PART II

Social Media: Essential for Research, Marketing and Branding

by Karen Blakeman and Scott Brown

Adding Value: Independent Information Professionals

Social Media – An Essential Research Tool – *Karen Blakeman*

Personal and professional networks such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are where many people now exchange news and information. It is where they share gossip and ask questions about both minor and major issues. People share videos and photos on YouTube and Flickr. Social media is where they let off steam if they get bad service in a restaurant or an airline lets them down. And if they are really annoyed they may resort to a hate campaign via a blog: quick and easy to set up and picked up almost immediately by search tools such as Google or Bing. It is no wonder, then, that many companies and organizations of all types and sizes are using social media to monitor and respond to negative feedback and also as a marketing tool.

I work with all types of organizations, and one of the services I offer is advice on the use of social media as an essential part of research and reputation management. Googling on your own company's name or on the names of your competitors is not enough. Although Google, Bing and Yahoo all now incorporate social media in their search results, it is only a small selection and not a reliable way of finding out what is being said on a subject. Some personal and professional networks, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, limit the amount of information that Google can search, so you have to be a member of these services and logged in before you can conduct a thorough search. During my public open access workshops and in-house sessions I take people through each of the social media networks and show them how to monitor them more effectively and efficiently.

It comes as a shock to many of them that there is so much going on in social media. About three years ago one of my clients was dismayed that information about a new product had been leaked to the public several months before launch. They thought that they had managed to keep its development top secret. A quick search on Blogpulse – a search tool that concentrates on blogs – revealed the source of the leak. Blogpulse has a *Trends* option that displays a graph showing how often the words you have searched on have been mentioned in blog postings over time. For this particular company's product we found a peak of discussion immediately after launch, which was to be expected, and a larger peak about six months earlier. Clicking on the earlier peak displayed the postings and how the disclosure had occurred. There had been an industry conference that my client's marketing director had attended. Unfortunately he drank a little too much wine at the conference banquet and blurted out the details. There are bloggers at every conference and it only took one to overhear that remark and make that information public knowledge. On a positive note, many industry experts and gurus use their blogs to write about what is happening in their sector together with opinions and analysis of the significance of those developments.

Blogs are now a well-established means of publishing information and, while there is still a large amount of insignificant drivel in the blogosphere, many bloggers take care and time over their articles. For imparting information rapidly and on the spur of the moment people turn to Twitter.

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You have 140 characters in which to tell your followers and the world what is happening and of interest to you at any particular moment in time. It can be accessed from your desktop computer, laptop, iPhone – in fact almost any communication device. Someone could be tweeting on useful information they are hearing at a conference or complaining about the appalling customer care provided by a company. The former might be a link to a presentation being given by the keynote speaker that includes a glowing endorsement of your product; the latter, a serious breakdown in communications between your organization and a customer. But are you aware of either of them?

There are many tools that make it is easy to set up automatic searches and alerts for mentions of a company name or product. But finding the right tool for the job can be trickier, and this area is another in which I work closely with clients. Would you prefer to integrate Twitter with Outlook? Twinbox, a plug-in for Outlook, is perfect for this function. Or perhaps tools such as Seismic or Tweetdeck that can be used on laptops and mobile devices are more suited to the way you work.

Monitoring Facebook for discussions of you and your services or products is essential if you are to nip bad press in the bud. Respond appropriately and you can turn negative feedback into a positive story. Bad press can also creep into the professional network LinkedIn. Many LinkedIn users automatically send their blog headlines and Twitter feeds to their profile, and these posts can initiate wider discussions in the Groups.

Resource sharing in the form of PowerPoint presentations (Slideshare), videos (YouTube, Vimeo) and photographs (Flickr, Picasa) is a major component of social media. If you are looking for inspiration for a presentation, want to see what was discussed at a conference or simply need a photo for an article or publicity material, then social media is where it is all happening. Do check, though, the copyright before you re-use material in any form. It may be readily available and free, but that does not mean it is copyright free. Most people assign one of the Creative Commons licenses to their work, but that does not mean you can do what you want with it. One form of the license allows you to re-use and distribute the material as long as you acknowledge the author and do not sell the information or incorporate it

into a commercial work. Another gives you complete freedom to do anything with it. There is usually a link that provides you with further details – click on it.

