

CHAPTER 5

Social Media and Text Messages

Social media has become a part of our daily lives. Although the phenomenon began with individuals, it didn't take long for organizations to figure out that this new platform provided another avenue of communication. In fact, the two-way conversation that lies at the heart of social networking has become such an integral part of an organization's presence that it has created an entire new job classification: social media manager.

Writing for social media contexts—social networking and video sharing sites, blogs, wikis, chat rooms—requires skill and careful, consistent management. This chapter will focus on the most common types of writing found in social networking: blogs, microblogs, and social networking sites. Before we begin, however, let's discuss how and why social media works.

Today's online audiences have come to expect that their opinions and voices be heard and acknowledged. No longer willing to absorb an organization's message passively, online audiences demand that an organization engage *with* them. Part of that engagement is conducted via the organization's social media presence on social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where consumers can post their reactions, comments, or opinions, and in blogs and microblogs, which try to garner large followings to promote a brand or awareness.

Large enterprises and small businesses alike have jumped on the social media bandwagon. Intel, a leader in social media use, has an extensive online presence that encourages managers, vendors, and others in the organization who have completed social media training to engage with stakeholders. Intel has an entire division devoted to managing its online presence, which it uses to build brand loyalty.

Small businesses and groups have also adopted social media in increasing numbers. For those with limited public relations and advertising

budgets, social networking provides an excellent way to build a brand or increase a customer base. By connecting and engaging with stakeholders, small businesses, nonprofits, and other groups extend their reach in ways that were unheard of just a few years ago.

Social Media Audience Analysis

Social media has three main audiences: customers and clients, employees, and the media.

Customers and Clients

Current or potential customers and clients are a primary audience for social networking sites, blogs, and microblogs. People interested in an organization, a product, an issue, or a person form the target audience for much of social media. These readers are a niche audience actively looking for information and for engagement.

To best reach an organization's current and potential customers or clients, potential readers should be well defined. As with all writing tasks, writing for social media will be most effective if the content fits the needs and wants of the target audience. A good way to create a more intimate and successful relationship with your social media audience is to create one or several *personas* for these messages. A persona is a profile or an invented biography of a typical user or reader based on real audience analysis and data. For example, a university might create several personas as targets for social networking that could include newer alumni, older alumni, prospective students, or parents. Each persona has specific needs that could be targeted in the posts.

It's also a good idea to monitor the activity of your competitors' social media to understand your audience. By watching the discourse between a competitor and its audience, you may gain important feedback that will influence your own communication.

Employees

Large organizations use social media internally to provide spaces for colleagues to share knowledge. These in-house channels of communication

have become extremely useful ways to connect coworkers, especially in organizations with multiple locations. Internal social media is often unavailable to outsiders.

Media

The traditional media is another audience for an organization's social media. News editors and writers comb the web in search of ideas for stories, interesting people, and news about organizations. Social media conversations provide the media with fodder for good copy, thereby allowing an organization to reach an otherwise fickle audience. And for unknown organizations, using free networking can be a way to attract the media's attention. By following a social media community's comments about a product or an organization, the traditional media can pick up on a new trend and write about it. In the eyes of the media, simply having an audience validates an organization or its product.

Social Media Guidelines

Because social media encourages conversations with almost anyone, those conversations can devolve into a free for all with the potential to do a lot of damage to an organization. For this reason, many groups adopt social media guidelines. Intel was one of the first multinational organizations to do so and has made those guidelines available to the public.¹ They remain an excellent source for any group that wants to create rules for its own social media presence.

Intel's "Social Media Guidelines" have three main principles: *disclose*, *protect*, and *use common sense*. *Disclose* refers to being transparent and writing in the first person—Intel requires anyone using social media on its behalf to identify himself or herself as an Intel employee. Furthermore, disclosure involves being upfront about having a vested interest in the topic. Lastly, disclosure includes talking to readers as if the conversation were face to face, using a friendly tone that avoids sounding pedantic. The final element of the disclose principle urges authors to write about their area of expertise only.

Protect means that no employee may violate confidentiality or legal guidelines. It serves to remind an organization's social media authors that

writing online means writing on the record. This portion of the Intel's guidelines also bars slamming the competition and urges writers to be judicious about what they share.

