Open Transportation

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Curated by the Transportation Team at OpenPlans.

Group blog for TransportationCamp.

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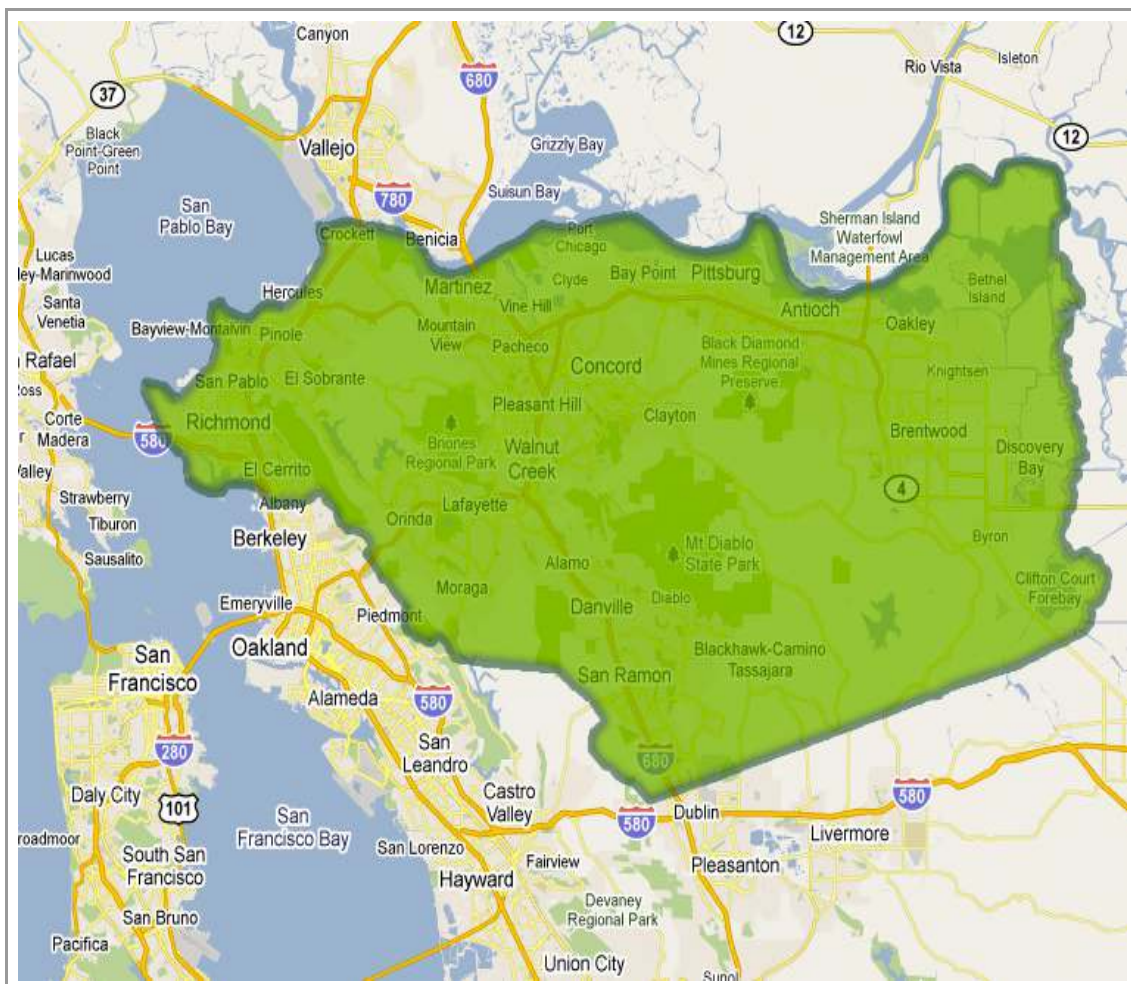
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Home

Putting the "Public" Back in Public Transportation: Social Networks for the Car-free

Northern California's Contra Costa County is, at first glance, an unlikely spot for a revolution. The sprawling and suburban Bay Area county, encompassing nineteen cities and nine transit agencies, is a place where driving remains king.

But Contra Costa's X-factors - a tech-savvy population, good regional transit connectivity, and the tireless efforts of transportation demand management agency 511 Contra Costa (511CC) - have made it fertile ground for a new tactic to promote alternatives to the single-occupancy vehicle. BlinkTag, Inc., as a consultant to 511CC, has more than three years of experience helping the organization use social media to get people aboard trains, onto busses and bikes, and into carpools. We firmly believe that better information is the key to helping people make more personally and socially responsible commute choices, and that social networking is fast becoming the most important way to spread the gospel.

Each strategy outlined below is based on patterns we've observed working with 511CC. But the miracle of social networking is its flexibility. We strongly encourage you to use our general approach as a foundation from which to expand and better meet your organization's individual goals.

