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White paper

## How to get better ROI from your social media strategy

Social media has become the most talked about communications effort. Companies are creating digital presences in all sorts of places, slashing resources in other areas of focus in favour of getting teams to manage their Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn pages. The primary aim seems to be increasing their social followers.

All manner of innovative campaigns are being employed: competitions, interactive videos, and infographics on social platforms are all the rage. But these efforts are often purely tactical - rarely is a well thought through strategy put in place. Communication efforts ought to be tailored to boost brand awareness and engagement with an online community, but it can do so much more if a company applies a collaborative, goal-oriented communication strategy that aligns with the organisation's principal aims.

### What do you really want?

Have you ever seen the film *Swimming with Sharks*? This 1994 dark satire focuses on the relationship between a high-level Hollywood exec, played by Kevin Spacey, and his new assistant. The recurring theme revolves around Spacey repeatedly asking the assistant what does he really want:

*Look, it's like they say, if you're not a rebel by the age of 20, you got no*

*heart, but if you haven't turned establishment by 30, you've got no brains. Because there are no story-*



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*book romances, no fairy-tale endings. So before you run out and change the world, ask yourself, "What do you really want?"*

This question might seem simple, but if you give it a little thought, you quickly realise that while it might be easy to ask, it is much more difficult to answer. This question forces you to choose a goal to focus upon, at the cost of other attractive aims. This is the key to good communication strategy: making a choice and sticking with it.

Quick, flippant answers to this question, like make money, sell more or improve the brand, might work superficially, but that is no way to underpin the expenditure of time, money and resources in a company. At the same time, you cannot overcomplicate your communication strategy. Balance is required. A good approach to consider is the one defined by Doran's S.M.A.R.T. criteria.

First published in 1981, this mnemonic is very useful in helping you set objectives that others can

understand and help you achieve. You can read a glut online about how to apply it, but the essence is this: make your goals Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely.

Ensuring your communication goals meet these criteria allows employees and business partners to set tactics intelligently. Consider these two goals:

1. Get us more social media followers ASAP.
2. Team X is allocated 10% of the budget to secure 10 000 new organic Twitter followers for Company ABC (@companyABC) by the end of the fiscal year.

The second approach is clearly superior as it sets parameters for success. It also calls for focused efforts. And, the word 'organically' prevents the team from using the allocated budget to buy followers in order to tick the box. Instead, they will need to apply that budget to come up with approaches to attract and retain followers.

Ideally, you want the broad company objectives to be nailed down before any specific departments or teams create their own. It's also prudent to create goals that align with your marketing and PR efforts. Not only does this approach avoid teams working in silos, but the social team knows its goals are working in tandem with others in the department as well as that of the company at large. This best ensures that if the communication team meet its S.M.A.R.T targets, it is directly contributing to the growth of the company.

Third-party agencies who specialise in communication can be instrumental in helping you create your S.M.A.R.T objectives. You bring your company and market knowledge to the table, while the agency provides you with its expertise of hot news trends, digital media platforms, and key influencers. This approach helps to ensure that your communication targets are realistic and the outcome desirable for the business.

### **It's all about the content**

There is an unprecedented amount of noise online. With hundreds of millions of blogs, billions of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter users, we are all suffering from information overload. Most know they want to learn more about X, but are not sure who is the right authority. And the big question

today is, how do you stand apart and attract and engage users in order to form a strong community?



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Do not underestimate the value of strong online communities; they are infinitely more valuable than gluts of casual followers. A dedicated community member can answer questions on your behalf because they are educated and knowledgeable. This person will share your information, tweets, posts, videos, promotions and articles with others, helping to attract new followers, as well as publicly defend your company against trolls and nay-sayers. It is easy to see how having a strong community can save your team money, time and resources, all while helping you get your key messaging out there.

An engaged and dedicated online community requires the right virtual habitat and that is where you come in. Think of a social platform, like Facebook or Twitter, as an ecosystem. Your job is to create a habitat within that ecosystem that provides your target audience with a place to learn, discuss and share with online peers.

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Once your communication goals are set, you can focus on creating a content calendar. The first step is to analyse your target audience. Many

companies want to broadcast their services, but give little thought to what their target readers are interested in, what they want to learn, talk about and share out with others. Other organisations are focused solely on community growth, so they give the community what they want without any thought to what the company is focused upon.

The balancing act is delicate. The application of a Venn diagram can be very useful here. After detailing what you want to talk about in one circle, and outlining the content that your target audience most likes to share and discuss, you can focus the majority of your attention on the areas of common interest.

