

ADCOMMUNICATIONS

Social Media - an overview in the business-to-business context



Social media platforms are a contemporary contribution to the business to business marketing mix. They offer a complementary method of building awareness of brands and products, sharing corporate content with a wider audience, and building more communicative relationships with customers, partners and influencers.

Social media changes the way in which a company communicates with its stakeholders. On the positive side, it enables greater engagement and mutual participation. Depending on the brand guidelines and corporate restrictions, it may also permit marketers to be more relaxed than in other areas of business, to adopt a less formal tone of voice.

Full engagement in social media requires that corporations set aside conventional notions of 'controlled' communications, and acknowledge that social media is collaborative, participative and conversational. It is not a one-way medium, but thrives on multi-way conversation, sharing of ideas and information. Successful social media engagement requires brands to 'listen' more than they 'speak'.

What's happening in our industry?

In the graphic arts industry, as in other B2B technology fields, there is increasing buzz around social media. In reality, the majority of blue-chip technology brands have yet to engage actively with social media, according to research by communications authority [PR Week](#).

Traditional media platforms such as [PrintWeek](#) have increased the profile of 'social media' such as discussion forums (although they have also demonstrated the control issues that characterise these, and the challenges of maintaining the quality and balance of peer group conversation in social media platforms.)

Web sites such as [WhatTheyThink](#) have proven the interest that can be created by delivering compelling online content in the form of video for example, the usage of which in 2013 is set to increase dramatically. Social media provides an interesting platform for the propagation of corporate video material in many different formats, albeit with caveats about tone and content.

Just as many graphic arts media outlets internationally have launched companion web sites and e-bulletins in recent years - and indeed may be driving more of their hard copy content onto online platforms - many publications, and their individual editors and commentators have a presence in the social media universe, and are continually increasing their engagement on platforms such as [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

Technology and business analysts are also inevitably increasing their monitoring of social media to identify trends, comment threads and debates relating to key technologies and the companies that offer them. A wealth of tools linked with the different social media platforms offer them an instant and free desk research tool.

Our industry does offer examples of successful community engagement, both on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#), while current opinion suggests that an increasing number of printers are also using [Twitter](#) (though it is difficult to properly analyse the demographic of this group).

FESPA offers a positive example of an organisation that has expanded its existing community with the use of social media, particularly through the creation of its own social media network, the [Wide Network](#), which has accumulated more than 2000 users, and growing, and [Ipex](#) is doing the same with its [IpexWorld](#) venture.

Among the major players in our industry, the rule of thumb seems to be that the US vendors have embraced social media more actively than their European or Japanese counterparts. This is probably down to a mix of the anglo-centricity (until recently) of many social media platforms, the earlier adoption of social media marketing in North America in general, and the tendency of US companies to be more assertive, informal and unrestricted in general in their approach to marketing and communication.

What kind of companies can benefit?

The smaller and more entrepreneurial the organisation, the easier – in theory – to implement an active social media strategy, in that communication can be spontaneous, authentic and interactive, without the constraints of corporate communications policies, lengthy approval cycles or concerns about corporate governance.

Smaller organisations face a different challenge, however: social media - like any other aspect of communications - requires time, resource and concerted effort. It is unlikely to be an effective strand of a marketing strategy if you have to dip in and dip out due to limited time or people resources.

The greater resources available to larger organisations may help to overcome this issue, but it is important to manage corporate expectations, understand the risk/reward balance, and agree the parameters for social media engagement. Below we set out some suggestions for going about this.

So what can social media do for my business?

The appropriate answer is ‘what do you want social media to do for your business?’ As we will show in this section, active participation in social media can work on many levels, but the key objectives for your business will influence the platforms you decide to prioritise, and your approach to using them.

Here is an overview of the areas where we see that social media can play a part for a business to business brand, albeit as one element of a multi-channel approach:

Social media as a news communication medium

Social media lets you share news with your audience without going through a middleman, and can undoubtedly increase ‘word-of-mouth’ for exciting corporate announcements or innovative product launches. AD Communications already distributes client news via our [news web site](#) and the AD Communications Twitter stream (@adcomms), which has over 1300 trade media, influencers and client followers. At the simplest level, clients themselves can also ‘tweet’ their news announcements, with links back to relevant online content; link tweeted news to the corporation or key individuals’ Facebook/LinkedIn/Google + profiles to reach other contacts in their sphere of influence; publish news links to a company Facebook or Google + page, if appropriate; and propagate relevant news links within online discussion groups (while recalling that social media is not a broadcast medium, and participants will expect brands to be free and open with answers to questions posed in response to corporate and product news.)

