

How To Develop a Business-Aligned Social Media & Social Networking Strategy

by

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Document Scope

This document describes a process for helping organizations define and prioritize the steps involved in applying social media and social networking to their operations.

The process described here is a structured one. A general structure and flow of work is proposed with the end goal being support for development of an organization-wide plan for employing social media and social networking in support of defined corporate goals. The intended audience for this document is middle and upper management within mid- to large-size organizations.

No assumptions or recommendations are made here about the governance structure of how such a plan should be implemented, nor are recommendations made for how technology should be managed to achieve these goals. It is assumed that (a) the strategy development process described here is applied across the entire organization, (b) all functions performed by the organization are considered in the strategy, and (c) the organization is receptive to a structured approach to planning such as the one described here.

Definitions

A **strategy** defines a set of processes that must be implemented to achieve a goal.

A **business aligned strategy** is a strategy that draws a clear connection between an organization's business goals and the processes that are needed to achieve those goals.



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A **business-aligned social media strategy** is a strategy that explicitly addresses how social media and social networking processes and technologies can be applied to an organization's operations in order to help it achieve its goals.

Social Media are collections of data and information that are developed collaboratively and/or shared interactively among individuals and groups. Examples of social media are blogs, wikis, shared bookmarks, and group rating systems.

Social Networking is the use of special processes and technologies to support the discovery, formation, and maintenance of personal and professional relationships. Examples of commercial social networks are Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn.

Overview of three step process

The strategy development process described here has three interrelated steps:

1. Describe Organizational Goals
2. Describe Organizational Functions
3. Describe Social Media Initiatives

Step 1: Describe Organizational Goals

Social media strategy development begins with identifying the goals of the organization. These goals drive the organization's planning and operational efforts. Goal identification requires working with top management to identify the 3 to 5 major corporate goals along with the associated metrics the organization uses to tell whether or not the organization is meeting those goals. The "3 to 5" number is suggested to make it easier to organize and present information to management for group discussion. The actual number will depend upon the organization.

These are examples of high level corporate goals:

- Maintain or increase profitability or levels of cost recovery.
- Improve communication among employees, customers, members, and/or stockholders.
- Help customers or members in their jobs or private lives.
- Increase the number of new and/or returning customers or members.

Obtaining agreement from management on these goals at the outset of a strategy project is important. These goals will drive prioritization of potential actions to put social media and social networking to use.

Some organizations will have already identified and documented such corporate goals and will have incorporated them into ongoing planning and budgeting processes. Others

may require assistance in defining a unified set of goals if, say, the planning or administrative processes of different divisions are highly decentralized or are impacted by historically separate organizational divisions. Either way, a key requirement of this step is an understanding and a sharing of what the organization is attempting to accomplish.

If an external consultant is assisting in the strategy development process, this may require that the consultant have access to private or sensitive corporate financial data given that financial measures will be associated with many corporate goals.

Step 2: Describe Organizational Functions

In Step 2 the goals identified in Step 1 are related to the functions that different groups within the organization perform. Here the term "function" refers to related activities that support a common organizational objective. The term "related to" can be interpreted to mean that a positive response is appropriate to the question "Does successful performance of Function X contribute to accomplishment of Goal Y?"

This step may involve identifying between 10 and 20 defined function categories that describe the work performed by the organization. Note that the individual functions, usually defined at a high level, may not map perfectly to the organization's formal hierarchical structure since it is not uncommon for organizational units within the organization to have overlapping responsibilities. In addition, organizational and reporting structures frequently change within an organization, while the functions these organizations perform change less frequently.

The following are examples of functions. This is a general list and would need to be adapted to functionally describe the actual organization in question:

- Asset Management
- Billing, Payment, & Cash Processing
- Business Planning, Management & Administration
- Customer Service
- Supply Purchasing & Trading
- Financial Management & Accounting
- Materials Transportation, Sales & Purchasing
- Human Resources Management
- Information Services Management
- Marketing & Sales
- Market Research
- Planning, Management & Administration
- Work & Work Order Management
- Manufacturing
- Distribution

Some organizations further aggregate functions such as those listed above into a few high level categories such as "customer facing functions," "administrative and support functions," and "business partner and supplier functions." This type of categorization is especially useful when presenting and discussing data in a group setting.

These high level categories, and the functions themselves, will vary significantly by organization and industry. These categories and functional definitions may be adapted from existing lists if a comprehensive human resources, financial, or customer support system has already been implemented that incorporates good comprehensive reporting tools. If not, the function list -- including definitions -- will need to be developed.

