



The Engagement Frontier: Exploring Meaningful Interaction through Social Media

Part 2: Using social media to develop and maintain online conversations

In [part one](#) of this series, we discussed how your organization can develop a branded social media presence and strategy. We emphasized the importance of your organization's message, how brand integration could enhance your communication efforts, and how critical it is to adequately prepare prior to going public.

In part two, we will show you how to use your social media presence to create and maintain meaningful professional interactions with your target audience. This will be achieved through effective publishing, by listening to your audience's comments and by committing to long-term engagements.

Beginning the conversation

Your first words in the social media realm serve as an introduction. As with the beginning of any conversation, you must appropriately address the audience members who already know you as well as the ones who don't. Therefore, your introduction must appeal to both types of audience members.

Start by creating a first post that introduces your organization, its mission, and why it is using social media. A post is any type of content that is published by your organization to its social media outlet. Outlets such as Twitter limit each post to 140 characters while others, such as blogs, allow you to publish as much content as you want in one post. You should still publish an introductory post even if your social media outlet can accommodate biographical information in the profile section. This practice is professional, courteous, and helpful. In your introductory post, extend an invitation to your audience that encourages them to browse your social media site and your website. This will help those who do not know you to become better acquainted with you and help make everyone feel welcome and comfortable.

Practice effective publishing

Effective publication is a vital part of a healthy social media conversation. Become familiar with the amount of social media content you have and create a schedule around which you can develop and distribute it.

The publication schedule, which is how regularly you publish new content, will affect the conversation. If you publish content too often, such as several times a day, your audience will struggle to follow the latest content; that could make them feel overwhelmed and unwilling to provide comments. If you publish infrequently, such as once a month, your audience will lose interest and may not see the point to providing comments.

For example, your organization decided to publish 30 short testimonials over the course of one month. There are several publishing options that include: publishing one testimonial an hour, one a day, or even

several during one week. Post one testimonial an hour and you may be lucky to see one comment. Valuable testimonials could be overlooked due to the frequency with which they were published. Post one a day and you could receive quite a few comments; that schedule would leave adequate time for your audience to provide meaningful feedback. If you decided to post several over the course of a week, you could still receive plenty of comments. However, you would need to monitor that in order to balance how much content you have with your audience's interest. By reviewing the total amount of content you have, you can determine how easily your audience will digest and respond to the information. In part one, we covered some potential content suggestions including: news and updates, special insights into your organization's activities, and interactive outreach to your audience.

Your publication schedule could also affect your organization's ability to reply to audience comments in your social media outlet. In order to maintain the conversation, consider how much content needs to be published and determine how many interactions you are able to engage in. Use this information to establish a goal for audience engagement; make sure to choose a goal that is reasonable and that is appropriate for your organization and its audience. The goal will also depend on the type of social media outlet you are using.

Goals could include replying to a certain percentage of blog comments or responding to a certain number of private messages. Although you could choose to address every comment submitted, it's better to reply to a percentage of comments since you cannot predict the level of your audience's participation. However, try to make *everyone* feel included by touching on the general ideas expressed in the ongoing conversation. For example, you decide to publish a new post to your organization's blog once a day. After your first post of the week, 10 members of your audience submit comments. Let's say your goal is 20%; for this example, you would post two replies. The following day, your next post receives 100 comments so now you are committed to submitting 20 replies. As you reply, the conversation continues because people are responding to what you are saying...and this is only day two! If you are unable to reply to at least some comments, your audience could feel as if their opinion is not valued. So, you can see how overwhelming publication can be if not planned properly. These factors need to be evaluated on a regular basis since your organization may publish different amounts of content throughout the year.

Listen to your audience

It is important to give your audience an opportunity to comment or interact with your published content. As they submit comments, listen to what they are saying. A conversation is a joint effort and listening is one part of that effort.

More often than not, if you care about your audience's thoughts they will care about your efforts. Therefore, publish replies that are meaningful and that relate to your audience. Generic statements will make your audience feel as if your organization does not place value in their presence within your social media efforts. For example, if an audience member cites one of their own programs in their comment, conduct basic research into that program to better understand it and why it was used as an example. Incorporate your insight into your reply.

