

Using Social Media to Protect Public Safety

DC's Fugitive Safe Surrender Prompts 530 Offenders with Warrants to Voluntarily Surrender in a Church

By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.

It's not easy to understand why anyone with a warrant would voluntarily surrender to law enforcement. But I spoke to many offenders during an event in the nation's capitol who told me that they were looking for a safe opportunity to turn themselves in. They wanted another chance to return into normal society.

But they and family members needed to learn about the program and be convinced that it wasn't a scam. We had to earn their trust. We did that through social and conventional media efforts. This may have been one of the first efforts on the part of a federal agency to use social media during a campaign.

The thrust of this article is not Fugitive Safe Surrender in Washington, D.C. (www.dcsafesurrender.org) but an overview of the possibilities that social media affords the criminal justice community. By social media, I'm referring to radio and television on the Internet (podcasting), articles on the Internet (blogging) combined with more traditional efforts such as web site creation, a telephone answering system, e-mail and radio and television ads.

Fugitive Safe Surrender in DC

Before we delve into social media we need a quick overview of Fugitive Safe Surrender in Washington:

The effort encouraged those wanted for non-violent felony or misdemeanor crimes in the District of Columbia to surrender voluntarily to faith-based leaders and law enforcement in a church. Fugitive Safe Surrender recognizes that many offenders are looking for a way out. The program provides an opportunity for individuals wanted for non-violent offenses to resolve their warrants and get on with their lives. Surrendering within the confines of a church (or other religious entity) provides the assurance that they will be treated safely and fairly.

Fugitive Safe Surrender (FSS) was successfully implemented by the US Marshals Service in six cities where over 6,000 people surrendered. Those participating generally go home that day with a new court date or have their charges adjudicated on the spot. Violent offenders (yes, they surrendered as well) are held for trial.

The entire criminal justice community in D.C. came together to create the structure for FSS. I was asked to lead the public information effort.

530 offenders with violent and non-violent warrants surrendered in a church in northeast Washington D.C. over the course of three days during November of 2007. There was extensive media coverage.

Social Media

Explaining why an offender would voluntarily surrender is easier than explaining social media. Social media is more a philosophy rather than a list of strategies.

One of the lead agencies for FSS was my agency, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency in Washington, D.C (a federal, executive branch entity). We do a series of radio and television programs under the banner of “DC Public Safety” at <http://media.csosa.gov>. The program includes a blog (articles) and transcripts. Some consider it the most popular criminal justice radio and television Internet site in the nation.

But the use of radio or television or blogs or transcripts or any other form of social media is not the point; *they exist to create a comfortable experience for the user*. People learn in a wide variety of formats. Some want to read while others want to listen or watch. For those who want to read, it’s preferable that the document be “story based” with an emphasis on enjoyment and readability. Audio and video programs need to follow the same philosophy.

Why?

The criminal justice system, like all bureaucracies, is usually conservative when it comes to news ways of communicating. As someone who has spent close to 30 years in communications for national and state criminal justice agencies, I understand the complexities and resource limitations.

Social media opportunities available for criminal justice agencies are enormous and very cost effective. Radio shows for the Internet (podcasting) can be done for cost of a computer and an additional \$500.00 for equipment and broadband access. Once purchased, you have almost unlimited opportunities to communicate with a local and national audience without additional cost.

The primary objective of social media is a personal, non-bureaucratic style of communicating that respects various learning styles and encourages the development of conversations with the public and media.

The bottom line is that social media, in combination with traditional media, creates a powerful and effective method of communicating. You can accomplish organizational operational goals effectively with social media.

Social Media and FSS

When we brainstormed media outreach efforts for Fugitive Safe Surrender, we realized that money was very tight and that Washington, D.C. is an expensive market to communicate in. Campaigns like ours usually depend on unassigned airtime donated by radio and television stations. In a market like D.C., available free air-time is almost nonexistent (especially for TV).

Planned bus ads and timely television ads were cut due to budget. Money for a telephone answering system and web site dried up. This left us with radio ads developed through the Broadcaster's Association, a telephone answering system cobbled together from our telephone system and a web site created by a staff member by my agency (www.dcsafesurrender.org). It became clear that our use of social media would go from an accessory to a primary strategy.

The first thing we did was to go to a city that had already conducted a successful FSS (Indianapolis) and do interviews with offenders who surrendered. We were able to get compelling testimony from them and family members as well as judges who heard the cases. That testimony was mounted on our web site.

The radio and television ads that we had produced were mounted on the website. This established a one-stop shopping opportunity for offenders, their families and the media.

The concept of social media embraces the personalization of communications. To insure that we knew *what* to communicate and *how* to communicate, we conducted three focus groups of offenders under our supervision. It was the focus groups where we discovered that friends and family members would do the bulk of the research on FSS and the majority had Internet access. We now knew who we were talking to and how to reach them. But to be on the safe side, we implemented a telephone answering system with recorded messages.

We created radio ads in Spanish to accommodate that part of our population.

We created a radio show that fully explained the program.

We mounted easy to understand print materials on the web site.

All radio and television ads referred people back to the web site and telephone answering system.

We posted the radio and television ads on the same server used by our “DC Public Safety” programs.

But possibly the most powerful strategy was to interview the first person in line to surrender every day. The interviews were mounted on the web site and publicized to media via e-mail and press release within an hour of their creation.

These individuals told compelling stories that resonated with the mainstream media and they presented those stories to the public at a crucial time of the campaign. One offender walked several miles to the site beginning at 3:00 a.m. at the request of his mother (it was her birthday). He described the surrendering process as a pilgrimage for change to a new life. He and several additional offenders agreed to be interviewed by mainstream media which furthered coverage.

Throughout the process, we looked for additional compelling stories to tell. We understood that story-based accounts communicated better than a public safety angel.

Results

The social and traditional media approach employed (with very little money) worked beyond our expectations with 530 surrendering during the three day process. Friends and family members told us how they heard the radio ad and went to the web site and how the audio and video ads and testimonies of prior participants convinced them that the effort was legitimate. They became so comfortable with the process that surrendering mothers brought in their children. Some offenders were accompanied by multiple family members and friends. A son recently released from prison brought in his father for a theft warrant.

It's important to understand that the social media approach worked with reporters, DJ's, talk show hosts and their management. Several told us that they thought that the program was a bit silly *until* they went to the web site and listened to the audio and watched the video. The web site convinced them that this was a program worth investing in and, through the stories we provided, they helped us to publicize the program.

Podcasting and other forms of social media are powerful strategies that everyone can use. Whether it's a quick form of emergency notification, getting the word out about a dangerous criminal or talking about new strategies, citizens and their leaders like the informal and informational aspects of audio, video and story based written material.

It's time for all of us within the criminal justice system to use social media tactics within our own communities.

Articles on social media, podcasting and community outreach for criminal justice agencies are available through our blog at <http://media.csosa.gov>. I look forward to your suggestions.