

Creating a Social Media Strategy

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It's easy to get excited about social media when you hear some of the numbers: nearly 500,000,000 people on Facebook, millions of celebrity followers on Twitter, plus blogs, podcasts, iPhone apps, and something called Foursquare. How do you keep up? How do you know where to begin?

We recommend that you begin with a strategy before jumping in. While it's great to be excited about social media, it's simply another tool museums can use to support their overall mission. One thing that's important to keep in mind about social media is that, once you join a platform (like Facebook or Twitter) you need to maintain your presence there. Having a strategy before you begin (or creating one as soon as possible) will help you get the most from your social media efforts.

Social media is an amazing way to communicate about and interpret your museum. From an education/interpretation perspective, social media is flexible, fast, free (or very inexpensive), and allows you to potentially reach millions of people with a minimum of effort. It's also working for you 24/7, and is reaching people on their desktops or smartphones, making it a very personal form of communication.

To create your social media plan, there are **four elements** you need to consider.

1) Who is your audience?

Who precisely are you trying to reach, and why? What do you want to say to them? How is this audience using social media? Are they likely to be on Facebook, Twitter, or Foursquare? How active are they in social networks? You may decide to use social media to try to attract a new audience, which is fine. But do consider exactly how this new audience is using social media, and also whether your museum offerings are really appropriate for them. Make sure that what you're "selling" on social media matches your actual experience. A wonderful free tool for assessing your audience's use of social media is the Social Technographics Profile Tool from Forrester Research. (A custom analysis like this would cost in the thousands of dollars.) It's from an excellent book called *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff (Harvard Business School Press: 2008). More on *Groundswell* in a moment.

2) What is your mission?

All strategy efforts should go back to your mission, whether you're talking about audience development, fundraising, or an interpretive master plan. Like any other planning effort, social media should not be given to an intern as a project. It's unlikely that you would assign something as important as long-range planning to an intern; your social media strategy needs the same level of consideration. Once you have your strategy, you can certainly use younger staff members to implement aspects of the strategy, after some training about your museum's voice.

3) What is your institution's purpose?

How might that purpose inform or infuse your social media efforts? For example, the Brooklyn Museum's mission is:

to act as a bridge between the rich artistic heritage of world cultures, as embodied in its collections, and the unique experience of each visitor. Dedicated to the primacy of the visitor experience, committed to excellence in every aspect of its collections and programs, and drawing on both new and traditional tools of communication, interpretation, and presentation, the Museum aims to serve its diverse public as a dynamic, innovative, and welcoming center for learning through the visual arts.

It's not surprising then to see the rich array of new media that the Brooklyn Museum has employed in support of its mission, making its collections as open and available as possible and having a warm and welcoming voice flowing through all its social media efforts. They have also made a significant commitment to social media, both in staffing and in technology.

4) What resources can you devote to social media?

One thing I hear repeatedly from museums that are active in social media is that they didn't "have time" to do it, but they made time to do it, figuring out how to integrate it into their daily work schedules. The USS Midway Museum used a consultant to kick-start their process, who trained Midway staff members how to use it, worked with them on it for a few weeks, and then turned it over to them. Now, it's simply the first thing that Marketing Coordinator Cody Bray does every morning, along with his email. What they found is that they actually had a number of people on staff who had skills relating to social media that they could tap into, and the process of working with the consultant helped them all communicate better with each other. Once they had a common purpose of feeding their Facebook Page, people in marketing, A/V, and web services have all helped by updating web pages, editing video and images, and troubleshooting. If you have a one- or two-person staff, you need to be realistic about how much you might be able to do. But even maintaining a Facebook Page or Twitter account (especially if you are already using them personally) is well within your reach. Start by polling all your staff and volunteers to see who is using social media, and how they might be willing to help. You might find that someone in accounting has been writing a food blog for several years and would be happy to set up the museum's blog, or that someone else is highly skilled at editing videos for their kids' soccer team and could create online videos for your museum. Once you have your strategy, then you can tap into younger staff members or interns for help with implementation.

As mentioned before, *Groundswell* offers an incredibly helpful framework for thinking about social media. The authors point out that it's important to think about your goals, because the actual platforms will always change and new ones will pop up. Facebook will probably be here in five years, but it will look and behave very differently then it does today. Having a strategy will help you ride the wave of social media effectively. Groundswell authors Li and Bernoff define five ways that social media can help you interact with your visitors and members:

1) Listening

By listening to visitors, members, and non-visitors, you gain a huge amount of information about your audience. Before social media, a typical "listening" activity might be gathering press clippings that mentioned your institution. Museums often paid (and may still pay) a press clipping service to gather mentions in print and send them to you on a monthly basis. This has been replaced with using Google Alerts set to any key word, like your museum's name. This free service scans the Internet every day, and returns links to you via email any time that key word or phrase pops up. Free, and immediate. Another way of listening is through visitor studies, whether front-end, formative, or summative. Methods include interviews, questionnaires, tracking and timing, video/audio capture, and focus groups. Visitor studies are still highly valuable and relevant; they can also be expensive and time consuming. One way to use social media to capture aspects of a visitor study is to search for your museum's name on a platform like YouTube or Flickr. You will find any videos or images that have been tagged with your name, and gain a lot of information about how visitors are using you museum. This doesn't replace a true visitor study, but can be done at any time for free. Do this in a systematic way, and report back regularly to upper management about your museum's online profile.

