BOSTON UNIVERSITY

MORE THAN A MUNICIPALITY: LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA IDENTITY

Project Portfolio

**Master's Collaboratory
Emerging Media Studies**
College of Communication
Boston University

Team & Client Bio

Team Bio

Our team is made up of eight MA students from the Emerging Media Studies program at Boston University including Rebecca Auger, Irene Geng, Erin Iwaskiewicz, Avery Singh, Zheng Song, Yimeng Sun, Fengyan Wang, and Tiffany Wang. We are forever grateful to our team mentor: Ph.D. student Sejin Paik. Group members hail from various countries and backgrounds with a broad range of research and career interests including UX/UI, product research, content creation, marketing strategy, data analysis, media research, and news. Collectively, we share a love for traveling and experiencing different cultures.

Client Bio

The city of Everett is located just north of Boston and is an urban Mystic River community bordering Boston, Malden, Medford, and Somerville. In close proximity to Boston's Logan International Airport, Everett boasts affordable and diverse housing, sustainable construction projects, and the development of accessible waterfront spaces and parks. The city has a long history of industrialism; however, with the arrival of the Encore Casino in 2019, they have started to show potential for a growing tourist community. Today, Everett hopes to improve its social media presence in order to build trust with citizens and solidify its identity as a vibrant, growing community for residents and visitors alike.

Client Memo

As part of the 2020 Emerging Media Studies Program, we worked with the City of Everett to explore approaches that might increase citizen engagement via social media. Specifically, the group concentrated on identity and relationship building through the city's use of Twitter. This memo offers suggestions for the City of Everett officials to consider as a part of their communication strategy, supported by the group's research and key findings as well as a variety of recommendations that the city might employ in the future.

Research Question & Methodology

The City of Everett is a small, post-industrial city located on Boston's north-west border. In close proximity to Boston Logan International Airport, Everett offers affordable and diverse housing, sustainable construction projects, and the development of accessible waterfront spaces and parks. With the arrival of the Encore Casino in 2019, the City of Everett has started to show potential for a growing tourist community. Today, Everett hopes to improve its social media presence in order to build trust with citizens and solidify its identity as a vibrant, growing community for residents and visitors alike. Specifically, the City of Everett asked how to encourage more widespread use of their social media platforms and raise the audience engagement. To respond to this research question, the team conducted a literature review and scraped data from 24 Gateway Cities' tweets posted on Twitter between June and December of 2019. Massachusetts Gateway Cities are mid-sized, urban centers that anchor regional economies around the state and often face stubborn social and economic challenges as a result. We then coded 1,092 tweets with a prototype codebook and analyzed the results to identify successful Twitter recommendations for the City of Everett.

Key Findings

There are three major parts to social media communication: the audience, information source, and the content distribution platform. Government communication with residents can be similarly divided into three parts: citizens, city officials, and the various platforms used to share information with the local community. As a result, we have categorized our research findings into three parts (citizens/city accounts/platforms) to address the aforementioned components.

1. Citizens

1.1 Citizens use "likes" and "retweets" differently. We found that government social media posts that encouraged and fostered a shared social identity with the community were more likely to resonate with residents and produce greater engagement.

In addition, our research showed that citizens used "likes" and "retweets" in different ways. "Retweets" were effective in spreading information because users shared the same tweet with their own followers. "Likes" indicated that users identified with a post but may not be sparked by the desire to share information. It is important to note that citizens will use "likes" to express their agreement with the post, but they will not use "likes" unless they feel a connection with the content. This evaluation process is influenced by how strongly the city has become a part of the residents' identity.

Therefore, when trying to evaluate if a post has potential for contributing to citizens' identity-building, a city should use "likes" as an indicator. "Retweets" are a more suitable metric for posts aimed at spreading information. Average values for both "likes" per tweet and "retweets" per tweet are shown in Figure 1, and examples of informational and identity tweets are shown in Figure 2 on the next page.

