

Social Media and Business:

Incorporating Social Media into a Business' Strategic Communications Plan

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### Abstract

This paper explores why social media should be an important part of Strategic Communications. It discusses various definitions of what social media is, and explains how communication and engagement are the key uses of social media. It also talks about what platforms are available and focuses on the popular ones that businesses should focus on: blogs, social networking sites, and content communities. It goes over how businesses can decide what will work best for them and how to build an audience. This paper discusses the benefits and negatives of having social media in a strategic plan, as well as how it should be used. We will also look at some case studies to show examples of how companies have used social media successfully and unsuccessfully.

### Social Media and Business:

#### Incorporating Social Media into a Business' Strategic Communications Plan

Incorporating social media into a business' Strategic Communications Plan can be intimidating at first. Proper understanding of how social media works as well as social media best practices are necessary for it to be added to a Strategic Communication Plan and for it to be successful. Businesses need to know what social media is, how they can use it to benefit them, what platforms their audiences are on, when it is best to do so, and what information should they be putting out. Any business can begin using social media to help generate interest, form a reputation, and build an identity. While that sounds simple enough, there are a great number of businesses that don't use Social Media correctly to maintain a positive reputation or identity.

### **What is Social Media?**

Only through a common understanding of social media may we, both within the communication discipline and across others, theorize the process and effects of social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Attempting to find a specific definition of exactly what social media is can be tricky. There are a variety of definitions out there on what social media is, and the lack of a common definition can result in making it difficult to come to a shared understanding to guide theory and research (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

However, prior research indicated that to understand how public relations leaders are being affected by social media, it's necessary to examine it and understand it – especially with issues

management and crisis management (Luo, Jiang & Kulemeka, 2015). And that statement has never been more true. In the 2016 Social Media Update done by Pew Research Center, 8 in ten online Americans are on Facebook, one-third of online adults use Instagram, and roughly one-quarter of online adults use Twitter ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)).

So, what exactly is Social Media? Joep Cornelissen, author of *Corporate Communication, A Guide to Theory & Practice*, defines it as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and exchange of user generated content” The term “Web 2.0” on the other hand describes a general ideological and technological shift in use of online technologies (page 260). You can deduce that the two can be merged together as one general definition.

Another definition is simple: web-based platforms which organizations use to communicate with external parties where “they maintain pages on popular public social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace, and they broadcast messages on microblogging sites such as Twitter” (Leonardi, et al, 2013). This simplistic definition is possibly the easiest to understand, although it is limited in truly defining what social media is.

Carr and Hayes have what I consider to be the best definition of Social Media yet: “Social Media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user generated content and the perception of interaction with others” (pg 50). This definition touches on everything that Social Media is about: interaction among others who use the platforms (or engagement,) users who generate the content, and all of it being online.

**The Uses of Social Media.**

There are two major uses for businesses to use Social Media: Communication and Engagement. Let's talk about Communication first. Social Networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are the perfect venues to explore communication as they allow people to broadcast messages to a large audience who then can respond in kind (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Facebook is known to be the place to go for generating conversations, while Twitter is the place for short bursts of information. YouTube is a video sharing platform.

Using these platforms as a sounding ground for new ideas, crisis management, trouble shooting, or even just having a conversation is key to helping build an online reputation and digital presence. It can even help keep the one you already have stay intact.

Here's an example: In a social media study run by Luo, Jiang, and Kulemeka, they discussed how social media helped a university when one of their students disappeared, only to later be found dead near campus. The university relations team created a page on their university website to provide details about the search and the case, then used their social media platforms to urge students, parents, concerned media members, and the media to the site for information. They also created a special discussion forum on their Facebook page to discuss the incident and issues surrounding it like campus security. Because of this transparency and use of social media to help other students grieve and get their questions answered, the campus didn't receive much blame for the death of this student. (pages 179-180)

Engagement is also important. A social medium is inherently social in nature, in that it seeks interaction. However, these interactions don't need to be interpersonal in nature, provided the user feels that there are. In other words, if the user feels there is engagement, then there is engagement (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Sometimes something as simple as liking a post that someone has made on a photo that you post or a tweet that is shared can be enough to show those who are following you that you are involved in their involvement. It's small and insignificant to you but huge to them.