"STUR" it up for a better blog post.

It's funny to think of blogging as a "traditional" approach to sharing information online, but effective blogging (in concert with nascent technologies like Twitter, Foursquare, and Facebook) remains one of the most important ways that agencies can reach their customers. With all the noise humming through the blogosphere at any given moment, the best way to stand out in the crowd is to write a "STUR"ing (Specific, Timely, Unique and Relevant) post. Hokey? Maybe. But an example will help prove the point.

In 2010, the top two landing pages on 511contracosta.org were the home page and a blog post titled "California Highway Patrol announces new traffic laws in effect for 2010", respectively. Out of over 400 pages and posts on 511contracosta.org, what made this one so special?

1. It was timely.

The post contained information about new traffic laws for the year and it

was published on January 4th, 2010, the Monday on which most people returned to work. Here is the traffic the page received from January to March:
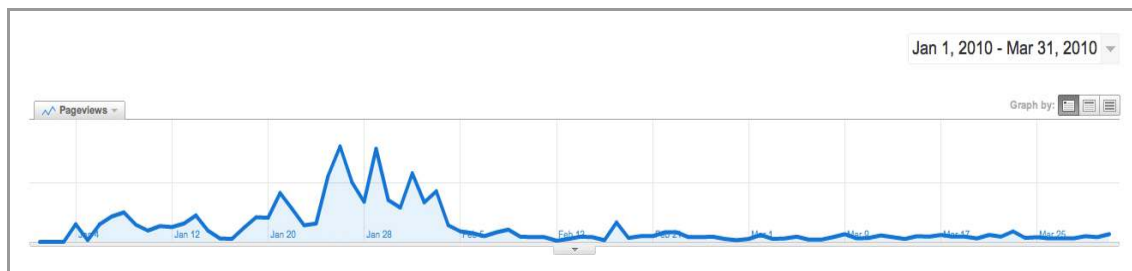
As you can see, it was hugely popular in January, but traffic dipped off significantly in the following months. If we would have published it in February, chances are that the post would not have gotten as much traffic.

2. The information was hard to find (unique), relevant, and specific to what people wanted to find out.

Sure, the California Highway Patrol had released the new traffic laws as a press release on December 23, 2009. But it was in PDF form and had to be downloaded from www.chp.ca.gov. By adding images to the same information and publishing it as a blog post, we made the information easier to access.

A great blog post should offer information that someone is likely to be looking for, and should coincide with an upcoming event, holiday or season. If possible, the content should help establish your organization as an authority or innovator on the subject. Otherwise, people will just look elsewhere for similar information. If you're considering writing on a subject that's been covered before, try taking a different perspective.

Comments can also add value to a blog post and increase search rankings for the particular post and the key words it contains. About a year ago, we wrote a post about the opening of a bicycle/pedestrian path over a local interstate bridge, and received a question about the rule for taking dogs on the path. As comments about this specific query increased, 511CC added more relevant content to the blog post on the bridge's canine friendliness. To see how this affected the site's Google search rankings, we took a screen shot of the query "benicia bridge dogs",

shown below.
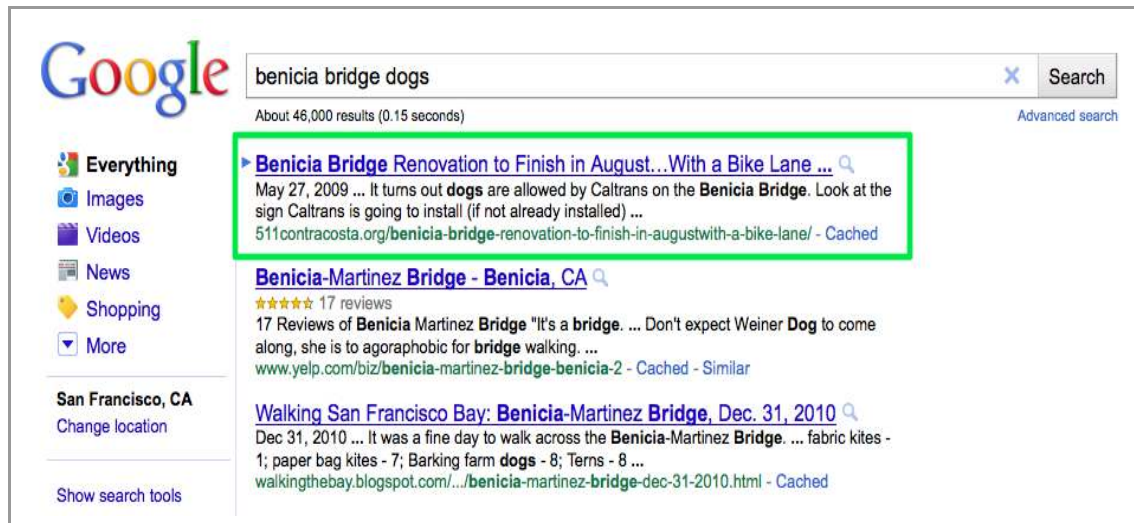
Topics we regularly cover using "STUR"ing blog posts to encourage alternative transportation are:

