Using Social Media to Engage Communities with Research: Creating a Community through Best Practices[1]

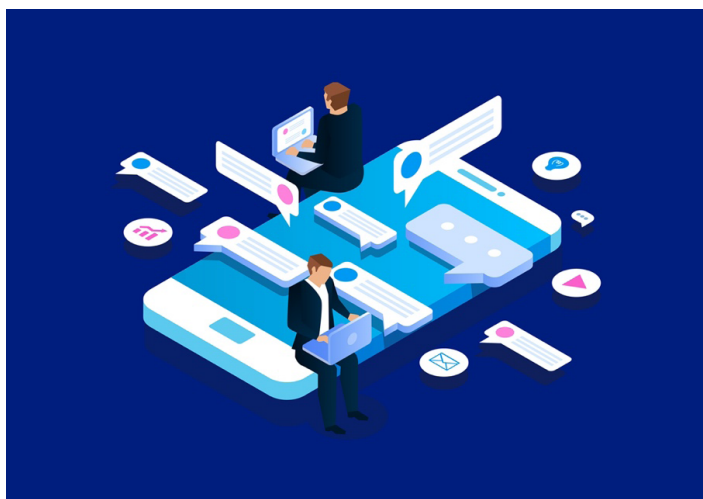Tyus D. Williams, Kathryn A. Stofer, Lisa Lundgren, and Kirsten Hecht[2]

Figure 1. Cartoon characters dressed as businessmen sit on top of a giant phone with online communication messages floating around them representing networking and interaction.
Credits: Getty Images

Introduction

On social media, success and popularity outside of any pre-existing notoriety appears to be attributed to how someone finds their voice and creates a community, but what do we mean by community building? Creating a community is the way you establish and ultimately present yourself through social media, combining marketing strategy, content production, and community engagement (Lair et al., 2005). In this document, our objective is to guide people through the preliminary stages of online community building to engage with a community about science. This document is part of a multipart series on social media titled Using Social Media to Engage Communities with Research.

The Function of Social Media and Online Communities

As technology advances and the internet population continually grows at exponential rates with young adults using the internet frequently over the years (Pew Research Center, 2021), organizations use various online communication platforms including social media to reach stakeholders, achieve communication objectives, and build relationships (Shin et al., 2015). Social media platforms provide a space not only for organizations to share information but also for organizations to interact with communities in a conversation (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Shin et al., 2015). Individuals such as scientists wishing to spread the results of their research to a broader community can use these same tools. Social media can also enable online communicators (e.g., science communicators) to hear directly from and engage in conversation

with people in their communities. Furthermore, a critical advantage to social media and online communities allows users to build themes and narratives online tailored to specific audiences, allowing organizations and personal platforms to distinguish themselves from others in online spaces.

Multidirectional or dialogic communication may disseminate information, but such communication also provides a mechanism to listen and engage with the public (Shin et al., 2015). To build an online platform to share and discuss scientific research, using dialogic communication strategies is the desired model to engage online communities and build an online presence to bring additional visibility to your work.

To build your community, we will next give suggestions on finding a theme, creating content/material for all interactions online, and establishing ways to engage online that build community and distinguish your voice.

Finding Your Theme

As a scientist or online science communicator or organization, ask yourself this: "what do I or we care about most?" This thought is the base that will support all your subsequent efforts. You have to first give yourself a starting idea of what you want to tackle with your social media efforts. Is your goal content-focused, such as sharing about local wildlife to help people identify or connect with what's around them? Is it focused on creating action or behavior change related to issues such as climate change or environmental justice? Are you trying to share the broader research process to bring new and more diverse researchers into your field? What are you passionate about? Sticking to a theme is vital for distinguishing your content as an individual or growing organization to attract your community while defining the major subjects of focus. This doesn't mean you can't post about anything else, but the majority of your content should relate to your theme in order to maintain interest and tell a story your community and network online can expect towards the future. Captivating stories and building relationships can go a long way to create communities with whom you can share your research to help them effectively use the best scientific information in their lives.

Content Considerations for Interacting with Online Communities

There are four elements that you should consider when interacting with communities in an online space. Consider: Who are you talking to? What is your desired outcome for the community? Most importantly, why is it important? Building these elements of your social media community in a format much like a logic model can coordinate and plan your course of action. We describe the elements in full below.

1. Who are you talking to? The demographic you target will change the entire trajectory of your narrative, rhetoric, and language you use to formulate your posts (Ward, 2018). Are you talking to young adults? Are you talking to seniors? Is your target community a specific group with particular social values? Regardless of who or what your community of interest is, you have to be tactful in the way you approach them. Take into consideration the values that people have, the interests, and the history of the community. This strategic approach goes a long way to ensure that your message is not only comprehensive but engaging to whoever may be listening.

