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Social Media: Don't Miss the Opportunities

Among controllers and CFOs of construction companies, social media is almost always discussed in the context of marketing or business development. However, there are many other areas where social media can be effective, including community outreach, talent attraction, employee engagement and loyalty, corporate wellness, customer service, and thought leadership.

Most contractors have only dipped their toes into the social media waters, with e-mail still being the most widely used and valued tool. This article can help extend your company's social media reach through e-mail and other social platforms for users of all levels.

Sharing Content through E-Mail

Finding value in social media can begin with something as simple and familiar as e-mail. There are three tactics that can improve your communication and make your e-mail exchanges more personal.

Presented in order of ease, these tactics can be leveraged to best suit your audience and business goals:

- 1) Add your social URLs to your e-mail signature;
- 2) Evaluate e-mail plug-ins to review your contacts' interests and social participation; and
- 3) Utilize a social Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to fully leverage social media.

Social URLs

Customize your signature line to include your LinkedIn public profile URL in order to showcase your expertise, reveal your resume and biography (in your own words), and promote your company's brand. Your company's LinkedIn profile can include embedded videos for its products and services, which can help differentiate it from its competitors.

You can also insert a YouTube channel or blog link to your e-mail signature to increase your company's credibility by highlighting special talents, which can help develop relationships with bankers, developers, and associates.

E-Mail Plug-Ins

Plug-ins extend the value of e-mail so that you can see the social connections and activity within Microsoft Outlook, IBM Lotus Notes, or Gmail. There are many options with unique features and advantages that offer profile access to LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Hoover's, XING, and free video conferencing integration to Skype. It's important to evaluate each option, as some impact the speed of your e-mail and may require IT optimization.

Outlook Social Connector

The most publicized plug-in is Outlook Social Connector (OSC), which is available for Outlook 2003, 2007, and 2010. OSC aggregates not only recent social activity, but also past e-mails, attachments, and meetings you've shared.

Xobni

Xobni (www.xobni.com) is another plug-in available for Outlook. Xobni has several mobile applications and offers widgets to integrate with Evernote, Salesforce CRM, and Google Translate. One notable feature of Xobni is its ability to show what time of day your contacts usually reply to your e-mails. This knowledge enables you to schedule the send times of your e-mails (an effective yet under-utilized feature in most e-mail solutions), which is often paramount to receiving a quick response and can improve communication.

Rapportive

An option for Gmail users is Rapportive (<http://rapportive.com>), which aggregates social profiles and recent activity in a sidebar. The sidebar overlays the advertising area, so you don't have to view ads.

harmon.ie

For Outlook and Lotus Notes users, harmon.ie (<http://harmon.ie>) enables you to insert a SharePoint link into your e-mail message and see all files that you've sent to the person in the right-hand pane. The social aspects are secondary, and are confined to the user's SharePoint profile, which may be useful for larger companies that are trying to build their own enterprise social network.



Social CRM Systems

A mid-year report from Gartner, Inc., “Magic Quadrant for Sales Force Automation,”¹ produced the leading social CRM systems and rated them for their ability to integrate with add-on tools, socialization features, etc. Salesforce CRM (www.salesforce.com/crm) is a cloud-based solution and offers many options for metrics, integration, and scalability. However, it may not fit into your company’s budget.

One product that didn’t make the Gartner report that’s simple and affordable is Nimble (www.nimble.com), which combines all your contacts from Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Outlook.

Sharing Content across Social Platforms

Social media encompasses more than just the popular social networks. And, not every tool is suited for every goal in your company’s social media strategy. Each social channel has its own personality, style, and audience. In selecting which tools and channels to use, ask these questions:

- What’s the purpose of this content?
- Who do I want to reach?
- What channel has an audience for this content?
- When are most people on this channel, and when is the best time to post?

At the Dreamforce 2011 conference in San Francisco, Angela Ahrendts, CEO of Burberry, said, “Your business isn’t just located in the community, your business *is* the community.” Is your company thinking this way?

Wherever you post content, you’ll want to have “like” or “share” buttons to share your content across social platforms. Let’s discuss what works well and where.

LinkedIn

Perfect for business-to-business contacts and finding people with special talents and expertise, LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a great tool for search engine ranking inside Google and highlighting business acumen.

A favorite among journalists, LinkedIn News presents opportunities for extending your story through liking and sharing content in groups and your status updates. Groups can attract Website traffic and business opportunities; however, your discussion topics must help the group more than promote yourself.

Numerous integration points with such third-party sites as SlideShare, WordPress and other blogging platforms, Twitter, and YouTube can help aggregate your full social profile across the Web. You can embed videos in your profile or connect YouTube videos to your company services to improve its brand and reach.

Your company’s LinkedIn profile and its products and services can be viewed publicly without a LinkedIn account. If your Website needs a facelift, then you can promote new products and services, new hires, and other news through your blog or even Twitter stream on LinkedIn while you await your company’s Website makeover.

Twitter

Think headlines in short messages. Twitter (<http://twitter.com>) works well for getting the word out beyond your local reach and for customer engagement. It’s good for promoting a blog, event, or press release and for crowd sourcing using a hashtag (a word, phrase, or abbreviation starting with “#”).

