



Raking in the Pageviews: North Dakota Residents Fall in Love with Online Leaf Collection Map

In a survey on the four seasons, YouGov reported that fall is the favorite time of year for most Americans. Even so, enjoying the splendor of autumn foliage soon gives way to the reality of having to blow, rake and haul away leaves once they start to fall.

While some cities have eliminated vacuum leaf pick-up in recent years, the City of Grand Forks, North Dakota, with a population of 55,000, continues to provide the service its residents clearly value.

“The benefits are twofold,” explained Grand Forks Communications Specialist John Bernstrom. “Vacuum collection keeps leaves out of our storm sewers, and we use the collected leaves for cover on our landfill. It’s one of those services that our community likes, but residents want to know when their leaves are going to be picked up.”

Grand Forks and other cities that offer leaf collection are well versed on vacuum pick-up, leaf bags and the community’s need for information. Residents’ questions and requests for information on leaf collection lead to a spike in call volume, putting a strain on the local government workforce already stretched thin during the busy fall season.

“Leaf pick-up is a service that, in the grand scheme of what city government provides, seems minor, but from a public standpoint it’s a big deal,” said Bernstrom. Recognizing the importance of communications, Grand Forks leveraged the versatility of its new website, www.grandforksgov.com, designed by government website

experts at Vision Internet, by adding a fall leaf collection page.

The idea had been a pipe dream with the City’s old, mostly homegrown website, which Bernstrom described as “cumbersome and tough to work with graphically, as photos would slow it down.” In contrast, the Vision Internet site Grand Forks launched in July 2014 is extremely flexible. It moves users seamlessly from the main site, to social media channels and related links.

The leaf collection page, which Grand Forks developed in-house at no cost and built using its own GIS technology, was integrated into the new website, which also is hosted by Vision Internet. Works leaf pick-up crews, shows where they are currently working and plots where they’re going next.

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John Bernstrom
Communications Specialist
City of Grand Forks

To keep residents informed, Grand Forks included GIS mapping on the leaf collection page and built a color-coded map that tracks the progress of Public Works leaf pick-up crews, shows where they are currently working and plots where they're going next.

The dedicated section quickly rose to the top of the site's "most popular" list. Results were eye opening. In the past, Grand Forks Public Information Center personnel had to connect with public works staff several times each day in order to inform residents of the collection schedule. When the new leaf collection page launched in the fall of 2014, phone calls dropped to a mere 7 percent of the City's total leaf collection queries. Online page views for leaf pick-up information reached 3,874, while the number of phone calls to Public Works and the Public Information Center dropped to 291.

The increased focus on the City's website as the go-to resource also stimulated its followers on social media. According to Bernstrom, since the site's debut, the popularity of city's Facebook page has "gone through the roof."

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Each leaf collection update was featured on social media. The City's 21 Facebook posts regarding leaf collection had a total reach of 6,941 followers. Twitter posts on leaf collection resulted in 9,439 impressions.

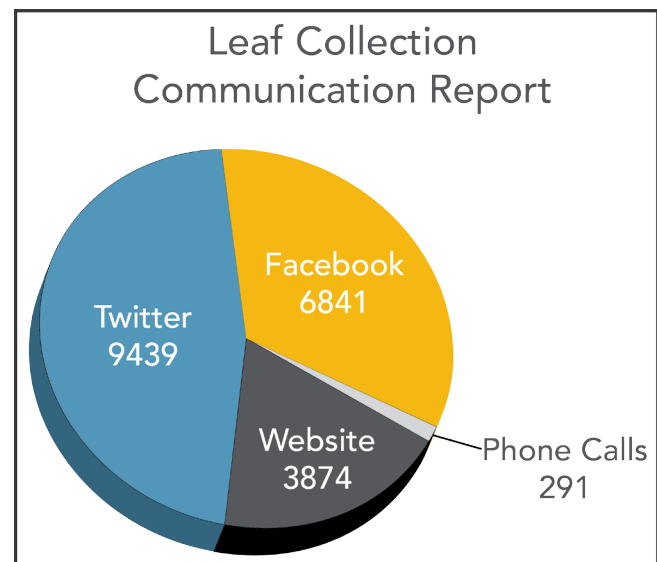
After the City's last pass for leaf vacuum pick-up in November, Grand Forks' website team issued a report to show City Council and department heads the value of the website leaf collection portal.

The data showed that a large majority of residents were able to get the information they needed without having to send an email or make a phone call. This in turn freed up staff time. The online presence also gave staff a resource to go to if they did receive a phone call regarding leaf collection.

"With any technology, you need the good foundation of a website, which we have now," said Bernstrom. "Vision Internet's content management system has given us infinite space to expand and enhance our site. It's exciting to have an idea and then have the tools in hand to create a cool new way to communicate with the public."

The powerful management tools provided by visionCMS™ have made citizen self-service a reality for hundreds of government agencies across North America. Although Grand Forks still gets some calls, most residents now view the leaf vacuum truck status on the city's online map.

"When people can serve themselves, it doesn't cost us anything," said Bernstrom. "From a communications standpoint, the fall leaf collection was a success. This data will now give us a baseline for leaf collection communications campaigns in the future."



September 2015 Update: Digital Media Annual Report Reveals How Tweet It Is!

The City of Grand Forks issued a Digital Media Annual Report this summer, marking the first anniversary of the launch of its new website, a 311 nonemergency reporting system and a coordinated social media campaign.

With a population of nearly 55,000, the report notes a significant increase in citizen engagement across multiple platforms. The website had 785,753 webpage hits with an average of 65,479 hits per month. During the last four months of the reporting period (which covered August 1, 2014 to July 31, 2015) the average webpage hits per month were 72,894. The most notable leaf collection stat was the City's social media metric for Twitter.

"Twitter was a very effective tool for communication during our Fall Leaf Collection in 2014," said Grand Forks Communications Specialist John Bernstrom. "People could easily click through to the leaf collection page on our website to view the color-coded map and get more detailed information. It worked beautifully."

Twitter traffic reached 36,447 in October 2014 - more than double the average of 17,265 per month over the 12-month reporting period. Overall followers of @GrandForksCity grew by more than 50 percent during the year, adding nearly 900 people, for a total of 2,643 on July 31, 2015.

"The combination of both traditional and digital media has become a very effective communication strategy for the City of Grand Forks as we work to be the leaders in engaged, open and transparent government," Bernstrom said.

