

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE – NOVEMBER 16, 2009

ENHANCING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Recommendations

The Commissioner of Legal and Administrative Services and the Director of Corporate Communications, in consultation with the City Manager, Chief Information Officer, City Clerk and the Senior Manager of Strategic Planning recommend:

1. That a staff working committee be established to evaluate appropriate opportunities for using social media, establish a strategic direction and create policies as required to guide social media implementation in the Corporation;
2. That Attachment 1 – Social Media Staff Working Committee Draft Terms of Reference be approved;
3. That the presentation from Robert Hutton, Pollara Inc. be received.

Contribution to Sustainability

Social media applications will facilitate the use of alternative channels of communication which contribute to sustainability.

Economic Impact

Funds for this initiative are not required at this point and therefore have not been allocated in the 2009/10 operating budget.

Communications Plan

A communications plan will be discussed by the proposed staff working committee.

Purpose

This report is being presented for information purposes and to discuss next steps in the process.

Background - Analysis and Options

Council at its meeting on September 21, 2009 approved the following recommendation from the Strategic Planning Committee at its meeting on September 15, 2009:

1. "That staff bring forward a report on the use of electronic communications and social media for communication purposes," and
2. "That staff bring forward a report on a creative public engagement plan for forums, including the Budget Public Information Forum" which is linked to a strategic initiative in the Vaughan Vision 2020; "Ensure citizen focused communication initiatives: establish and implement a more effective model for civic engagement and enhance our public consultation strategy."

Understanding Social Media

Social media can be defined as primarily internet and mobile-based tools which are used for sharing and discussing information among people. These online technologies and practices allow people to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives with each other. A characteristic of all social media is User-Generated Content (UGC) which allows users to post

their own information. A sample of tools currently being used includes: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, Wiki's, blogs and discussion boards.

Before engaging in a discussion of the applicability of social media to the government environment, it is important to keep in mind that social media is best used as a *tactical* and not a *strategic tool*. In other words, it is a great tool for getting messages out, for mobilizing, and for engaging. However, it is not as useful a tool for developing sound strategies and policies. An example of a successful social media campaign is that of President Barack Obama.

The Obama Phenomena

There has been a lot of attention paid to the success of Barack Obama and his use of social media during his successful presidential Campaign. The Obama Campaign used social media very effectively to communicate and mobilize. However, there was absolutely no policy or platform development, or strategic development, using social media. Instead Obama's strategists saw social media as "A *virtual mechanism for scaling and supporting community action*." In particular, the website My.BarackObama.Com, was used as a networking site that aggregated Obama supporters and provided the tools to create groups, plan events, raise money, and connect to each other. Social media tools such as Twitter and e-mail blasts were used primarily to alert supporters and potential supporters of town hall meetings and other campaign gatherings. This allowed the campaign to gradually and effectively grow momentum and communicate.

The Obama campaign developed policy and strategy through focus groups primarily and it is a successful example of uniting people, and mobilizing them. The keys to success were:

1. A sophisticated software engine which allowed users to interact with the website
2. Using social media as an information and messaging tool not as a policy tool
3. Mobilizing people through social media to 'get out the word' and attend campaign events

Pros and Cons of Social Media

An example of a municipality using social media effectively is the Region of Waterloo and their rapid transit initiative. The Region was interested in investigating ways to reach out to youth regarding their various transit initiatives. By establishing a Facebook account various events such as open houses, public consultations and council meetings are advertised on the site which can alert citizens and other stakeholders to events which are being scheduled to discuss the rapid transit event. They also offer the opportunity for those who cannot attend the event to fill out an online comment sheet which can capture their feedback. Users can also access any documents about the rapid transit initiative on the site as well as any articles which have appeared in local papers.

Currently, Vaughan Public Libraries has a Facebook account which is aimed at teenagers. It is called Vaughan Public Libraries Teen Vortex and provides information regarding upcoming teen programs and other information teens may be interested in. They also have two blogs, one for teens and one for adults.

There are two key drawbacks to using social media as a strategic tool; representativeness and control. Representativeness refers to the difficulty in getting representative, unbiased information since there is a significant risk that the process will be hijacked by radical individuals or groups. Online discussion groups have increasingly become characterized by a lack of civility and intensifying and amplifying extreme rhetoric. This makes it hard for more reasoned middle of the road voices to be heard. The drawback associated with control is, by utilizing Facebook, Twitter and other external programs it is hard to maintain management control over the dialogue and reaction to information which is posted.