Social media to build corporate and spokesperson profiles

Engaging key spokespeople in social media through blogs, guest blogs, Twitter and relevant social media discussion groups, for example, can help to build visibility of these individuals. This may in turn invite later coverage on conventional printed or online media, and encourage requests for expert interviews and comment. This approach requires some consideration as to how much time such individuals can feasibly devote to this, to what extent it is a priority in

their remit, and to what extent the company will aim to police and direct their social media engagement.

Social media to demonstrate thought leadership

Like conventional media, social media provides opportunities for companies to establish and demonstrate thought leadership in particular business, technology and application areas. This requires an active blogging presence, regular participation in discussion forums, and a readiness to monitor online conversation on Twitter for example, and step in proactively to offer advice and comment that paints the organisation in this light. This might require the engagement of multiple contacts within an organisation, for example senior executives or their approved spokespeople, product managers, technical support managers.

Social media to promote products and services

Social media should be viewed as one element of an integrated communications strategy for the promotion of specific products and services. Social media can be used tactically to drive additional traffic to campaign-specific microsites or pages covering specific products. Social media also provide ideal environments in which to communicate price or service promotions or bundling deals, or to invite requests for trial products (new consumable launches for example). Social media may also provide useful platforms for activating user groups of particular products, to encourage interaction and sharing of experiences (though like real world user groups, these require the active engagement of senior management, product manager/s and technical support resources, to monitor conversation, listen to feedback and contribute proactively.)

Social media as an SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) tool

One area where social media can make a definitive contribution is as an element of a proactive SEO (search engine optimisation) strategy. Search engines love social media content. Mentions of your spokespeople, company and products in blogs, on forums, and in social networks can move your company up the search rankings, with a positive impact on traffic to your web site/s. If the sites then do their job to hold interest, inform and engage, and ultimately drive sales, this could have a significant impact on your business.

Social media in the product review cycle

Whether you like it or not, social media is an active environment in which buyers openly review products and services, and can be very vocal about what they do and don't like. Social media networks and discussion groups can be expected to actively propagate both good and bad reviews. Monitoring this, and maintaining a proactive social media presence of your own, allows you to stay on top of feedback of both types, and respond to any key posts. It enables you to nurture product evangelists and to directly address the concerns of critics. In product launch phases, social media provide a vehicle to keep your own live news and updates flowing quickly and directly to and between users, to an extent that conventional media could not.

Social media as a sales tool

Most companies will ask, quite justifiably, whether social media will contribute to sales. Like any single aspect of an integrated marketing or communications strategy, it is likely to prove difficult to trace leads specifically to social media, even with the constantly evolving Google Analytics, and to engage with social media simply with a view to increasing sales will probably disappoint in the short term. However, social networks do provide an immediate and obvious communications channel for prospects interesting in finding out more about a product. Significantly, research by PeerIndex indicates that 80% of B2B buyers refer to peers during a purchase cycle, and increasingly these buyers are looking to forums and networking sites for comments and reviews of product and after-sales service.

What becomes clear is that the areas described above correlate very closely with the role that 'conventional media' play in the marketing mix. 'Social' or 'shared' media represent a complementary route to market to achieve some or all of the objectives set out above, and may certainly improve the effectiveness and overall impact of marketing activity when used in combination with bought media (advertising, sponsorship), earned media coverage (through PR), and owned media (such as web presences and customer publications).

Social media also offers scope to support businesses in other ways. Here are a few examples;

Social media as a customer engagement and loyalty building tool

Even if direct sales don't come from the social media outlets, there's no doubt that social media offers an opportunity to optimise customer service, by providing an immediate, accessible and transparent environment where customers and partners can engage with you, albeit publicly. Social media platforms can help you turn one-time customers into repeat customers, for example if you can solve a customer's problem because of a social network complaint. The flipside is that social media makes customer complaints public, and you must therefore have the resources and cultural openness to be willing and able to deal with these situations in public if necessary. Social media also makes it simple to reward loyalty, for example by sending promotional codes to customers who 'follow' you on particular social media networks.

