

DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE BASICS

JULY 2011

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BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA

It takes far more than press/media releases to communicate now, and stakeholder expectations of how one interacts with organisations have changed from being a passive receiver to an active participant. Social media is rapidly becoming the norm for the spread of information between people, groups, organisations and even governments; even the mainstream media now uses it as a primary source, as well as a means of pushing out news¹.

Social media is a tremendously powerful tool, but also one to be handled with care and respect, as getting it wrong can have negative consequences both for individuals and organisations.

Note: A fictional organisation, Organisation X, is the example used in the rest of this document.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA, EXACTLY?

Social media is the collective noun for the websites, technologies, software and other tools which have, in the last few years, allowed a vast increase in the interactivity of publishing on the internet. Common applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are examples of social media.

Unlike previous publishing models, in which an organisation or person put out an item (for example, an article or blog post) to a passively receptive audience (one-to-many), social media not only allows, but actively encourages, many-to-many interactions, where the key factors are relationships, user participation, collaboration, high accessibility, and fast turnaround times on availability and communication.

One of the key characteristics of social media is its speed - whereas media releases come out periodically, and generally go through multiple layers of research and approval, social media works in real-time. Additionally, it has a different tone to conventional communications: it is more informal, and is a conversation rather than a broadcast.

¹ During the Darfield and Canterbury earthquakes in 2010/2011, the Twitter stream #eqnz became one of the country's primary means of disseminating information about the earthquake, including resources and finding people. Indeed, the mainstream media began to use it not only as a source of information, but also to put out relevant information (as did aid services, private companies such as Telecom, etc). The #eqnz hashtag is still in use throughout New Zealand, and is often the fastest way to discover what is happening around any given earthquake.

WHICH ARE THE MOST COMMONLY-USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS?

There are a number of different types of social media which are commonly employed, each with their own particular uses and benefits.

MICROBLOGGING

Microblogging allows users to post short messages up online, akin to the status updates seen on Facebook. Of the various microblogging services, the most commonly used is the almost ubiquitous [Twitter](#).

Twitter allows people to post messages (tweets) of 140 characters or less – these often comprise links to items of interest (articles, pictures etc), as well as what people are currently doing, how they feel about an issue, and so forth.

The newly released [Google+](#) service is similar to Twitter in many ways, although it has not reached anything near the adoption levels seen with Twitter.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

The most famous of the social networking platforms is [Facebook](#), with over 500 million users worldwide. Platforms such as this allow people to form networks of ‘friends’, post status updates, articles of interest, etc. They also allow people to plan events, play games, and show their appreciation, through the ‘Like’ button, for websites and webpages.

A feature used by many organisations is the Facebook ‘page’ function, which allows organisations to set up a specific page devoted to the organisation. Such a page could have a Wall, on which people post messages, as well as links to the organisation’s website, pertinent articles, image links, and so forth.

Google+ also has aspects making it similar to Facebook.

FLICKR

[Flickr](#) is one of the most widely-used photo-sharing websites. Users can post their images up online, and depending on how permissions to view (and use) the images are set, other people can then view the images, choose to follow the user (meaning they are notified when new images are posted), and so forth.

YOUTUBE

[Youtube](#) is the most widely-used of the online video websites. On it, users can post videos of whatever they choose. Other users can choose to follow a user's 'channel', meaning that they receive a notification whenever new content is posted, and there is also the ability on some channels/videos for people to post comments on a video (you would have control of this).

BLOGS

Blogs are online journals on which people post either items of interest, or articles (posts) which they have written. Some blogs are devoted to a single subject or organisation, whereas others are devoted to a wide range of subjects. In addition, blogs might have one or several authors.

Blogs have seen increasing use by organisations as a way to 'humanise' themselves, presenting an accessible face to the public, and also allowing members of the public to engage directly with them since most blogs allow readers to post replies to each entry (post), encouraging discussion and audience engagement.

Well-known blog platforms include [Blogger](#) and [Wordpress](#). Some blogs are also organised into collectives - well-known New Zealand examples include [Sciblogs](#) and [Public Address](#).

WIKIPEDIA

[Wikipedia](#) is an online, user-written encyclopaedia. It is increasingly becoming one of the go-to sources of information on the internet. Users can submit articles on a given subject, which are then subject to review (and can be edited by other users).

