

Putting the Social Media Cart before the Horse

By Randall Craig and Gerald Bramm

Implications and Findings from the CSAE Social Media Benchmarking Survey

Are your social media plans strategic, focused, efficient, effective, and add value both to your organization as well as its members? (How do you know?)

Do you have evidence of the impact of your social media activities, especially given your Social media investment in time and dollars? (Or is it anecdotal at best?)

And have your efforts over the last year or two been guided by the "best practices" in the field, or are they guided by the momentum of the past? (Or worse, have you been distracted by the latest shiny social media object?)

We have seen many examples of social media initiatives developed after-hours by young and keen communications and IT staffers who believe in the promise of social media. They are explorers, establishing Facebook pages, Twitter profiles, and LinkedIn groups well before any clear strategy is developed – or approved.

By experimenting this way, these *Scouts and Rangers* develop or improve your social media organizational IQ, and often carve out roles for themselves as social media go-to people. (The problem, however, is that these folks already had a day job before social media burst onto the scene... and still do.)

But beyond the experimentation, how should social media be used to achieve organizational goals? To better serve and engage members? For advocacy? To drive event attendance? And to improve the membership value equation?

What are other associations doing in that area – and what are they planning to do in the next year? What lessons can be learned from them?

To answer these questions (and more), Bramm Research and Pinetree Advisors completed the first ever social media benchmarking survey for the CSAE, and it has recently been released. (The entire report can be ordered at <http://budurl.com/csae2012>)

Let's listen in as Randall Craig of Pinetree Advisors and Gerald Bramm of Bramm Research discuss some of the findings – and their implications.

Association Magazine (AM): First of all, how extensive was the market research itself?

Gerald Bramm: More than 440 associations answered one or more parts of the survey – 340 answered the survey in its entirety. The survey instrument was pre-tested

amongst members, and reviewed in detail with CSAE staff (for which we are very appreciative.)

Randall Craig: We asked 32 detailed questions on every aspect of social media strategy, policy, current and future usage, budgets, best practices, success stories, and disasters.

Gerald: The CSAE membership was very open with their experience, and the survey results – all 105 pages of them – is a great reality check. It is invaluable for an organization that wants to compare what they are doing with what other similar organizations are doing.

AM: Are there any results that stick out?

Gerald: There is a significant amount of data, graphics, and analysis within the report, and it will mean different things to different readers. But there is one item that did strike us as interesting: 65% of the respondents rely on informal comments and feedback when it comes to understanding member expectations regarding social media, and 23% admit to "not knowing" at all. Yet, the survey also shows that this year there will be the big rush to put social media strategies into place.

Randall: The gap between current knowledge and future intentions raises concerns. How do you know what strategy to put into place without asking your members first? Consider your own organization: how do you know your social media strategy will meet the needs of your members and other stakeholders? I should also mention that this question really needs to be asked twice: At the beginning, to determine the rudiments of the strategy, and then as part of an ongoing monitoring and measurement program. This will ensure that the members' needs are actually being met – and that an appropriate "return" is being generated for the social media investment.

AM: What social media sites are the most important for members?

Gerald: Facebook and Twitter are the dominant sites where it is believed that members expect a presence. YouTube is a distant third, followed by an association page or group on LinkedIn. We would have expected a higher result for LinkedIn; the lower ranking might be a function of what members *know* about each platform, instead of each platform's *suitability*.

Randall: The issue is also connected to a tough social media choice many associations must make: should they have their own "private" forum on their own websites, fully under their own control, or should they take advantage of the ubiquity of public (but lockable) forums/groups within sites like LinkedIn? The lower results for LinkedIn may only be a consequence of an already-existing discussion forum on their own site.

AM: What concerns do members have about social media?

Gerald: Lots! Here's a sampling from the report:

- Lack of participation/engagement from members
- Difficulty protecting brand image from damaging 3rd party social media online conversations
- Comments on social media not representative of general opinion
- Difficulty in demonstrating ROI

Randall: And here are some verbatim comments:

“Staff time allotment to manage social media.”

“Diminishment of the brand -- why belong to an association when you can communicate online for free.”

“Not having a clear social media plan with guidelines and policies for employees to follow.”

“The rapidly evolving pace of social media making it difficult to “keep up”.

“Dialogue among members, visible to external entities like government, conflicting with organization's official position (demonstrating fractured views or dissent that could weaken our advocacy).”

Gerald: These concerns are not simple concerns: productivity, ROI, risk management – yet 27% of respondents had no formal mechanism for keeping up with trends. Most rely on their inner circle and seminars/conferences to keep up to date.

AM: What did respondents say about their own social media best practices?

Randall: There were two general themes: that communications not be overly formal, and that they should be engaging and conversational in tone.

Gerald: Here are a few quotes from respondents:

“It’s about the conversation - treat it as peer to peer messaging.”

“Not to be too advertorial in messaging tone...to continually provide interesting, helpful messages that capture interest and attention, peripherally showing our organization in a positive light, rather than crowing about ourselves.”

“On social media channels be conversational, reflect the spirit of the organization.”

Randall: One of the models we use in our consulting practice is called *the Three Tiers of Social Media Activity - Passive, Broadcast, and Engagement*. The Passive tier is all about listening... and doing nothing. Broadcast is more about repurposing existing content through social channels. Engagement is all about the conversation and the development of community. The above comments speak to the importance of moving beyond the broadcast.

Gerald: The importance of a disciplined approach is also important. From another respondent:

“We treat social media like any other communications function - it has a strategic plan behind it and each tool is being used in a particular way to support the organization's overall goals and activities.”

Randall: Let me broaden this insightful comment in another way. Too often, social media is thought of as a marketing and communications tool, driven by the Director of Communications. Social media really needs to be considered a tool no different than the telephone; it can be used for just about any organizational goal, by anyone within the organization, to reach out to any stakeholder group, for any particular purpose. Used properly, it has the power to mobilize volunteers, to fundraise, to advocate, to recruit staff, to provide professional development (or support) to members, and so on. It is for these reasons that there needs to be a wider social media strategy; that it not be a communications-only initiative.

Gerald: Sadly, the data suggests that the reality is exactly the opposite: 61% of respondents reported that Communications/PR had responsibility for social media, followed by Executive Management (30%), and Marketing (28%). We can surmise that it is communications-led because social media usually starts in a Passive and Broadcast mode. Or the ad agencies that "advise" on social media are experienced only in marketing and communications.

AM: Any final stats that our readers might find interesting?

Gerald: One thing to stress is that we have provided detailed analysis by operating budget, staff size, type and size of membership, and by type of organization. So readers should take care to compare their own experience against appropriate comparators – not just the generic survey results. That being said, here are some data points:

- Almost one-quarter (23%) are not promoting their social media activities.
- Slightly more than one-third (37%) of those surveyed do not formally track their initiatives.
- Only one-third of organizations say they measure their social media success.
- Four-in-ten (41%) are not using any tools to monitor their social media activities. The most common tools are Google Analytics and Google Alerts.

Randall: And a few more:

- Very few organizations have documented social media strategies and risk management policies. (15% and 1% respectively). For the most part they would be described as a “work in progress” or non-existent.

- Social media staff training is either non-existent (in 45% of organizations) or rudimentary in most others.

The survey contains 100+ pages of tabulated data, charts, and commentary. It is available to CSAE members for \$229, at <http://budurl.com/csae2012>