### **What Platforms Are Available For Use?**

Before we step into discussing what platforms are out there for use, let's discuss what Social Mediums there are. While there are a lot of them available, we will only look at the three that are top choices for businesses to include in their strategic plans: Blogs, Social Networking Sites, and Content Communities.

Blogs are a controlled web-based medium that enable an individual or group of individuals to publish information in a diary or journal style (Cornelissen, pg 261). The micro-blog Twitter, which is a social media site to which a user makes short, frequent posts, is the most popular platform used. (Table 1) Younger Americans are more likely to be on Twitter, where some 36% of adults ages 18 – 29 are on the social network, which is triple that of adults 65 and older (Pew Research Center).

Social Networking Sites are sites that allow users to present personal information and create profiles of themselves, and share these with others. This sharing typically leads to the creation of networks and communities of friends and colleagues who interact with each other.

(Cornelissen, pg 263). The most popular of these networking sites is, of course, Facebook with 79% of all internet users (Pew Research Center; Table 2) and over 700,000 businesses (Cornelissen) are on the platform. Other popular social networking sites are Instagram (Table 3) and LinkedIn (Table 4).

Finally, Content Communities are applications through which users share media content. Such media content could include text, photos, videos or PowerPoint presentations (Cornelissen, pg 263). YouTube, which has over a billion users (almost one third of all the people on the internet) and can be navigated in 76 languages, has launched local versions in more than 88 countries (YouTube.com).

### **Deciding What Works for You:**

Figuring out what works best for you and your business takes research; research of your audience as well as of your communication strategy. You need to look at why your audience uses social media sites as well as which ones they use (Popovic, 2016).

We already know that the majority of the people are on the internet, and that they are on social media, now we just have to find out if our audiences are there as well and how to reach them. I always encourage those who are starting out to truly define what their demographic is, then figure out where that demographic falls on the social media scale. In this kind of research, Google is your friend: You can search for a lot of statistics in a quick Google search, including business statistics from major organizations like Forbes.

Once you can determine what your demographic is and your social platforms of choice are, choose only the top three. Many businesses will want to do all of them, but this is one of those

cases where too much of a good thing is truly too much. As Kevin Popovic said “Every social media profile created represents an opportunity to connect and a responsibility to do so respectfully. Social Media can even become a liability if left unattended” (2016).

Once you have launched your pages, spread the word to your employees so that they can find you. Encourage them to like you, and to invite their friends to like you as well. Soon, others will find you and your audience will grow. Make sure you continue to post content daily so that it is fresh when others come to your pages. Engage with those who are on your page, chat with them or like their comments. Now is the time to start building that digital reputation.

Prioritizing your platforms and message will enable you to successfully launch your digital presence with ease.

### **Why add Social Media to the Strategic Plan?**

Now that we have discussed what social media is, let’s talk about why you should add it into your strategic plan. Since most the population are already on the internet, it’s only expected that brands and companies should be there too.

In a relatively short time, marketers have embraced social media marketing for a variety of marketing objectives, especially branding. Brands may utilize social media marketing as an integrated component in marketing campaigns, as an ongoing corporate communications channel. It can also be specifically designed for digital exposure. (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

Social media is also changing the way stakeholders and companies communicate daily, providing opportunities for collaboration, participation, interactivity, and engagement. Social



media platforms create opportunities for organizations to have real conversations with internal and external publics. For stakeholders, social media also brings opportunities because it's easier for them to track companies for unethical communication behaviors (Vasquez and Velez, 2011).

However, there can be some serious negative repercussions if companies start social media platforms and don't keep up with them. Brands can suffer if consumers feel the relationship is one sided or if the brand does something that is not consistent with the consumer's identity (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

There is more. A lot of times it falls back on the company itself. According to one study a "...lack of monitoring of social media content, lack of training and support provided to staff engaged in social media organizations, and a lack of social media strategies in organizations were found..." (Macnamara and Zerfass study, 2012). This can cause unprofessional reactions to situations online and tend to stir up negative reactions, which in turn can cause protests.

Also, found in the study, was a unanimous agreement that both public and private sector organizations should have a social media strategy. They also stated that while policies and guidelines inform who is authorized to speak on what, when and who within organizations, a strategy should include overall objectives (Macnamara and Zerfass study, 2012).