An important caveat is to note that Wikipedia has very strong rules about the extent to which individuals/organisations can submit articles about themselves. It is not a marketing resource, but rather a reference source.

ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

While many organisations are already engaging through social media, a number are still considering whether they should become involved in this new – a question viewed by many with significant trepidation.

ON WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS MIGHT ORGANISATION X ENGAGE?

While a presence on both Facebook and Twitter are increasingly becoming ‘the done thing’ for many organisations, it must be carefully considered, in each case, whether such a presence is worth it, and which platforms are the most appropriate.

1. Twitter and Facebook could be used by Organisation X to actively engage with the public, build up communities around its work, showcase its work and foster improved communication both internally and externally
 - a. Services such as [Storify](#), which turn tweets around a specific story or organisation, could also potentially be considered for big stories/issues/subjects
2. Youtube – the most commonly used video channel on the internet (at least in Western countries), many people now conflate ‘Youtube’ and ‘online video’. Hosting videos on this service can greatly improve their visibility and ranking on search pages.
3. Flickr – the byname in online photo sharing, using Flickr would also help to improve the visibility of Organisation X’s images. In addition, Flickr’s wide use means the system itself is stable and highly useable, and interfaces well with most websites, content management systems etc.
4. Blogs – Blogs written either by individual bloggers, or by collections of bloggers (for an example, see [Southern Genes](#), which is the Genetics Otago group science blog) serve to talk not only about Organisation X’s work itself, but also about other work/research and issues which are pertinent.
 - a. In addition, there is the concept of ‘counter blogging’, defined by the US Air Force as “when [US Air Force members] counter the people out there in the blogosphere who have negative opinions about the US government and the air force.”² With the right terms of reference, a similar strategy could be employed by Organisation X in some of the areas in which, if this is an issue (it will not be for many organisations) its work is seen as more controversial.
5. Wikipedia would only be appropriate if articles are posted on specific subjects. Possibly, an article about Organisation X itself might be useful, too, but the tone and subject matter of the article would be key. It can in no way look like marketing/PR material.

² [The US Air Force: Armed with social media](#) and [US Department of Defense Social Media Hub: Education and Training](#)

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

It is also worth seriously considering the use of an internal (i.e. private to Organisation X) twitter-like service, of which [Yammer](#) appears to be the international benchmark.

The use of such a service would:

- Avoid huge (and frequent) group emails. Such emails clog the system, take up everyone's time, and the increased volume of emails in people's inboxes makes them less likely to see pertinent emails.
- Foster much improved relationships between the staff of Organisation X. It reduces the need for meetings, fosters better collaboration among coworkers, and reduces the tyranny of distance felt by people working remotely/from different locations.
- It would also be great for boosting morale, by allowing Organisation X staff to see that management values not only their opinions, but their right to freely express same.

Telecom NZ uses Yammer, as does eBay, UNICEF, Thomson Reuters, the Flemish Government, the European Commission and over 100,000 other organisations³.

Yammer's basic functionalities (which would be all that was required, at least initially) are free⁴, giving Organisation X time to test-drive the concept and service.

WHY WOULD ORGANISATION X WANT TO ENGAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA? (I.E. WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?)

Although it is becoming almost de rigeur for organisations to be involved in social media, it is not always a) appropriate or b) appropriately done. While there are some risks - discussed in *What are the risks?* below – Organisation X should nonetheless be involved in social media, for a number of reasons:

- To tell its stakeholders about our work via a direct and personal channel, but, as or more importantly;
- More openness would reduce the “them and us” label used by its critics on a range of issues.
- To engage with its stakeholders about its work and who it is as an organisation - and this includes engaging both with its supporters *and* its detractors

³ Yammer: [What is Yammer?](#)

⁴ Yammer: [Pricing](#)

Twitter, blogging and Facebook together could all increase visits to Organisation X's website, promote new items on the website, improve the uptake of our releases by local and international media, and publicise new blog posts. It would give it bigger reach, through many channels, but with the same brand.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Allowing people to freely engage with Organisation X, and vice versa, has two principle risks:

- Its staff saying something inappropriate, either by putting out incorrect information, or by saying something damaging regarding the organization.
- People who have an issue with the organisation, or the work in which it is involved, using social media channels to actively harass Organisation X.