Figure 1: Average "likes" per tweet and "retweets" per tweet across the entire 1092 tweet sample

1.2 Citizens want conversation. Social media is considered a useful and effective way for citizens to directly communicate with the city by commenting on, messaging, and retweeting the city's official account. From our data analysis, we found that when city accounts replied to citizen tweets, those same accounts then went on to receive additional replies as a result. Existing studies investigating government social media use have also shown that by increasing interactivity with citizens, the perceived transparency of that city's account is higher. These positive interactions ultimately lead to an increase in the perceived trust between a community and its government.
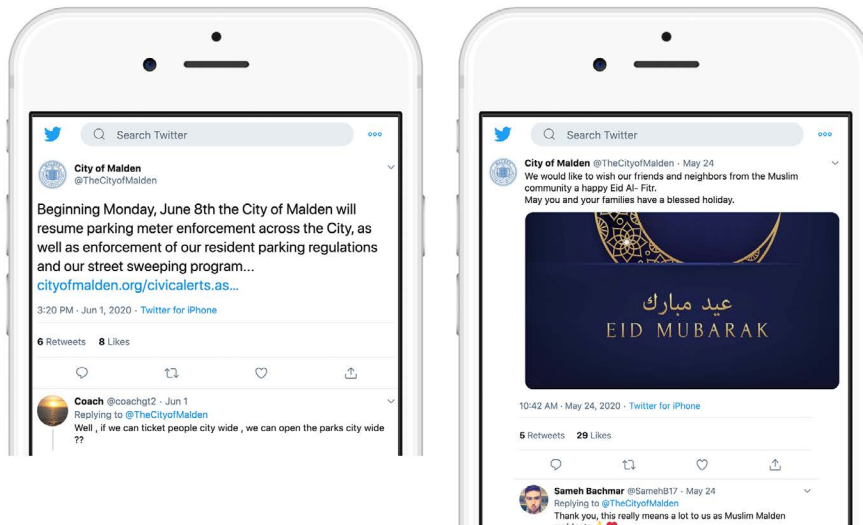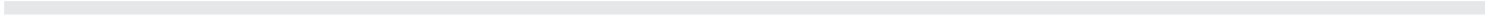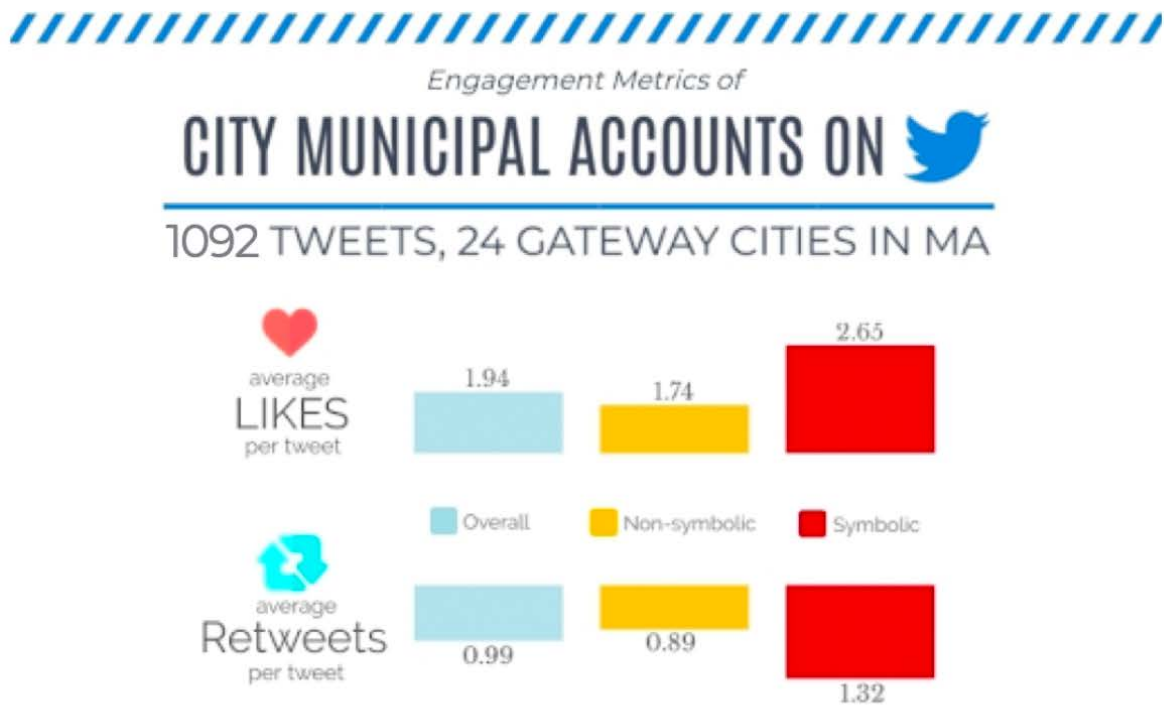

Figure 2: Examples of informational (left) and identity building (right) tweets from the City of Malden

2. City Accounts

2.1 Authentic and locally conscious city social media posts perform better. Social identities are a theoretical framework for understanding what inspires individuals to join groups or identify with brands. In the case of municipalities, social identities speak to individuals who have incorporated their residency in a city as part of their identity. Many accounts in our sample used the Twitter platform to create an online social identity centered around defining features of the community and its citizens by crafting posts that highlight these features. Posts that demonstrate a connection to the social identity of the community were found to be more likely to be "liked" than posts that did not, with the difference being statistically significant. Differences in the engagement metrics between locally conscious and non-locally conscious posts are shown in Figure 3.