Organizations who host online discussions struggle with this problem. If they use a light hand in moderating, any extreme opinions will quickly dominate, and that drives the “middle” views – those that are most typical out of the discussion. If a heavy moderating presence is used, deleting extreme and uncivil language extreme views may be eliminated from the process, however, the discussion is heavily biased due to the ever-present threat of deletion and dismissal – and conversation becomes stifled.

An increasing body of theory suggests that uncontrolled, open social media has caused an increased *polarization* of political discussion and values, rather than aiding in bringing people together. Open discussions, such as discussion forums and wikis, are declining in use.

Social media can be used as a tactical outreach and engagement vehicle. A virtual town hall could be created using the City's new website Vaughan Online. Seeded by participants from a community attitudinal survey, this virtual town hall could be used by numerous City projects such as Vaughan Vision 2020, Vaughan Tomorrow, Green Directions and the Budget process as a sounding board for feedback and input on the various initiatives. Further, the larger community could be engaged on multiple levels such as Twitter, Facebook, and email in outbound communications to provide information about upcoming events. These types of applications could be made available through the Vaughan Online website if applicable. It would be an efficient and effective way to engage, refine, and mobilize as well as provide a venue as it grows organically for a regular, well controlled and moderated virtual town halls.

Other applications such as live streaming video and podcasts could be considered as the technology is made available through Vaughan Online and the new city hall. Overall, the goal is to use 'social media' type applications for outbound informational purposes while gathering qualitative strategic information through creative methods such as an attitudinal survey and virtual town hall. It is recommended that all social media applications be administered through the Vaughan Online system.

Next Steps

Currently some City departments such as Vaughan Public Libraries, and Economic Development have experimented with different social media applications. Others such as Corporate Communications, City Clerks and Strategic Planning are considering using these tools in future applications. Thus, there is a need to look into the application of social media tools in a strategic and deliberate manner in order to ensure a corporate approach. To approach this issue it is recommended that a staff social media committee be created composed of key user departments whose goal would be to develop some strategic objectives, guidelines and policies to guide the use and application of social media in the City. This committee would report back to the Strategic Planning Committee periodically to keep the Committee informed of its discussions.

Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020/Strategic Plan

This report is linked with strategic initiative number five “Ensure citizen-focused communication initiatives: establish and implement a more effective model for civic engagement and enhance our public consultation strategy.”

Regional Implications

Staff will monitor social media trends occurring throughout York Region

Conclusion

Exploring utilizing new technology to improve civic engagement and public communication provides new opportunities. Implemented in the most effective manner social media can be a useful tool for outbound messaging to support public forums for the Budget, Vaughan Tomorrow or the Vaughan Vision 2020. The concept of a virtual city hall offers the opportunity for a creative public engagement approach which can build off the capacities of the Vaughan Online system. Forming a staff social media working committee will assist in establishing a corporate approach to the issue.

Attachments

1. Attachment 1 – Social Media Staff Working Committee Draft Terms of Reference
2. Attachment 2- "Social Media in Government: A Quick Primer" Presentation

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Respectfully submitted,

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Madeline Zito
Director Corporate Communications

**SOCIAL MEDIA STAFF WORKING COMMITTEE
DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The social media staff working committee will review the application of social media tools in the City Corporation. This includes developing strategic goals, policies, guidelines and a governance structure to regulate their use. The committee will be composed of representatives from key departments, will meet every two months and report to the Strategic Planning Committee periodically.

OBJECTIVES

1. Develop strategic goals and objectives to guide the implementation of various social media applications in City departments
2. Assess the potential of social media in supporting strategic communications
3. Develop a creative public engagement strategy for public forums using social media applications
4. Assess the feasibility of establishing a ‘virtual town hall’ mechanism to be utilized by departments and key strategic project leads to gather citizen feedback and input
5. Complete a social media audit which aggregates departmental needs in order to gain a perspective of what is desired across the organization
6. Formulate policies, standards and guidelines which will guide the use of social media to achieve consistency across the Corporation
7. Assess the risks and benefits of using different social media applications and evaluate what the target market is for each initiative

Social Media in Government
A Quick Primer

Prepared for:

Vaughan City Council

November 16, 2009

POLLARA

Social Media is a hot topic with lots of buzz – what’s it all about?

