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## Developing Your Association's Social Media Strategy

By Jeff De Cagna

Social media tools, such as blogs, podcasting and wikis, are beginning to gain traction in the association community even as they have exploded in popularity over the Internet as a whole. A growing number of associations have come to recognize the essential power of these technologies, and the timing is right for leaders (staff and volunteer) and likely contributors to explore the best ways to leverage them as part of their organizations' work. It makes sense, then, for every association to have a clear social media strategy that connects back to its overarching strategic direction.

This article outlines a basic framework that should help all associations, regardless of size, think through the core strategic considerations of using social media. Before delving into the framework, however, let's consider three fundamental principles on which it is based:

- **Social media are about people, not technology** — Blogs, podcasting, wikis, social bookmarking, photo sharing and other technologies make passionate and purposeful engagement possible. In the book, *We Have Always Done It That Way: 101 Things About Associations We Must Change*, I describe social media as "manna from heaven" because organizations in our community now have access to tools that are specifically designed to help support goals in which virtually all associations share, such as creating rich conversations around important issues and facilitating the creation of stronger professional networks and communities. So while the tools themselves are important, it is the outcomes they will stimulate over time that should be every association's primary strategic focus.

- **Social media are about trust** — Since social media are about people, it follows that the ability to trust those people is an absolutely essential ingredient of your success. You cannot foster passionate and purposeful engagement in your association's activities without the accompanying resolve to let go, so your staff and volunteers can run with their work in new and surprising directions. Social media will allow them to experiment with greater ease, and probably with a slightly increased risk of making a more public mistake. Such missteps, however, are much more likely to be temporarily distressing than irrevocably fatal. In thinking about a social media strategy, then, it is important that association leaders emphasize a long-term perspective.

- **Social media are about driving innovation** — Social media provide associations with the opportunity to create new and different value for their members and customers. This focus on innovation makes the strategic use of social media a matter of both unleashed imagination and effective implementation. On the one hand, social media should be used creatively, even when they are being applied as an improvement to something the organization is already doing. A mindset of disciplined experimentation, with an approach to match, is critical. Associations using social media should give the tools a fair chance to succeed over a reasonable period, and not settle for half measures that are suspended at the first sign of difficulty, guaranteeing they will have no impact on any stakeholder group or the organization itself. In short, associations should actively prototype their social media projects to learn how they work under actual conditions, and give such experiments the time they need to fully develop before deciding how to proceed in the long run.

Given these three principles, how can association leaders think strategically about using social

media in their associations? What I propose is a very straightforward framework of four strategic issues (simplicity, authenticity, integration and distinctiveness) that staff and volunteer leaders should consider when thinking about the best and most effective ways to deploy social media. Here is a closer look at each of them:

### **Simplicity**

Arguably, the most important consideration in implementing social media is simplicity, i.e., how do we make them as simple as possible for our members and customers, as well as our own people, to use? The good news is that most social media are inherently easy to understand for individuals who possess at least a basic knowledge of today's most ubiquitous technologies, especially e-mail and web browsers. Nevertheless, even for very capable people who are able to send e-mail or locate information online using Google, the notion of accessing blogs, podcasts and other social media resources can be a bit daunting. Associations, therefore, should focus on providing their members and customers with social media experiences that invite them in to participate simply. Among the ways this can be accomplished are by using different terms, e.g., you can call it an "online journal" rather than a blog or "virtual radio" rather than a podcast, by integrating social media into other forms of regular communications such as e-mail and print materials and by using your association's early adopters of social media as mentors who are willing to assist their peers.

John Maeda, MIT Media Lab professor and author of *The Laws of Simplicity*, argues that "simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful." From a strategic point of view, associations would be wise to heed Maeda's words at all times, and especially when it comes to social media. The more meaning you can introduce into your social media experiments, the more likely your members and customers will invest their discretionary time, energy and attention into learning what they need to know to make it work for them and for you.

### **Authenticity**

Before an association jumps into the world of social media, its leaders must think long and hard about whether they are prepared to participate in a global online conversation that places a very high premium on authenticity. No form of official "speak," be it marketing, PR or legal, will succeed when your association begins writing a blog, recording a podcast or using social media in other ways to communicate, educate or influence its stakeholders. Your association — and those who animate its public persona — must be willing and able to interact with and engage the audience in an honest and open conversation about important issues and ideas.

Among the association leaders I meet, the chief concern about using social media is the possibility their organizations will end up, at best, looking bad or, at worst, in legal jeopardy because of something written or said inappropriately, but with the appearance of official sanction. It's true this could happen, but the likelihood is rather small, since your organization generally will choose most of the direct contributors to any social media effort. The bigger issue is with people who may comment, on blog posts for example, and the key strategic consideration is how your organization would deal with that kind of challenge if and when it were to occur. Would your association choose to be authentic even in the face of public embarrassment? The answer must be a factor in your thinking about whether and how to use social media.

For the most part, associations are highly bureaucratic, and bureaucracy is generally not conducive to the kind of honest and authentic conversation described above. In fact, as I write in *We Have*

Always Done It That Way, "[s]ocial media are the antithesis of bureaucracy. Social media are pure creation." To successfully leverage the full potential of social media, associations must be able to embrace the fundamental authenticity of pure creation.

### **Integration**



The real power of social media is released when multiple tools are integrated, such as a blog that includes text posts, audio and video podcasts and extensive links to other online resources. To create a rich and relevant social media experience for your stakeholders, your association should engage them directly in selecting the tools that are likely to be most useful for them, and look for creative ways to combine them. For example, if your members are professionals who need quick access to photos, you might consider setting up a Flickr (flickr.com) account and allow your members to view, add and blog on images they would like to share with their colleagues. If your members need easy access to work-related Web sites, you can create an account at the social bookmarking site, del.icio.us (the name of which is also its URL), to make it easier for your members to find links provided by multiple contributors. While it definitely makes sense to incorporate these and other tools into your strategy, be mindful that you don't want to overwhelm your audience, and inadvertently interfere with the effort to be as simple as possible.

Because I recommend that all associations prototype their initial social media projects, it does not make sense for you to integrate these tools with your Web site right away. You want to be sure that you will continue to use and support them over time, and your initial set of free and inexpensive technologies may change when you get ready to scale up for broader use. Moreover, in the beginning, it can be strategically valuable to create several social media prototypes, each with its own unique look and feel that is qualitatively different from the association's main website so the organization can gain invaluable insight about how members and customers use and interact with a variety of sites in different ways. Some of these prototypes will fail, but the learning you will derive from them most likely will be quite considerable.

### **Distinctiveness**

The more distinctive your association's social media efforts, the better off you will be in the long run. If the point of using social media is to innovate, then your association should consider carefully at a strategic level how these tools can help you create something new and different given its specific content resources and interested contributors. In the end, however, the ultimate decision about how best to achieve distinctiveness through social media should be left to those who are actually going to engage in the work. These direct contributors, who are most likely already using social media tools in some manner, can bring both their technical expertise and their understanding of professional or industry issues in order to identify the most promising opportunities for effective and meaningful implementation. Keep in mind as well that distinctiveness is a constantly moving and changing target, so a consistent focus on this question is required.

Social media offer associations a great opportunity to engage their members by sparking a renewed passion for contribution, and a reinvigorated commitment to purpose. But a thoughtful approach is required to guide critical choices that will influence the long-term impact of social media on the association's overall strategic direction. Working with the clear principles and strategic framework outlined in this article, your association should be able to develop an effective social media strategy that will help you make better decisions about how best to capitalize on these powerful new tools today and going forward.

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