Outside advice here can be very useful. Working inside a company with a specific focus can skew your perspective on content messaging. An organisational environment naturally develops its own micro-language and focus areas, which may differ wildly with what exists externally. Getting a third party to work alongside you, or at least review the content strategy, should highlight questionable content

ideas before you publish, ensuring you don't confuse or bore potential community members as well as influential digital media users, bloggers and journalists.

### **Making content sticky**

The other aspect that needs careful consideration when we discuss content strategy is its magnetic factor and its staying power.

So, let's assume that you have isolated the common topics that both your target audience and your organisation are interested in exploring. The next step is how to get it out there in a way that is not only fresh and compelling, but also sits comfortably with the personality of your company or organisation.

If you sell widgets and your company's goal is to sell more, you will get internal pressure to use PR and social media to get the word out about your widgets. Sadly, the direct approach - using the 'hey, buy our widgets now' approach - will only give you success if your widgets are obviously unique as well as amazingly useful or covetable. For the 99.99% of us, a creative, edgy approach that also builds upon the personality of your brand, your people and your product is how to can create your niche.

Here is a great example: the company Blendtec is a US-based company that makes blenders, mixers, etc. Its social strategy is genius. The campaign, which has been going for years now, is called Will it Blend, and the premise is this: Blendtec founder, Tom Dickson, puts electronics, like tablets and smartphones, or items

like rakes, crowbars, and pool cues into his blender, takes a video, slaps it on YouTube and sees what happens.



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They have had over 225 million views. It is a magical recipe: people love to see stuff get destroyed, and Blendtec loves to show how indestructible its blenders are. This whole campaign helped not only to promote the company's products, but also build the company's personality and philosophy. And through sticking with this campaign, but refreshing and nurturing it regularly, Blendtec has built a strong corporate personality with enviable brand love.

### **Building the right communication strategy for your business**

You have your objectives, you have decided on the content material you want to push out, and you have isolated the most appealing approach for your audience. The question now becomes what format to use and what social tools will serve you best. There are numerous formats: video, podcasts, infographics, blogging, for example, and there even more tools to consider: Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, Vine, LinkedIn, Tumblr, or Orkut.

If you have too many idle hands and no work to give them, you can certainly try your hand at all of

them, but very few of us are in such a luxurious position. This means you have to make an educated guess on which are the best ways to help you achieve your goals.

The first thing to take into account is where is your target audience. This refers to existing customers and prospects, business partners, employees, journalists, bloggers and influencers. The wonderful aspect of social media and public relations is that rather than trying to shout your message from your website, you can analyse where your target audiences digitally hang out and approach them on their own turf.

Second, you need to figure out how much time and resource you can afford to give. One of the most important elements of social media is that it is not a place to broadcast, but a place to communicate. For example, your Facebook posts might get comments, and these need to be read and responded to. Imagine a complaint is posted publicly and it is not addressed by your company. Or that someone asked a question or shows off the strength of a competitor's product on your page. These are things you want dealt with quickly, so they don't mushroom into a crisis scenario.

Third, you need to trust whoever you put in charge to manage that online presence. This person, or team, needs to understand what will work and not work. For instance, LinkedIn allows you one profile, so if that person is posting on behalf of the company, their personal profile picture and public information is readily available. Is this something you are comfortable with in your organisation? The other point here is that you need someone who can handle pressure. When things get a little sticky - perhaps you have a troll on your page that is asking difficult and pointed questions - you don't want the person in charge to get into a public fight, where they might react in a way that is detrimental to the company. This can be difficult if attacks are personal. If the social media handler goofs, for example, and then the community notices and begins to rub salt into the wound, your social team needs to be able to handle it calmly, honestly and quickly.

Finally, It is a good idea to involve all other communication vehicles available to you in the business - the web team, the marketing team, and most importantly, the PR team - to underpin your social efforts. If you work collaboratively with these teams, your messages will be significantly amplified, giving you greater return on your investment. A social media campaign that is echoed across your website, email communications, newsletters, blogs and press releases has greater clout and greater chance of success.

Social media doesn't have to be mysterious or all-consuming. Experts in the PR world, for example, understand what makes a good objective, how to knit together a campaign that will appeal to target influencers and journalists. Essentially, social media is really just a

natural extension of traditional PR. Good public relations companies are invaluable to get your social strategy up and running without costing you a fortune in fees, resources, or time.



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