Tweetering Your Way to Better Community Relations

By Michele Coppola

When Officer Matthew Droge of the Riley County Police Department (RCPD) burned a hole in his pants with a road flare while on duty, he let the public know about it through the department’s Twitter site. This friendly, open approach to using social media has helped humanize police and improve relations with the community.

Droge, a professional photographer, joined the department in 2010 as a beat officer on the swing and midnight shifts. He took over social media in 2012 and became the department’s public information officer in early 2013. He remains on the bike patrol unit and patrols whenever he is available and during special events.

The Riley County Police Department, with approximately 102 sworn officers, serves a population of about 73,000 and is headquartered in Manhattan, Kan., which is also the home of Kansas State University with its 23,000 students.

“A main reason we use Twitter is public relations and to open a line of communication between the community and the police department,” Droge says. “Someone can tweet us a question and a police officer will answer them directly. They have direct access, which is the most important part, especially since we have a high number of college-age students in the community and that is how they communicate.”

“It also shows that police officers are human,” he adds. “We try to keep humor in our tweets and do question-and-answer sessions that are sometimes not necessarily related to law enforcement and done in a casual way so people can interact with us.”

The department uses Twitter to notify citizens about crime alerts, road closings, accidents, community events and dangerous weather conditions, and to ask for citizens’ help in solving crimes. Police can post an unidentified suspect’s photo and ask for the public’s help in identifying the individual. Droge says citizens’ tips have led to solving several cases, the majority of which involve theft.

The department holds regular Twitter question-and-answer sessions for the public, and periodic “Tweet-Alongs,” during which everything that happens during a patrol officer’s shift is tweeted as it occurs, including the time a fellow officer’s soda cup broke.

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Police Twitter Followers Speak Up

The Riley County Police Department has improved community relations through its use of Twitter, encouraging comments and reaction from citizens. Samples of some of the comments follow.

I love the RCPD!! They tracked down my stolen phone!!

To wonderful police force of Manhattan, keep up the good work and thank you for the entertaining tweets!

Huge shout-out to the @RileyCountyPD for helping me get my car unstuck after the snowpocalypse!

Thank you for educating your followers on how to stay safe, out of trouble, & reminding them to keep MHK nice!
“Everything we do is tweeted, whether it is embarrassing or not. That has helped in community relations, especially with the college crowd,” Droge says.

Droge and two colleagues who also tweet for the department, Officer Trevor Wilkey and Sgt. Scott Hagemeister, often use humor and a casual tone in their messages, and it has paid off. The site has attracted followers for its entertainment value as well as for its valuable information, and has resulted in lighthearted exchanges such as the following:

If I declare a donut emergency does that mean you have to deliver donuts to me? I have bacon to trade.

RCPD: Watching our figures... Sorry. And we don’t share donuts. Sorry.

Droge’s enthusiasm for Twitter has earned him the nickname “Twitter Cop” from some of the site’s followers.

“A few people referred to the person tweeting as the Twitter Cop, which came from the community and which is incredibly positive for us because the community is participating,” he says.

Although the department uses Twitter to ask for the public’s help in solving crimes, it does not encourage users to submit tips through Twitter because of security concerns.

“We ask for information through social media but tell the public to provide information through calling the department or through Crimestoppers, which has security protection. We don’t want that sensitive information on a public forum,” Droge says.

“One thing we do which is unconventional for some of our officers is if I know, for example, that an officer is in a certain area doing radar, we will tweet that an officer is doing radar checks at a particular location,” he adds. “It’s better that we tweet it rather than someone else. In the end we get the same result of people slowing down. I call that a win. We are out to make our community a safer place to live.”

He says response from the community to the Twitter site has been largely positive.

“Every once in a while we get negative feedback, someone complains that tax dollars are being used to pay people to tweet, but tweeting does not take up much of my day and the benefits are most definitely worth it.”

He says the key to the successful use of Twitter is to simply use it frequently enough to encourage followers, and to keep up with changes as social media evolves.

“It offers some level of transparency that we should have and the community appreciates it. Our goal is to interact with and be in the community as much as we can.”

For more information, contact Officer Matthew Droge at (785) 537-2112, ext. 3048 or MDroge@rileycountypolice.org. To view the Riley County Police Department Twitter site, go to https://twitter.com/RileyCountyPD.