

Introducing Government Agencies to Web 2.0

WHEN A VISITOR BECOMES A COMMUNITY

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November 10, 2009

The Future is Now

Picture a Sunday afternoon in October...

You step inside from a sunny but cooler day - a sign of things to come. The TV is on and from the crowd noise you know it must be a football game. You only catch a glimpse of the game before a car commercial comes on. You don't pay close attention to it, but look up as the ad closes. The major car company no longer is advertising its website, but instead encourages viewers to visit its facebook page.

Is this the future of advertising in America?

No. This is 2009. That car company is Honda.

Social media is here to stay. For corporations, political campaigns, nonprofit organizations and government agencies, it is changing the way we interact with our clients, stakeholders and the public at large. The traditional notion of the target audience is now too limiting a concept. With social media we must think beyond target audience and conceive of target communities. The opportunities

to collaborate with your target communities are endless. The potential to engage those that matter most to your organization is now unparalleled.

What is it?

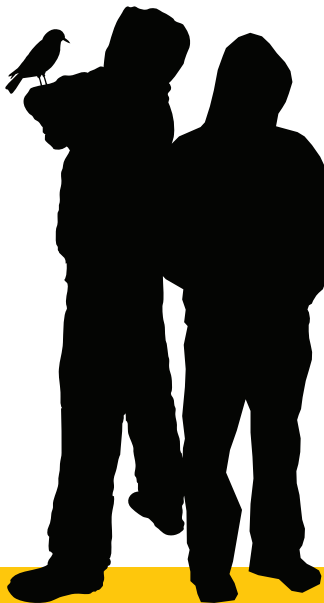
Social media or Web 2.0 is an evolution in the use of the internet. Through new tools and technologies, users can now have control over the information or content that they access, share and create. Currently the most popular forms of social media are blogs, wikis, facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter. But social media also includes an array of other tools that enable users to generate new ideas, deliberate about issues, and take action together.

What's all the fuss?

Social media shifts the focus from one where people primarily view online content to one where people create content and engage in it with others. Anyone can now author, design, produce and distribute online content like blogs, video and photos. At the heart of the transformation is the speed at which information (and misinformation) is created and shared through online networks. Information can spread out in seconds through mobile phones and social networking sites, via people's personal networks or communities.

What kinds of social media do you need to know about?

The major distinction within the world of social media is the difference between a social application and a social network. A blog is an example of a social application. Anyone can create a blog and start to publish content. People may actually read, follow and comment on the blog once it is created. Facebook is an example of a social network. People join networks to share information and create relationships with other members of the network. Simplistically, you can



think of social applications as being single purposed and social networks as multi-purposed.

Two of the most popular social applications are blogs and wikis. Blogs or weblogs are the ‘diary of the 21st century’ except that they are intended to be shared, have the ability to be complemented with multimedia, and can be commented on by readers. Wikis are collaborative web pages where many people can co-create and edit content. Comments, additions and revisions are all tracked within a wiki.

Another popular category of social media application is known as crowd sourcing. Crowd sourcing allows you to take advantage of the decentralized nature of the internet to brainstorm ideas and tackle large problems by engaging your user community or true believers. For example, the White House and several federal agencies have asked the public to help generate new policies and programs by brainstorming and ranking ideas. In relatively short periods of time, crowd sourcing applications enabled large groups to sift through hundreds or thousands of ideas to identify the most useful or interesting.

Facebook and MySpace are social networks. Millions of users visit their profiles every day to share information with friends, family and colleagues. These networks also have applications that can be built into them that allow users to share additional information or collaborate together on a common project.

Twitter is an interesting combination of a social application and network. It is a micro-blogging application through which users can share short 140 character messages or “tweets”. It is a network too, as individuals can interact and follow others within the twitter community. Many organizations and leaders use twitter to update their supporters about new developments and insights, but the platform is also becoming a popular way to engage supporters in conversations about current events.

Many social networks have also formed around the sharing of media. Through YouTube, users can easily watch, record and comment on videos about every subject under the sun. Photo-sharing communities like Flickr and Picasa encourage users to post their photos and join networks of like-minded people.