Engagement Metrics of

CITY MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTS ON 🐦

1092 TWEETS, 24 GATEWAY CITIES IN MA

average **LIKES** per tweet — 1.94 (Overall), 1.74 (Non-symbolic), 2.65 (Symbolic)

Legend: Overall, Non-symbolic, Symbolic

average **Retweets** per tweet — 0.99 (Overall), 0.89 (Non-symbolic), 1.32 (Symbolic)

NOTE: NON-SYMBOLIC VS SYMBOLIC

Symbolic communication is a variable that indicates the presence of imagery or phrasing that sought to build a positive identity around city policy, events, or the achievements of community members. This included discussion of municipal or individual awards, congratulating local sports teams, and discussions of a city's unique history. We found that symbolic communication helps to promote citizen engagement *significantly.*

Source: Client Project for the City of Everett

Figure 3: Differences in engagement metrics between locally conscious (symbolic) posts and non-locally conscious (non-symbolic) posts

a. Posts reflecting the community demographics signal government care and connection to citizens. City accounts that know their community and demonstrate this knowledge in their posts will see a better performance on their social media. For example, some city accounts post in both English and Spanish, recognizing that Spanish speakers make up a large percentage of the whole population. An example from the City of Chelsea is included in Figure 4. Additionally, speaking to minority populations in their native language will help communicate a certain level of care and attentiveness to those citizens. While the number of tweets containing other languages in our sample was fairly low, posts written in multiple languages were concentrated to a few specific accounts, highlighting the point that these cities are aware of the makeup of their community.
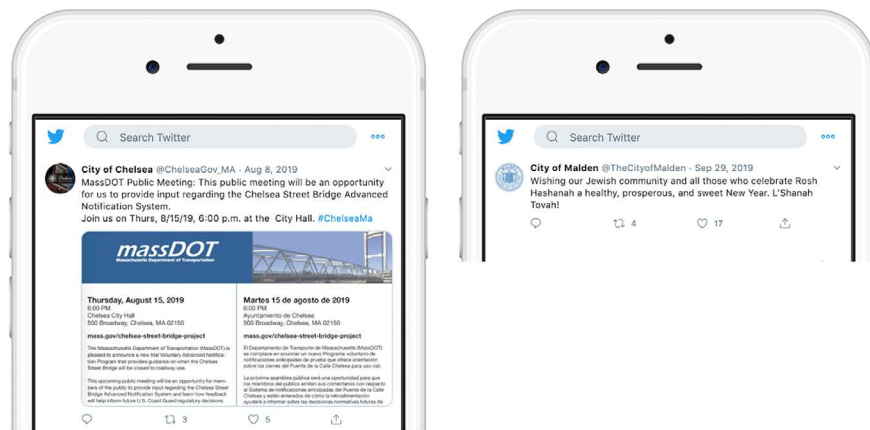

Figure 4: A tweet in English and Spanish from the City of Chelsea (left) and an example from the City of Malden wishing their community well in Hebrew (right)

b. Sharing community events boosts citizen engagement. City accounts should be aware of local events and achievements so they can share this information with the community. In our sample, posts that spread information about local events and citizen achievements performed better on engagement metrics. Our data shows that locally connected posts have a statistically significant higher average of "likes," which means a higher engagement level. Posts mentioning city events and demonstrating civic pride have proven to make citizens more inclined to identify the city as a part of their own social identities. An example of a tweet highlighting a community member in this way is shown in Figure 5 to the right.
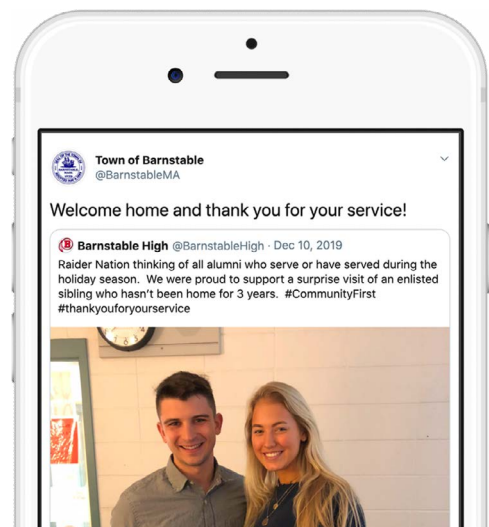

