

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 7/14/2021

Staff Report No. 21-328

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Michael A. Hursh, General Manager
SUBJECT: Social Media Use and Strategy

BRIEFING ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider receiving an update about social media, including use, growth, and future plans. [Requested by Director Walsh - 3/10/2021]

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Safe and Secure Operations
Initiative - Service Quality

Social media has become an integral part of our lives, and a valuable, and time-sensitive strategy for rider and stakeholder communications, and public outreach. The use of social media amplifies the vision of the District as a trusted lifeline and helps fulfill our mission of delivering reliable and sustainable service for over 60 years.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no budgetary or fiscal impact associated with this report.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

Social media platforms offer the opportunity to inform the public about services and programs, to retain and attract new customers, provide customer service, build support for new projects, gather input from the community and foster a culture of transparency that elevates the brand of the District.

Social Media Use

AC Transit has had a social media presence since 2008 with the RideACT campaign to promote the District's relationship with its riders. From that start, AC Transit's social media presence, profiled as RideACT, has grown significantly, with the universe expanding to include YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. While there are dedicated resources specifically identified to provide social media content, it is the responsibility of all Marketing & Communications staff to develop content that supports our overall engagement strategy, which is to provide timely, relevant and engaging information about AC Transit. Our focus includes consistent dialogue, social listening and informative exchanges that foster relationship building with our riders, followers and transit stakeholder groups and organizations, with the objectives:

- Support AC Transit service use by facilitating and encouraging bi-directional online dialogue,

- Inform the public about services, programs, and upcoming initiatives
- Ensure brand promotion and advocacy among AC Transit advocates, community stakeholders, and AC Transit current and potential customers:
- Incorporate social media channels as a part of the District's Customer service infrastructure by: responding to queries in a timely manner, escalating issues as needed and providing regular updates about unplanned service interruptions

The District operates five separate social media channels-Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. While a majority of curated content is deployed multi-channel, each channel has specific use cases, and audiences are not necessarily duplicative. Twitter has the highest number followers at approximately 10,800, while YouTube has the fewest at 2,239 (as of June 24).

Platforms	Followers June 24, 2021	Content Type
Twitter	10,819	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide-ranged District information that includes a strong focus on unplanned service disruption notification, including delays, detours and missed trips • Polls, surveys, and events • Planned service changes and holiday schedules • Announcements, product launches, and amplification of District initiatives • Sharing relevant content from transit partners and stakeholders
Facebook	8,490	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar content to Twitter, with less focus on unplanned service disruptions and more focus on community engagement, including livestreaming virtual public outreach activity • Planned service changes & major disruption notifications • Announcements, product launches, and amplification of District initiatives
LinkedIn	5,847	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused content of interest to businesses, organizations, and employees, including District recruitment efforts, District and employee accolades and awards, promotion of relevant cross-industry information like the Zero Emission bus program, sponsorships, and partnerships
Instagram	2,355	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong focus on brand building through organic photographic content and the , amplification of user generated content • Community engagement, such as the ridership campaign
YouTube	2,239	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video and visual-based content with an emphasis on brand building & public education including user tutorials, campaign-based streaming digital content, and a repository for archived videos
Total Number of Followers	29,750	

Social Media Staffing & Governance

There are two full-time social media coordinators, whose primary responsibility is to provide bi-directional social media engagement and coverage Monday-Friday from 6 am- 7 pm. These staff members are embedded in the Operations Control Center (OCC) and are strongly focused on communicating minor and major daily service disruptions. Secondarily, they encourage customer and stakeholder engagement through polls, giveaways, promotional and educational content; provide feedback to the Customer Services team; and create organic content and repost relevant content from other content providers. Additional social media content is developed by the digital communications team, marketing/communications campaign project managers, and the Legislative & Community relations team, and staffing configurations have been developed to support some after hours and emergency operations communication needs.

AC Transit's social media use for staff on-and-off-work is governed by the Board of Director's approved Social Media Policy 456, providing a framework for responsible use of social media.

Content Development and COVID-19 Impact

Typically, curated content creation is guided by the Social Media Handbook, an internal staff resource that outlines how we implement the objectives and strategies outlined in this Report, and the Editorial Calendar. The research, creation and editing process includes:

- Weekly Marketing and Communications staff meetings that include asset allocation, identifying priorities and scheduling in upcoming campaigns
- Shared documents for each week of the year for themed and curated content
- Editing and refining process that includes daily ongoing dialogue before scheduling final posts

The Bay Area COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders created service conditions that required pivoting from our themed curated content. The immediate rollout of our response focused on how AC Transit staff continues to work around the clock to provide safe rides. Our objective was to nurture trust, provide transparency, and engage in ongoing social listening and public education, aligned with guidance from Public Health Officials.

