

# 2017 COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

THE WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY OFFICIALS



# BACKGROUND

In September 2014, the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO) held a plenary session to determine the association's priorities. The membership identified communications as one of its three top priorities. In March 2017, a memberwide survey overwhelmingly reaffirmed these priorities; 93.68% of responding members again listed communications as one of WACO's top priorities.

In March 2015, WACO adopted an initial communications plan to address four key areas.

1. Increase the quality and consistency in all WACO communications;
2. Educate Washington residents about the roles of elected officials by being a source of trusted, accurate information;
3. Grow the Association's audience; and
4. Improve member communications.

These four areas of focus are given further guidance in two objectives of the 2017-2019 Strategic Plan:

- Develop materials to effectively describe the work of county officials and county services, and
- Support WACO members in their work of sharing the story with local media and stakeholders.

Since adopting the 2015 communications plan, WACO has made big strides in branding. By setting publication standards in design, maintaining correspondence templates, implementing process checks and balances, and keeping consistent online logo and branding usage – WACO has increased the quality and consistency in all WACO communications.

In March 2017 WACO released the ninth edition of Washington County Government. Washington County Government, first published in 1979, is an extensive guide to the roles of elected officials and their offices; the popular booklet had not been revised in over a decade.

In conjunction with the new edition of Washington County Government, WACO launched a new webpage (<http://countyofficials.org/233/Washington-County-Government>) that contains information on each affiliate, as well as a download of the booklet, and affiliate specific info-graphics as a resource for the purposes of online campaigns.

Additionally, WACO launched a video and online campaign “Know Your County Officials” detailing the work of elected county officials. The campaign launched during National County Government Month (April), and saw the highest response/impression rates on both social media and viewership analytics.

Every analytic benchmark to measure audience growth set in the initial communications plan has been met or greatly exceeded. The growth in website traffic, social media interaction, Courthouse Journal (CHJ) readership, and more has been sustainable while outpacing the initial three year performance goals.

In addition to an analytic approach to measuring audience, WACO has found increased success in interacting with key newspaper and radio markets when releasing information. WACO has gathered a list of over 400 statewide and regional media outlets to provide information to and interact in follow up contacts and media calls. This has led to media coverage on topics ranging from the annual County Scholarship Fund awards to legislative specific topics such as levy lid lifts, the elimination of anticipated

taxes and assessments, and more.

Since relaunching the WACO website and reviving the Courthouse Journal, WACO had greatly streamlined and diversified the avenues of communication – often offering information in multiple mediums to suit the learning styles of a wide range of individuals. This has created a measurable increase in engagement, as well as provided an avenue to solidify a robust platform for both internal and external communications.

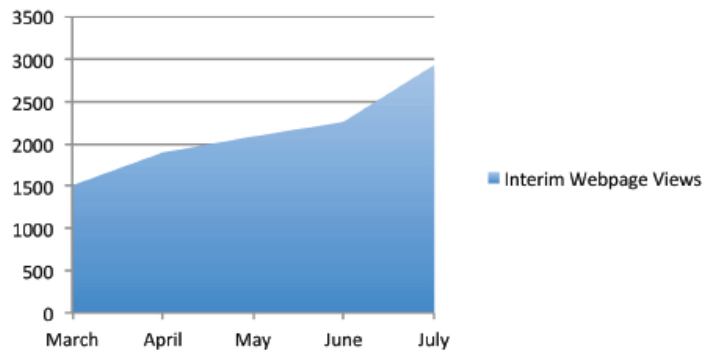
# WEBSITE

The WACO website integrates social media, video training, news sharing via the CHJ, and more.

Since launching two years ago, the re-launched WACO website has experienced substantial growth in terms of visitors – resulting in an increase in the use of video content, social media engagement, and more.

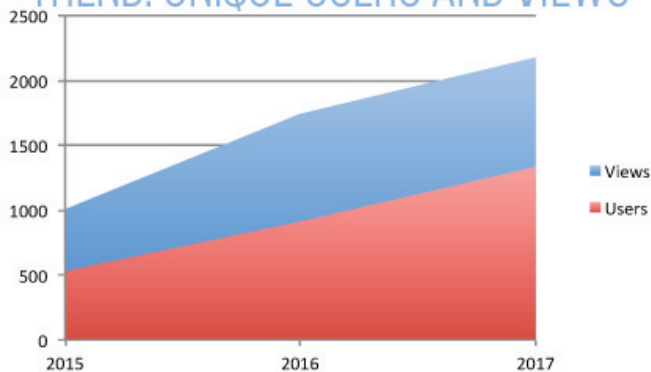
WACO did not track analytics prior to launching the 2015 interim website, a temporary page built prior to development of the new website. The initial task during the interim website phase of development was to monitor usage while working on the new site. This was done in order to design a website that mirrored current usage, while allowing for future growth. In the five month period when the interim webpage was active, website usage grew by 95%.

INTERIM WEBPAGE VIEWS



The average monthly page views grew 172% from 2015 to 2016, while users grew 72%. So far 2017 the website has seen 124% and 145% growth respectively over 2016's numbers. What this points to is two trends: one, large growth based on the launch of the new WACO website in both users and page views from 2015 to 2016; and two, continued growth in users in 2017, with slightly smaller growth in page views. This occurrence can be attributed to an increased familiarity with the site, and fewer individuals having to click through multiple pages to find information.