Why is it important for government?

Social media provides an opportunity for government agencies to collaborate with citizens and stakeholders, solicit public input, and build communities of interested users. By helping government agencies to better understand the needs of the general public, social media enables agencies to refine their programs and address misconceptions. Agencies now can have access to vast amounts of information about the

communities that they are meant to serve and can ask for help from experts, stakeholders and average citizens to build and deploy new programs.

What have early adopters in government learned so far?

A tremendous amount has been learned by government agencies which have experimented early with social media. Taking advantage of these learnings will significantly ease your organization’s transition to the new world of Web 2.0.

Lesson One: Begin with your strategic priorities. All too often, agencies conduct social media experiments that do not fit well with their organization’s strategic plans and priorities. The result is often wasted effort with little to show for it. Thinking hard about where your agency is trying to go and how a deeper relationship with the public will help to get you there will pay off significant dividends in the end.

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Lesson Two: Let the objective drive the tool. Sometimes a shiny new tool ends up driving the design of a program. It is more important to consider your real needs and objectives before selecting a social media tool. For example, are you trying to inform or to engage? Is there information that the community has to understand first or misinformation to correct? What is the timeline? What will be analyzed?

Lesson Three: Content is key. Social media requires a different approach to communicating information, through both substantive and style. Substantively, organizations must be more willing to share content and be less protective of data. Stylistically, content needs to be presented in a more easily digestible format. Federal agencies are not used to writing 140 character tweets, nor can a 120-page report be effectively cut and pasted into a blog. You will need to think in new ways about how and communicate you share your content.

Lesson Four: Commit to the conversation and the community over the long haul. Building an effective social media presence takes time. Whether you are creating a blog or a facebook page, users need to know that they can rely on you to provide ongoing content and to respond to their contributions.

Lesson Five: Social media requires a culture shift. Web 2.0 requires a change in how your organization thinks about its relationships with its stakeholders. From seminars and trainings to brown bag lunches, it will be important to educate staff on social media and how your agency wants to relate to stakeholders and the public.

Remember Honda

You probably still have many questions. The good news is that many of them have answers – they just take some work and a little organizational soul searching to find.

Where should you go from here? We hope that it is clear that you need a strategy, and how you use social media needs to be carefully thought-through. The Open Government Directive requires this. A strategy is paramount, and is best developed with a sprinkle of creativity and open-mindedness.

You can be certain that Honda thought-through what it meant to cannibalize its home page for a facebook page. They asked themselves a simple question, “What is more important to us: a visitor or a community?”

The Ascentum logo features the word "ascentum" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font. A blue curved line arches over the top of the letters "e" and "n".

ascentum

Joseph Peters is a Partner at Ascentum.

The AmericaSpeaks logo features the word "AMERICA" in blue and "SPEAKS" in red, both in uppercase, bold, sans-serif font.

AMERICASPEAKS

Joe Goldman is the Vice President of Citizen Engagement at AmericaSpeaks.

What are some common goals and objectives?

Inform, Educate, Engage, Find, Build, Leverage, Share, Complement, Evaluate, Brand

There are many goals and objectives for government in the strategic use of social media. Most of these apply and can be adapted to fit the context of any organization.

1. Inform the public, media, stakeholders and other interested communities about information and developments within your organization.
2. Educate communities with accurate information and address misinformation.
3. Engage communities in brainstorming and evaluating new ideas, policies and programs.
4. Find where your current and prospective users are spending their time on social networks and join them, rather than waiting for them to come to you.
5. Build and nurture relationships with key audiences to establish communities.
6. Leverage the energy, time and expertise of users to help implement your programs.
7. Share data that you have been keeping in a drawer so that the public can take advantage of it and use it in ways that you couldn't have imagined.
8. Complement and enhance other communications, marketing, or engagement activities.
9. Evaluate the effectiveness of your policies and programs by soliciting input from users.
10. Brand and increase awareness of your organization.