



# Doing social media — some fundamental principles

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- Effective participation in social media requires engagement with the community on its own terms
- Encourage community self-moderation to avoid it becoming dependent on the presence of a moderator

**Facebook has clocked up some 400 million registered users worldwide; Twitter has just reached the 100 million mark. Within these communities, Australians appear to be particularly active: we lead the world by spending nearly eight hours per month using social media. These figures highlight the fact that for most businesses, social media are now important for engaging with customers.**

Sadly, though, many of them have yet to understand the ground rules of this new space: a user-driven environment into which a corporate presence is accepted only if it leaves its mass communication approaches by the door. Simply issuing press releases using Twitter and Facebook, for example, will generate an instant backlash; conventional marketing models are out, and direct engagement with customers is in. Similarly — and many newspapers get this wrong — simply attaching a commenting function to online articles without providing the tools for users to develop a persistent personal online presence (and on that basis, a lasting sense of community) only encourages hit-and-run commenting that will quickly discourage meaningful discussion.

What these simplistic attempts to ‘do’ social media fail to recognise is the crucial role that community plays in these environments — and that in spaces like Facebook and Twitter, multiple overlapping communities, formed around shared interests and attitudes, already exist. A corporate account which

merely broadcasts PR messages, without engaging with the community it attempts to address, is about as popular as the obnoxious person at a barbecue recruiting people for a new real estate scheme while other are trying to have real conversations.

At the same time, users participating in social media on behalf of their companies can join — even become leading members of — social media communities; the ABC’s Managing Director Mark Scott (@abcmarkscott) and *The Guardian*’s editor Alan Rusbridger (@arusbridger) have both done so on Twitter, for example. But they must play by the community rules, and to participate as people, not simply as corporate representatives.

## Genuine community involvement

Where such engagement is successful, however, this also helps the organisation: the community which may form around a social media presence can become a valuable source of information and feedback, and it may also help spread positive messages about the company (or dispel negative ones). Treated well — and assuming there are no real problems with the company’s products, of course — the community becomes a key ally in its public relations efforts.

Corporate engagement with social media takes place across two major spaces: it ranges from a connection with social media users where they are already present (on Facebook, Twitter, and in a variety of smaller sites) to the development of online platforms operated by the company itself, and attached to the corporate website.

The former addresses a more general community, while the latter is more likely to connect with the company’s dedicated followers — and a combined engagement strategy operating across both in-house and third-party social media helps separate committed from casual users, and enables the

organisation to address different user groups in different ways, while also encouraging casual followers to become more committed.

To develop a positive relationship with social media communities across these spaces, organisations and their representatives engaging in social media must adhere to a number of core principles.

## 1. Be open

'Open' has two chief meanings: first, both as social media communities expand and develop, and once they have reached a certain maturity, it is necessary to maintain a constant influx of new contributors. These contributors add diversity to the community, and may offer new ideas and impulses for existing discussions and processes. They replace existing users as they drop out of the community through natural churn. Under the right circumstances, the result is a process of continued, gradual development, and of knowledge transfer from older to newer community members.

Social media communities are stable if the influx of new and disappearance of old users are in reasonable balance — avoiding both the disappearance of substantial parts of the community without replacement, and the influx of large numbers of new users without being adequately socialised. It is the community — not corporate operators acting either through personal intervention or through rules and guidelines — which is best placed to show new members the ropes and channel energy towards the most productive participation. The more embedded in the community users become, the harder it is for them to act against community interests without a loss of standing. For this reason, many comments threads on YouTube and on news websites remain unruly; in the absence of a strong and stable community of users, there are few consequences for behaving disruptively.

Second, 'be open' also means being clear about the organisation's interests, and aiming for transparency in dealing with community members and providing information. Users should never be in doubt about whether statements from a corporate or semi-corporate account are made in a personal or professional capacity; they should be kept informed about internal developments (such as upcoming products or changes to existing services) well in advance wherever possible, so they can spread the word and generate interest. Their comments and criticisms need to be addressed speedily.

Importantly, this also includes responding humbly to problems (or perceived problems) as they are raised in social media, there is no place for corporate pride. Whatever the issue, the only feasible response to criticism is to acknowledge the problem, apologise, and outline how it will be dealt with; Queenslanders will recognise this as the Peter Beattie approach to political damage control, and will recall how effectively it prevented long-term impact on the Labor brand.