Step 3: Describe Social Media Initiatives

In addition to defining the unique sets of goals and functions that describe the organization, the project must list and describe the potential programs, initiatives, and projects that rely on social media and social networking. The following are examples of initiatives; note that some are planning exercises while others involve delivery of operating systems:

- Create and maintain a corporate Facebook page to serve as a corporate marketing and recruiting tool.
- Establish and operate blogs for all customer- or member-facing divisions or committees.
- Offer free web-enabled telephone conferencing services to customers.
- Create and maintain a CEO blog.
- Establish and operate wikis to create and share "best practices" information.
- Partner with a professional accreditation organization to develop a podcast based lesson series offering continuing education credit.
- Develop and implement training processes on how to employ dedicated blogs in support of project management.
- Create and publicize a network of experts within the organization who can be consulted on business specific topics.
- Establish a secure company wide social bookmarking system to support the tagging and sharing of internal and external information sources.
- Develop a corporate policy and training program on information security and privacy.
- Develop and implement a corporate security policy to monitor and control inadvertent leaks of sensitive or private information.
- Create and test a plan to employ social media and social networking in crisis situations.
- Create and implement a competitor monitoring system to track competitor activities on blogs, social networks, public wikis , feed subscription services, and social bookmarking systems.

Initially, an organization creates an inventory of all potential applications that can be related back to functions and ultimately to goals. It does this by reviewing how each function is performed within the company and asking questions such as the following:

- How can we use social media and social networking to improve how this function is performed?
- Can we improve conversations, information sharing, and collaboration among people who perform this function?
- Can we improve how feedback is obtained from people who benefit from the output or products of this function?
- Are there functions that are in need of innovation or creativity?
- Are there functions where the people involved currently have difficulty in communication or collaboration?

The inventory should include descriptions of these initiatives in terms of:

- Cost (e.g., fixed vs. variable; one-time vs. ongoing)
- Quantitative and qualitative benefits (e.g., revenue enhancement, cost reduction, improved public image, improved staff morale, improved innovation, etc.)
- Impacted function(s)
- Impacted goal(s)
- Priority level
- Impacted groups (e.g., internal vs. external users)
- Schedule
- Relationship to existing systems and processes (e.g., impacts, is impacted by, is dependent on, etc.)
- Likelihood of Acceptance (e.g., by management, by staff, by vendors, by customers, etc.)

The list of initiatives should be in a form that simplifies review, updating and revision by team members. Information on initiatives can be presented in summary or table form so that management can compare, contrast, and -- most importantly -- provide feedback on the different opportunities in relation to the organization's goals and functions.

One approach to presenting findings as they evolve is to create a secure project blog for use by project team members to support project functions such as the following:

- Report progress against schedule.
- Discuss intermediate findings.
- Store and share documents and multimedia.
- Obtain feedback on key topics to supplement -- or replace -- face to face meetings.

It is not unusual to find that the total costs of doing everything in the list of initiatives

will be greater than the available budget. This is where mapping the different opportunities to functions and goals aids in prioritization. Once this initial prioritization takes place by the project team and results are communicated to management, more detailed review and planning and socialization (including staff assignments, content selection, detailed schedules, program governance, and technology infrastructure development) can continue.

Discussion

The process described above represents a fairly traditional strategy development project. Putting it into practice requires addressing several practical considerations:

1. The role of strategy
2. Accounting for organizational complexity
3. Internal politics
4. The role of technology
5. Using the strategy development process to "bootstrap" social media adoption
6. Sequencing the initiatives

1. The role of strategy

There are several practical reasons to develop strategies around social media and social networking:

In many organizations staff members are already using social networking or social media while at work and away from work. They are already be devoting time and attention to learning about a wide variety of systems and processes. They may even be communicating about work related issues in their communications with others. If the strategy process can tap into this evolving proficiency, it might be possible to increase the efficiency of introducing social media and networking into the rest of the organization.

Independent pockets of potentially incompatible social media and networking initiatives may already be evolving within the organization. Developing a unified strategy early may reduce the cost and time involved in later converting users away from competing or incompatible platforms, thereby speeding adoption of standard systems and processes.

Establishing a formal strategy increases the likelihood of defining both ownership and responsibility of each initiative. Formalization of roles and responsibilities may not have taken place around various corporate activities, such as who is responsible for changing corporate blog access privileges when an employee leaves the company. Establishing ownership and responsibility early on will, at minimum, help to ensure that managers are held accountable for progress and performance.

