

Dallas Police Launch New Social Media Strategy

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Protect, serve — and tweet.

That could be the new motto of the Dallas Police Department after officials unveiled a new social media strategy Monday following a flood of promotional teases on Twitter and Facebook.

Police commanders, led by Chief David Brown, have emphasized using technology to fight crime and announced three initiatives: getting officers on Twitter and running a news website and a Pinterest page.

Officials said only Toronto's police service comes close to the Dallas department's social media efforts.

"We are pushing the envelope, and I dare say that we lead the country in terms of social media," said police spokesman Lt. Max Geron.

Dallas officers will not be required to use Twitter. But the department has pushed the online platforms, including using them to heavily promote Monday's unveiling event. And Brown, a prolific user of Twitter, has made using social media a priority. He recently told City Council members that he sees Twitter as a way to reach younger Dallasites who care about crime but don't attend crime watch meetings.

Officers will tweet from crime scenes, but commanders say there are guidelines; don't tweet photos of evidence and limit the information to what can be officially released. But they hope the new initiative will lead to more direct interaction with the public such as reporting suspicious activity or providing other tips.

But not everyone is a fan of the new social media strategy. Dallas Police Association president Ron Pinkston, who attended the launch event, said he believes it will interfere with police work.

"Most citizens want these officers to protect and serve, not sit there twittering all day," he said.

Brown had previously extolled the values of social media, but the formalized strategy was implemented after the department hired Massachusetts-based consultant Lauri Stevens for \$43,000. Stevens, who runs a communications firm, conducted a survey of Dallas residents late last year and submitted recommendations that call for rolling out the new strategy in three phases. Future phases could mean more video, more email communication and ramped-up social media pushes, she said.

About 80 Dallas officers have volunteered and taken the one-day training course on proper social media use. That number, which Stevens called "pretty aggressive," includes patrol officers from across the city and crimes against persons detectives.

"It's just a beginning," she said. "The important thing is that the Dallas Police Department is putting a structure in place."

Stevens previously helped develop the Toronto Police Service's strategy. There, nearly 300 officers are on Twitter. Brown has been following many of them.

Toronto police Constable Scott Mills, a social media officer, said police there have had great success with the tool. He said the key is strong internal support where officials communicate to their social-media-using employees what they can and can't say.

Sometimes, though, that's not enough. Mills said that Toronto has had some officers tweet inappropriately.

"It's just like anything else," he said. "People are people."

Even Brown, who primarily uses Twitter to promote news about the department, used profanity in one recent tweet. He also came under fire for tweeting the name of a person of interest during the investigation into a series of rapes in South Dallas. That person was later cleared.

Dallas police community affairs manager Shawn Williams said department officials know that "there will be some possible missteps along the way."

Still, Stevens said, concerns about Twitter are overblown.

"As chief said to me the other day, we give these guys the authority to take people's lives if they have to," she said. "Why would we not trust them to talk to the community?"

Twitter isn't the only way the department plans to engage the public online. Officials also unveiled a news blog, dpdbeat.com. The site is similar to the department's

Facebook page, which highlights police work, provides information and displays photographs of officers, police dogs and other department items.

In addition, the blog contains a telephone directory of the department's offices and requests for help with cold cases. Members of the command staff might also use the website to write white-paper-style posts for the public, Williams said.

Pinkston, however, said he doesn't believe the department should be in the media business.

"This is Big Brother's way of circumventing the media and putting their spin on the news," he said.

Pinkston said he didn't have a problem with the department's new Pinterest page. The department uses that social media site to post pictures of recovered property. Officers in that unit have time to do that, Pinkston said, but patrol officers don't.

Mills, the Toronto social media officer, said the police association there also has been resistant. He was bullish on the Dallas department's prospects.

"Dallas police are going to shine big on this," he said. "It's going to have some growing pains, but they have the right people in place to make this work."

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