Social media a mixed bag for law enforcers

By MEGAN KREMENTOWSKI,
ANABELLE ORLANDO,
ADRIANA SALAZAR
and JEANNE S. ONGE
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The weapons of law enforcement have definitely changed and they are no longer just guns, bullets and codes.

Today, law enforcers—including those at the state level—have another ally: cybersecurity and social media.

University of Connecticut police, however, are taking a wait-and-see approach to utilizing this tool.

An example of police-sponsored social media marketing is the Connecticut State Police’s “Wanted Wednesday,” a popular feature on the state’s Facebook page.

State Police Trooper Tyler Wecden, who works in the public information office, said the department has closed numerous cases after posting suspects’ photos there.

Some of those who see the photos actually message the police, turn themselves in and ask for their photos to be removed.

The state police have joined other police departments throughout the country that are making social media an integral part of their community relations plans.

Wecden said the various state police posts on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter's Facebook account range from the light-hearted and engaging to important public service messages.

They, even, include requests for help in capturing suspects.

The department has about 52,000 Facebook page likes.

Besides its Facebook postings, the Connecticut State Police have more than 22,000 Twitter followers and 11,000 on Instagram.

“We use the triangle of legitimacy and social media: it’s right in the middle of that,” Wecden said. “That is how we tie together direct contact and social media.”

The International Association of Chiefs of Police in 2013 found that 93.9 percent of agencies surveyed use social media, with 88.4 percent saying it helps solve crimes and 73.1 percent saying it improved their community relations.

Despite enthusiastic support for these online communication platforms by the state police and so many other departments, the University of Connecticut police department remains off the grid when it comes to social media.

While students say social media is their prime communication tool, UConn Police Chief Hans Rhynhart said his department has not yet taken the Facebook plunge.

Instead, he said, it is keeping community outreach and human interaction as its community relations priority.

“What we want to do is keep it simple, philosophy,” Rhynhart said.

The department is planning to begin using Facebook in the future, but it would likely be reserved for community interest pieces and photographs and not necessarily for emergency communication, he said.

UConn police currently use a texting and e-mail platform to communicate emergency information, but some students complain about this method, saying they rarely read their e-mail alerts.

Other universities in the area have a similar primary emergency alert system, but they also are warming up to the use of social media.

“The university has an emergency alert system and everyone can sign up for it,” said University of Rhode Island Police Sgt. Erica Vaztie. “They choose how they would like to receive the message. We try to keep up-on alerts, but sometimes we get too busy, so our internal emergency alert system is the official way of receiving those type of messages.”

Rhynhart said when the UConn department introduces a Facebook page, it likely will be centrally controlled and he wants to be sure whoever is assigned the task of posting has enough time for it.

There are 54 UConn officers on the Storrs campus alone.

“We are looking at more of a centralized process, because I am very concerned about quality control and making sure that we are putting out an appropriate message and that we are putting out factual information,” Rhynhart said.

While UConn has no plans to use social media for breaking crime alerts, many police departments have had success using social media for both tackling crime and connecting with their communities.

The Waterford Police Department, a department of 47 officers in a town of about 20,000 residents, has earned a reputation as a leader in the use of social media, for example.

“We try and friend both community outreach, crime prevention and crime solving in our page,” said Waterford Police Chief Brett Mahoney.

The Waterford Police Department’s Facebook page has almost 9,000 likes and posts about anything from petty thefts to sexual assault to fundraising events.

“We do a lot of events as a police department, so we want to let people know what we are about to do, so that we can get a good crowd,” Mahoney said. “We like to solve crimes out of it. We like to post closed circuit television pictures of people that have stolen something or been in a robbery.”

On Dec. 2, for example, Waterford police posted a surveillance photo of someone suspected of stealing items from Target, along with a photo of a car the person was suspected of leaving the parking lot in.

Also, on Nov. 29 pictures of two separate larcenies in Waterford were posted — one at Crystal Mall and the other at Wal-Mart. Mahoney said he believes social media has better connected the police to the community.

“I think that it has strengthened our community bonds, because we are always showcasing what we do,” he said. “People want to see what their taxes are paying for and social media allows them to do so.”

Rhynhart said although UConn has no plans to use social media to solve crimes, it is always considering ways to improve.

“We never think that we have all the answers or that we are where we want to be at,” Rhynhart said. “We are continually learning how we can do a better job adjusting our programs.”

Currently there are numerous programs aiming to better connect campus police to the community.

These include sponsoring a citizen police academy, having officers play a role in freshman year experiences and orientation classes, sponsoring active threat classes and hosting social events such as “Coffee with a Cop.”

“Pizza with a Cop,” office hours in the library and providing students with snacks during final exam weeks.

“Our main theme is that we want people to understand that we’re human,” Rhynhart said. “When a person with a uniform comes in, there’s a certain level of authority and order that hopefully comes from that. We want people to see us as human, we want people to interact with us.”

There is evidence this face-to-face emphasis is succeeding.

“I really appreciate a personal interaction. I think seeing a friendly face around the corner consistently is really good,” saidJulia Anderson, a graduate assistant at the UConn Rainbow Center Higher Education Student Affairs.

“This is a physical space and to be physically present is important in order to interact with the campus. The personal interactions have been very beneficial.”

Editor’s note: The writers are University of Connecticut journalism students.