Social media as a market research mechanism

Online networks and discussion forums provide a ready-made platform for soliciting opinion that can contribute to market research, while loyal follower groups can function as online focus groups, and can be engaged online to contribute to offline research. Social media can also provide an instant barometer for monitoring the effectiveness of certain marketing campaign activities.

Social media as an internal communications medium

Social media platforms can offer a cost-effective method of sharing information with employees, and offering them an open internal forum for exchange of ideas and issues. By creating a known platform, employers can be seen to encourage openness and dialogue, while also monitoring and contributing to conversations. Like most other areas of social media though, this requires close and constant monitoring.

Social media as a recruitment tool

All social media in which a brand participates can also function as a way of communicating available roles, and some, such as LinkedIn, offer the scope to advertise open positions to specific target groups, for a fee. An individual's level of social media connectivity, and their social media profile may also be a useful vetting tool in the recruitment process.

Social media as a crisis management platform

Social media can be an effective tool for crisis response, when handled responsibly. It gives your company a chance to be heard directly rather than having your problems and solutions aired first by someone else. This can be the key to stemming negative publicity. By 'listening' and analysing employee and customer sentiment through social media in a crisis situation, you can see clearly when a rumour or issue about your business is taking off online and adopt a proactive strategy for disseminating factual information, quashing rumour, and tackling activists. You will need a crisis management plan that covers social media, to ensure that, if confronted with a crisis, you are not searching for the username for Facebook or Twitter,

trying to work out who is in charge, and who is authorised to comment on the company's behalf.

This second group of social media areas has implications for customer services, HR and even legal departments, and – depending on the size of the company and the stakes - needs to be considered thoroughly as part of a corporate-wide social media policy, with the relevant training put in place for the internal stakeholders involved.

So how do I start to develop a B2B social media plan?

All of the benefits described above represent undeniable value to a company, some more than others. Social media engagement, for the most part, is a 'long game', requiring a high degree of day-to-day involvement and some experimentation to determine which tools and platforms prove more effective for your business.

To start with, we recommend that companies think carefully about why they are interested in social media.

- Because everybody's talking about it
- Because we think we should
- Because our customers are telling us we should
- Because our competitors are
- Because we want to sell more
- Because we have a good story to tell
- Because we want to engage in industry debate and discussion
- Because we have valuable content we want to share
- Because we want to boost traffic to our web site
- Because we want a way of hearing what our customers and prospects are saying

Considering your own reasons for introducing social media to your marketing mix is an important first step.

What should my goals be for social media?

The second is to think about some measurable short- medium- and long-term goals. When embarking on a social media programme for the first time, it is important to recognise that realistic activity targets should be set, and preparation is very important.

Ask yourself at the outset what social media success looks like for your business. Will you be happy if you simply create and nurture a community of followers? Or do you want them to pursue a certain course of action as a result? Are you expecting to see a spike in sales leads for a particular product? Do you want to generate traffic to a particular site or microsite? Are you looking to generate registrations to an event or open house? Do you want people to sample a product? Are you looking to shift perceptions of your company or product in a certain direction?

Your goals may differ depending on whether you are looking at social media as an additional channel to support your general marketing efforts, or to support a specific campaign or promotional activity.

What guidelines should I have in place?

When developing a social media strategy, it makes sense to put an internal policy in place, to ensure that there are clear terms of engagement, and that you retain a degree of control over how your social media presence is managed from the side of your own organisation (bearing in mind that you will have little or no control of the third-party interactions that take place in shared media environments.)

In terms of setting a policy, you will need to consider – among other things; how you define social media: (public versus private, professional versus personal); what is acceptable behaviour when employees engage in social media, particularly when their social media profiles link back to the company or when they are talking about their work; how you will maintain and protect company and personal confidentiality; how you will comply with other company policies; how you will ensure compliance with the terms and conditions of social media sites; how will you handle breaches of the policy?

What do I need to put in place in terms of content?

Social media invites a more relaxed and informal style, so it is a mistake to think that existing marketing collateral can be used in a social media context without adaptation. It may be necessary to adapt existing guides to style and tone of voice. Social media is conversational, and the most effective participants make contributions that are thought-provoking and designed to invite engagement and response. Immediacy is also important – wait too long and comments become too late for the conversation.

Before embarking on a social media campaign, consider how you will generate an ongoing stream of interesting and relevant content, who will create and approve this, and how you will feed this on a daily basis for the duration of your engagement.

