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A Social Media Primer for Technical Communicators

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HUMANS HAVE BEEN INTRIGUED by the shallowness of the network pools for quite some time. Whether through in-depth genealogy searches tracking family trees or the strange, yet fascinating, game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon,” we want to know how quickly we can be connected with each other.



Social media—forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content—has provided an opportunity to connect humans more quickly and easily than ever before.

Social media is more than social networking sites like Facebook. It includes a whole network of sites and services where users interact with one another. The information graphic timeline (see Figure 1) shows only a handful of the most popular sites and their uses, and all of these (and many more not shown) fall under the category of social media. And social media is not going away. Forrester reports that three out of four Americans use social technology, while Nielsen found that social sites account for 10% of all Internet time, and these activities are the 4th most popular online activity—even ahead of personal email.

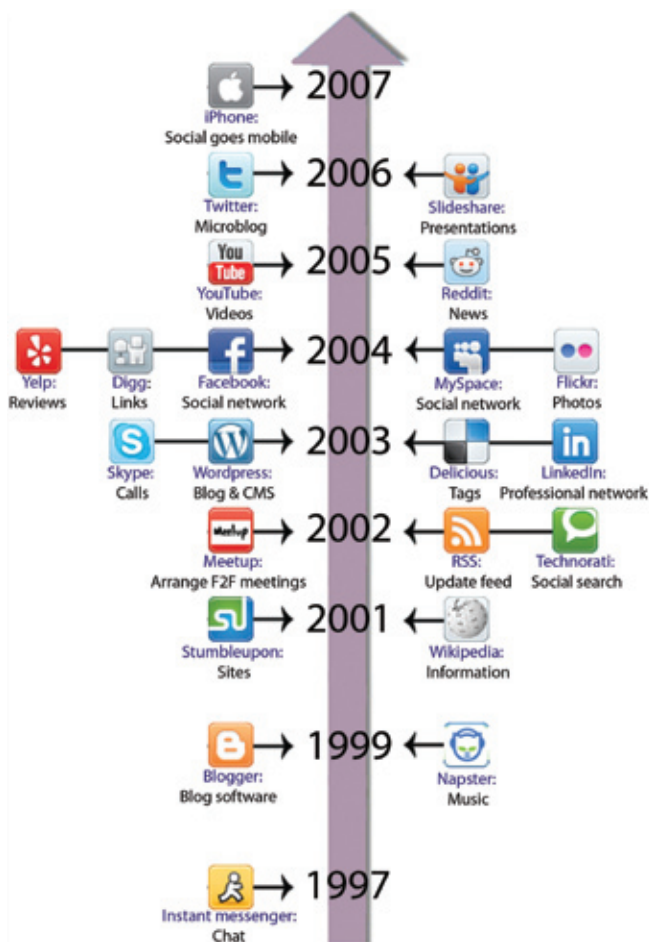


Figure 1. Timeline of popular social networking sites and uses

How can organizations use this activity and connections to their advantage? And why is this important to technical communicators?

Understanding Social Media and Its Role in Technical Communication

The predecessor of today's social media can be traced back to Geocities, which launched in 1994. Geocities was

designed to bring people together in chat rooms, as well as to provide more ambitious users with a place to host personal websites. Although it closed in 2009, Geocities is an extended case study in the history of social media and interaction.

On the heels of the dot-com bust in 2000, innovators realized the future of the Web was social. Sites such as Napster (1999) for music sharing, Blogger (1999) for hosting blogs, and AOL's instant messenger (1997) began paving the way for an interactive Internet. Moving past the flat, one-way delivery mechanism of the Web's early days, Web 2.0—which debuted in our lexicon in 2004 at the O'Reilly Media conference—emphasized information sharing.

Users of Web 2.0 crave and expect interaction with the sites they visit. Most often, however, an organization's Facebook page is merely a place to post information. If users really wanted to read posts, they would simply visit the homepage. To be beneficial to organizations, technical communicators need to understand that most users turn to social media to cement existing relationships, not to connect with complete strangers. So if social media is all about interaction and information, and if most users only connect to people and products they already know, then what is a technical communicator to do?

