

Building Police/Community Relations through Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, police departments around the globe have been involved in a slow, but steady transition from call-based policing to community-oriented policing. The former approach, while effective at closing cases once a crime has occurred, does little to develop crime prevention partnerships between officers on the beat and the citizens of local communities. Community-oriented policing serves to increase awareness of issues and potential problems before they occur, thus assisting police departments to provide a more proactive approach to stopping crime within their communities.

One of the greatest difficulties in developing effective community-oriented policing programs is establishing solid, two-way communications links between police officers and the populations that they serve. Information flow to the police and suggestions back to the citizenry often fall victim to the same constraints—lack of time to interact effectively and lack of a ready-made mechanism to deliver the information in a timely manner. To reduce or eliminate these constraints, interactive police department Web sites and virtual communities (that involve both police officers and citizens) can provide actionable and measurable performance increases in the efficiencies and the effectiveness of community-oriented policing efforts. Although the IT hardware, software, and design expertise needed to create interactive Web sites and virtual communities are readily available, online efforts at community-oriented policing will remain more of a theoretical interest than a broad-scale application until police departments truly understand the needs and the wants of the citizens within their local communities.

This article explores a service-learning approach for use in a university classroom that combines IT applications with current research practices in the use of citizen satisfaction surveys conducted for local police departments. Examples are drawn from three primary-based research studies involving police departments that are turning away from call-based policing practices and proactively moving toward community-oriented policing practices.

BACKGROUND

Descriptions of community-oriented policing efforts may be found in the literature as early as the 1960s, although the majority of papers published date from the mid-1990s to the present day. Successful community-oriented policing programs began to emerge as departments returned to fundamental cop-on-the-beat policing that put officers back in close contact with citizens in their neighborhoods and in their places of business (Sissom, 1996). The knowledge gained from the early community-oriented policing efforts was used to improve departmental training efforts and also used to focus police officers more closely on crime prevention techniques. Community-oriented policing practices have continued to evolve in more recent studies where most authors focus on how the police can better identify specific issues that are divisive within their respective communities (Culbertson, 2000; Vincent, 1999; Woods, 1999; Rohe, Adams & Arcury, 2001).

Community-oriented policing programs rely heavily on current and ongoing issues of citizen concern received from both the police departments and the citizens of the communities served. The basic premise of community-oriented policing involves both sides becoming very familiar with each other's needs, wants, and expectations, and then forming a true community partnership to create a safe environment for citizens to live and work. Police officers are, in a sense, being asked to enroll in a police version of a basic marketing course in order to learn how to sell this new approach to the residents of their communities (Cummings, 2001). Residents, long accustomed to seeing police officers only when an emergency has been reported, can represent a tough sell for police officers in terms of forming proactive crime prevention citizen partnerships. Additionally, many police departments, themselves, may believe that the extra time and effort necessary to create community-oriented policing programs is not worth the increased costs, given the difficulties in measuring the perceived benefits of crime prevention programs. Crime, itself, is measurable and actionable in terms of police performance. For example, the widespread incorporation of computerized emergency call systems (e.g., 911 in the United States and similar systems in other

nations) has given police departments ready access to tools capable of tracking performance measures such as call volume, time from call to officer arrival, clearance rate of calls, and so forth (Siegel, 1999). Particularly for police departments that score well on these measures and are rewarded appropriately by their city councils and/or their citizenry, the impetus to move toward more time-consuming and less easily quantified community-oriented policing objectives appears to be small. Like many governmental agencies, operational change in police departments tends to be extremely slow and very difficult to implement.

Regardless of these prevalent views, however, one finding that all parties seem to agree on is that the proper incorporation of new computer-based technologies will help police departments get closer to the citizens that they protect and serve. Computer-based technologies also help the individual officer solve crimes at the same time. An excellent example of such a technology is the mobile laptop computer now found in a high percentage of patrol cars (Greenemeier, 2002; Couret, 1999). Officers in the field now have access to virtually the same information as their office-based counterparts, and they can get at that information in real time without the translation losses associated with working through a radio dispatcher. Frequent reliance on the Internet and e-mail for sharing information and communicating between local police departments and other external police agencies also adds to the active network in use by the majority of police departments today. Given the significant improvements in computer technology, the timing is right for police departments to begin to implement community-based policing practices.

The design and development of efficient and effective “customized” community-oriented policing programs clearly places a burden on police departments to solicit, collect, analyze, and interpret data from their citizenries in order to make wise choices regarding the scope and size of any program that is set up. Obtaining high-quality data can be a formidable task, due to the diversity of the population to be sampled and due to the fact that not all respondents share the same expectations regarding active participation in crime prevention with their local police departments. It is with this background framework in mind that modern IT techniques, combined with current research practices, can significantly boost the ability of all parties to communicate and to share information that is critical in moving a police department from call-based policing practices to community-orientated police practices.

SURVEYS, INTERACTIVE WEB SITES, AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

B

Police departments often lack not only the knowledge of what citizens might respond favorably to in terms of interactive Web sites or virtual communities, but also to the expertise that is needed to conduct unbiased research surveys among their constituencies to generate the required data input. Citizen satisfaction surveys are becoming highly efficient and effective tools for a variety of city government purposes with credible studies cited in the literature over the past several years (Kearney, Feldman & Scavo, 2000; Oleari, 2000). Often, such citizen surveys, conducted among random samples of the community’s population, will be highly revealing of the type of information needed to set up initial Web site and/or virtual community structure(s).

To generate useful data that can drive the development of interactive Web sites and virtual communities, it may be necessary to enlist the services of professional researchers. Given large citizen populations, researchers may want to choose conducting either a mail or an online survey. If neither format is selected, they then need to develop a survey instrument, a process plan, and a timeline for conducting the survey, and at the conclusion of the survey, an unbiased set of concrete, actionable, and meaningful recommendations on how to put the data to use. Unfortunately, hiring a professional research firm can cost thousands of dollars that taxpayers cannot afford to spend given today’s tight city budgets. A workable alternative, therefore, is to “hire” university students (under the direction of an instructor knowledgeable in current research techniques) who want to have a “hands-on” educational experience that benefits themselves, their university, and their local community in a service learning setting.

The three citizen satisfaction surveys described in this article were conducted following a traditional mail survey format. Table 1 briefly summarizes the city locations, numbers of surveys sent and returned by respondents (including response rate), and the dates that the research studies were conducted over the past few years. In each case, the study was run collaboratively with a police department in Southwestern Ohio (all looking to implement community-based policing practices in their communities) and an undergraduate Marketing course at Miami University. Students in each of the courses developed the database (in Excel or in Access), handled all of the data tabulation, and analyzed the results under the guidance of the author (as instructor of the courses).

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