As the pandemic unfolded, our strategy expanded to include amplifying the multi-faceted operational changes, while highlighting our employees as essential workers, and AC Transit as critical infrastructure, serving the community for over 60 years. The campaign included the creation of designated artwork that incorporated AC Transit's primary brand colors to foster affinity, brand recognition and theme-based messaging. To foster engagement and evaluate results, we implemented polls, and use hashtags such as #ACTransitStrong and the #iwearmymaskfor campaign, introduced last Fall. The campaign used motivational visuals and photos of AC Transit to share why masks have become part of our social responsibility and helped combat compliance fatigue. Based on metrics, the campaign led to notable organic growth, included gained followers, likes and shares. For example, engagement on AC Transit Twitter was up 345% in September 2020 compared to September 2019, which is usually our busiest promotional month, connecting riders with AC Transit staff at back-to-school events, fairs and Fall festivals. During the pandemic, we also refined and expanded our Social Media Handbook.. The revision and updating process developed during the COVID-19 pandemic that will be incorporated into post-pandemic recovery strategy includes the following:

1. Evaluate relevance based on changing audience: streamlining monthly editorial calendar, while committing to highest engagement weekly themes, alternating them with specific posts about health and safety measures and honoring essential workers

2. Celebrate milestones and launches, including campaigns and initiatives like the 60th anniversary and Tempo in addition to the reNew Campaign and Transit Talks
3. Focus on visual storytelling to help reduce content redundancies, such as frequent face mask and social distancing posts that saturated the marketplace from CDC, State and County Public Health Offices
4. Listen to existing and emerging voices of transit advocates, and share their input with respective departments to help facilitate improvement and service planning
5. Leverage operational information to help promote AC Transit as a reliable lifeline and transit provider
6. Illustrate contributions of our essential workers to help foster affinity and appreciation, collaborating with our HR department on native visual content solicitation
7. Promote empathetic brand voice and customer service responses that focus offering solutions whenever possible
8. Deploy sharable content with Call to Action that keeps users engaged, such as downloadable digital wallpaper
9. Create synergy consistently to optimize content and tracking, including adding hashtags to campaign pages on the new website to help drive adoption
10. Leverage research and monitoring industry trends, partner agency activities, and opportunities for collaboration, like our participation in the Bay Area Transit Plan inter-agency Twitter campaign

Social Media Channel Usage and Growth

Based on our monthly analytic and comparison reports results, we have experienced growth in the number of followers and page likes despite the sharp drop in ridership. Metrics for May 2021 compared to May 2020 include the following:

- **Twitter:** Top performing post in May 2021 had 45,817 impressions and 373 engagements versus 21,097 impressions and 129 engagements, resulting in 22% growth in engagements and 79% in impressions compared to May 2020
- **Facebook:** top post, TransitTalks, had 17,064 reach versus 2,896 in May 2020, resulting in 489% increase in May 2021
- **LinkedIn:** 5,812 followers in May 2021, an 8.2% increase
- **Instagram:** total number of likes was 2,106, highest number of likes #VTAfamily
- **YouTube:** number of subscribers were 2,231, resulting in 8.4% growth
- Highest engagement topic in May 2021: #ACTransitStrong

Note that 80-85% of Twitter content is comprised by notification posts as dictated by daily unplanned service interruptions: missed trips, detours, delays, bus bridges and others. These notifications are of interest to a large or a small segment of our riders, depending on the scope and magnitude of the disruption, so they can alter engagement metrics. Hashtags are used for all curated content to help use analytics for content planning and improvements.

Planning Ahead

The pandemic has shown that in times of need and uncertainty, AC Transit riders will turn to social media. Building on legacy knowledge, steady growth metrics and learnings from these past 18 months, AC Transit staff recognizes the need to constantly evolve in the digital sphere with the following objectives in addition to initial practices and processes and the modifications outlined in the Content Development and COVID-19 Impact section of this staff report:

- Integration of post-pandemic market needs into the Editorial Calendar
- Focus on service recovery and engagement growth, while keeping our established popular themes flowing
- Evaluate resource allocation, including advertising strategy and invest in paid campaigns to grow reach

Additionally, growth and retention objectives have been revisited to align with post-pandemic recovery opportunities that will be implemented in Fiscal Year 2022:

Objectives	Goals	Examples of Proposed Tactics
1. Grow the AC Transit audience	Broaden awareness of service provision and available resources to gain new riders	Example: launch weekly curated posts about accessing community resources using AC Transit
2. Improve reach and retention	Cultivate how riders feel and think about AC Transit	Example: schedule follow-up posts to inform riders how we have used their feedback to improve offerings
3. Grow engagement	Increase the number of comments, likes, shares and media uploads with branded hashtags	Example: Create geo-specific ad campaigns as resources permit to amplify District priorities, such as service recovery, and explore additional features such as Twitter Spaces as resources allow

Ultimately, the vision of our social media use is to constantly evolve, while help grow ridership, engage the community about ways public transportation and AC Transit can change lives, and partnering with the public to help shape the future of bus service in the Bay Area and beyond.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

Operating social media platforms based on a set of standards fosters compliance with AC Transit Board policies, and applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations helps fulfill the District's vision and mission. There are no disadvantages to operating digital platforms that are aligned with, and in compliance of, these policies, laws and regulations.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

No alternatives were considered as this is an informational report about the District's social media use.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

Board Policy 456 - Social Media Use

ATTACHMENTS:

Prepared by:

Julia Kocs, Communications Manager

In Collaboration with:

Sarah Foster, Intern, External Affairs, Marketing & Communications
Zachary Farmer, Digital Communications Specialist
Amy Franjesevic, Marketing Administrator

Approved/Reviewed by:

Nichele Laynes, Acting Director of Marketing & Communications
Beverly Greene, Executive Director of External Affairs, Marketing & Communications