## 2. Seed community processes

Functioning communities rapidly develop social structures which can become elaborate. Controversy may accompany these developments as some community members rise in standing while others' decline; this process becomes a struggle to define the community's aims and values. Not only should it be allowed to run its course, it should be supported through the provision of tools which communities can use to organise from the means to demonstrate personal achievement and community contribution through the tools to facilitate interaction and self-organisation, to systems for acknowledging individual users' status. This is particularly important for an organisation's in-house social media spaces.

An organisation's representatives should model desirable behaviour, and act as community animators, encouraging community members to participate productively. In social media spaces operated by the organisation, they also need to set the community's ground rules. But wherever possible, it is preferable to encourage community self-moderation to avoid depending on the presence of a moderator. The result of such dependence would be that community interaction could only occur during times when the moderator is on duty. Given the cost of employing professional moderators, community moderation does not scale well as the community grows. (The ABC, for example, is forced to switch off most of its commenting functions on weekends, resulting in a limited experience.)

## 3. Support community dynamics

As community structures become evident, it is important for site operators to engage emerging and established community leaders as partners in the continued development and operation of the social media space and its community. This may be achieved by involving them as 'beta testers' for new products, seeking their input in the conduct

of the space, or even formally employing them as community moderators. (However, it is also important to ensure that such engagement does not damage their standing in the community itself.) Properly managed, this enables community leaders to serve as a two-way conduit between the organisation and community.

While working with community leaders is important for managing relations between site operators and users, it is also important to recognise that community structures, aims and values are never static. Due to continuing membership churn and various internal and external influences, new ideas and goals may come to be at the core of community activities. This is natural and unavoidable, and must be supported and even encouraged by the community tools provided by the corporation.

Properly managed such change can be a source of innovation which benefits the community and the organisation. Social and intellectual innovation may attract new user groups to the community, who in turn add further ideas and open up new avenues for spreading the message. But in the process, it must be understood that ultimately it is the user community of a social media space which will determine the further trajectory — if the interests of the organisation and the community begin to diverge, they cannot be forcibly reconciled. Heavy-handed moderation that attempts to ensure users stay ‘on message’ will only deepen the rift. Instead, it is important to understand and accommodate user interests.

#### 4. Don’t exploit the community

While, in principle, social media sites continue to be owned by their operators, in practice the user community feels a strong sense of ownership. This sense of ownership inextricably linked with a sense of loyalty to the site. This is notably absent in many troubled or dysfunctional social media sites; few YouTube users are likely to feel a strong sense of loyalty to the site, beyond (at best) their own space on the site. This explains the frequently abusive comments attached to videos there. It also varies between user groups. Deeply involved, frequent contributors are likely to feel more connected than casual users.

A strong sense of ownership, loyalty and pride in a social media space is an important factor protecting against disruptive and abusive behaviour. Site operators, therefore, must aim to develop this

in as many users as possible. This is achieved by encouraging them to contribute content and form strong connections to the community in order to increase a sense of *personal ownership*, and by building respectful consultative partnerships in order to develop a sense of *shared ownership* and responsibility.

However, it is important to avoid a perception of rules, regulations, and terms of service provisions as exploitative and designed to maximise profit, and of the organisation’s decision-making as aloof and disconnected from user interests. This is especially important for developments which directly affect the content created by users on a corporate site (for example, limiting their ability to influence how it may be used, or to change, revise, and delete it). Such concerns may be mitigated in advance by utilising Creative Commons or similar licences, which clearly spell out the conditions under which users contribute content.

In more generic social media spaces, corporate participants must also acknowledge where they draw on other users’ contributions, and to avoid any perception of unauthorised use of community content. Simply put: if in doubt, ask. The contributor who is approached in this way, and who subsequently sees their material acknowledged (for example, ‘Flickr photo by Jane Smith’) is likely to become a loyal supporter. To be perceived as ethical is a significant plus.

Overall, the central rule in social media is to be open, honest and ethical, and to understand the fundamentally community-based nature of these environments. They are described as *social* media for a reason. Many operators fail to understand this, and may end up with public relations problems as a result of their flawed approaches. The basic principles (summarised from a two-part report on social media strategies which was produced for the Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre) provide the foundation for a more productive approach to social media. If followed, they enable organisations to turn social media communities into allies, which may generate substantial benefits for the brand.

See also [www.smartservicescrc.com.au](http://www.smartservicescrc.com.au).

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