2. What is your desired outcome? For each post or series of posts, when you are engaging with your community, ask yourself, "What is the focus of my discussion, and how does it fit within my overall theme? What do I hope my community will take away from this series or this post?" Some options may be sharing information and increasing knowledge, motivating action, or changing attitudes. Knowing what we want to achieve allows us to construct a clear and concise message.

3. Maintain the narrative within your theme so you stay on track. In the beginning, choose a few subjects within your theme to start with. For example, if you're an entomologist, perhaps you want to discuss the diversity of pollinating insects aside from just bees to increase awareness. If you study ocean and atmospheric science, the deterioration of air quality in response to climate change might be your central focus. No matter what your subject may be, there is likely a core focus of what you are interested in discussing with your community despite the numerous layers associated with it.

4. Why is your topic important? We emphasize this component, because you're not just sharing information, you're also advocating for the significance of the topic,

including, sometimes, suggesting particular behaviors or actions to adopt to improve the circumstances met with the situations presented within your discussions. Immediately tell your audience what you plan to share, that is, give them the "so what" up front. As researchers, many times we start with background information per our standard conference presentation model. Broader communities, however, more likely will want to hear why something is interesting or important up front in order to be drawn into your posts. As the speaker, you should understand why your subjects and overall theme are valuable and share them in a variety of ways that are succinct and understandable.

More strategies for building your communication practices for broad audiences can be found at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Communication Toolkit https://www.aaas.org/resources/communication-toolkit and in our EDIS documents on Public Engagement: https://journals.flvc.org/edis/article/view/127513

Finding Your Voice Online

Once you've set up your media channels and developed your theme, you'll then focus on building your community and platform online. Naturally, you're going to have a lot of individuals with similar interests, which can work in your favor in terms of having a community to interact with. However, with 93% of American adults online (Pew Research Center, 2021), and organizations, businesses, and personal accounts competing to accomplish their objectives online (Argenti, 2006; Pollach, 2005; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), creatively conveying information can aid in distinguishing your voice. Here are some suggestions on how to get started:

1. Create a unique event that will encourage content production. On social media platforms, some people have curated weekly events to engage with their community. For example, Twitter, which utilizes "tweets" as the output of dialogue, holds a compilation of various weekly events that engage people with a suite of topics, such as #StreetCreatures, #FossilFridays, #GuessTheSkull, #NameThatTrack, #FindThatLizard, #CougarOrNot, #Dino101, and #SciQFridays. All these scheduled events have different missions, which attract and engage different communities. These events ensure that your community knows when content is coming so they can anticipate and get involved. In addition to your regularly scheduled events, keep your community engaged with authentic material that you post intermittently; it keeps people involved in your activities and interested in what you are doing, which captivates a community.

2. Address important issues upon occurrence. Oftentimes on social media there will be trending topics that may be complementary to your interests and knowledge; it's wise to take advantage of that. If people are discussing a topic suited toward your expertise, then you should use that to your benefit creating an opportunity to hold discussion and share knowledge on the topic or issue. Wilcox and Cameron (2009) argued that the practice of dialogic communication is an extension of building relationships, which is critical in the process of addressing sensitive and important topics using online media. Communication is a method to build relationships; therefore, some ways to cultivate it online include (a) listening to stakeholders, (b) having a positive regard for stakeholders, and (c) being willing to change as the world changes (De Bussy, 2010). For personal use, listening to the public and being considerate toward people online forms positive public relations, which ultimately influences the quality of the outcomes (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011).

3. Building relationships online. One of the benefits of harnessing the strength of two-way communication strategies online is the ability to build relationships with various parties of interest (Shin et al., 2015). Within the concept of organization-public relationship (OPR), relationship-cultivation strategies are communication efforts to cultivate and maintain a quality relationship with the public (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Shin et al., 2015). Forming relationships online is an effective strategy to circulate information to a broad community. Particular relationship-cultivation strategies lead to different qualities of outcomes. Some of the strategies generated to encourage and cultivate positive relationships include access, openness, positivity, networking, task sharing, and assurances (Shin et al., 2015; Grunig et al., 2002). **Access** refers to the effort an organization (or individual) exerts to provide public audiences chances to reach it, such as by providing a range of communication channels. **Openness**, also known as disclosure, refers to the manner in which one discloses or shares information about the organization or one's personal life to the public (Jarreau et al., 2019). **Positivity** refers to the strategy or method that an organization uses to make the online relationship formed more enjoyable for the public. **Networking**, which is a popular term within online interactions and communication strategies, denotes an organization's or individual's effort to build networks with the groups to which the public belongs, like unions or community

groups. **Task sharing** refers to the extent to which an organization and the public work together for mutual benefit. Lastly, **assurances** refers to the lengths to which an organization assures the public or company their concerns are legitimate and the organization is committed to maintaining the relationship. Considering online organizations use all six of these strategies, personal users can use them in online science communication to build relationships as well.