2. Accounting for organizational complexity

One of the most basic logistics questions we need to address early in a strategy project is, "Whom do we need to interview?" In a project such as this, the likelihood of finding documented descriptions of all necessary pieces of information may be low, even in older, larger, more bureaucratic operations. Communicating with key staff must be included in the schedule.

Another consideration is the manner in which the needs of important groups are included in the project. This is critical given the collaborative nature of social media and social networking. If it is desirable to incorporate input from large numbers of users, employees, members, customers, suppliers, or partners, a variety of polling, surveying, or conferencing systems exist that can be used to establish relationships with multiple interest group and gather information in a structured or semi-structured fashion that facilitates analysis. The value of obtaining such feedback must, of course, be balanced against cost and schedule considerations.

3. Internal Politics

Politics are present in any organization. Some staff members may distrust or be threatened by some of the changes that adoption of social media and social networking may generate. These concerns should be acknowledged. Failure to do so openly may threaten the validity of the entire process.

4. The Role of Technology

While the primary focus of the strategy development process is not technological but organizational, the outcome of the strategy process has implications for how the company manages and procures its IT and telecommunications resources. Also, the sharing of information that occurs as the basis for many social media and social networking initiatives may have security or bandwidth implications.

For these and other reasons the IT department must be directly involved in the strategy development process, especially in the description and assessment of the various initiatives.

The need to involve the IT department may seem to be a "no brainer " but there are situations where some IT departments and their structured approach to managing IT project priorities have been viewed as inhibitors to innovation.

Having been on both sides of the IT management fence I come down squarely on the need to involve IT from the start.

5. Using the strategy development process to "bootstrap" social media adoption

It was suggested above that a blog (or perhaps a wiki) could be used as a tool to provide feedback to strategy process participants during the course of the project. It seems a natural application of such collaborative technologies to provide for more participation and feedback during the course of a project. The discussions that can arise increase the likelihood that communication and synergy will take place.

It is tempting to think that the strategy development process itself can be a mechanism for introducing the organization to the potential benefits of social media and technologies.

I advise caution. Receptivity to being asked questions about goals and objectives is one thing, but openly discussing corporate operations in a fluid give-and-take style may not be acceptable to all. You may find, for example, that the existing ground rules for one department to communicate with another may be threatened by some of the short cuts that occur when potentially sensitive topics are opened up for open or collaborative discussion.

Because of this, I recommend that the use of a strategic planning process to introduce social media and social networking to an organization be considered very carefully. Some groups may be reluctant to participate in open discussions; it is the participation of such groups that will be critical to success of the effort.

At this early stage it may therefore be appropriate to employ more traditional communication and collaboration techniques. Again, this will depend on the organization and its overall receptivity to innovation, collaboration, and open discussion.

6. Sequencing the Initiatives

Creating and delivering a set of ranked initiatives is only part of a strategy. Thought must also be given to the planning and scheduling that are associated with implementation.

In the blog post "What Social Media Adoption Model Are You Following?" <<http://www.ddmcd.com/model.html>> I discussed four separate "adoption models" for social media:

- **Top down.** In the "top down" model the organization's leaders implement and lead the adoption of tools and techniques such as blogs, wikis, social networking systems, shared bookmarks, and podcasting.
- **Bottom up.** In the "bottom up" model the workers start blogging, using wikis, and social networking systems to advance their jobs.

- **Inside out.** This is a variation of “bottom up,” only this time the tools are adopted internally by the organization and their usage spills over into external markets, members, or customers of the organization.
- **Outside in.** In this model the adoption of social media and social networking by the marketplace progresses to a point where the organization can no longer ignore it, especially if usage by competitors starts to become public.

Knowing which adoption model makes the most sense for the organization will, along with budgets and organizational priorities, help management to prioritize where to start. If, for example, there is a groundswell of "unofficial" activity already arising within the organization, that might be a good place to start, even if the initial applications are small and are dependent of "word of mouth" for promotion.

Conclusions

Much of the work done in a strategy development project such as this is designed to organize and present a view of the organization, its goals, and its functions that makes clear how to prioritize the many different opportunities that social media and social networking present.

Some of these opportunities will be small and will require few if any changes to current operations. Others may be large and may require significant changes to existing management and technology infrastructures.

In either case, an open strategy development process that itself is collaborative -- or at least, as open and collaborative as possible given the culture of the organization -- can provide much insight into ways to generate useful innovations and improvements.

Additional Reading

"Seven Articles about Strategic Planning and Social Media" <<http://www.ddmcd.com/7.html>>

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