

# Franklin Sees Results From Social Media Push to Connect With Residents, Businesses

By DANIEL DEMAINA

At the beginning of 2016, Franklin Town Administrator Jeffrey Nutting realized that if Town Hall wanted to increase transparency while reaching more people with important news and notices, town officials would have to do a better job with social media.

“While people are calling in this generation for transparency, what they’re really talking about is accessibility,” Nutting said. “In the digital world, it was time to become more proactive in trying to reach out to people and have them reach back to us. That’s not one of my skill sets, from a technology standpoint. When Jamie came on I said, ‘Listen, we have to do a much better job.’”

“Jamie” is Deputy Town Administrator Jamie Hellen, who started in Franklin in January. Since then, the town’s Twitter account (@TOFranklinMA) has nearly quadrupled its followers, while the town’s Facebook page (under the name “Town of Franklin”) has seen a steady increase in followers, likes, shares and comments. Social media accounts for the town’s Fire, Police, Public Works and Recreation departments also grew, as did accounts for the senior center and the library. And the town grew its social media presence without adding dedicated staff.

## Less Bureaucracy, More Autonomy

To Hellen, doing a better job on social media meant ridding the town of a process

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COURTESY PHOTO

*Jamie Hellen, Franklin’s deputy town administrator, manages the town’s Twitter and Facebook accounts from his cell phone. As a result of its social media efforts, the town has seen an increase in its followers, local news coverage, and registration numbers for recreation programs.*

that predated his arrival and precluded department heads from posting to their department-specific accounts without running it up to the administrator’s office first for approval.

“If you’re going to have to go up the food chain too many times, the news is already outdated,” he said. “If it takes a day or two to get approval to post a picture, the public is going to know it’s outdated. They want it in that moment.”

Giving the department heads that autonomy meant the town first needed a clear social media policy, delineating the kind of content permitted and how town officials would use social media to communicate with the public. A link

to the policy is pinned to the top of the town’s main Twitter and Facebook pages, and it consists of ten main points and a list of who is authorized to post for each department. The policy (available at <http://tinyurl.com/franklinsocialmedia>) is less than two pages long.

“That’s the framework,” Hellen said. “The key is having a good policy for who has access, who has access to passwords, so there’s some level of accountability if something is done that is incorrect or controversial.”

The town’s main accounts are handled by Hellen and Administrative Secretary Chrissy Whelton, who works part-time in

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the office and manages the news section of the town website. After posting new information to the website, Whelton will then post on Twitter and Facebook. Hellen also posts by accessing the accounts from his cell phone to add photos or share posts from other town departments' accounts. He will also reply to comments when needed.

"We're just trying to keep it simple and trying to do what we can do, focused on where the most people are, which is generally Facebook, Twitter and YouTube," he said. "Collectively, I spend twenty minutes a day, maybe, just checking the accounts a couple of times—in the afternoon, lunchtime, and at night. I do a lot of photos—I load those up and Chrissy kind of holds the fort down. She probably spends fifteen minutes a day on it and collectively we spend maybe a couple hours doing it each week."

Hellen said spending fifteen to twenty minutes a day on social media is a better use of staff time than writing press releases, which take longer for approval and don't necessarily generate local news coverage. Officials have, however, noticed a significant increase in newspaper coverage since the town began its social media push this year.

## **Small Investment, Big Returns**

Hellen admitted that he does not have any personal social media accounts. He learned how to use Twitter, Facebook and YouTube on the job and through research. "It's a tool anyone can use and develop," he said. "You do not need any personal experience with social media to get started. This may be something people who are tentative [about social media] may find eye-opening, as some folks think this is just for young people, it's difficult to learn, and younger folks have more experience using social media. Not true. You can learn on the job."

Hellen stressed the fifteen-minutes-a-day investment as one of the main messages for any municipality looking to do more with its social media presence. Department heads and officials may initially balk at the idea of having yet another task when asked to post on social

media, but Hellen said the key is not to make social media into a big project, and ask department heads and other officials to take it slowly. "Brevity is the key to success," Hellen said. "Keep it simple, keep it short, pictures are worth a thousand words, and do what you can do." In other words, he said, "Be human." He emphasized that building a following on social media takes word of mouth and time.