- In discussing social media, the one key concept is that social media is *tactical* – *never* strategic. Examples include; Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Wikis, Blogs
- It’s a great *outbound* tool – for getting messages out, mobilizing and engaging
 - e.g., The Obama campaign used social media very effectively to communicate and mobilize people motivated by a common cause,
 - It was complex, complicated, heavily moderated, vetted, and controlled, requiring both a huge developmental budget and a large infrastructure of staff campaign headquarters
 - It was expensive
- BUT social media was NOT used in policy, platform, or strategic development
 - It’s a terrible tool for developing sound strategies and policies
 - Feedback of a qualitative nature was provided to the campaign strategists, but otherwise, there was nothing strategic developed on social media – all tactical.
 - Obama’s social media ‘army’ did not carry over into the government, because developing policies and programs cannot be done through social media
 - *Nota Bene: Obama’s policy and strategic direction were heavily influenced by numerous focus groups, not social media*

The Issue of “Wingnut Wars”

- Pollara’s research into social media habits and attitudes illustrates two key drawbacks of social media as a strategic tool: **Trust** and **Representativeness**
 - Consumer Marketers do NOT use social media for strategic research – because it does not provide representative, unbiased information
- Organizations who host online discussions use two less-than-perfect approaches as they struggle with the issue of representativeness:
 - Light-hand in moderating – encourages ‘wingnuts’ to hijack the discussions and drives the ‘middle’ out
 - Heavy moderating presence – results in heavily biased responses because of threat of dismissal/deletion and the resulting in trite responses that conform with the moderator’s views
- Uncontrolled, open social media has caused an increased **polarization** of political discussion and values rather than bridging people together;
 - Social media does not provide a balanced discussion; Rather, it has become **directional** (in the sense of outbound messages, e.g., Twitter)

Current Situation

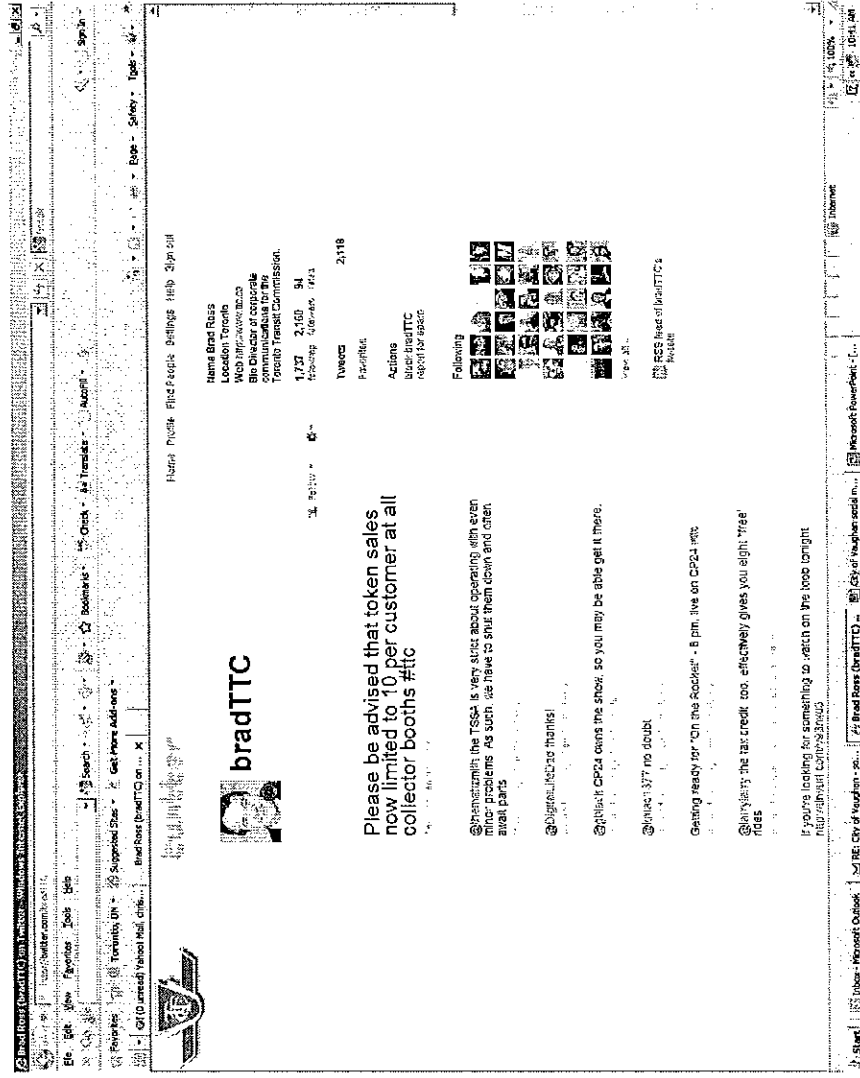
- A choice-based strategic model is necessary to effectively allocate the City's finite fiscal resources (tax dollars),
- Obtaining feedback through town halls does not work
 - Town halls do not engage the representative portion of the population whose input is needed
- Obtaining feedback and direction through social media (either discussion forum or a wiki application) will not work
 - It's a communication, not a strategic tool
 - People do not have the context or knowledge to make choices beyond their immediate self-interest
 - People tend to react to, and follow the loudest voices (the wingnut problem)