Figure 5: A post from the Town of Barnstable that highlights an individual's accomplishment or honor

2.2 A city needs a consistent social media voice to help convey its identity and brand image.

Local governments need to make concerted efforts to consider the nuances of social media and find the voice that is most suitable for reaching their specific community. Throughout the literature, we found that the most important things for city branding are building a persona and continuously strengthening that unique image. Several cities in our sample had consistent voices in terms of the style, tone, and overall look. These accounts had consistently higher engagement than accounts who did not employ a consistent style. When crafting every post, a city account should keep its brand image in mind and use the same voice to speak to constituents. Figure 6 showcases examples of posts that have a consistent voice.

Figure 6: Examples of posts having a consistent style from City of Lowell and City of Chelsea

3. Platforms

3.1 Various social media platforms operate in different ways. Each social media platform has specific niches and content that are most suitable for maximizing reach and engagement. When posting on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, be sure to understand each platform's guidelines and how to leverage its features in the best way. On Twitter, for example, this means attending to the character limits and considering how the text or media will appear visually on a user's timeline. According to our research, some city accounts used Twitter to repost links from other social media platforms while others used external services to automatically generate tweets. Instead of creating original messaging for Twitter, our results indicated that these one-size-fits-all approaches are largely unsuccessful. While it is possible to promote similar content across platforms, every message should be tailored to each specific platform.

3.2 Tweets with visuals perform better. Visual elements are an important part of a social media strategy because they can be both aesthetically pleasing and attention-grabbing. Based on our research, including images, graphics, and videos in tweets produced a higher average number of "likes" as compared to tweets without any visuals; an average number of approximately 15 (image-included posts) and 16.6 (video-embedded posts) "likes" compared to text-only posts with an average number of 6.28 "likes." Therefore, including photos, graphics, or videos should be considered not only for visual appeal but also for their reach and engagement potential. You can see the statistics and a graph below.
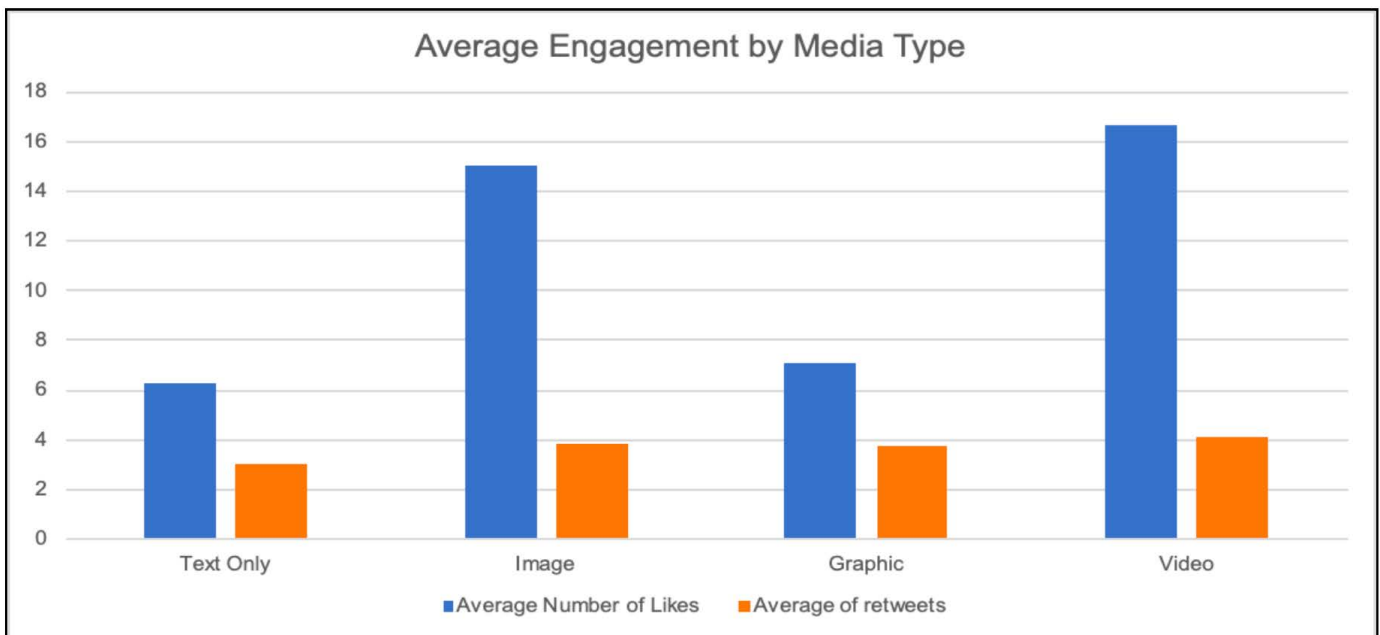
	Average Number of Likes	Average Number of Retweets
Text Only	6.28125	3.03125
Image	15.00900901	3.830357143
Graphic	7.129032258	3.741935484
Video	16.64285714	4.142857143