It's also important to think beyond words: images, video, web content, all contribute to the richness of your social media campaigns.

What resources will I need?

Proper engagement with social media – like any other aspect of communications - requires a substantial time investment and shouldn't be something you try and undertake on the side or in your spare time. What's more, it will take time to get going, and results may not be instant, so you will need to be prepared to stick with it and give it a chance. With this in mind, a consideration of resources is important. Who will manage your social media presence in-house? How much time will you allocate to them to do it? What budget will they have available? Will they have the scope to work with external agencies to support them? Within the company, who will be allowed to engage proactively with social media platforms in a marketing communications context? What training will they require? Who will police what they contribute? What approval mechanisms are needed? Who will monitor the ensuing 'conversations'? How will you feed the social media appetite for new content? How will you balance these responsibilities between the in-house team and your comms agency?

How do I go about selecting the most relevant 'social' media?

Media selection is a natural starting point in a conventional media relations strategy. Which publications does my target audience read? What level of decision-maker do these publications reach? In which sectors and geographies? What do they go to the publication for? Industry news? Inspiration? Technical information? Analysis? Comment? Gossip? What's the editorial tone of voice, and does it suit that of my brand? How should we prioritise this publication against the others we plan to engage with? What proportion of our attention

does it warrant? What measurement tools does it offer me? The same considerations apply with social media.

Based on our ongoing observation and analysis of the key social media platforms for their relevance to our B2B technology clients, AD Communications identifies four current social media tools as being particularly pertinent:

- Blogging
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- [Google +](#)

Further platforms warrant consideration, depending on the objectives.

- Facebook
- [Pinterest](#)

Blogging

Blogging is the contemporary online equivalent of the 'conventional media' bylined article or opinion piece (and may in fact be useable in both contexts), with the added benefit that the online environment invites comment and interaction with the reader, and infinite opportunities for participants to propagate your material.

A blog on your own website, or a contributed blog on a third party site, allows you to create content on a subject – whether reactive or proactive – and position your brand or key spokespeople as thought-leaders or subject matter experts.

Blogs, if authoritatively written and well propagated, have a good track record of driving web traffic. The key consideration is which spokespeople will contribute blogs, or how agencies will be used to 'ghost blog', with what frequency, working from what content, and with what approval cycles.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn provides the opportunity to build relationships with fellow industry experts. It provides a platform to undertake pre-sales investigation (through discussion topics), to promote an individual's capabilities and to network within special interest groups. If LinkedIn is identified as a key social media platform based on the business objectives, in the first instance both the company page and individual employee profiles should be updated as much as possible, and where possible, a LinkedIn training session should be provided so that all employees understand what they can get out of keeping their profile up to date, joining groups and engaging in discussions. Like all social media, effective use of LinkedIn requires time investment from key spokespeople to grow and maintain contacts, join groups, read discussion threads and contribute actively, but the relevance of the audience is immediately measurable and effectiveness is therefore arguably clearer than via other platforms.

Twitter

Twitter is one of the most talked about social networks, offering a micro-blogging platform on which people can 'tweet' up to 140 characters at a time. Tweets may use shortened URLs to link to online content. Statistics show that only 10% of Twitter users are net contributors. While this can be cited as a reason for brands not to engage with Twitter, it does imply that a significant percentage of users are 'lurking' to listen and monitor the activities of the business

entities or personalities they follow. A percentage of this silent audience could be existing or future customers.

Engagement with Twitter requires some time spent initially researching your target audience to determine who should be 'followed', depending on what you hope to gain from Twitter. For example, is it simply to be a newsfeed providing useful information to journalists, or a customer service feed. Twitter has a wealth of information within its Business Centre which provides tips and advice on how to grow your presence on Twitter, integrate its API into your website and use the various available widgets and resources.

Participation in Twitter can be via news, industry observations, a response to a tweet from someone you follow, a retweet of an interesting story you have picked up. Each tweet is relatively quick to do and an account can easily be managed from a smartphone if necessary. Followers can link directly to your website, and Twitter has the added benefit of offering an online snapshot of what else is going on in the industry, which can be managed via lists.

Twitter requires a daily investment in building a following and tweeting relevant, up-to-date and engaging content to maintain that following. Twitter is highly public and extremely fast moving, factors which must be taken into account when determining how Twitter will be used in a social media strategy, and who will manage and contribute to your corporate presence.