Current Situation

- Many City departments are interested in the concept of social media and would like to use it for their programs or projects. However, there is a need for a coordinated, consistent and well thought out approach
- Have to define what are your strategic objectives and target markets before implementing the tools
- Everyone should be using the same citizen information in order to ensure it is representative
- Vaughan Online internet platform will facilitate a Corporate approach and a common base to utilize for various departments

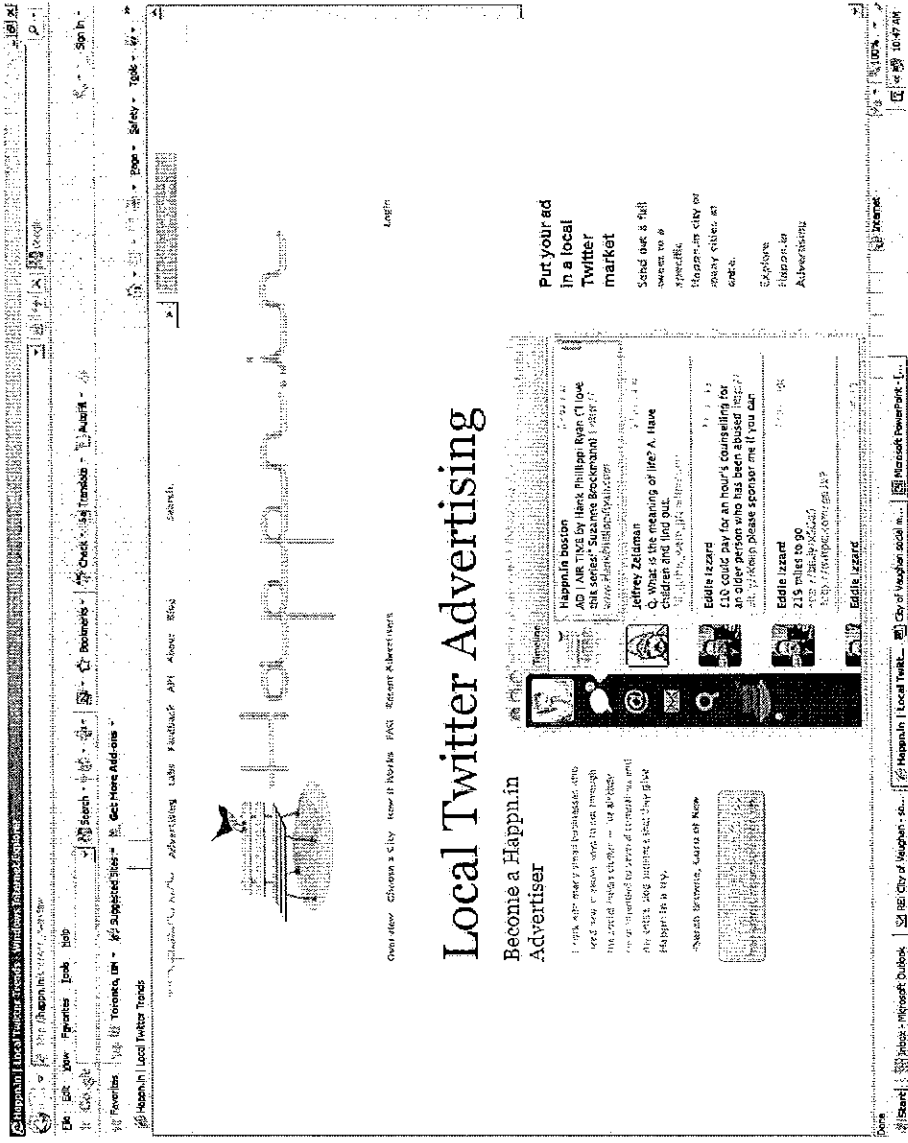
Using Social Media in Vaughan – Some Examples Worth Considering

