

Johnson County Sheriff – The Social Media Experiment

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Experiments are the catalyst to success in all aspects of life. Before we walk we experiment, and we experience the successes of taking a few steps and the failure of crashing to the ground. Through these experiments, we learn to walk, then run, bike, drive, and so on. But without enduring these experiments, we would still be on all fours crawling through life.

Today, we are in the midst of a massive, worldwide experiment called social media. This offers us in corrections and law enforcement new options. We can be a part of the experiment, learning to crawl then walk, or we can turn a blind eye, bury our heads in the sand, and pretend the social experiment doesn't exist.

As we began crawling in the social media world at the Johnson County Sheriff's Office (yes, we are the one in Kansas) a decision was made from the outset that experimentation was acceptable. Because of our strong, forward-leaning leadership, failure was also acceptable as an outcome, which gave us room to breathe and learn to crawl.

Our agency is often referred to as an "early adopter" of social media. From the get-go, we invested time in MySpace, and at the time, there wasn't much else out there that provided the potential value that MySpace did. Although the experiment with MySpace was more valuable than can be described, it was short-lived as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and now Pinterest have all taken its glory.

So why the experiment? Why do jail administrators or sheriffs want to risk the possibility of failure? Simply, without failure there is no risk and without risk there is no reward.

Johnson County Sheriff Frank Denning through his leadership put the social media experiment in the hands of his Public Information Officer. This allowed a seamless flow of information that normally would go out to established media outlets to also be posted appropriately in the social media.



This began to happen within standard public information release guidelines that made the experiment slightly less risky.

We often think of the social media as something for those with too much time on their hands. To many baby boomers and even some Gen X employees, social media doesn't make sense. This article may provide information that will help those who don't believe in social media to reconsider their position and start their deep-seated creative juices flowing.

Jails Make News

Jails and their “guests” are news at times; in fact, a lot of times they ARE the news. It’s an interesting world when those who do wrong often overshadow those who do right. This being the climate we live in, however, why not embrace the norms, make some changes in how we operate, and lead from the front?

Implementing social media should be approached in a holistic manner that includes input from all areas of your agency, related agencies, and the public. In reality, social media is just as much about us, the

government, as it is about the people we serve. Social media provides us a platform in which we can communicate to the public without any filter and they can provide us feedback and ask questions they might otherwise have not asked.

So let’s talk jails. Unless you work in one or have been a guest in one, the only exposure people have to jails is through TV shows or stories from neighbors and friends. Since most jails don’t allow the public or media inside to just visit, it is even more important for us to tell the real story of jails.



How to Get Started

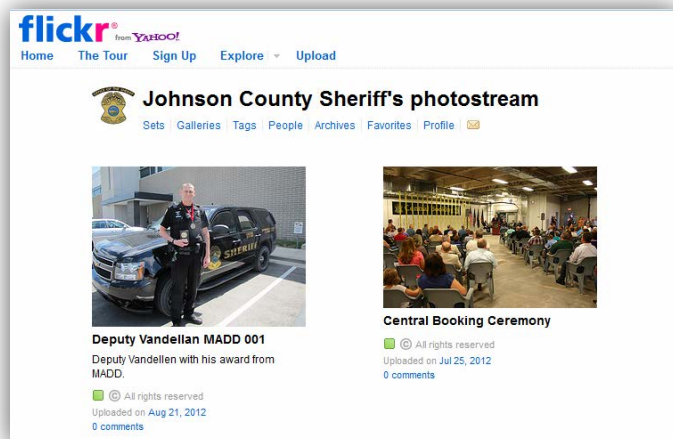
Jail commanders and sheriffs: here is how social media can help you tell the tale of what a day in the jail really looks like.

- You will need the following equipment to get the job done: one smart phone. That’s it, nothing more, nothing less—just a smart phone that has a camera, video camera, and Internet connectivity.
- Assign your PIO or another trusted employee to take video and photos of staff (not inmates) working in the facility, talking about what they do, why they work there, etc.
- Upload the videos to YouTube and the photos to Flickr. Then share the videos and photos on Facebook and Twitter, and take a little time to write a post with a few words about what people are seeing. It is really amazing to see people’s reaction to seeing “behind the curtain.”

Another idea is talk with the inmates. This logistically can be a bigger issue as you need to have consent from them and possibly their attorney. But it’s not insurmountable, just a hurdle. Have the inmate tell his/her story of what the jail is like. We don’t care to hear about why they are there; that is irrelevant. We do want to hear their thoughts on what being in jail is like. You already know pretty much what they will say, so just help it along. There is no more powerful a statement then an inmate telling the public that they really don’t want to spend any more time in your jail.