Designated employees need to build social media into their regular workflow. When there's a sewer main break, workers are installing a new generator, or police officers are meeting with community groups, it's a good idea to take a photo and upload it with a brief description.

Part of the human aspect of social media are the comments that people can leave on pages, which may give local officials pause. Hellen and other Franklin department heads, such as Department of Public Works Director Robert "Brutus" Cantoreggi, said the vast majority of the interactions with followers are positive. They mostly come in the form of "likes," although the occasional question is posted. When a negative comment is posted, it stays up (as long as the language is clean).

"I don't get into bantering," Cantoreggi said. "You never win an argument on social media. If someone wants to put up something negative, that's their right. If something's not accurate, like 'Our office opens at 1 p.m.' but it really opens at 11 a.m., I'll correct that. But I won't get into an argument—and I'm not going to do it with an audience."

Fire Chief Gary McCarraher said he doesn't use social media, so when Franklin began its push this year under Hellen, he delegated control of the Fire Department's Twitter and Facebook accounts to Captain Joe Barbieri. In addition to alerting people about fires and posting photos from emergency responses, Barbieri posts photos from the high school internship program, the department's annual open house, and other events.

"What I've learned is that social media is really how we contact people, how we keep people engaged through the community," McCarraher said. "The challenge for specifically people of my generation is to be open-minded about

the technology. My strategy is to look to our younger employees, ask, 'How do you stay connected to folks?' and try to learn from that perspective."

## **Simplicity and Sharing**

Franklin Recreation Director Ryan Jette is no stranger to social media, having kept his department active on Twitter and Facebook even before Hellen's arrival. His approach is one of simplicity: deadline reminders, sharing information about other youth programs in town, and anything recreation-related that he thinks people want to know about.

Two months before the start of the town's winter basketball program, Jette put a reminder, "Register for basketball," on the reader board in front of the Recreation Department. He then took a photo of the reader board and posted it on Facebook and Twitter on a Friday morning with the simple message, "Register before October 17th to avoid the registration late fee!!" That weekend saw a huge increase in registration, with \$8,000 worth of registration fees coming in, Jette said. "We can directly correlate that one blurb on Twitter and Facebook [with] the uptick in our registration," he said.

Jette said he avoids posting too frequently, which can lead to followers feeling like they're being drowned in messages. He added that more than half the information he shares through Recreation Department social media accounts is about programs and activities not run by the department.

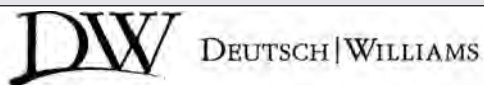
"It impacts the community as a whole and we feel the responsibility to get the information out," Jette said. "I have kids in the town that go to the schools and play youth sports, and just like any other parent, I would want to know about registrations that might be going on."

At the DPW, Cantoreggi uses only Facebook, with three employees, including himself, authorized to post on the account. Rather than trying to push out emergency information, he said he focuses on showing tax dollars at work, taking photos with his phone when out in the field.

"People don't realize what we do," Cantoreggi said. "For example, we have twenty-six sewer lift stations

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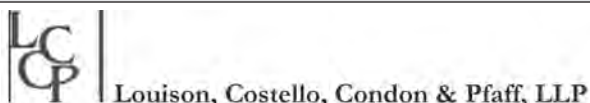


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throughout the town—little buildings in the middle of the neighborhoods, and no one knows what they are. So we do a profile of this pump station. ... It's good for transparency. It's worked out pretty positive; 95 percent of the comments I get are very positive or, 'I didn't know that, how cool.'"

### Information in Your Pocket

The next step, Hellen said, is Franklin's new mobile-friendly website, set to launch this fall. When followers are checking Twitter or Facebook on their

phones, any links to information on the town website will come up in a phone-friendly format.

"I think government has kind of a fiduciary responsibility to be where people are," Hellen said. "Our customers, residents, and visitors, people who are looking at buying property in Franklin, businesses looking to do business in Franklin—they're all doing a lot of what they do with their families on smart-phones. Our job in government is also to make sure we're responding to that and making sure we're serving the needs of the public as best we can." ❁

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