Your audience's participation will tell you what they are thinking. You will learn what they find interesting, troublesome, or helpful. For example, one of your organization's blog posts sparked a series

of comments between two of your audience members. You should pay attention to what they are saying, ask questions or comment on their discussion. They will appreciate your interest in their opinions. You may also learn some valuable information from their interactions that could help your program's efforts and/or its communication strategy.

When appropriate, tailor your content to what your audience is discussing. As you review your audience's comments in your social media site, post new content that relates to subjects that are important to them. Or, if your organization implements a new policy, procedure, or program that was inspired by an audience member's comments, give them credit on your social media site. These activities will show your audience that they are important to your organization. It will add value to your social media presence.

Occasionally, you may receive a negative comment. Before you address it, consider what was said, who said it, and review their reasons for submitting the statement. If the statement pertains to a legitimate issue, do some research and try to address the issue as adequately as possible. Addressing legitimate concerns is one way to follow-up on the conversation. Your actions in this type of situation are a direct response to what's important to your audience. If the comment is unfounded, you may not want to address it directly but at least acknowledge that an opinion was submitted by politely expressing a general response.

Conversations should be ongoing

Over time, an ongoing social media conversation with your audience will develop real relationships. However, online networking and interaction should not be viewed as a replacement for in-person communication. Try to incorporate face-to-face interaction as your relationships develop. For example, consider setting up a networking event for audience members who are local to your area. Or, you could organize a two-day conference for both local and non-local audience members. These events would build upon the relationships developed online and would compliment them by adding a more personal touch to the overall experience.

Consistent promotion will ensure that your social media presence is sustainable so always promote your social media efforts regardless of the current amount of audience interaction. Use word-of-mouth promotion and business cards. For example, a business card can be very effective at an industry conference or during a casual conversation at a coffee shop. People still enjoy tangible, personal items so a meaningful face-to-face conversation followed by a business card will still go a long way. You could also use email or other means that are widely used by your program but make sure to include links to your social media sites in your email signature. Also use your organization's website to emphasize the benefits of your social media presence to your audience.

Evaluate and Adjust

In order to maintain healthy and ongoing social media relationships, regularly review your organization's social media efforts to determine their effectiveness. Your evaluation should contain some sort of metrics along with a commitment to adjust or discard what does not work well.

Use a set of metrics by which you can judge the effectiveness of your social media efforts. These metrics will be one or more variables, such as the number of blog comments in a given month that provide insight into things such as audience engagement or content effectiveness. The variables used for measurement can be anything that could produce valuable data for your organization. For example, your organization wants to determine how effective its blog is at generating audience views of weekly articles versus using your main website. As a measurement variable, you may use the number of times users viewed article pages in your blog and website during a particular month. By comparing the amount of page views in two different settings, your organization can see which setting is more effective. If you wanted to see which types of articles your audience finds most interesting, you might compare the amount of comments between various types of articles. You could also commit to publishing articles that garner a certain amount of comments each month and use the monthly amount of comments to determine article topics. There are also online resources such as [Radian6](#) that provide professional monitoring services but they are not always free.

Keep what works and adjust what does not work. As you monitor your social media efforts, pay attention to the aspects that produce positive results and to the ones that do not. Continue using what works; there is no reason to change efforts that generate positive results. You will, however, need to review what did not work to determine why it was not effective. If something did not work well, do not immediately discard it. Consider changing its parameters or how it is used. Lastly, always look for new and interesting ways to use social media. This will help you adjust your social media efforts when certain elements are not working effectively.

In order to be successful with social media, an organization must create and maintain a real conversation with its audience. Start by publishing effective content on a regular basis. Once your audience responds, listen to what they are saying and contribute meaningful replies. Lastly, commit to long-term engagement with your audience and regularly evaluate and adjust your organization's social media presence. Remember, professional relationships through social media involve real people: if you care about their thoughts, they will care about your efforts.