TREND: UNIQUE USERS AND VIEWS



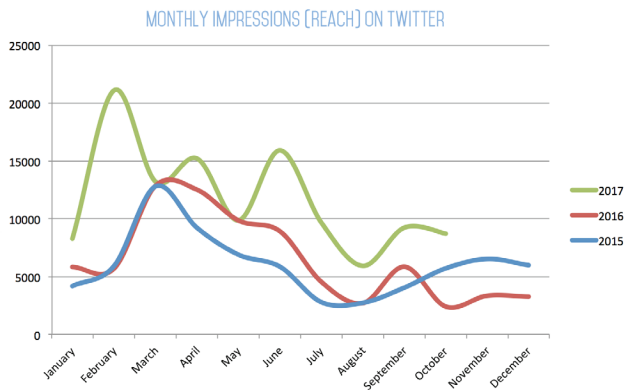
The most visited pages on the WACO website are the WACO mainpage, conference page, legislative advocacy page, and training page. This aligns with the association's focus on legislation, education, and communication – as well as the 2017-2019 Strategic Plan's goals on membership engagement.

WACO is taking proactive steps to consolidate and maximize services online. For example, the Clerks' ClerkShare website was migrated to the

WACO website with a URL redirect, saving on the cost of maintaining two sites. This same approach has been taken with the County Scholarship Fund site, and staff has identified other future targets for information consolidation. This will drive up web traffic, as well as create a centralized location for content management and upkeep.

# SOCIAL MEDIA

The strength of social media, much like social capital, or traditional social connections is not through direct communication, but the ability to communicate to one set of individuals and build on their separate set of partners and connections to spread your messaging to an audience not immediately within your reach. It is through strengthening these connections that your own audience and reach grows.



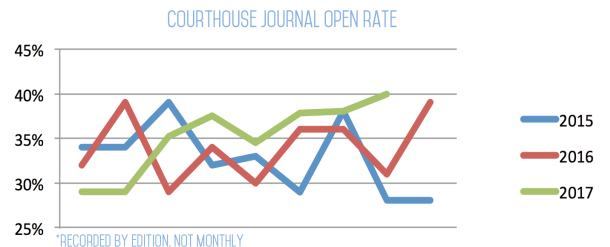
WACO’s Twitter account has 179% growth in the average monthly impressions (reach), with higher peaks, over 2016’s sustained growth. Additionally, WACO saw a 243% increase in profile visits on a month-to-month average over 2016. Simply, more people are seeing what we are posting, interfacing with the posts, spreading the messaging, and looking further into what WACO is about at a high rate of growth.

Throughout 2017, WACO diversified and increased its shared content focusing on the work of county elected officials. Additionally, WACO focused on timed opportunities such as National County Government Month, the legislative session, and more to expand the association’s reach beyond familiar stakeholders.

# COURTHOUSE JOURNAL

For 2016, and the first part of 2017, WACO utilized the Civic Plus product Civic Send to provide the newsletter to the membership. During this period analytics for the CHJ saw a decline in engagement – this prompted WACO staff to return to using MailChimp to provide the newsletter to the WACO membership. The resulting switch produced immediate results.

The CHJ has an average open rate, defined as a person opening the email in a separate pane – or marking it read, of 35% thus far in 2017 with trend on out-pacing the 34% average of 2016. The number of actual readers may be higher if you account for different readership habits that does not provide for a read receipt. Additionally, the CHJ saw a high of 40% for its open rate so far in 2017 - the highest since tracking began. When compared with WACO annual conference registration numbers, the CHJ readership is slightly higher than conference attendees.



Noting some roadblocks in receiving the CHJ, WACO has worked with county IT departments to help ensure that messaging will be delivered to the appropriate inboxes without first going through a quarantine delay by preparing safe lists for network security purposes. Staff will continue to work with county IT staff to increase delivery, and continue to monitor analytics to better determine readership.

In mid-2017 WACO began to host a Courthouse Journal blog on the WACO website, the blog allows users to sign up for updates, or browse at their leisure. After the launch of the CHJ blog – WACO began wrapping the blog posts up in its traditional monthly newsletter, and greatly expanded the content of the CHJ.

# VIDEO MEDIA

WACO launched a robust plan to utilize online meetings, trainings and webinars. Beginning in June 2016 – WACO has utilized Gotowebinar to hold remote meetings, and has offered its use to affiliates for meetings and training purposes.

So far in 2017, WACO has held 33 webinars or meetings, saving WACO members and staff on time, travel, and associated costs.

In addition to the use of webinars and online meetings, WACO has also produced 45 videos, which have been viewed over 5,000 (1,727 complete) times, for 179 hours of total viewing. In 2017 alone, 109 unique viewers have watched 40 hours of video education on the WACO website.

Following the feedback gathered from both the 2017 Education Survey, and the 2017 Legislative Survey, WACO will provide more clarity on when new videos are available, and where they can be found to increase video usage with members and stakeholders.

## WHAT IS NEXT?

In 2017, WACO's communications platform has grown significantly. However, there are still some technical roadblocks preventing some membership engagement. These IT related issues will continue to be an hurdle to cross when discussing increased online engagement. While important steps have been taken over 2017 to alleviate the issue, WACO will need to continue to proactively address the situation.

The ultimate goal for the WACO website is to provide a sustainable, reliable, and fiscally smart approach to WACO's communications needs. WACO has made great strides in co-locating various websites that were once on different servers – this trend will need to continue and grow over the next several years. This will create a one-stop-management platform, and ultimately save resources and increase traffic to other pieces of information on the site.

Travel costs, and time away from the office, are often cited as barriers to participating in WACO education activities and meetings. WACO has done great work in establishing a remote meeting and education platform, but needs to grow it in both sophistication and usage.

Throughout 2017 WACO's communications vision began to crystalize in a more formed manner – this year was a very good year in that regard, setting a foundation for informed and sustainable growth in the years to come.