message directly to the public.

### Community Engagement enables:

- **Easy Resident Opt-in:** Easily increase resident opt-in's at an exponential rate. Maintain a robust database of resident contact information to foster a community dialogue or provide effective emergency notifications.
- **A Force Multiplier:** Publish and distribute public information at scale, with the push of one button, via social media, websites, email, text, **OneBridge** mobile app, and Google Alerts. Leverage residents to act as force multiplier to assist in preventing and solving crime. Ideal when internal resources are limited.
- **Control Public Information Dissemination:** Maintain complete power and control to author messages and disseminate information to the public at will.
- **Precise Neighborhood Targeting:** The most precise neighborhood-level geographic targeting system available. Send messages to specific communities or neighborhoods.
- **Focus on Public Safety:** The most trusted public safety product on the market, as used by over 8,000 public safety agencies. Completely focused on helping agencies keep residents safe and informed.