2) Talking

Before social media, talking with visitors might have been accomplished through visitor studies (mainly through focus groups, as the other types are focused on listening as opposed to having a dialogue), and community advisory panels for exhibits, programming, or long-range strategy. But it was still what's called in advertising "push" communication, sending out your message and hoping someone is listening. Few places were actually conversing with visitors or guests. With social media, conversations are truly taking place on blogs and Facebook Pages.

3) Energizing

Energizing a community means getting people excited about your offerings and having them help spread the word. While this has happened informally for years through word-of-mouth advertising, social media now makes it possible to amplify the voices of these customer evangelists on your behalf. The California Academy of Sciences has recently launched a program called NightLife Insiders. They recruited six social-media-savvy fans of their weekly NightLife event, gave them special access, and asked them to post about their experiences. The NightLife Insiders always identify themselves as such (it's

completely transparent), and they blog, tweet, make videos, or create other content about the NightLife happenings. By deputizing these customer evangelists, the museum hopes to leverage the power of their individual social networks to benefit the museum within that demographic.

4) Supporting

Museums have always supported their communities by hosting events, offering education programs, and partnering with schools or other organizations. In the online world, Li and Bernoff discuss creating communities of users. Tech companies did this as a way of lessening their own support staffing costs, but many companies have found benefits to creating forums for like-minded people to connect around your topic. Cancer support groups can use websites like CaringBridge to communicate with loved ones while lessening the burden on family members and patients. The USS Midway Museum is in a unique position, having been in active duty for nearly 50 years, and having an active community of former sailors who actually lived on the ship. It was this community, in part, that helped bring the ship to San Diego and made it possible for it to become a museum. From nearly the beginning, the Midway's website hosted a forum for former sailors to find each other and communicate. Recently, they hosted the 35th anniversary reunion of the airlift out of Vietnam, called Operation Frequent Wind. Over a thousand people attended, including sailors, pilots, and former refugees. The Midway is getting ready to launch a special section of their website for members called My Midway, using the Blackbaud NetCommunity platform.

5) Embracing

The final level of social interaction builds upon the other four. Companies are using crowdsourcing techniques to build new products, and beta test products and services. The key question in embracing is, "What would you do if you were us?" In the museum world, Nina Simon's excellent book *The Participatory Museum* is filled with examples of museums that have embraced visitor input and interaction in various ways.

Interpretation and Marketing

Finally, how well does social media promote museum interpretation and education, in addition to marketing? In our experience, it does all three beautifully when used in a strategic way. One example is the power of online video. If you create a short educational video (1-3 minutes), that video can become part of a podcast series, it can go on YouTube, your website, your Facebook Page, tweeted as a link, and placed in your blog and on other collective websites related to museums like Museum 3.0. See the accompanying Podcast-in-a-day document for more details on how you can take one video and place it in more than 25 online outlets at no cost to your institution.

Lessons learned from social media

The Midway's launch into Facebook in January 2010 was full of lessons for the staff members. Facebook does not provide a "preview" mode, so once the Page went live it immediately began drawing fans, reaching 100 in three days. So we had to learn quickly to check our spelling, make sure event information was concise and accurate the first time, and generally get into the swing of Facebook very quickly. One specific note about

events is to be clear about whether an event is “free with admission” or includes free admission. We learned the hard way that this can be confusing for fans. If event information changes (but the event is still happening), make sure you edit the event listing instead of canceling the event on Facebook. If you remove the event from Facebook, every fan immediately gets that message on their Facebook feed. As a marketer, Facebook is an amazing tool, because everything you post immediately goes straight out to all your followers. We love this because it engages folks, connects people from different circles, and expands our reach, hopefully converting fans into My Midway members! Facebook takes on a life of its own and we’ve learned just by posting events and happenings, fans start conversations surrounding our posts. But social media doesn’t work if you simply use it to promote events, you need to learn to have a conversation and the marketing naturally grows out of that.

We encourage you to outline your strategy and get started. Feel free to contact us if you’d like to continue this conversation. You can follow the USS Midway Museum and Experienceology on Facebook and Twitter, or email us:
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