Recommendations

Based on our research findings, we have developed the following recommendations for the City of Everett to consider as part of their communication strategy within the social media landscape.

1. Citizens

1.1 Conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups with local residents. It would be valuable to seek feedback and spend time understanding the people who live in or travel to Everett: what citizens think about the image of the city, what their needs are in terms of interacting with the city, and what they are interested in seeing on social media platforms. Additionally, it could be helpful to be aware of active social media users within the city as well as whether or not citizens prefer communicating with the city on social media versus in-person or on an official website.

1.2 Respond to your community's questions and concerns. Social media can be its own sort of public forum and place for government officials to go back-and-forth with constituents. However, this type of communication could also serve as a timelier alternative to email, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings. Governments can take advantage of these time-saving benefits and immediately address concerns as much as possible or direct citizens to resources if necessary.

2. City Accounts

2.1 The city should craft posts that feel authentic and locally focused. As was discussed in the Key Findings section, posts that are focused on authentic and local content perform significantly better. City accounts should be aware of the demographics of their citizens and portray that knowledge in the posts. Also, city accounts should plan to post about local events and share information recognizing local achievements. Citizens like to know what is happening around them, and events and city pride posts will contribute to the likelihood that they include their connection to the city as a part of their social identity. The more relatable the posts are to them, the higher the engagement might be.

2.2 Identify an objective before posting using the Push, Pull, Network typology. Push, pull, and network posts all serve different purposes in government functions and community-building (see Figure 7). Being aware of these differences can assist in crafting a more effective message. For example, a city should use explicit call-to-action words when they want citizens to vote or join city hall events. Sentences starting with "We encourage you to" or "We invite you to join" show that the city cares about the citizens' participation and could build a greater sense of community awareness. Figures 8, 9, and 10 show additional examples of pull, push, and network posts that have clearly drafted purposes.public forum and place for government officials to go back-and-forth with constituents. However, this type of communication could also serve as a timelier alternative to email, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings. Governments can take advantage of these time-saving benefits and immediately address concerns as much as possible or direct citizens to resources if necessary.
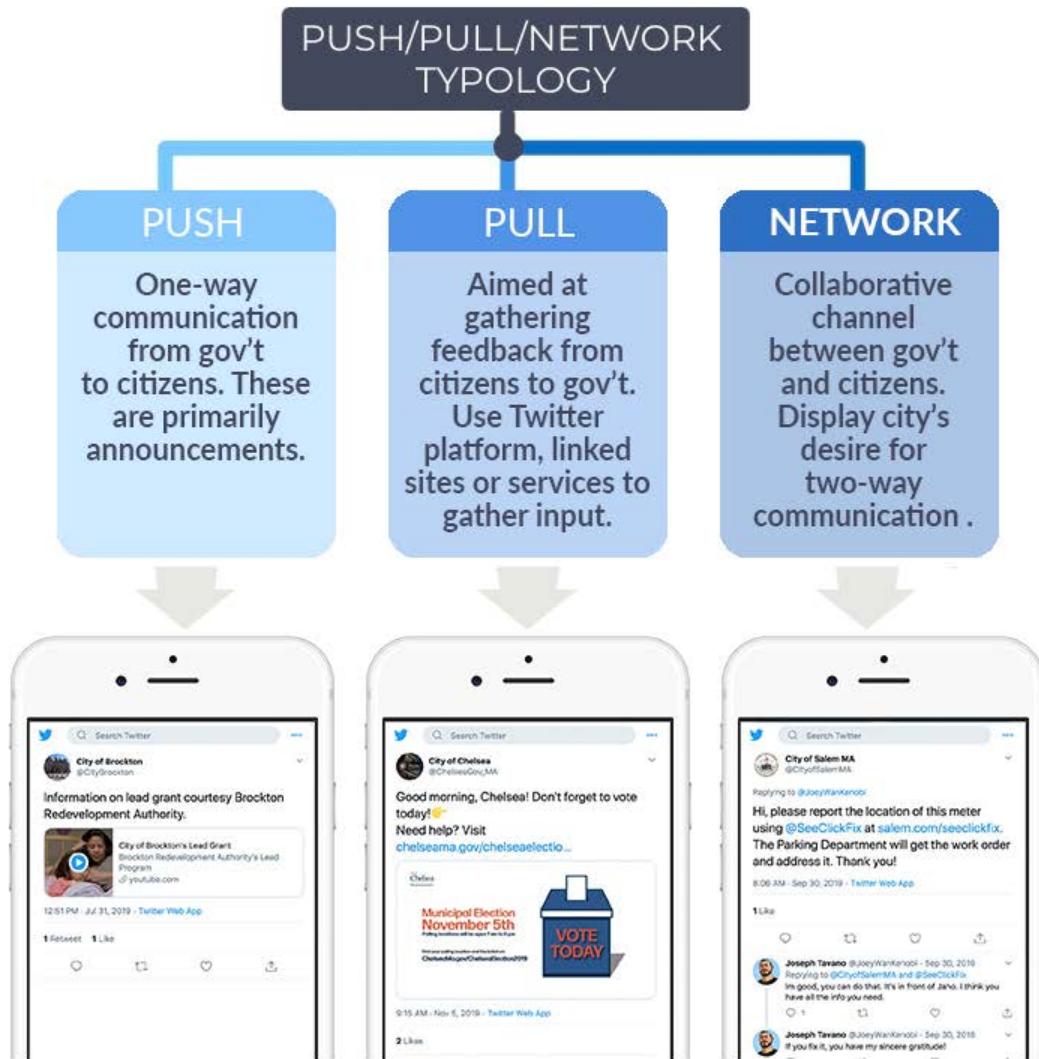
Figure 7: Push, Pull, Network typology explained