Using common sense includes three points, the first of which is that social media must add value rather than take up space. This principle includes the idea that once authors have started an engagement, they must stay engaged, that is, not drop the ball. The final principle guiding Intel's social media use includes keeping a cool head and being careful and considerate. It also declares that mistakes should be admitted.

If your organization uses social media, you should create clear guidelines for all involved.

Blogs and Microblogs

Blogs and microblogs work hand in hand. Often a microblog announces the presence of a blog, which contains the meat of the message. Here we'll discuss the purpose and content of composing in these media.

Blogs

Blogs—short for *web logs*—are actually websites with individual posts archived by date in reverse chronological order. Blog posts tend to be articles, reviews, white papers, or recommendations, but almost all have a bias or voice the author's opinion. Because blogs are so plentiful, they must contain relevant information that appeals to readers and invites an interactive experience. Therefore part of each message usually includes a link to video clips, photographs, other blogs, websites, or an invitation to post comments. Blogs differ from a website in that they are dynamic and change frequently.

Many blogs are the work of one author. However, it is not unusual for a blog to have multiple contributors, thus keeping the content voice fresh. News entities, corporations, government agencies, and individuals all produce blogs.

The media is a major player in the blogosphere. Established media like *The New York Times* and *Fortune* magazine, for example, have blogs whose content is written by a staff writer or a contributor with expertise

on a topic. For example, a reporter who covers medicine for *The New York Times* may also contribute blog posts on medical-related topics. The articles differ from the blog posts, which are less formal, contain the writer's opinion, and offer a link to a source. The news story published in the newspaper will be written in a more objective tone and may attribute a source but will not link directly to that source.

Organizations use blogs to communicate directly with consumers by offering useful, consistent, and interesting updates. Interactive blogs can be highly effective channels of communication that produce a lot of bang for a relatively low cost. When consumers sign up to follow a blog, for example, they may share that information with their own network of friends. By doing so, the number of people exposed to the information can expand exponentially. It is this characteristic that makes blogs so popular with organizations.

Individuals are responsible for a huge number of blogs. Some are read by a handful of friends and family; others end up creating new careers for the authors. Julie Powell's blogs about her cooking experiences of every recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* lead to a book and a movie, *Julie and Julia*. Before that Powell was a typical 20-something New Yorker.

Blogs frequently use RSS technology (*Rich Site Summary*, also dubbed as *Really Simple Syndication*), which allows followers to keep track of a website. An RSS feed is a software application that aggregates syndicated content. When an author syndicates content, readers may sign up to follow those headlines, posts, or updates. Since a blog's goal is often to accrue followers who sign up to follow it, blog writers incorporate searchable words and terms into the copy.

Characteristics of Blog Writing for the Workplace

Blogs written for business, government, or nonprofit organizations can take many shapes. Many if not most are written using the *inverted pyramid organizational style*. That is they begin with a paragraph that summarizes the main point. All details supporting that point are then arranged in descending order of importance and contain the 5Ws and 1H of journalism: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Figure 5.1 illustrates the inverted pyramid organizational style.

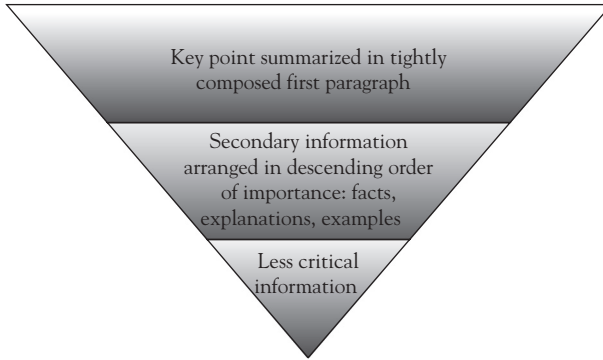


Figure 5.1 *Inverted pyramid organizational style*

Some blogs are written in a style that humanizes the dialogue between a company and its stakeholders. Consequently, the writing voice is more casual. In fact, some blogs read like a conversation with someone who has a distinctive voice. To capture that voice, using graphical elements (such as underlining, italics, or dashes) or turns of phrase that helps the blog sound like a conversation is not just allowed—it's expected. Look at the use of first person and casual language in this paragraph from Kevin Smith's post on *Business Insider's* blog:

Over the weekend at the SXSW Interactive conference in Austin, I had the opportunity to briefly try on Google's next-generation gadget, Google Glass. The experience was interesting, to say the least The current design is dorky, but hopefully before they ship, Google can make Glass sleeker and not so noticeable.²

Organizations use blogs to promote themselves or their brands. However, experts advise against the temptation to try to sell to readers or sound overly promotional.³ Notices of sweepstakes, coupons, special offers, or contests should comprise no more than 10 percent of what the audience sees. Instead, the organization should focus on informative content, engaging conversation, links, and infographics.

Blog post content falls into several broad types, as follows:

1. Narrative: Tells a story or provides an analogy to engage readers while explaining a concept or complex process.

2. Interviews: Transcribes or summarizes points from an interview with an expert on a topic.
3. Events: Describes an event the organization participated in or hosted.
4. Informational: Discusses a relevant topic to the audience.

The screenshot in Figure 5.2 shows a post from one of the National Institute of Health's (NIH) blogs and is a good example of an informational article. You can read the entire post at the Community Health Maps website.⁴ <http://communityhealthmaps.nlm.nih.gov/2014/06/30/how-accurate-is-the-gps-on-my-smartphone/>



Figure 5.2 Information blog post

Source: Community Health Maps.com⁵

Before jumping in and writing a blog, spend some time observing the online community's conventions. Look for commonly used acronyms, jargon, and stylistic elements such as tone and language use. If you're going to become a member of a group, you don't want to stick out—you want to fit in.

Consider including the elements listed in Table 5.1 when you write a blog.

Table 5.1 Characteristics of blogs

Catchy, intriguing headlines
Keywords that contain blog's main idea; searchable words for Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
Graphical devices such as <i>italics</i> , dashes (—), and punctuation marks (!) for emphasis or to emulate a real conversation
Length of 300 to 400 words or more divided into paragraphs
Time and date stamp
Short sentences that avoid long introductory phrases or dependent clauses
One-sentence paragraphs or very short paragraphs
Questions
Blogrolls or hyperlinks of lists to other blogs
Casual tone with relaxed adherence to conventional grammar (but no glaring errors that would poorly reflect on professionalism)
Tags, keyword identification
Careful balance of information-share and self-promotion
Brief author bio and photo or other way to identify author
Artwork or some sort of graphic for visual interest

Microblogs

Microblogs are shorter than traditional blogs. They may be published using technologies other than the web-based methods, including text messaging, instant messaging, e-mail, or digital audio. Among the most notable microblog services are Twitter and Tumblr.

The popular Twitter microblogs called *tweets* are limited in length to 140 characters. With more than 270 million monthly users, Twitter has become increasingly popular with organizations as a way to reach a network instantly, thus creating word-of-mouth publicity. Social networks allow a message to be viewed instantly by thousands and thousands of readers, making the posts invaluable.

Tweeting has become commonplace at many organizations. Recently CEOs at Yahoo and Sun Microsystems tweeted notice of their firing, shooting out the message to their large networks in the time it took to type a few words. Smaller businesses, however, have mixed reactions about

the effectiveness of tweets, perhaps because of the time factor involved in constant tweeting.⁶

There is no question, however, that Twitter fuels our celebrity culture. From Justin Bieber to President Barack Obama, celebrities dominate the TweetoSphere. In the summer of 2012, comedian Louis C.K. tweeted his followers about a relatively unknown comic, Tig Notaro. After the tweet, Notaro achieved instant celebrity status. So it is clear that tweeting can harness enormous power if a network is wide enough—and if the content is noteworthy.

Characteristics of Microblogs

Microblogs help an organization create an online presence. Those who follow a Twitter account, for example, are interested in a particular subject, and therefore, anticipate tweets as a way of keeping posted and up to the minute. The way people follow topics is through a unique characteristic of microblogs called *hashtags*, a word or phrase preceded by the # symbol that marks a topic by use of keywords. Hashtags make microblogs searchable and create the phenomenon known as *trending*. When a topic catches on and grabs the attention of many followers in a short time, that topic is said to be trending.