Most importantly, in my opinion, is monitoring social media content which could be considered essential components of tracking and measurement is only patchily undertaken by most organizations per the Macnamara and Zerfass study (2012) and this is a critical mistake. To keep a solid digital presence, one must be consistent in monitoring social media platforms.

If the decision to add social media to one's strategic communication plan is to occur, then the company needs to follow through with the necessary training and staffing to be certain that each platform will thrive.

### **How Should Social Media Be Used?**

First and foremost, businesses should create a social media strategy. Just jumping into the social media world without a plan is fine if you just want to see what's out there, but if you want to try and be competitive with those companies who are out there alongside with you, then it's key to have a strategy.

The first step is to conduct a detailed analysis of the competitive environment, including potential partners. The second is to prepare an honest inventory of the organization's current strengths and weaknesses. The third is the development and evaluation of strategic scenarios that can position the organization relative both to its existing capacities and potentially available niches in the marketplace. Once a strategy is chosen, senior leadership and governing boards are then engaged to obtain their input and approval (Eisenberg, Johnson, Pierson, 2014).

That sounds like a lot, and quite scary. Let's make it a little bit. Here are a few effective ways to promote your content using social media(Content Marketing Forum, Curata.com):

- a. **Be Visual.** Posts, whether they are on Twitter or Facebook, get more engagement when they have photos with them. In fact, Instagram is based solely on photos. Don't hesitate to snap a photo that works well with your post and share them together

- b. **Timing is Everything:** Each platform has a high point; a time frame, even a day, where the users are at a peak. Do a little research and find out when the peak is for the platforms you are on and post during those times.
- c. **But keep posting:** But don't stop posting on off times as well. Especially if there is a crisis or a major announcement. If it's big, they will come.
- d. **Pay to play:** Don't pay for likes, pay for ads. That way, you can get legitimate likes or follows from boosting an ad or a post on your page to people who want to follow you instead of ghosts who aren't real.

Also, strategic success is greatly enhanced when leadership seeks out regular feedback about the impact and adoption of the strategy throughout the organization. Organizations investing in social network analysis are doing so because it provides a way to steer good managers toward better decisions (Eisenberg, Johnson, Pieterston, 2014).

### **Case Studies: Winning at Social Media**

There are many stories out there about businesses being successful with social media. Some of these stories have even made national news and gone viral in major ways. Here, we'll look at some of the more successful social media strategies businesses have used to gain notoriety and fame.

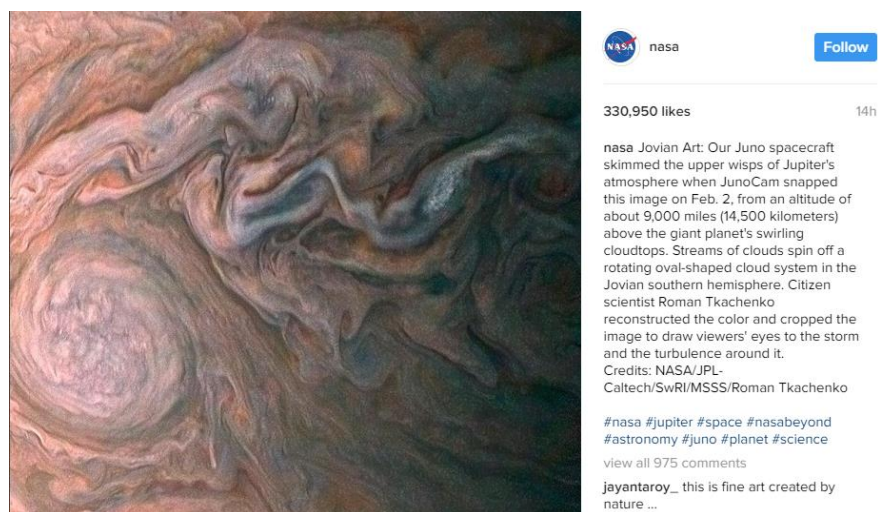
**Touchdown, Oreo.** Anyone who was watching Super Bowl XLVII remembers the infamous black out. During third quarter, a power outage occurred and caused some of the lights to go out for 34 minutes. Oreo took advantage of this and tweeted out a photo with the text "You can still dunk in the dark." (image below)



The tweet went viral, with over 15,000 retweets on Twitter and almost 20,000 likes on Facebook. But how did Oreo do it? According to an interview with Wired.com, Oreo had a 15-person social media team on standby to respond to whatever happened online in response to the Super Bowl because of an ad they had running during the first quarter of the game. Since they already happened to be on hand when the lights went out, they took advantage of it and put out the photo about eating cookies in the dark and won the internet. Years later, people are still talking about that post.