Figure 8: Push post- sharing information on the event

Figure 9: Pull post- inviting residents to vote
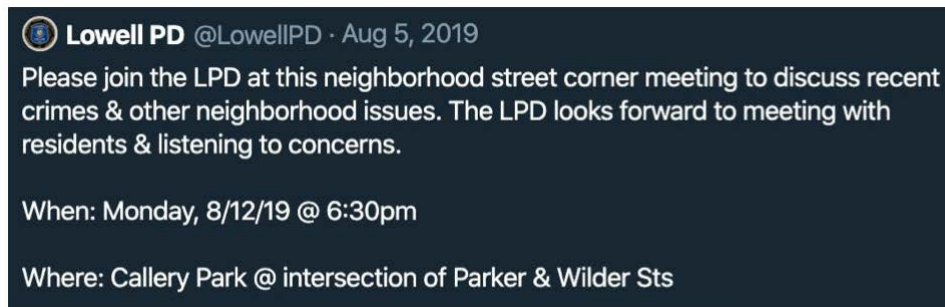
Figure 10: Network post- inviting residents to join the meeting to discuss community issues

2.3 Be involved in the community. Attending local events, connecting with community and opinion leaders, and building in-person relationships with residents can foster genuine rapport between the city administration and its citizens. These connections will assist in crafting posts and messaging that addresses the concerns of citizens and concentrates on accomplishments and events that citizens identify with.

3. Platforms

3.1 Be platform-specific. As previously mentioned, city accounts should post platform-specific content. Knowing how to leverage content for each platform is an effective way of increasing social media performance as a whole. For example, if using a specific infographic on Facebook, this same information might be shared on Twitter by pulling out a key fact to highlight from the infographic and adding a link to the full version. Additionally, utilize videos and images with the right dimensions for each platform. Adding relevant hashtags and tagging platform-specific accounts could also boost visibility. It is also worth noting that there are optimal posting times which differ for every network, and it is not recommended to release too many messages on the same platform all at once. Timing, frequency of posts, and various headlines should be tested with the city's audience to learn which patterns generate the highest levels of engagement.

Finally, to keep the audience interested, the city should also vary content regularly. Questions, polls, and calls for user-generated content are all great ways to facilitate conversations and showcase different individual or group activities that relate to the community.