But because tweets are limited by length, they share certain characteristics, listed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 *Characteristics of microblogs*

No headline
Profile picture or company logo or photo of an individual's face or a product, subject to change if one doesn't produce results
Questions to prompt engagement
Length of up to 140 characters or roughly 12 words
Truncated language that omits articles (<i>a, an, the</i>) and abbreviations
Link to a recommended URL using a URL shortener such as bitly
Content containing response to another tweet, a recommendation, or link to an item of interest
Hashtags relevant to the topic
Punctuation marks "!" and "?"
Writing style similar to news headlines

Social Networking Sites

Another social media tool that has gained popularity among businesses is a social network page, with Facebook being the current favorite. Social networking sites should be considered complementary to an organization's online identity, not a replacement for it. Some consider the sites to be information gathering tools to measure marketing efforts rather than messaging tools—Facebook, for example, offers organizations considerable tools to measure involvement. We'll discuss two dominant social networking sites in the following sections.

Facebook

Facebook pages allow organizations to supplement their online presence by engendering interactivity among *fans* or readers. Organizations use this free new media to keep a community engaged as well as to drive traffic to their websites.

Facebook pages help brand an organization and are yet another way to communicate with stakeholders. They mirror blogs and tweets in that they, too, are conversational, interactive, and provide pertinent information to readers. Groups manage their Facebook pages by regularly updating wall posts written for *news feed optimization*. Essentially this means that the content encourages fans to *like* or post comments. The more *likes* a posting receives, the more probable it is that Facebook's algorithm will pick up the post and put it in a news feed. When that happens, more readers will receive the post, theoretically increasing the audience. Comments or likes posted on Facebook pages also help an organization gauge what's going right—or wrong! For example, Dr. Pepper Snapple Group learned that its Facebook followers preferred edgy one-liners instead of special offers and prices as a result of issuing the message on its Facebook page.⁷

When composing an organization's Facebook page, writers should employ the language used on all social media and corporate communications for branding purposes and to stay on message. Notice how this small business posts information on its Facebook page in the screenshot shown in Figure 5.3.

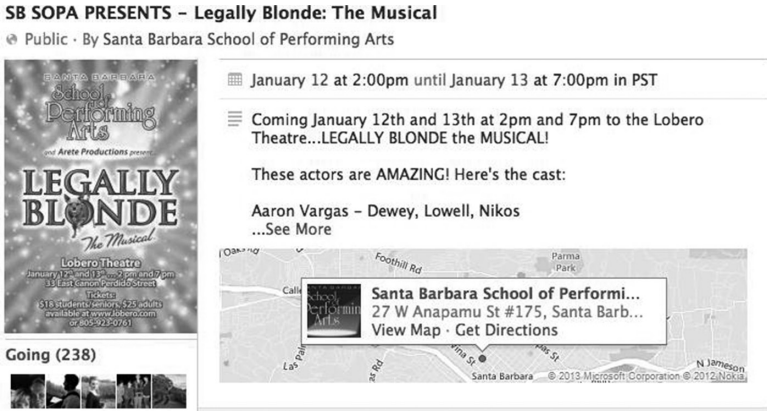


Figure 5.3 Santa Barbara School of Performing Arts Facebook page

LinkedIn

Considered the best social networking site for attracting employees, LinkedIn company pages connect a business with the millions of people who have profiles on the professional networking site. LinkedIn company pages allow an organization to post company news, business opportunities, and job openings. Such pages can provide job seekers with a look inside an organization so they can better evaluate whether their skills fit with the organization’s culture and needs.

Integrate the characteristics listed in Table 5.3 when writing status updates.

Table 5.3 Characteristics of LinkedIn status update

Wording consistent with other organizational messages for branding
Messages relevant and posted on a regular basis
Tone that is conversational, wording is concise
Links, images, and videos that are embedded
Updates sent at the beginning or end of a regular business day

Conclusion

Social media has become essential for an organization’s online presence. Organizations using all social media must track postings, respond to

Copyright © 2015. Business Expert Press. All rights reserved.

inquiries, delete damaging or inflammatory comments, and post regularly, making its management time consuming. Writing clearly with the organization's goals and values in mind is important to all social media messages. The employee adept at using social media will be a valuable member of any organization.