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Martinez joins other Bay Area cities on Twitter

BYLINE: By Lisa P. White Contra Costa Times

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MARTINEZ Although Twitter has been associated primarily with self-promoting celebrities and corporate brand marketing, more cities are using the microblogging service to communicate with residents.

Martinez last week joined Richmond, Pleasanton, Orinda and one Walnut Creek department in sending Twitter updates to followers about committee meetings, holiday events and volunteer opportunities.

"I'm trying to just see if we can get into the modern age," Martinez City Manager Phil Vince said. "I just wanted some interaction to see if we can do a better job of outreach and see if (residents) can get some information to make their lives better."

Pleasanton joined Twitter last month and had 75 followers as of Saturday afternoon.

"I think there's a large segment of our population "... that's how they get their information; they get their information on their phone, and they get their information on their PDAs, and I think we needed to explore that additional tool," said Joanne Hall, Pleasanton's public information officer.

Although most of the messages duplicate notices that appear on Pleasanton's official Web site, Hall said Twitter provides a way to deliver brief messages to people who are often on the go. For example, last month when the first thunderstorm of the season swept through the Bay Area, Hall used Twitter to spread the word about streets that were closed because of flooding.

"I could see that from a disaster or emergency situation (Twitter has) got really good potential," she said.

Social-networking sites are growing in popularity, particularly among baby boomers and professionals in their 30s and 40s. Nielsen NetView reported that Twitter had more than 7 million unique visitors in February, up from 475,000 in the previous February. In April, Facebook announced it had reached 200 million users.

Communications experts say Twitter and Facebook can be effective marketing tools for cities and other government agencies, but only if cities build an audience and deliver relevant information.

"Don't just give information that's regurgitating what's on your Web site," said Ashley Dos Santos, of Crosby-Volmer International Communications, in Washington D.C.

Dos Santos said cities should use social networking sites to become a hub for information about everything fun or interesting going on in the community from a call for volunteers to an announcement that Miley Cyrus concert tickets

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are going on sale. Cities also must tweet frequently, she added.

None of the Contra Costa cities on Twitter are "followers" of other individuals or entities who use the service, and that's a big mistake, according to Marcus Messner, assistant professor in the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University. To build a community on Twitter or Facebook, cities must actively seek followers, friends and fans, he said making it a two-way street.

"It needs a true engagement. If you have one person sitting there who 15 minutes before work is over posts news releases, that's not going to work," said Messner, who acknowledged smaller cities may not be able to dedicate staff to frequent tweeting.

With respect to Twitter, Messner said cities should establish "niche channels," dedicated to news about the arts or emergencies, for example, so people can get only the information they want.

Walnut Creek has adopted that approach. Though the city is not on Twitter yet, the Walnut Creek Department of Arts, Recreation and Community Services has set up separate Twitter accounts for the Leshner Center for the Arts, Bedford Gallery CenterREP and the recreation department.

Lisa P. White covers Martinez and Pleasant Hill. Reach her at 925-943-8011.

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