Google +

Google + has had a lot of press attention and since changes to Google's algorithm's in late 2012 is definitely one to add to the list. This is because users on Google + will be seen (in the eyes of Google) to have more authority and be more trustworthy, with content appearing higher up search rankings. As yet it doesn't appear to have taken off in the B2B space, but we anticipate that this will change in the next 12 months. Google + integrates with other Google products such as Picasa, GMail, Maps, News etc., and allows users to share news in circles. It makes it very easy to create circles for different parts of your life such as friends, family, work etc. - a bit like bringing together LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and so on into one place.

Ones to watch:

Facebook

Facebook has been traditionally seen as a consumer networking site, but has also received some acclaim in the print industry for helping to sell equipment. It provides a good opportunity to place targeted advertisements and can act as a successful internal communication tool for information-sharing and team-building via established groups.

The argument for using Facebook for B2B marketing is now growing, and an increasing number of trade publications are joining the platform. With the correct meaningful and interesting content Facebook can help you connect with, and educate, your target market, in a different way from your website/blog/Twitter feed. The key is providing visitors with something worth a re-visit.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a [pinboard](#)-style [social photo sharing](#) website that allows users to create and manage theme-based image collections such as events, interests, hobbies, and more. Users can browse other pinboards for inspiration, 're-pin' images to their own collections or 'like' photos. Pinterest's mission is to "connect everyone in the world through the 'things' they find interesting" via a global platform of inspiration and idea sharing it's quickly become one of

the top ten social network sites, but has been mainly used in consumer or personal capacities. It's one to continue to watch to see how it evolves.

How do I identify and evaluate social media influencers?

Once you have your target list of tools, the next step is to identify the influencers in your marketplace - the users of these platforms or the publications that are the most active and relevant to your brand. The level of influence depends on the platform / publication and your marketing needs, but some guide criteria would be:

- For a publication, how many readers?
- For a blog, how many articles per month and how many comments per article?
- For a Twitterer, how many tweets per day and how many followers?
- For a LinkedIn group, how many members?
- For a Facebook group, how many members and how many comments?
- In all cases, are the majority of participants from your target country/region?

The nature of an ongoing successful social media campaign means that you will continue to discover more influencers as you progress - and they will discover you too. It is, however, crucial to start your campaign with a solid group of influencers across the relevant platforms you have identified, and there are a wealth of tools available to help you do this.

How do I track the impact of social media activity?

With the volume of content growing all the time, it's not possible or realistic to monitor social media by numbers. This simply doesn't work (think of the rising number of users). Sentiment analysis is one way of looking at your social media mentions – what are people saying about you and your products, and in what tone of voice? There are various social media monitoring tools in existence, some offering free services, some paid for, and all with varying degrees of analysis. You can also benchmark yourself by tracking competitors, customers and prospects. Fundamentally, the key is to measure social media success against your own objectives – i.e. target audience and influence versus relevance. Whatever you measure, you will never have the whole picture, so make your metrics representative, rather than attempting to be exhaustive.

How can AD Communications help?

There are a number of ways that we can help you where social media is concerned, from planning to execution. For example, we can:

- Work with your marketing team to discuss social media objectives and measurement
- Agree the most relevant platforms for ongoing engagement and to support specific campaigns (these may be different)
- Participate in discussions about leveraging all communications to support your SEO strategy
- Submit 'campaignable' ideas that can leverage social media, and develop a social media approach that fits with your existing marketing mix
- Develop tactical plans and timelines integrated with your other communications disciplines
- Work with you to develop your social media policy and style guidelines
- Adapt existing messaging frameworks to social media
- Harness and adapt your existing content for social media outlets, and create new content to feed social media campaigns

- Help to identify key social media influencers and develop strategies for nurturing them
- Advise you on targeted advertising over social media platforms
- Help to build your profile on Twitter, LinkedIn, Google + or Facebook, as appropriate
- Act for you on an ongoing basis to ghost blog or ghost tweet, with relevant input
- Monitor social media discussions and contribute comment, with your authority
- Highlight opportunities for your spokespeople to contribute to discussion threads and topics

For more information contact Helen Tolino on htolino@adcomms.co.uk or 01372 464470. You can also visit our [web site](#) or connect with us on [Twitter](#), [Google +](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

© AD Communications 2015