The answer lies in information overload. Users will generally move outside of their accepted networks when they need an answer to a specific question. Some immediate ways an organization can leverage social media are:

- ▶ Customer relations
 - ▼ "Insider" news
 - ▼ Early purchase on new products
- ▶ Crisis management
- ▶ Documentation
 - ▼ Traditional online help
 - ▼ Wiki-based online help
 - ▼ Policies and procedures launched internally
 - ▼ Video instructions
- ▶ Marketing
 - ▼ New products and services
 - ▼ Highlight documentation and user forums for products and services
 - ▼ Event coverage surrounding a new product of service
- ▶ Knowledge and content management
- ▶ Interactive FAQ page
- ▶ Training
 - ▼ Video training
 - ▼ Policy documents
 - ▼ Quality assurance materials

Information can no longer only be provided as downloadable, static documents. For example, help pages should now include forums, email options, and opportunities to message a help technician. Users are no longer satisfied with the option to email a help desk only to wait a few days before receiving a response. These help forums allow users to invest their own knowledge, building an immediate connection. After posting a help comment,

invested users may be much more likely to take the step to further build the relationship through Facebook or Twitter. A company's help page is a way to solidify a relationship with a customer, converging technical content with marketing communications, e-learning content, knowledge management, and user-generated content. They can now be seen as an underutilized avenue providing an added value for customers and clients.

So how can an organization effectively use social media? What are the best ways to start?

Steps for Moving into Social Media

It is a challenge to build a social media strategy in an era of tight budgets and over-extended employees. Furthermore, the 90-9-1 rule still applies to most social media. The 90-9-1 rule is the idea that only 1% of users will actively participate. The difference now, though, is that social media has given that 1% significant power. All users are now product reviewers, journalists, and stockholders who can immediately impact a company's reputation. It involves careful planning and implementation—like any other communication strategy.

Step 1: Understand the Social Media Landscape

Social media is more than Facebook and Twitter, and it depends on the company's mission and goals as to which of these are the best choice(s) for user interaction. Users may simply appreciate a comment function on certain website pages and nothing further. Or, they may appreciate a separate forum. Anne Gentle's book *Conversation and Community* provides a great starting point to orient a company in the social media landscape. The timeline also provides a quick overview of the many different types of options available.

Also, social media choices have to be integrated with other communication and documentation practices already in place. A thorough understanding of the social media types and how those technologies integrate into existing systems is a key part of Step 1.

Step 2: Build a Strategy

How does a business implement a successful social media marketing strategy? It must involve more than placing social media buttons on the homepage. Amber Farley insists that companies must have a plan, a key part of which is answering three "big picture" questions recommended by Daniel Bixby:

- ▶ Where are the people?
- ▶ What's in it for them?
- ▶ What's in it for the company?

Taking the time to answer these key questions could prevent a lackluster presence with an even more dismal participant base. They underscore the more defined steps an organization needs to take to begin using social media

as part of the overall communication strategy and how the company will define success later on.

Strategic planning should include questions such as, "If I share something on Facebook, do I also share it on Twitter?" "How often do I need to interact?" "Who should be the voice or face of our social media presence?"

Someone must have ownership of the social media strategy. The initial reaction is to look to the new intern or the youngest employee because he or she is probably using many of the tools, but this can be an unsuccessful choice. An individual's goals do not always align with a company's goals. Individuals are often looking to share personal thoughts, photos, and news with family and friends—probably not the same goals as a company. The strategic choice is someone who understands the mission of the company, the goals of implementing the strategy, and how the tools, and the message delivered therein, may have positive or negative effects. The technical communicator understands the power of written messages and how to best leverage those messages through various delivery methods.

A big question that many organizations struggle with is, "who will be the site or page author?" The strategy owner should not walk in haste to the cubicle of the youngest employee. While the youngest person on staff may participate in an advisory role with the strategy committee, this employee's lack of business experience can be detrimental to the plan. The author of the page or site should have a clear understanding of proper customer service techniques, in addition to understanding what content will encourage consumer interaction. The technical writer on staff is a likely choice, so companies should be sure the writer is part of the planning and has a clear idea of the goals and implementation.