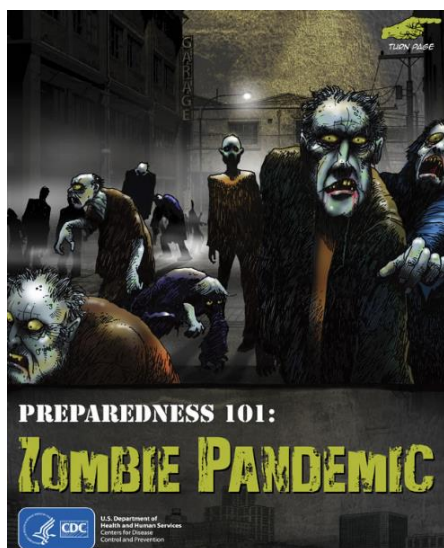
**NASA Dominates Social Media.** Whether it's Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, NASA is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to being social. In an article published by Wired.com, John Yembrick, the NASA Social Media Manager, says there are over 500 social media accounts across the agency – from astronauts to rovers to entire laboratories. NASA has won awards for its social media, it's that good.

NASA posts photos from space and from Earth and takes the time to educate the public who are choosing to follow them online in a way that is fun and entertaining. Take this Instagram post about Jupiter for example. It's a beautiful photo and the description is in a way that allows everyone to understand it.



But NASA goes one step further with their social media. When Prince died, they shared a photo of a purple nebula in honor of him. Commander Scott Kelly of the International Space Station shares selfies of his space walks and in his helmet, you can see the reflection of the equipment he is using. When NASA launched its Juno mission to Jupiter, it launched a Twitter account and tweeted in first person, which caught the attention of the younger crowd (Engadget.com). NASA is doing social media right, and it shows every time they launch a new account.

**Beware of Zombies.** The Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is responsible for ensuring public health. To engage new audiences, the CDC decided to try their hand at preparing for a Zombie Apocalypse. In May 2011, they posted a blog on their site called “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse” which outlined how one would prepare to take on the undead and survive. The idea was “If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse, you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack” (Fraustino and Ma, 2015)



The blog went viral. Within 10 minutes of the initial publication, more than 30,000 people flooded the blog site, causing it to crash. Over the next three days, they experienced 60,000+ views per hour, and that was just on the blog site. Soon, the CDC started posting some of this information on their social media sites and that soon went viral. Information about how to prepare for disasters, make an emergency kit,

how to create an emergency plan, and where to find additional information. The campaign ended up being a huge success.

### Case Studies: Losing at Social Media

Unfortunately, for every win there seems to be a miss at social media out there. Many of these happen because of lack of understanding on how social media works or lack of research. Let's look at some of the biggest fails at social media here.

**The Shame Game.** When Self Magazine reached out to runner Monika Allen for permission to use one of her running photos in an upcoming issue, she was excited to say yes and participate. But what she didn't know was that her photo was going to be used for their "BS Meter." Feeling angry and frustrated, Monika took to Facebook to voice her frustrations on her page. That spurred on a lot of people to go to Self Magazine's Facebook page and voice their complaints on how Self should have done their research better and learned more about Monika before running the photo.

Self Magazine's social media people didn't respond to any of the comments for over 12 hours. When they finally did respond, the damage had been done: their followers had plummeted, every post they had shared in the past 10 days was flooded with



negative comments on how Self shames people, and their magazine subscriptions dropped.

**Dude, It's Beef.** For the better part of two decades, it was a beef by-product that was nothing more than a mild-mannered staple in fast food hamburgers, tacos for school lunches, and ground beef in supermarket freezers. But it was in an email that got leaked to the New York Times that the name changed to 'pink slime' and one tweet with that name ruined this product for the beef business.