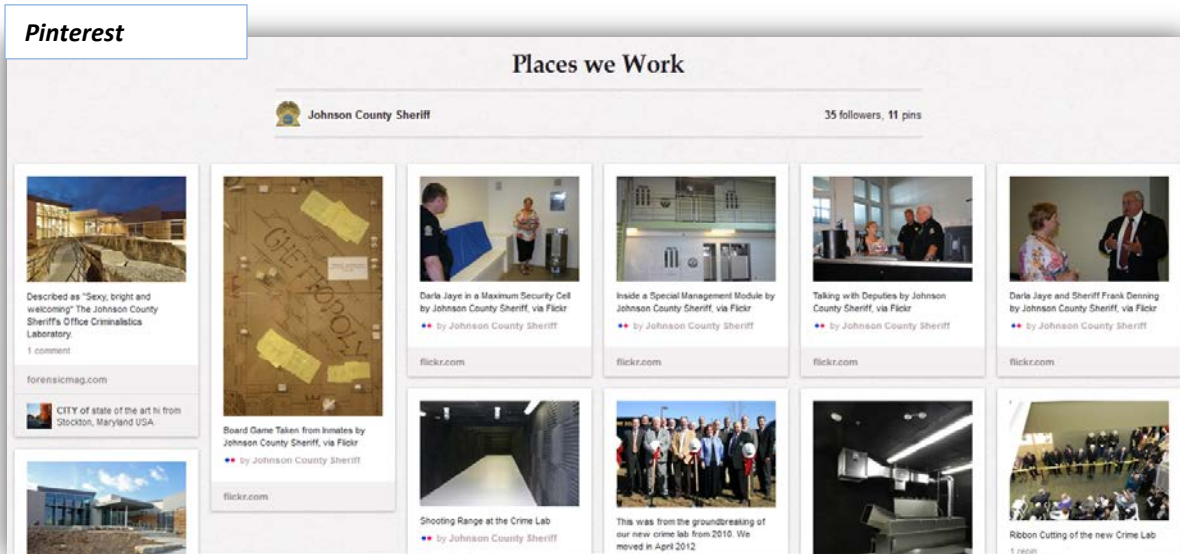
As another possible source for news, jails are becoming more and more technologically advanced. When your agency installs a new security system, video monitoring system, or digital fingerprint machine, that is exciting news.

The public wants to know and should know about it, as they are the ones who paid for it. The social media world tends to be very tech-savvy, and the public will eat up this kind of thing. Take photos of whatever it is and talk about exactly how it will help you do your jobs faster, more efficiently, and more effectively. Watch the response.



The Experiment Continues

Johnson County has used social media to engage the public on almost every facet of jails and law enforcement. We have covered issues ranging from a new fingerprint machine to a 554-bed jail addition and a remodel of another jail. We have posted about inmates, tied our social media posts back to traditional media coverage on our inmates and our jails, and posted a lot of photos of our jail on our social media sites.



So what about safety, security, and privacy, you ask? Well, those are all important issues, and as the experiment rolls along, we continue to learn that when dealing with jail issues we should be concerned with those things. But let's ask ourselves another question. If you run a jail with, let's say, 10,000 inmates coming through the booking area each year, and you post a photo on a social media site of your booking area, which do you think is more of a risk to your security? You guessed it—the 20,000 eyes that want out of jail once you put them in. The public does not pose a risk; they have never been the security problem. But once an inmate has been in jail, that picture is burned into their brains. We have to be careful, but sometimes we make decisions based on old habits such as not releasing information—when in fact, some information release might be helpful.

The take-away is, if you command a jail or are the Sheriff, you need to get on the experiment train. It left the station in 2006, but it's never too late to catch up. We do and see things that 95% of our local population never gets a chance to experience, so why don't we give them a peek behind the curtain? The support and increased trust from the public are really the end game. Talk to them—when you do, you will be surprised at just how much they care.

Law enforcement is nothing more than a long experiment in humanity. Let's all embrace the experiment.

The Johnson County Sheriff's Office is online at <http://www.jocosheriff.org>. From the homepage, you can get to our primary social media sites:

<http://www.facebook.com/jocosheriff>

<http://www.twitter.com/jocosheriff> (@jocosheriff)

<http://www.youtube.com/jocosheriff>

<http://www.flickr.com/jocosheriff>

<http://www.pinterest.com/jocosheriff>

Document available at:

http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/10/09/johnson-county-sheriff-the-social-media-experiment.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

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