

Social Media and Social Networking Starting Points

By Chris Brogan...



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By [Chris Brogan...](#)

Organizations have a lot to consider once they decide they want to jump into social networks and social media. There are many opportunities to slide off the rails, or worse, to let the effort fall into disarray. Here are some thoughts based on a question I received recently in email about guidelines, a toolbox, and how to grow a community.

Start With the Intent

First, know what the intent of your social media and networks will be. Are you hoping to improve awareness and open communication about your organization? Are you looking to reach new markets and open channels for sales or membership or market adoption? Are you hoping to use these tools as collaboration platforms? Are you making informational products? Are you just virtualizing your water cooler?

Knowing your intent drives which path you take.

Treat Your Community Like Adults

Companies and organizations are most worried about how blogs and podcasts and wikis will be used. The truth is, most employee code of conduct policies cover this related to email use. It's not much different. Don't add another thousand rules as to what should go on within the social networks, except insofar as what differences come with the medium. For example, don't bury people in what not to say. If you're a publicly traded company, let them add a disclaimer to the blog (strictly my opinions), remind them about the email policy, and let it go.

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A Sample Blogging Policy

If I were launching a social media program at a company, I'd hold a quick meeting in person. I'd mention the following:

- We're opening up blogging to the organization. Every one here is now invited to use our new blogging platform. Why do this? Because we think you're creative, intelligent people, and we want to give you a chance to share your ideas with a larger audience, inside and outside the organization.
- As this is public, just remember that we can't talk about company secrets, upcoming projects that aren't yet public, or anything that could impact our company's stock value.
- Within reason, you can say what you will about our publicly released products and services. If you're critical of something, recommend solutions. Offer examples of improvements. We'd prefer it to be constructive. Use your judgment.
- When posting pictures or movies or music, understand that some materials may be copyrighted. For instance, just because you can see a picture on a Google Image Search or find it in Flickr, that doesn't mean you have rights to post it on your blog. We'll talk more about [Creative Commons](#) and some other resources later.
- It's fine to post "off-topic." We don't expect every single post to be about the organization. We hope you'll talk about us from time to time, as our goal is showing our customers, vendors, and other stakeholders, as well as the community at large, that *you* are what makes our company amazing.
- Mentioning our competitors is fine. The world doesn't revolve around us (okay, we pretend it does!), and we know that some people do some aspects of what we do better. Don't rub our noses in it, but we get it.
- Deleting blog posts is considered bad etiquette on the web. We won't do it here, unless something violates our privacy policies, and/or our ethics policies. Posting hotties probably won't fly, but the occasional cute picture of your cat in a cowboy hat is okay. You're a real human, not a robot.
- Did we mention it'd be cool if you talked about us once in a while? Great!
- It's considered good etiquette to link to other great posts you read, and to comment on other blogs written by people you admire or want to engage in conversation.
- As for how often or how much is too much, and things like that, around here, we measure you on your results at your primary function. If your work starts suffering on your way to the A list of bloggers, we'll have to adjust your expectations a little bit. Otherwise, use your judgment.

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Elements of Your Social Media Platform

People are selling all kinds of technology for blogging. Even when there are [plenty of free](#) and [open source](#) platforms out there. Even [simple hosted](#) opportunities abound. Beyond that, there are some [great new collaborative](#) products, and TONS of content management software companies out there making all flavor of solution. So, instead of recommending any specific platform, I'll point out some things to consider:

- Operating environments vary: several content systems work on Linux platforms, using solely open source, and others are built for a Windows environment. If you're building the system in-house, consider what your IT team will be comfortable supporting. Or, bypass both camps entirely and build on a hosted environment out on the web, but this is a consideration.
- Related to the last point, the more arcane or unknown the system, the less likely it will be for you to find support, should the vendor and you fall out of love. Be wary of that.
- The content system should feature RSS feed support. This means that all the content can be exported via a specific protocol that allows people to view it in a reader or other application of their choice, and not just at the website as a destination. (For me, systems that don't support RSS are a show-stopper. You might have a different opinion).
- The ability to post in a simple visual manner (that would feel like using a tool like Microsoft Word) as well as the ability to post in HTML format is useful. I like writing in HTML, but others might prefer the comfort of the WYSIWYG tools.
- Media support is fairly standard these days, but should be considered. In a world where YouTube isn't just skateboarding dogs any more, the ability to embed Flash video, as well as the ability to post MP3 and MOV files (amongst other types) would be important.
- Video has lots of added challenges. I strongly recommend a 3rd party hosting platform, and then embedding a player instead of integrating to your platform. Yes, there are great platforms working inside the firewall, and there are some easy add-on video solutions, but if you're going to go heavy into video and aren't a production or media company, that's a part that's probably best outsourced.
- Is mobile a priority? There are applications like [Utterz](#) and [Tumblr](#) and more who allow for mobile posting. Integrating input from more than one source would thereby also be important and of interest. Pay attention to how easy it is to import feeds and post into your media platform. This is one limitation that can be somewhat vexing later on.
- Backing up, exporting, importing, and some administrative functions are important to consider, if you're going to put any serious data and effort

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into the platform. For example, I do full backups of the data on [chrisbrogan.com] every week, regardless of the fact that it's posted on a hosting system.