- **Twitter Page** – e.g., TTC uses social media to interact with transit riders
- Establishes an online presence
- Engages its users for notifications (e.g. delays), as well as a forum for users to express thoughts and concerns
- Creates a two-way line of communication for users and TTC to interact through social media
- The City of Vaughan could benefit from establishing this type of online presence to increase interactions between users as well as giving the citizens to “stay in touch” with the City’s initiatives, etc.



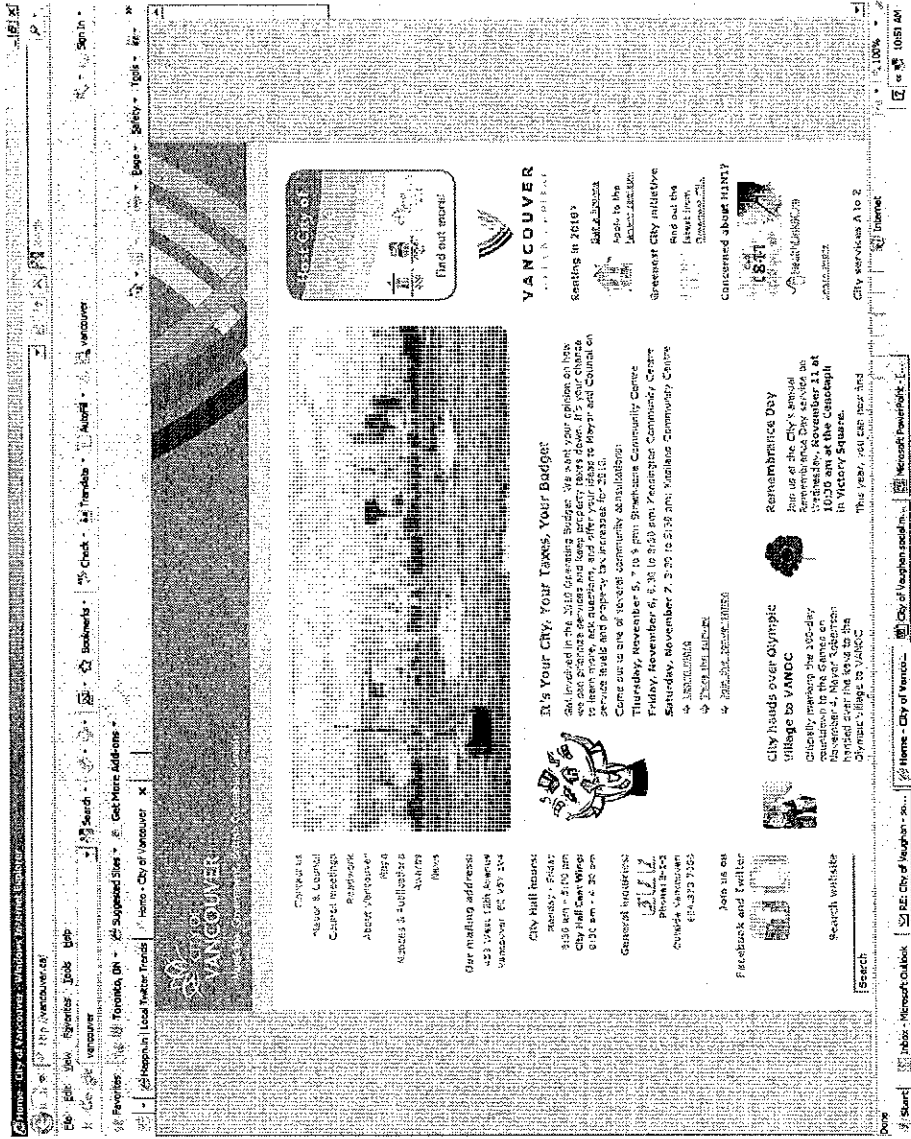
Using Social Media in Vaughan – Some Examples (cont'd)