- Free rides and discounts on local transit agencies
- Upcoming cycling events for Bay Area cyclists
- Updates on transportation infrastructure such as bike/pedestrian lanes and bridges and carpool/HOV lanes
- Information on tax credits and other incentives for commuters

"New" Social Media: like blogging, only more so

These general principles of blogging are only more relevant to the faster-moving world of Tweets, Facebook updates, and Foursquare check-ins. But more than just short attention span blogging, these more truly "social" media applications are better than blogs in two important respects: prompting user-generated feedback, and attracting dedicated "followers" of your agency.

Over the years, we've solicited feedback from our followers and readers using various methods. Across the board (Twitter, Facebook, blog), general questions such as "What did you think?" and "Send us your comments!" are met with much less enthusiasm and far fewer Retweets, "Likes", and comments than more specific questions. "What's your favorite form of transportation and why?" and "Where are some of your favorite places to bike in the Bay Area?" led to many more responses

than tweets and posts asking for general feedback.

Here are three pairs of effective and less-effective tweets we've sent - can you guess which is which and why?

1a) Tax benefit for commuters who ride mass transit extended through 2011: http://511cc.org/h45lkg

> **511CC** 511 Contra Costa
> Tax benefit for commuters who ride mass transit extended through 2011: http://511cc.org/h45lkg
> 24 Dec

1b) Do you set aside tax-deductible money for transit? By law, you're allowed $230/month: http://511cc.org/h45lkg

> **511CC** 511 Contra Costa
> Do you set aside tax-deductible money for transit? By law, you're allowed $230/month: http://511cc.org/h45lkg
> 23 Feb

2a) Keep those ReTweet's comin' and get entered to win $25 to Peet's every month! http://bit.ly/9bVubQ

> **511CC** 511 Contra Costa
> Keep those ReTweet's comin' and get entered to win $25 to Peet's every month! http://bit.ly/9bVubQ
> 13 Jan

2b) To date, we've given away $500 in Peet's cards to @511CC followers. RT, follow or @ mention us to enter! #twitterlove

> **511CC** 511 Contra Costa
> To date, we've given away $500 in Peet's cards to @511CC followers. RT, follow or @ mention us to enter! #twitterlove
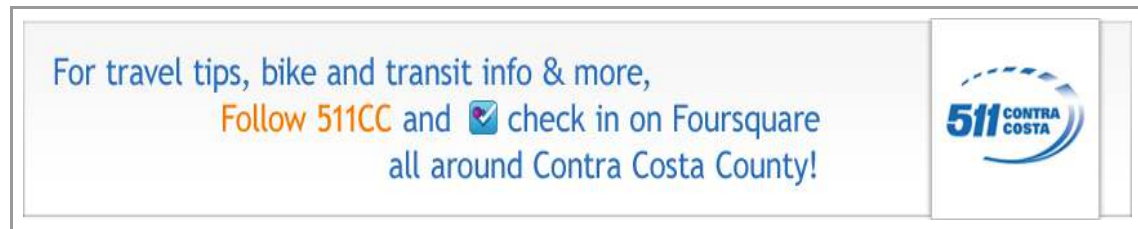> 17 Feb

Making it play in Peoria.

If your goal is reaching out to everyone in Contra Costa County, CA, having 500 followers on Twitter from Chicago, IL won't get you much

closer to your goal. If you're trying to gauge the effectiveness of your social media campaigns, make sure you know who your followers are and where they're from, not just the number of Twitter followers or Facebook Likes.

For travel tips, bike and transit info & more, Follow 511CC and ✅ check in on Foursquare all around Contra Costa County!

We recently created a Foursquare account for 511 Contra Costa. In less than three weeks, it amassed over 400 followers before we even had a chance to promote it. Upon inspection, we discovered that a disproportionate amount of these followers were from Indonesia and New York.

However, we also have followers who are from Contra Costa County. These are the ones we're counting.

Likewise, we pay more attention to our Twitter followers' locations and whether or not we're being Retweeted or mentioned rather than the number of followers we have.

Looking at just numbers, we have far fewer Likes on Facebook than on Foursquare or Twitter. However, the majority of our Facebook followers are from Contra Costa County, which is exactly what we want.

Has your organization discovered other tools or strategies for increasing the effectiveness of your social media campaigns?

Or, following our own advice to be more specific:

What's your most effective social media strategy?

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