If you want to network with others who have the same passions, interests, and discussion topics, then tune in with a hashtag. Popular construction industry hashtags include: #construction, #bim, #revit, #LEED, #sustainability, and #aec. You can also start your own or use #CFMA and #CCIFP in conjunction with a popular hashtag to draw attention to the association and certification.

You can also promote your local events and charities on Twitter. Just remember to include your local hashtag (e.g., #Phx, #NYC, etc.) and include a Web address or URL to all the details. Job postings are also common on Twitter, in conjunction with other social sites. Timing your “tweets” is important to reach the largest audience, as most users check updates during their lunchtime.

LinkedIn has tight integration to Twitter. So, if you attach a Twitter account to your LinkedIn profile, then you have the option of instantly sending your LinkedIn status updates to Twitter. The LinkedIn applications directory (found under the “More” tab) offers the Tweets application so you can see your connections who have a Twitter account. It also lets you view the Twitter stream from within LinkedIn.

Facebook

Facebook (www.facebook.com) allows businesses to create their own pages. Construction leaders should recognize the primary value proposition with Facebook lies in talent attraction. Posting career opportunities and apprenticeships

is good to do, but you also must have people to spread the word to candidates seeking positions. When possible, share a “day in the life” blog post of the position inside Facebook or highlight the experiences and challenges for job growth (as told from the perspective of a current employee in that same position) to help candidates envision themselves in the position.

Community outreach and charity programs also thrive here, as many employees, customers, and vendors are already using Facebook personally and want to help further the causes your company supports. A one-day event, an ongoing fundraiser, or an employee volunteer program can produce not only compelling success stories, but also photos to go with them.

Facebook also works well with informing the public of progress on neighborhood construction projects and how your company is solving problems.

YouTube

You’ve probably watched a video on YouTube (www.youtube.com). This site is a great place to educate, entertain, and exude enthusiasm. The most effective communication conveys emotion.

By combining pictures and voice inflection, your best alternative to a face-to-face meeting lies here. Smart job seekers today are making short videos to introduce themselves, so why not do the same with your business to showcase its expertise?

Having a YouTube channel can increase customer communication, brand exposure, and search engine optimization. Video can also be easily repurposed by editing a video into short clips for use on your Website, in a blog post, or inside LinkedIn profiles.

MailVU

One of the easiest and most inexpensive remote video capture products is MailVU (www.mailvu.com), which also has a great Facebook application. They offer business branding for Website integration, enabling you to record and upload your videos to YouTube.

Customers can easily provide feedback, reviews, or video testimonials from work or home, which can then be used as content. Prospective employees can also submit their video resumes.

StumbleUpon

StumbleUpon (www.stumbleupon.com) is terrific for driving traffic to a Website, and has recently added a search feature for special interests. StumbleUpon is a news community for sharing Websites. In construction, the hot items are sustainability, green building, solar and alternative energy, and facilities maintenance. Build these keywords into your content across social platforms in conjunction with your primary keyword targets and submit your content to StumbleUpon.

SlideShare

PowerPoint slides, Google presentations, documents, and videos can be shared online with your own SlideShare (www.slideshare.net) channel and embedded within your blog or LinkedIn profile. Great for visuals and showcasing your expertise, libraries of presentations and projects help establish your credibility and build trust. It may also get you another speaking engagement or interview, which could equate to future business opportunities.

Flickr

One of the premiere photo-sharing sites, Flickr (www.flickr.com) can get you onto the first page of Google Images. Don’t overlook this Website if your business produces eye-catching visuals. The same photos you put in your blog or status updates can get double exposure with a Flickr submission.

Optimizing the photo metadata (name, description, etc.) to include your keywords and location will help increase Website traffic. I’ve seen this very effectively used in 3-D renderings, landscaping, and architecture. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words.

WordPress

Blogging is similar to a newsletter, only it focuses attention on a single article at a time. A WordPress (www.wordpress.org) blog can be inside your Website or have a separate URL. You can have multiple authors, topics, and discussions and allow for commentary. The larger the company, the bigger the benefits, as content varies from thought leadership, project updates, and customer celebrations.

Inside your Website, search engines see new content and crawl more frequently, as bloggers often post once per week or more. Carefully crafted keyword-rich blog titles can deliver good organic search rankings. There are many options for adding plug-ins and widgets for other social activities.

Google+

Google+ for business (www.google.com/+business) has



some great features, including Hangouts, which offers free 10-way video conferencing, and selective group communication, called Google Circles.

Conclusion

Now that you're aware of the variety of popular social channels, it's time to begin effectively attracting business opportunities, encouraging employees, and building closer relationships through social media. The new talent expects you to be using social media, and so do your socially savvy customers, project partners, and employees. Don't miss the opportunities. ■

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She has been a speaker for CFMA's 2009 Annual Conference & Exhibition, and was also a featured speaker at the 2009 and 2010 NAWIC National Convention.

A member of CFMA since 1997, Carol served on the Valley of the Sun (VOS) Chapter's Board of Directors. She earned her MBA and BS in Computer Science from Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, PA.

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Endnote:

1. "Magic Quadrant for Sales Force Automation 2011," https://www.salesforce.com/form/pdf/sfa_magicquadrant_gartner.jsp

web resources

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