- Twitter Ads - In addition to establishing an identity online through Twitter, the City of Vaughan could purchase local ad space to target its users directly, as in the Toronto Twitter Ad shown here
- Targeting a local audience is a great way of increasing exposure and awareness of the City
- Twitter ads are an excellent medium to pull and direct citizens to an online engagement with the City



Using Social Media in Vaughan – Some Examples (cont'd)

- **The City of Vancouver** - offers an excellent example of a effective use of social media outlets in citizen engagement
- Aimed at increasing feedback and encouraging a higher degree of participation in local issues which affect residents
- One approach: **Facebook** “page” – to access information easily and allows users to become a “fan” of the city
- Another approach: presenting easy ways for users to become involved with the processes and events which affect the city – “**join the conversation**” and “**take the survey**”



Alternative Approach to Engagement with the City's Constituents

- An alternative is to develop an approach that provides a *strategic* direction for a municipal context
- It is a survey-based methodology, online, that engages a representative sample of constituents
 - The survey measures residents' feelings on key attributes associated with government services
 - It introduces a choice-based model by placing the services and outcomes in a personal and social context
- This approach provides deep *strategic* information about what people truly value as users and from a social good standpoint.
 - It identifies gaps in service delivery and social development, and where problems need to be addressed
 - We do not ask about satisfaction. We ask about choices, situations, and social contexts

Virtual Town Hall

- A 'Virtual Town Hall' would be...
 - Derived from the initial survey sample
 - Augmented through an ongoing recruitment via a variety of online sources (e.g., invitations through the City's website, Twitter, Facebook) and other vehicles that are at the City's disposal (e.g., public buildings, local newspapers, community centres)

- Virtual Town Hall could be administered through the Vaughan Online platform so as to ensure control and present a corporate 'face' to the public

- Engagement on **multiple levels** could be facilitated through Virtual Town Hall

- Tactical outreach to communicate and mobilize (e.g: Facebook, Twitter, the City's website (Vaughan Online), email, text)

Virtual Town Hall

- Strategic surveys develop and refine strategic direction;
- Ad-hoc surveys (e.g., to fine-tune implementation of initiatives and programs)
 - Any survey conducted using this approach would follow a regular, structured survey process, allowing the City to add new questions, track the same questions over time, and add open-ended questions
- Virtual town hall discussions – more controlled environment for opinion gathering, and for identifying, developing and refining strategic directions
- Virtual focus groups for opinion gathering, and for identifying, developing and refining strategic directions
- Various City departments or programs could utilize virtual town hall to access citizen feedback as an alternative to traditional meetings

Our Experience with Citizen Engagement

- If various City departments are each conducting their own survey's and citizen feedback there is a danger that it won't be representative and any strategies which are subsequently developed will be flawed
- Pollara has recently implemented and conducted (second year in a row) a value measurement study for the City of Mississauga, where a similar choice-based approach was needed to identify which of the City's many services provide the greatest value to the citizens at an individual level, as well as to the community at large
- Our approach has been very effective in identifying those services and their corresponding attributes that are most important for the City's residents and which drive the overall perceptions of value citizens feel they receive from the City, thus identifying the areas where the City of Mississauga should focus its resources

Key Conclusions

- For the engagement to produce successful and actionable results, it must capture what citizens identify as the most important factors in the context of both personal and social good, thus providing a direction for strategy development
- Having a representative and in-depth citizen survey will provide a database of information which all departments and projects can draw from for implementation of their strategies
- Establishing a ‘Virtual Town Hall’ through Vaughan OnLine will provide a representative group of citizens who all departments and projects can utilize as a resource and sounding board for their citizen engagement
- Creating a staff working committee is a good first step to ensuring an awareness of all the social media needs in the Corporation as well as a mechanism to establish objectives, guidelines and policies to guide its implementation.

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