Neither risk is to be taken lightly, as both could potentially damage the organisation's reputation and possibly morale, and further distract its members from their work.

However, it must also be said that while responding to posts/enquiries/tweets carries its own risks, Organisation X should also consider the risk of *not* responding. Social media is, fundamentally, an interactive channel, and failing to engage means that the debate goes on without us, which could lead to a bad conclusion for us. In addition, should a significant issue arise, social media would allow direct and early engagement with stakeholders, allowing an issue to be dealt with before it reaches a level where it gets picked up by the media.

There are also ways to mitigate these risks:

CHOICE OF ORGANISATION X'S SOCIAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES

Organisation X should choose official social media representatives who are familiar with the tools and platforms involved, have a strong understanding of social media itself, and are committed to ensuring that Organisation X is well represented. Clear lines of engagement would also be beneficial.

MODERATION

Moderation allows for comments posted on, say, Facebook and Youtube⁵ to be 'moderated' (i.e. publishing control). In addition, using a disclaimer is both wise and best practice - they "account for social media and advise users on how the agency manages their social media presence⁶".

⁵ It is not possible to control what others tweet, or retweet, on Twitter.

⁶ Queensland Government: [Official use of social media guideline](#)

STRONG POLICY

A strong policy, which makes it clear that statements which are inaccurate or defamatory are not acceptable, needs to be written. In addition, an organisation is not required to respond to a comment or question. Those which are merely provocative can be ignored (as pointed out by Neal Richardson of Telecom NZ), whereas those asking questions can be pointed to the correct resource.

Additionally, should a question arise frequently, it is worth considering turning it into a FAQ, a resource for which could be available on Organisation X's website. This might also lessen the number of email/telephone enquiries received by Organisation X, and which take up valuable time in responding to.

It must be noted that neither Organisation X nor any other person or organisations has any control over the content of other people, or what they do with *its* content. As a result, it would be wise to form strategies covering all the possible scenarios which could affect the organisation, and how Organisation X would react.

OTHER ORGANISATIONS – SOME CASE STUDIES

Organisations all over the world make use of social media, in different ways, to engage with their stakeholders - a few examples are discussed below.

GNS

It uses these media predominantly to put out news of new blog postings, news articles, GeoNet news, etc. Occasionally, it answers questions. Its use of social media in this way - as an RSS tool - lacks the some of the interactivity which has identified social media as a separate channel with its own style.

LANDCARE RESEARCH

LCR uses social media to talk about news, events, as well as to comment on issues, events and so forth (eg. the running commentary on the recent [Magnetic South](#) game, which was a crowdsourced way of looking at Christchurch's future needs).

Landcare's use of social media is far more 'personal' than GNS's. It talks about non-LCR events etc too, showing levels of engagement with people outside organisation (eg. posting about interesting papers, journals, even relevant shopping deals). This is a far more effective use of social media.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NEW ZEALAND

NLNZ uses Twitter to promote the *identity* of NLNZ and the archives, as well as the content itself. @NLNZ has acquired a reputation for having a huge personality and a sense of humour - they are often mentioned as 'an organisation who's doing it right'. While they are an exemplar in many respects for tone, however, they may not be perfectly suited as a model for every organisation, depending on the tone (and formality, possibly) of its output and brand.

The NLNZ Facebook page is very simple, linking people to a Wikipedia entry about NLNZ.

US ARMY (INCL. THE US AIR FORCE)

Surprisingly, the US Army is very actively engaged in social media. They have a comprehensive social media strategy and presence, and have also brilliant resources, including documents of advice and policy, widely over the internet. Some of these are even hosted on [Slideshare](#), an open source site on which people can publish presentations for others to browse and use.

Quick reference sheets on the use of Facebook and Twitter are included in the *Appendix* of this document, and should be viewed as a possible example for Organisation X's use thereof.

QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT

The Queensland government has also become widely involved in social media, and has produced some great documentation around policy and strategy for government involvement therein. Of course, being absolutely governmental, some of the strategies/policies are not applicable.

Various departments might use the services differently, but the strategy overall is one which demonstrates a clear knowledge of social media, its benefits, risks and constraints.

THINKING FORWARD

Below are detailed questions⁷ which would need to be answered before launching a social media presence:

- What do we want to achieve/communicate? It could include distributing information about our work, connecting to a community, building internal morale/connections etc.

