

## **Final report on ODOT's first blog for the Willamette River Bridge project**

### **Planning and implementation**

The Oregon Department of Transportation launched its first blog to supplement the significant public involvement already underway on Bundle 220, Interstate 5: Willamette River Bridge, the largest bridge replacement in the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program. The target audience was motorists, truckers, residents and others who had an interest in the Eugene–Springfield project.

A high percentage of the project's stakeholders were active bicyclists, runners and university students who tend to use social media more than traditional ODOT audiences, so the agency launched the Willamette River Bridge blog as a pilot program to accomplish the following objectives:

- Modernize ODOT's communications methods and directly engage citizens where they consume information.
- Provide a new digital pipeline for information not available elsewhere, such as project photos.
- Create a forum for agency-created content.
- Open a dialogue with the public.
- Provide a platform to respond to potential issues or misconceptions.
- Keep motorists and path users informed of road and park conditions.
- Educate the public about the construction details.

ODOT launched the blog on June 1, 2010, posting an average of two to three times per week. Most posts were from the project's stakeholder engagement specialist, while monthly posts from the construction manager and area manager provided their perspective on the project.

All content, except for guest posts, was included in the bridge program public involvement budget, and the blog was hosted on Blogger, a free platform. The team as a whole spent between eight and 16 hours per week to identify topics, draft and finalize blog postings, identify pictures, and post and monitor the blog.

Consultants on the project's public involvement team provided draft content that was personalized and posted by ODOT staff. ODOT maintained and monitored the blog platform and responded to reader comments. The team developed most blog topics approximately one month in advance of posting but remained flexible to posting sooner on topics that needed to be addressed.

ODOT has an internal social media policy, so it was important that all posts met agency guidelines. The team also moderated comments to ensure that only those that met stated policy were posted. This meant that comments had to be relevant to the Willamette River Bridge project. The team's goal was to treat the blog like Ask ODOT and respond to comments in fewer than five days.

ODOT cross-promoted the blog by tweeting about new posts and encouraging stakeholders to visit the site in other project informational materials. In addition, the team monitored other transportation and bicycle blogs for opportunities to engage in conversations via comments to increase engagement and demonstrate expertise.

The blog became a "go-to" source for facts, project updates and fun tidbits about the project. Topics included announcements of project milestones, features about the intricacies of bridge construction, profiles of the contractors, and posts on economic development and environmental protection issues, and community involvement activities. ODOT regularly posted construction photos that allowed the public to see aspects of the work that they otherwise wouldn't be able to access.

## **Results**

### Readership statistics

The Blogger tracking program recorded readership statistics, though it did not distinguish between actual readers and potential spamming sites.

The blog received nearly 100,000 worldwide page views, averaging almost 90 hits weekly. As shown in the graph below, the most viewed post was an interactive one asking readers to identify safety hazards in a 1950s photo showing construction of the original I-5 Willamette River Bridge. Other popular posts covered completion milestones and photos of construction activities.

## Posts

Entry	Pageviews
<a href="#">Can you spot the safety hazards?</a> May 3, 2011, 1 comment	2695
<a href="#">I-5 Canoe Canal Bridges near com...</a> May 23, 2012	1926
<a href="#">ODOT's first official blog post</a> Jun 1, 2010, 2 comments	1478
<a href="#">Arch completion photo story, part 1...</a> Mar 11, 2011	1130
<a href="#">Answers to safety hazards quiz</a> May 12, 2011	1096
<a href="#">Off-ramp work progressing</a> Jun 25, 2012	863
<a href="#">Wide range of skills needed to build...</a> Feb 22, 2011	789
<a href="#">Scenes of shaft drilling</a> Mar 27, 2012	782
<a href="#">Visit the artistic enhancement virtua...</a> Apr 8, 2011, 8 comments	702
<a href="#">Box girder beam bridge construction</a> Feb 18, 2011	534

## Pages

Entry	Pageviews
<a href="#">Blog Use &amp; Comment Policy</a> Mar 8, 2010	511

More than 65 percent of the viewers were in the United States, while other viewers logged in from Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany and France. Viewers found the blog primarily through bookmarks, ODOT's website or Google, as shown in the following graphic, which also shows hits from spam searching sites like vampirestat.