Figure 2. Shot of a group of professional people of various races and genders seated at a table and having a discussion.
Credits: Getty Images

Using Storytelling to Engage Your Community

Social media applications such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook aren't just places to engage in dialogic communication and exchange ideas. They are also places to tell stories personally, which can make a difference in how organizations or individuals garner attention from a community and spread information. If a story has sufficient appeal and interest, it can spread beyond people's own networks in social media and potentially be shared around the globe (Lund et al., 2018). In other words, it can go "viral." Hence, if people have the capacity and caliber to tell stories effectively, the potential dissemination and reach of stories can result in them influencing millions of people. Thus, captivating storytelling leads to influence and power; it can affect discourses. Considering these elements, using storytelling as a strategy to gain social media attraction and attention online may prove useful as a means to sharing information with your communities. Bierman (2010) points out that without a special story, there is nothing distinctive about brands, and the message here can be applied to social media platforms used by organizations and individuals. Having a story along with the theme of the message tailored to your organization or personal platform can distinguish yourself amongst others in online spaces. For example, as

many media producers compete for attention on various social media platforms, appealing stories attract consumers who face a plethora of media choices (Lund et al., 2018). Supplementing communication strategies and efforts with the emotionally captivating power of storytelling can meaningfully engage your community (Lund et al., 2018).

Resources on creating stories and using technology for sharing them on social media can be found in the following EDIS documents:

Story Development (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/wc215)

Letting Them In: Sharing Your Story with People outside of Your Industry (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/wc216)

Face-to-Face Storytelling (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC217)

Storytelling through Social Media (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/wc218)

Using Narratives and Storytelling to Communicate Science with Nonexpert Audiences (https://www.pnas.org/content/111/Supplement_4/13614)

Summary

Online media, especially social media applications, are multifaceted in use. Organizations, individuals, and businesses can engage in the public in a number of ways to build community and establish a voice and presence. Building an online presence effectively for interacting with online communities and accomplishing objectives uses multiway communication to facilitate discussion and establish a functioning relationship with the public. Captivating stories and personal connections can go a long way to create communities with whom you can share your research to help them effectively use our best scientific understanding in their lives.

References

Argenti, P. A. (2006). How technology has influenced the field of corporate communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 20*(3), 357–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651906287260

De Bussy, N. M. (2010). Dialogue as a basis for stakeholder engagement. In Heath, R. L. (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 127–144). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Grunig, J. E., & Huang, Y.-H. (2000). From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationship, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes. In Ledingham, J. A., Bruning, S. D. (Eds.), *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations* (pp. 23–53). Mahowah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., & Dozier, D. M. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410606617

Jarreau, P. B., Cancellare, I. A., Carmichael, B. J., Porter, L., Toker, D., & Yammine, S. Z. (2019). Using selfies to challenge public stereotypes of scientists. *PLoS ONE, 14*(5), e0216625. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216625

Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review, 24*(3), 321–334. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(99)80143-X

Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management Communication Quarterly, 18*(3), 307–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318904270744

Lillqvist, E., & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2014). Facing Facebook: Impression management strategies in company-consumer interactions. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 28*(1), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651913502359

Lund, N., Cohen, S., & Scarles, C. (2018). The power of social media storytelling in destination branding. *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management, 8*, 271–280. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.05.003

Pollach, I. (2005). Corporate self-presentation on the WWW: Strategy for enhancing usability, credibility and utility. *Corporate Communication: An International Journal, 10*, 285–301. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280510630098

Rybalko, S., & Seltzer, T. (2010). Dialogic communication in 140 characters or less: How *Fortune* 500 companies engage stakeholders using Twitter. *Public Relations Review, 36*(4), 336–341. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.08.004

Seltzer, T., & Zhang, W. (2011). Toward a model of political organization–public relationships: Antecedent and cultivation strategy influence on citizens' relationships with political parties. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 23*(1), 24–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2010.504791

Shin, W., Pang, A., & Kim, H. J. (2015). Building relationships through integrated online media: Global organizations' use of brand web sites, Facebook, and Twitter. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 29*(2), 184–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651914560569

Ward, T. (2018, May 31). How to build your personal brand online. *Forbes*.

Wilcox, D. L., & Cameron, G. T. (2009). *Public relations strategies and tactics* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.