⁷ Using [this document](#) as template

- What is our audience? (Not forgetting that this will include the public, stakeholders, politicians, community leaders, and people who have an issue with us/our work)
- What companies does Organisation X admire for their social media/digital strategy success?
- How will Organisation X measure the impact of any changes it makes? What tools are in place to help with this measurement (see next section)?
- As part of this, how will Organisation X measure the success of a social media presence? What KPIs are necessary?
- For example, we could track metrics such as impressions, comments etc on all Twitter, Facebook and Youtube (include use of a URL shortener like bit.ly for tracking clicks on links)
- How comfortable/familiar is the senior staff with tools like Twitter and Facebook? Of course, engagement in social media will be delegated.
- Is there a culture of allowing staff to access social media during the working day?
- What is in place to help Organisation X deal with adverse comment and discussion on social media sites now?

Without commitment from senior staff, any attempts to improve Organisation X's social media presence are likely to fail. It is imperative to remember that social media is more than simply ticking a box, and should be closely linked with Organisation X's marketing and communications activities.

MONITORING TOOLS

Monitoring tools are both useful and necessary, as they make the job of managing an organisation's social media presence far easier, less time consuming, and provide valuable insight into the public's engagement with the social medium in question.

Possible monitoring tools which could be used are:

- [Bit.ly](#) – a URL shortener (useful for Twitter, particularly) which enables one to track how many times it's been clicked on, plus a range of other metrics.
- Inbuilt trackers – most social media services have inbuilt trackers which look at number of clicks, location (where possible), and so forth
- [Google Analytics](#) – GA is a very strong tracker able to provide a range of metrics such as page view, number of visitors to pages, location, etc. It would be used for blogs.

Given that government policy states that many organisations need to keep records of their communications, the use of an archiver for tweets would also be key. There are a number of different services for this – [TheArchivist](#) is one (which allows either public or private archives), but one could also build private archives on Organisation X's servers, etc.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

There is an important distinction to be made between official Organisation X's social media accounts, which would be branded and toned as such, and the private social media presences/usage of staff. Private social media presences are not, and should not be, controllable by Organisation X, although it may be a good idea to suggest to staff that any defamation of the organisation could bring with it negative consequences for the individual.

The language used by the official Organisation X accounts should not be overly formal: instead, it should be personal, approachable and engaging (where possible). Sounding like a media release, or a PR consultant, defeats the object and turns people off. Press releases are written to the style and language requirements of the media. The disconnect between this style and how people actually speak has created the gap which social media has filled. Not adjusting the style would be failing to use the channel properly.

Social media communities don't build overnight – be patient. But, be aware that people are also easily bored, so social media messages need to be frequent and timely. Recent research indicates that 90% of consumers⁸ stop following brands because of communication which is too frequent, boring, or irrelevant.

“Make sure that whatever you do, it is not with the sole intention to push information out ... Take the time to respond and have meaningful conversations. That will increase your following tenfold. It's just like e-mail marketing: Don't be a blaster. Be a resource,” says Carissa Newton, Delivra's director of marketing⁹.

Finding the right people for Organisation X's official social media accounts will be key, as the organisation needs to trust them enough to let them post and respond without responses having to go through multiple layers of approval.

Organisation X's website should allow for easy ways to share its content – this is best done through the use of buttons which allow people to share content via tweet (Twitter), the 'like' button (Facebook), or to add it to an RSS feed such as Google Reader.

⁸ Top Reasons Why Consumers Unsubscribe via E-Mail, Facebook and Twitter, Erica Swallow, Mashable <http://mashable.com/2011/02/08/why-consumers-unsubscribe/>

⁹ [5 Proven Strategies for B2B Social Media Marketing](#)

REFERENCES

References used to construct this document, but not always specifically referenced:

- [DoD Social Media Hub](#)
 - US Army: <http://www.slideshare.net/USArmySocialMedia/>
- Queensland Government: [Official use of social media guideline](#)

APPENDIX

US ARMY TWITTER QUICK REFERENCE SHEET – TECHNIQUES LEARNED FROM THE VERY

BEST PAGES

<http://www.slideshare.net/USArmySocialMedia/twitter-quick-reference-sheet>

Do:

Be creative

Use URL shorteners (<http://goo.gl/>, <http://go.usa.gov/>)

Use hashtags in every Tweet by searching for what's out there and creating your own
Tweet links to content (articles, photos, websites)

Tweet breaking news related to your unit

Tweet Army senior leader quotes

Live tweet events

Create your own hashtags for events

Establish hashtags early for an event and advertise

Use Twitter to communicate during a crisis

Follow other Army and DoD Twitter accounts

Check often for new Twitter accounts and acknowledge, follow, share, etc.