These services are just some of the social media that can be used as part of your research strategy. Tracking all of them may seem daunting at first, but once you have done your initial search there are usually options for running and receiving automatic updates by RSS feeds. These can be pulled together into a feed reader such as Google Reader but, again, there are many other tools to fit every style of working. I am often asked to set up monitoring services for my clients. Once the feeds are running and I have identified how the client would like to view them, I then show the client how to edit and adapt the feeds to meet changing needs. One of the more popular tools is Netvibes. It is very simple to set up and customize and it is free.

An example of a Netvibes page is shown below (Figure 1).

So now you are ready to get started on your social media research strategy. If you are still feeling a little bemused, I am always available to lend a helping hand. How do you contact me? Through social media, of course.

FIGURE 1. Netvibes

TOP OF ARTICLE   < PREVIOUS PAGE   NEXT PAGE >
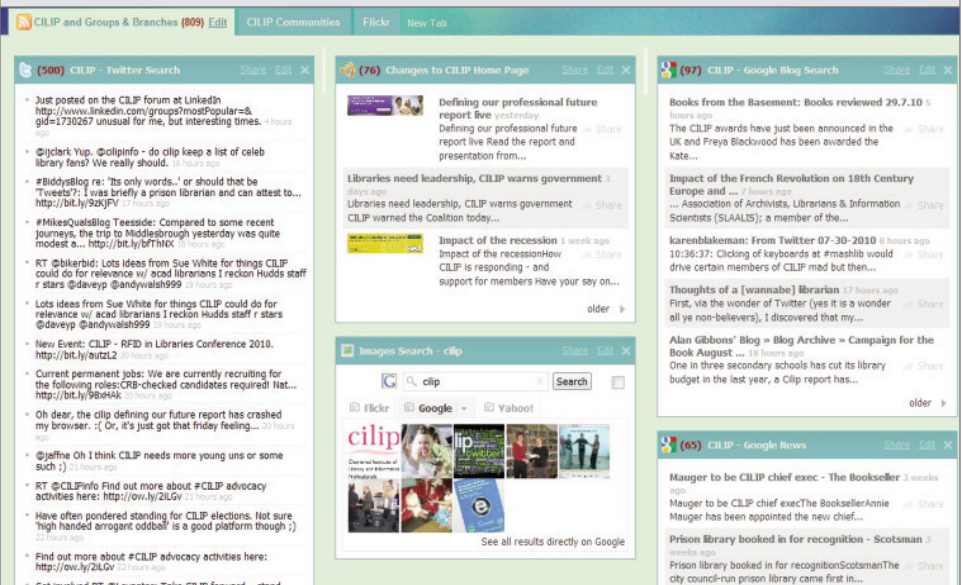
Social Media for Marketing, Branding and Awareness - *Scott Brown*

I've spoken with librarians, independent information professionals, small business owners, government agencies, corporations and job seekers about these tools for driving awareness, personal branding and marketing. Many of the principles remain the same, in any context.

Why do these tools work? These tools work because they are essentially online versions of in-person networking. When you go to a conference or a gathering, you get to share what you do and what you enjoy with the people you meet. You get introduced by people you already know to new people you don't know yet.

The same thing happens online. Because you are sharing your knowledge, expertise and personality, people can get to know you in more depth. Whether you're looking to enhance your professional contacts and online presence or looking for clients for your business, social networking tools can help.

They also work because, on the top tools, there is a high level of participation. You've undoubtedly seen invitations from friends, coworkers and colleagues to connect on some of these tools. Did you know that if Facebook were a country, it would be the world's 3rd largest in population? Did you know that 80% of companies now use social media tools for recruiting, and 95% of those companies use LinkedIn? Why not tap into these huge, worldwide networks?

From any professional standpoint, these tools make it easier for people to discover you. When you use social networking tools, you raise visibility, awareness and access to you or your organization. There are more ways people can actually find you and connect with you online.

Why should you care? The benefits of social networking tools are very similar to the benefits of in-person networking – whether you're networking within an organization, networking as an organization or as an individual. Some of the very real benefits you can realize are:

- Acquiring new customers
- Gathering feedback from your customers or community
- Raising awareness of your community efforts and connections
- Building your community network
- Fund raising

The beauty of it is, these benefits can apply to you no matter who you are or what your business is – independent practitioner, librarian, government agency, corporation or non-profit.

Differences in professional use. Many people come to social tools initially for personal use – for example, their friends or family may be using Facebook to stay connected. If you've only used these tools for personal use, it may seem strange to think about using them professionally. It's not hard to make the leap. To me, the main differences in using social tools for professional purposes are in tone and content.