- Customization is important. If you can't make the platform look and feel like the rest of your presence, what's the point? Most systems accommodate for this rather well, permitting CSS (Cascading Style Sheet) support and other features, but make sure.
- Beyond this, there are lots of "your mileage may vary" opinions, but this should be a good start.

Keeping a Community Alive and Growing It

I saved the hardest part for last. In that old Kevin Costner movie, Field of Dreams, the tagline/hook of the movie was a ghostly voice in the cornfields saying, "If you build it, they will come." Nothing is farther from the truth.

People's attention spans are frayed to their very edges. Work stresses are equally ramped up. The "shiny new thing" quotient on the web is at its highest right now. So the odds of making a full, fat, rich robust community that swells into the hundreds of thousands overnight is fairly slim. For every "overnight" success like Club Penguin for kids or Facebook for everyone else, there are tons of digital ghost towns out there. I'm not about to say that I know what the secret ingredient is, because if I did, I'd make my own network, and get Microsoft and Google to bid me up to the billions and retire to Newfoundland.

Here, instead, are some thoughts.

- Communities that have "something to do" do better. Want an example? Amazon. You can go there and review books, write comments, build wikis, and do a million other things around products you love. Another? Flickr. Go there and look at other people's photos, join groups, tag and comment and make notes. Facebook? You could get lost in all the time wasting applications, or get deeply involved in all the groups there. Make sure there's something to do.
- Go outside the borders often. New communities grow by gently encouraging new immigrants. For example, if you're active on Twitter, you can occasionally point to posts on your new community. Not always. That gets boring quick. You can comment on other blogs that are similar to your group's intent, and where you populate your URL (in most blogs, you enter your name, email, and URL). Folks click on the URL of comments that seem interesting. (Don't spam!)
- Encourage more than you stifle. You want to see a community turn on their keepers? When sites go astray of their community-minded goals,

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bad things happen. Look at [what happened](#) when social news site [Digg](#) changed their algorithm a bit. It wasn't pretty. So be wary of how you interact with the community.

- Make it worth it for the community. If you're going to build a place for people to collaborate and share ideas and build content, be on the lookout for ways to give something to your community for their efforts.
- Administrators are not community managers. Community managers exist out there who know all the great ways to engage people. [Connie Bensen](#), [Jake McKee](#), [Jeremiah Owyang](#), and a host of other great people are community types to their very bones. They know how to energize a community. Seek out a community manager to run the environment, and make it their primary role. This is worth TONS in the long run.

Other People's Networks

Here is one consideration for when to build your own social network and when to use existing social networks: whether you have an abundance of community around your organization already vs. if you are seeking to grow a community. If it's A, then build a social network. If you're looking to grow from nothing, consider starting in B (other people's social networks).

I use both for my own interests. I think it's important to be part of the community at large, and so I participate on Twitter, to a lesser extent on Facebook, and then in a variety of other places. My personal method is to focus on the people, not the platform, meaning that I'm not on Facebook because it's Facebook. I'm there because some of my friends and business colleagues are there. That's a popular [Eric Rice](#) warning to social networks, too. He goes where his crowd is, not just to the new and shiny thing.

For you, it's mostly a question of whether you have the community in place and are looking for a targeted place within your platform to offer them tools and resources to connect and cross-communicate. One of the current best-of-breed examples of this is [FastCompany.com](#), who turned their online property into a social network around their magazine's points of business, instead of a rehash of their magazine. Points go to [USAToday.com](#) for their effort, too.

Is there a hybrid model? I think so. You can perhaps build a network and understand that it might be slow to grow, and then grow your community by participating in "outpost" areas like Facebook or Twitter or the other two billion networks that are out there.

People are the Core

At the core of this are people. Everything that has come before this doesn't work a lick until you understand the people you intend to reach, the people you hope will contribute, and the people who will share their time with you on all angles. If, for instance, you start a blogging platform at work, and then complain that people are using it, they won't use it. If you build a social network dedicated to talking about how great your company or products are, that will get old really fast.

Do you know humankind's greatest need? The need to feel wanted. If you consider the incentives behind most people's actions in a given day (especially mean people), what's at the core of it is to feel that they're doing something important, interesting, and worthwhile. That has to be at the center of your motivations and perspective if you're launching a project like this. Make it worth it for the people, and they will participate.

Now, Just Start

Analysis paralysis is a terrible thing. Just try something. Even if you launch a really small part of your project's intentions, now is the right time to try. What's holding you back?

If you want advice, or to customize this information for your organization, I'm always available to talk more. Email me at blog at chrisbrogan dot com, or just stop by [\[chrisbrogan.com\]](http://chrisbrogan.com) and leave a comment with a way to reach you. I'm always happy to help.

Chris Brogan advises businesses, organizations and individuals on how to use social media and social networks to build relationships and deliver value. He is VP of Strategy and Technology at [CrossTech Media](http://CrossTechMedia.com), and co-founder of [PodCamp](http://PodCamp.com). He blogs at [\[chrisbrogan.com\]](http://chrisbrogan.com).

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