Make sure you're following the correct account, do not follow imposters

Retweet content from other accounts while also adding your organization's words

Engage with your Twitter audience by asking questions, retweeting their answers.

Include usernames of other accounts in your Tweets to boost awareness and followership

Listen to what your followers are talking about

Ask yourself "Would I want to retweet this" before tweeting

Check your messages and mentions daily and respond.

Tweet photos

Create a voice and personality for your organization

Become the go-to resource for timely news and information

Use direct messages to engage with your organization's followers

Focus on tweeting exceptional content

Mix up your Tweet times in consideration of other time zones

Edit your Tweets and avoid typos

Cross promote other social media pages maintained by your organization

Don't:

Tweet too many times a day (you will lose followers)
Follow brands (Pepsi, Coke, etc.) It looks like an endorsement
Obsess about followers. Numbers come with time.
Clutter all your Tweets at one time
Tweet on the hour (everyone does that)
Be too promotional
Tweet with unprofessional Twitter language (“lol” “2 be” “be 4”)
Let your Twitter account become stagnant (go more than a week without tweeting)
Add location to Tweets
Be too selective in who you engage with (users will notice who you respond to)

Remember:

You do not control what happens to a message once it is posted
Once a Tweet is out there, it’s out there

US ARMY FACEBOOK QUICK REFERENCE SHEET – TECHNIQUES LEARNED FROM THE VERY

BEST PAGES

<http://www.slideshare.net/USArmySocialMedia/facebook-handout-8029049>

Do:

Start with a strategy – how does social media fit into your overall communication goals?
Scatter your posts throughout the day; do not clump all together
Post on weekends and evenings, and evaluate which time works best
Tag at least one other page in each post
Try to ask an engagement question for every post
Respond to questions in a timely manner
Post and follow a comment policy, and enforce it
Remember to post in a friendlier tone, but not unprofessional
Spell check every post prior to posting
Thank your followers and praise them often
Use lots of quality photos (be sure to add as many details about the photo as possible – or ask your audience to add details as an engagement item; also ask them to tag themselves or others)
Use short, raw, catchy video
Ask yourself: would I share that with my friends?
Mix it up: photos, questions, videos, sharing others' content, news stories, etc.
Add a personal touch; connect with your audience
Set defaults to show only your posts first (after all, this is a command information platform, and this allows your message to be seen first, and allows others to still comment on your wall)
Welcome participation, collaboration, and feedback
Get a short, smart vanity URL (facebook.com/username) (available only after 25 followers)
Update top 5 photos often (show a variety of activities, angles, personnel, etc)
Have someone else read your posts before you post them (to see if they make sense)
Track metrics and evaluate how content performs. Determine what metrics are important to you before you engage, set a benchmark and track over time.
“Like” sister or similar organizations, and tag them often

Post information or comments on other pages, while using your organization's page (be mindful if you are posting as organization or business)

Always use OPSEC when posting

Identify/find SMEs to answer questions that come up on your page, or direct them to SME

Avoid using automated posting services to post same content to multiple sites

Ask your followers what they would like to see on the page

Don't:

Post too many times a day (you will lose followers)

Clutter all your posts at one time

Do not be too promotional

Use boilerplate messages or snoozy press releases, unless necessary

Use social media (teen) language in professional posts (ex: I wanna b ur bff 2day & 4evr)

Use geo-tagged programs on your page (ex: showing where you are Tweeting or FBing from)

Post a link without giving some sort of lead, description, or call to action

Remove content just because you don't like it. If it doesn't violate your comment policy, leave it!

Remember:

You do not control what happens to a message once it is posted

It only takes one unprofessional slip to taint a reputation

If you do not have a lot of time to monitor, then set tighter restrictions (photos, videos, comments, etc.)