You wouldn't typically walk into an interview and show pictures of your family. It's the same with social tools. If you're using them professionally, keep the content and tone professional. This doesn't mean you have to be formal – I think one of the best things about social tools is how much fun they are. But it also means thinking twice about posting that rant about your boss.

As I've observed my own and others' use of social tools, I feel that using social tools effectively requires a shift in thinking about yourself and how you show up in the world. Here are some of these shifts:

- From simply broadcasting information to being willing to have a conversation
- From being the authority (though you are the authority on you) to being a moderator
- From you talking to your audience to the audience talking among themselves

In some ways, it really requires a willingness to be more open and transparent and somewhat vulnerable. "What if someone says something negative? What if I get criticism?" With social tools, there is an element of loss of control, and you have to ask yourself the question: Can I handle that? Only you know the answer to that question.

What should you do? So you've decided you're ready to dive in or do more. Choosing the right tool or choosing a tool to add to your online presence should be a thoughtful process. Here are some factors to help you think about some of the current top tools:

Facebook – www.facebook.com
For local businesses, nonprofits, public libraries and other community

organizations, Facebook is a very popular tool to give greater visibility to your company, specialties, products and offerings in the community. When community is key, Facebook can be a powerful tool.

Blogs – such as Typepad, Wordpress and Blogger
Think of blogs as a form of informal publishing. They are great tools if you are creating a lot of content – opinion, editorials, research, news, etc. You can use blogs as forums to increase visibility and awareness of your thought, your vision and your interests. When content is key, blogs may be the tool for you. Blogs are content-intensive; you need to be sure you are committed to feeding the beast.

LinkedIn – www.linkedin.com
LinkedIn has grown to be one of the top global professional tools. I think of it as a resume or curriculum vitae on steroids. Recruiters everywhere are using LinkedIn to find executives and employees. The powerful thing about LinkedIn is that you can showcase your skills, your interests, your presentations, your awards and honors, your reading recommendations and more, all on LinkedIn. When connection is key, especially professional connection, LinkedIn is the tool for you.

Twitter –www.twitter.com
It's extremely easy to get up and running on Twitter. All you do is create an account, start tweeting (writing micro-posts) and following people. Often times, individuals and organizations use Twitter as an extra layer of advertising and contact. Twitter is truly like a flock of birds – sometimes there is a lot of noise, but you can quickly get the word out and find out the latest buzz. Twitter really is the intersection of connection and fast-moving content. When connection, content and speed are key, Twitter fits the bill.

Within organizations, it can be difficult starting to use these tools because of firewall and security issues. In all likelihood, though, people within your organization – faculty, staff, engineers, researchers – are using some kind of social tool, internally or externally, to collaborate and share information. I think of these as playgrounds, and the same rules that applied as kids apply to these communities:

- Go out and find the playgrounds, and think about which playgrounds appeal most to you. Where can you provide the most value?
- Ask to play. Tell the kids on the playground what you can offer. More often than not, the other kids will be happy to have you, and you will enrich the play.
- If you can't find any playgrounds, consider building your own, and invite the other kids.
- Allow yourself the freedom and the time to get used to your new tools. It takes time to build your networks and to start getting your content out there. Set a reasonable time frame for yourself, at which time you'll re-evaluate. At a minimum, give yourself at least three months with any given tool, even though this is a pretty short time frame. Just as it took you a long time to build your in-person network, it takes some time to build your online network as well.
- Don't advertise them until you're ready. Take the time to write some blog posts, compose some tweets or get your experience and skills into LinkedIn. Once you feel comfortable, you can let the world know. How do you do that?
- Integrate these tools with what you are already doing. Put your Twitter feed in your email signature. Make sure it's clear and easily findable on your site. Print it on your business cards. Use your traditional marketing properties to market your new online presence.
- Another part of integrating these tools is making them a part of your day. People work differently. Are you a person who likes to schedule things? Then establish a set day and time during the week that you'll use to update your blog, your Twitter or your LinkedIn profile. Personally, I like to build my social networking into other processes. After I check my email each morning, I tweet those things that I find interesting. For me, this works very well.

So – what's your plan? Hopefully you have some idea now of which tool to choose and how to get started. So, ask yourself:

- Which tool(s) would you choose? What's important to you: content, connection, community?
- What content would you share?
- How often – realistically – would you update it?

If you can answer these questions to your satisfaction, you're well on your way to an even more effective online brand. Like Karen, I'm always happy to help you sort out your online social brand – just contact me. ■