Step 3: Know Your Audience's Preferences

Another reason technical communicators should be integral to a social media strategy is their audience advocacy. While this step is a vital part of "Step 2: Build a Strategy," it warrants being highlighted by itself. It's likely that the company already knows a lot about the existing audience(s) and should use that knowledge to its advantage in beginning the foray into social media. If users are mostly desktop users, then a Twitter feed should be on the main page. If users are over 50, then consider creating a Facebook group, since users over 50 are one of the largest growing users of Facebook.

Meet the audience on their own turf. Taking this strategic approach will avoid putting time and energy into a social media tool users aren't even attracted to or familiar with. Implementing social media should enhance existing strategies, not draw resources from them.

One way to build on the audience's preferences is to use them to encourage participation. Tom Smith, founder and managing director of Trendstream, found a study reporting that the number of active users reading blogs grew from

54% to 77% globally from 2006 to 2008, while the number who had written a blog grew from 28% to 45%. Offer something to those that participate or join, an extra 5% discount or VIP release of the newest product. Use badges, points, and the like to help vet the quality of participation. Ask questions of substance that will invoke responses.

Audiences are also not homogenous and disembodied. The U.S. government estimates 15% of the population has some sort of disability, a substantial number that can potentially impact the way technical communicators approach audience analysis and deliver content. Audience considerations for social media also need to include a discussion about accessibility, such as captioning of videos or including a CSS adjustment to make the text bigger on a blog.

Step 4: Interact

A key understanding to these tools is they can't just push information. Writers can create daily blog posts, but they also need to engage with the community by responding to users or creating interaction. Social media is social, which means there have to be ways for users to connect with the company and fellow users.

Since users also want to feel invested, they want two-way communication. Users aren't looking for another way to simply hear the company's slogan. Rather, they want to know someone is listening. Farley points out that if you are aware of what's being said, what's being asked, what's being discussed, and what's being desired, then you have the power to adjust your products and services accordingly.

Businesses must understand that pages and sites cannot be created and then left to germinate on their own. Successful sites and pages must be monitored and cultivated daily. New information and responses need to be posted regularly.

Fresh content for social networking sites cannot wait for the executive team sign-off. While it needs to be calculated, content also needs to be timely. Because social media allows users to immediately share experiences, both good and bad, companies need to be prepared to respond to any negative posts quickly and appropriately. Customers and users would rather have an immediate apology, albeit short, than a long-winded response that took days to write and approve. Today's consumers expect immediate attention and superior customer service, whether in person or online. If the company is not ready to relinquish part of the writing process to the author, then it's not ready to launch a social network presence.

According to Maurice Ramirez, customers and users crave genuine interaction. But what does "genuine" mean? Presenting a transparent, authentic version of the company is key to a successful online marketing campaign. Not only should posts be written honestly and reflect the values of the company, but the users should also be true consumers, and not the author, other employees, or volunteers posing as friends or fans. Inauthenticity can leave a darker mark

on the company's reputation than any negative feedback. The one quality all businesses want to convey is honesty.

Step 5: Evaluate and Adjust

Once a company commits to a social media strategy, it will be an ongoing and long-term part of the overall communication goals. To ensure success, social media strategies need to be continuously evaluated and adjusted as the social media landscape changes and the user preferences shift.

There are lots of tools that can help automate (to a degree) and monitor discussion about the organization on the Internet, including Google alerts, posts on Facebook, Tweetdeck, and Google Reader. Be willing to adjust the strategy as needed, after *careful* consideration of all outlets. Consistency is still important, but if the audience is shifting to a new outlet, be open to adjusting the strategy accordingly.

For technical communicators, the idea of usability and bringing users into the process is not new, and for a successful social media strategy, obtaining feedback from users is even more critical. Remember the saying "the customer is always right"? In this case, they truly are. Let the audience do some of the work in guiding the strategy.

Entering the Social Media Conversation

Still wondering how this all fits in to the job duties of the technical communicator? The writer needs to be able to do more than just write strong content. He or she should also be able to help guide the process. These strategies are new for many companies, and many don't have that "Word-of-Mouth Strategist" on the team yet. Knowing how to integrate a meaningful social media strategy can only prove beneficial to the technical writer currently on staff.

Ultimately, social media is all about information, content, and technology—which are strong suits of most technical communicators. Using social media, and using it effectively, means that technical communicators can continue to be integral parts of their organizations. **f**

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