3.2 Consider visual appeal. Examining the overall look of a post is another effective way to increase engagement. Based on our results, posts with images, graphs, or videos performed better than posts with only text. People are naturally drawn towards visually appealing things, so including graphics, images, or videos when possible will make those posts more likely to be shared. In addition, make sure to use clear, high-resolution photos when possible because these images will reflect the image of a city.

If resources are a concern, there are many free and low-cost tools available online which can assist with the creation of graphics. To name a few: Pexels.com offers a variety of free stock photos, PNGtree.com allows for the download of simple icons and backgrounds, and Canva.com can be used to combine visual elements into cohesive social media graphics. All of these components, as well as similar fonts and colors, should contribute to a unified and consistent brand style. Templates can also add to a more professional appearance and make grasping information in a quick glance much easier. Figure 11 shows how the City of Chelsea featured consistent visual elements in a templated style. Finally, the use of emojis and the polling function on Twitter could also boost interactivity and do not require any time or tools outside the platform.
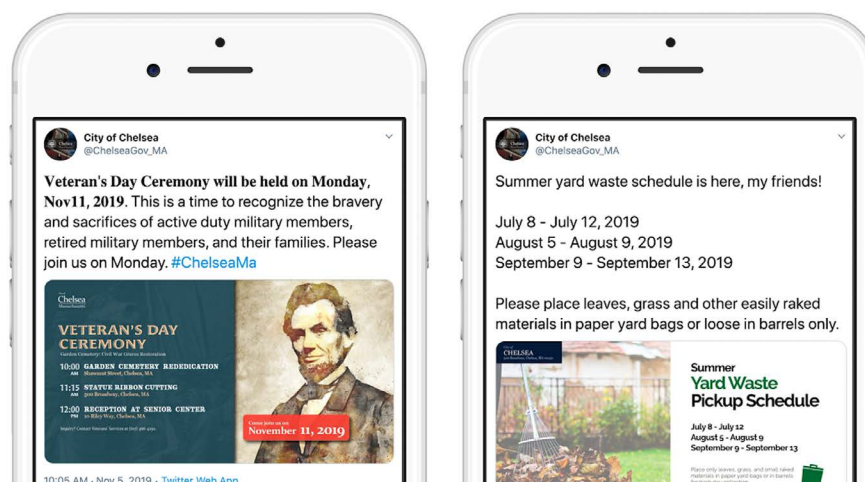

Figure 11: Examples of tweets with graphics from the City of Chelsea

Closing

Through our research and data analysis of Twitter accounts, we found how important it is for a city to establish a social identity that resonates with the community as well as to build a network with residents which encourages more involvement and engagement. People are eager to know their community, learn what is happening in their neighborhood, and engage in conversations with the city. These desires provide an opportunity for a city to build a bridge with residents and win their trust through social media platforms like Twitter. Moreover, we have identified some effective social media strategies from the findings. For example, responding to posts will help generate conversations with residents, and crafting posts with a specific purpose in mind (i.e. using call-to-action words when seeking feedback) can boost the way residents interact with the city.

It is important to realize that residents have different personalities, needs, and preferences. By developing a solid understanding of the makeup of the whole community, a city can evaluate which specific methods to use to communicate with citizens. Although our research did not include data about the thoughts and opinions of residents, we highly recommend that a city consider conducting annual surveys and questionnaires in the future to keep up with the changing opinions or needs that residents may have. Additionally, it is worth noting that social media is just one piece of a larger brand strategy, but it should be part of a comprehensive communication plan that is continuously researched, monitored, and evaluated (see Figure 12 on the next page). Ultimately, the more a city can intimately understand its residents and businesses, both in terms of demographics and communication needs, the more that city's social media efforts will resonate and be effective.

Finally, we would like to note that engagement metrics for local governments on Twitter are generally low, so even small changes in engagement can mean a big difference for the city. Don't be discouraged by these fluctuations in engagement, follow the lead of citizens, and remain consistent with social media use, and the slow work of building and maintaining an audience will come with time.

GOVERNMENT + CITIZENS: BUILDING CONVERSATIONS ON TWITTER

COMMENT   LIKE

SOCIAL IDENTITY
Develop a voice and persona that resonates with the community: attend local events, identify leaders, take note of concerns, conduct surveys and focus groups.

SELF-PRESENTATION
Balance positivity with transparency: share highlights and unique community achievements but make sure to also use clear and honest messaging when needed.

TWITTER POSTING CYCLE

EVALUATION
Track and understand metrics. Likes often indicate that citizens identified with a post and retweets show that citizens want to share information with their network.

THEORIES
Social identity theory and **self-presentation theory** can both be used to inform relationship-building strategies through social media.