## Referring URLs

Entry	Pageviews
<a href="http://willametteriverbridge.blogspot...">http://willametteriverbridge.blogspot...</a>	2379
<a href="http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY...">http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY...</a>	1460
<a href="http://www.google.com/search">http://www.google.com/search</a>	1259
<a href="https://www.google.com/">https://www.google.com/</a>	502
<a href="http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractio...">http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractio...</a>	374
<a href="http://www.vampirestat.com">http://www.vampirestat.com</a>	251
<a href="http://r-e-f-e-r-e-r.com/willametteriv...">http://r-e-f-e-r-e-r.com/willametteriv...</a>	202
<a href="http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY...">http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY...</a>	111
<a href="http://www.vampirestat.com/">http://www.vampirestat.com/</a>	83
<a href="http://topblogstories.com/">http://topblogstories.com/</a>	66

## Referring Sites

Entry	Pageviews
<a href="http://www.google.com">www.google.com</a>	13706
<a href="http://willametteriverbridge.blogspot.com">willametteriverbridge.blogspot.com</a>	2642
<a href="http://www.oregon.gov">www.oregon.gov</a>	2333
<a href="http://www.google.co.in">www.google.co.in</a>	710
<a href="http://www.google.ca">www.google.ca</a>	576
<a href="http://www.bing.com">www.bing.com</a>	542
<a href="http://www.tripadvisor.com">www.tripadvisor.com</a>	459
<a href="http://www.google.co.uk">www.google.co.uk</a>	421
<a href="http://intranet.odot.state.or.us">intranet.odot.state.or.us</a>	363
<a href="http://www.vampirestat.com">www.vampirestat.com</a>	347

While the blog contains 322 posts, only 63 comments were posted on the blog. We assume that limited comments are related to the fact that the posts are informational in nature and do not necessarily prompt engagement. It is also possible that a moderated blog discourages commenting.

Comments focused on the sound wall, path improvements, design enhancements, other construction details and praise for the posts.

Most people viewed the site Monday through Friday, with relatively little traffic on the weekends. Sunday is the day with the lowest number of visitors, ranging from zero to 15, with an average of two to three. Use of the blog archive continuously increased, indicating visitors do look back at older blog posts.

#### Accomplishments and challenges

Based on readership analytics and positive feedback from the community, ODOT accomplished the objectives it set for the blog. By opening a dialogue with the public, the blog gave project team members as well as citizens an opportunity to discuss potential issues or misconceptions. It led to follow-up questions or requests for site tours.

The blog prompted members of the public involvement staff to capture visually interesting aspects of building the iconic bridge and to produce videos profiling the work and workers. Viewers expressed interest in seeing more photo stories, such as the arch work that was a unique and interesting aspect of this bridge. The team pushed to keep the content fresh as construction tasks at times seemed routine. Doing so enhanced the quality of the content by presenting new angles and unique photos.

The blog won a 2010 Public Relations Society of America (Portland Chapter) Spotlight Award and a 2011 International Association of Business Communicators (Oregon Columbia Chapter) Bronze Beacon Award. It has also been covered in traditional media stories about the project and trade publications.

Time commitment was the greatest challenge on the blog. Some reasons for the time commitment were:

- Simplifying technical construction jargon for a wide audience.

- Filtering information through the construction manager for accuracy.
- Obtaining security clearance for new contributors from ODOT's Information Security.

## **Conclusions**

The Willamette River Bridge blog was a valuable tool that enhanced ODOT's reputation by keeping followers informed in a timely manner. It built a wider public awareness of an important project.

- **Monitoring traffic forces focus on public need.**

The project team continually monitored the most viewed and discussed posts to remain focused on giving the public what it wanted. The team honored the need to post new information quickly.

- **Post regularly to increase consistent readership.**

Readership patterns implied that the more consistent the days of posting (e.g., every Monday and Friday), the more likely it is that visitors returned to the blog. Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesday were generally the highest. Information from the first year indicated that consistently publishing two blog posts per week leads to the most ongoing viewership.

- **Use tracking software to track true and unique visitors.**

The blog platform's statistics tool lacked the ability to differentiate between new and returning readers and to track potential spamming sites. A tool with these capabilities would provide a clearer picture of the audience and how to customize the blog.

- **Don't expect significant dialogue with your readers.**

The blog was not an ideal tool for two-way dialogue, but it did lead to follow-up questions directed to the construction team, requests for tours and the increased use of the other communication channels available to project followers, such as videos on YouTube.

- **Do use the blog to quickly address citizen concerns.**

The blog provided a timely, flexible forum to address citizen concerns. For example, after reading negative public comments on the blog and local media websites, it became clear the community misunderstood the allocation of the design enhancement funds. The team decided to address the feedback in a blog post responding to the comments point-by-point so readers could learn more about the funds, where they come from and how they were used. This immediately reduced the amount of negative comments.

The blog for the Willamette River Bridge project was an integral element of the expansive public engagement conducted for this project. Such engagement made the project as successful as it was.