It started when celebrity chef Jamie Oliver did an episode about this by-product on his show. He demonstrated how the by-product was produced and added to the meat, which by the way has not had any food safety issues or concerns to date. This episode triggered a blogger to launch a petition to remove this 'pink slime' from school lunches, and after nine days the petition was successful. Oliver then tweeted the petition out to over 2 million of his Twitter followers. Chaos then ensued.

The American Meat Institute estimates that if the lean finely textured beef was to be removed, it would take another 1.5 million cattle per year to offset the loss. And despite many people stepping forward to back the beef industry, they suffered tremendously. People learned more about 'pink slime' and stopped eating beef. And it all started with a tweet.

**#myNYPD Faux Pas.** The Social Media Team for the New York Police Department (NYPD) meant well when they posted a request for photos of New Yorkers and police officers, but what they got in return was far from what they expected.

The #NYPD will also help you de-tangle your hair. #myNYPD pic.twitter.com/nrngQ1bOWv

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Instead of smiles and hugs, NYPD was flooded with images of officers making arrests, fighting with citizens, and in some instances wielding their weapons. The photos came from citizens as well as anonymous accounts like Occupy Wall Street.

No matter how much NYPD tried to spin this situation into something positive by saying police work isn't pretty, the damage to their reputation had already been done. NYPD used a hashtag which is easily searchable with just one click, and because of open record laws, these images are now unable to be deleted. Even now, a quick search on Twitter will show a lot of the same thing.

## Conclusion

When used correctly, Social Media can do wonders for a business's reputation. As long as a business takes the time to employ social media practitioners who are educated and trained to monitor and run the platforms, use it correctly and put in the effort necessary for a strong social media campaign, a successful digital presence will be easily achieved. It is these social media practitioners who are going to be able to help rebuild a reputation after a crisis, or keep a positive image during one, in the digital realm ... as well as prevent one from occurring there. Adding social media to a strategic communications plan should be something every business should seriously consider.



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Table 1  
Twitter Growth Chart

**24% of online adults (21% of all Americans) use Twitter**

*% of online adults who use Twitter*

All online adults	24%
Men	24
Women	25
18-29	36
30-49	23
50-64	21
65+	10
High school degree or less	20
Some college	25
College+	29
Less than \$30K/year	23
\$30K-\$49,999	18
\$50K-\$74,999	28
\$75,000+	30
Urban	26
Suburban	24
Rural	24

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.  
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.  
"Social Media Update 2016"

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Table 2  
Facebook Growth Chart

**79% of online adults (68% of all Americans) use Facebook**

*% of online adults who use Facebook*

All online adults	79%
Men	75
Women	83
18-29	88
30-49	84
50-64	72
65+	62
High school degree or less	77
Some college	82
College+	79
Less than \$30K/year	84
\$30K-\$49,999	80
\$50K-\$74,999	75
\$75,000+	77
Urban	81
Suburban	77
Rural	81

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.  
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.  
"Social Media Update 2016"

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Table 3  
Instagram Growth Chart

**32% of online adults (28% of all Americans) use Instagram**

*% of online adults who use Instagram*

All online adults	32%
Men	26
Women	38
18-29	59
30-49	33
50-64	18
65+	8
High school or less	27
Some college	37
College+	33
Less than \$30K/year	38
\$30K-\$49,999	32
\$50K-\$74,999	32
\$75,000+	31
Urban	39
Suburban	28
Rural	31

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.  
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.  
"Social Media Update 2016"

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Table 4  
LinkedIn Growth Chart

**29% of online adults (25% of all Americans) use LinkedIn**

*% of online adults who use LinkedIn*

All online adults	29%
Men	31
Women	27
18-29	34
30-49	33
50-64	24
65+	20
High school degree or less	12
Some college	27
College+	50
Less than \$30K/year	21
\$30K-\$49,999	13
\$50K-\$74,999	32
\$75,000+	45
Urban	34
Suburban	30
Rural	18
Employed	35
Not employed*	17

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.  
\*Not employed includes those who are retired, not employed for pay, disabled or students.  
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.  
"Social Media Update 2016"

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