INTERACTION
Social media is a great tool for back-and-forth conversation. Reply and interact as much as is appropriate and possible.

OBJECTIVE
PUSH/PULL/NETWORK posts all serve different functions and these differences should inform how messages are crafted.

EXECUTION
Attend to platform-specific needs (character limits, image sizing, etc.) and use original copy for each platform.

AUDIENCE
Be aware of the demographics and communication needs of the community. Consider adding local events & achievements to contribute to citizens' identity-building.
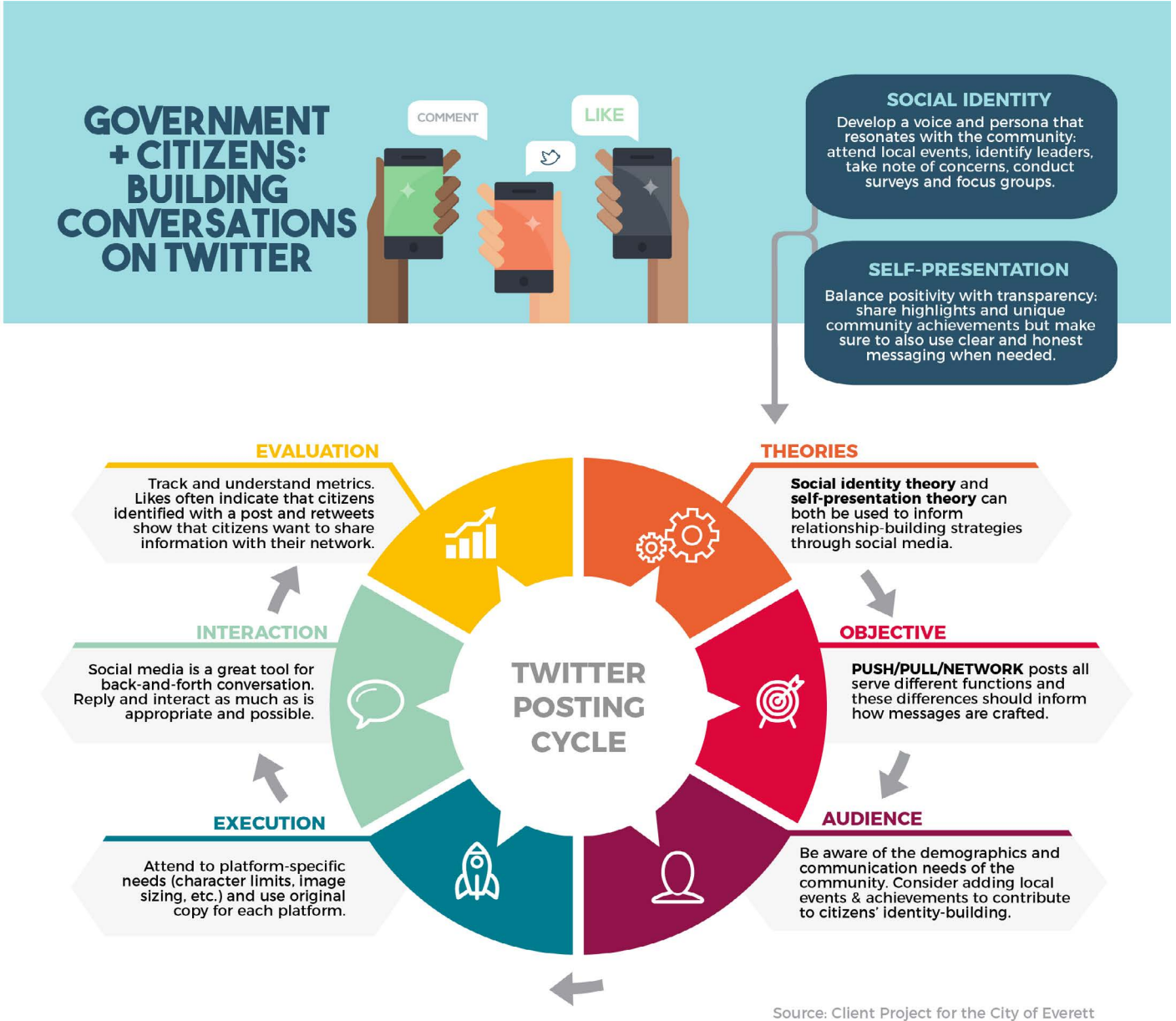
Source: Client Project for the City of Everett

Figure 12: Twitter posting cycle for local governments