

Social media for fun and profit

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Back in July, UKeIG and CILIP Yorkshire and Humberside invited me to speak at a members' day about social media. It was a pretty broad brief, so I decided I'd share a few lessons about how I've used social media in my work and personal life, and share some tips I've picked up along the way. I called it "social media for fun and profit"; reflecting how social media can benefit both your personal and professional life.

I can't promise any actual profit though, sorry!

For fun...

I'm a pretty shy person. I'm not good at making small talk and getting to know people: I was always the one hanging around the back of dreaded networking events, avoiding eye contact and wishing I knew how to make conversation in the way that seemed so effortless for all my peers. I don't want to make sweeping generalisations here, but I don't think I'm alone in our profession in finding this sort of thing difficult!

However, people often express surprise when I tell them about how shy I am and how difficult I find social interactions. They tell me that this is not how I come across - I even had one person tell me that they saw me as a "power networker"! That phrase makes me cringe, but I took it as the compliment it was intended to be.

The big change for me has been social media, which has taken the fear and anxiety out of social interactions. It's great for getting to know people, and allowing them to get to know you, without the terror of the awkward silence. You can think about how you put yourself across, and make a good impression.

Now, when I go to professional events, I'm no longer walking into a room full of strangers. Thanks to social media, I can't remember the last time I went to an event where I didn't know anyone - there's always someone who I've chatted with on Twitter, or whose blog I follow, or someone who will mention that they've read my blog or an article I've written. I cannot overstate how much easier this makes the whole thing.

As well as tackling my fear of networking, social media has enhanced my professional life overall. I've been exposed to ideas and met people that I probably never would have come across offline. My professional network is global. I've collaborated on projects across time zones and with people working in organisations I'd never heard of previously. I've had invitations to speak at events and write for the professional press thanks to my social media profile. I'm certain I owe at least two jobs to the fact that the person interviewing me already knew who I was because of my writing.

I know people who have been headhunted via LinkedIn, and others who have launched successful freelance careers off the back of their social media profiles. These opportunities are available, if you put yourself out there.

...and for profit!

I've been involved in managing social media accounts at various workplaces: in higher education, in the legal sector, and in the charity sector. I've also managed social media accounts on behalf of professional bodies and networking groups.

In all places I've seen it done both well and badly. I'm going to share a few examples of each from my own experience. To protect the innocent and the guilty, I'm not going to say from which sector or workplace each example comes - I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions!

Leap first, look later

I get it: social media is exciting. You hear about the latest new social network and immediately have to sign up for it: It's new! It's shiny! It could be great for... And that's where many people come unstuck.

I'm actually pretty conservative when it comes to social media. I'm not an early adopter, I tend to wait and see what people are using it for and how it could usefully fit into my own workflow, before signing up for something new. I think that approach is especially important for organisational social media accounts, otherwise you end up with lots of accounts all over the place, no clear idea of what you are using them for, and inevitably some will get forgotten/neglected, which leads to lots of dead accounts floating around.

My advice is, before you sign up for a new social media account for your organisation, ask yourself three questions:

1. Can I do something with this that I can't (easily) do with another existing service?
2. Does this do something significantly better than any existing service?
3. Is my audience (e.g. my library users) already on this service?

If you can't answer yes to at least one of those questions, leave it alone!

Is anyone there?

If you have an organisational social media account, you must be responsive! Social media is a conversation, and people will expect you to engage.

One organisation I worked for had a Twitter account, but only used it to tweet press releases and links, and never responded to @mentions. This was actually harming our reputation, as the area we worked in was occasionally considered controversial, and we often had people commenting on Twitter attacking our position on various issues. As the policy was never to engage with these tweets, we didn't have the opportunity to set the record straight, even when those tweeting were twisting our words and position out of all

recognition; and worse, our silence was taken as admission that we couldn't argue our position!

Eventually, I and some colleagues managed successfully to argue for a more responsive policy, and began engaging with people who disagreed with us on Twitter. Far from making the situation worse, as was management's fear and the reason the non-response policy had been in place, engaging in respectful discussion via social media actually won round some of our most vociferous critics as allies.

The organisation has since set up a blog, which they invite other interested parties to contribute to - often people who have disagreed with them on social media - which allows a more in-depth discussion of controversial topics that are not often well-served by a 140-character argument! This is the best turnaround in social media use I've seen, and exemplifies what I believe to be best practice here: by all means, ignore/block people who are being abusive or aggressive, but responding to people who are trying to engage with you on social media is an absolute must.

Um, what are we doing here again?

I'm a firm believer in guidelines for organisational social media accounts - within reason. For organisational accounts it's common to have more than one person able to post content, and they may have varying experience with the capabilities, conventions and etiquette of any particular service, so some basic dos and don'ts can be really helpful. I would recommend providing general guidance on what sorts of things to post, when/how often, who is responsible for doing so, and how to deal with complaints/criticism. It doesn't have to be lengthy or detailed - a page is plenty.

The main problems I've come across are where either there are no guidelines at all - in which case people are uncertain of what to do, possibly nervous of getting involved in case they do something "wrong", which leads to accounts slowly dying as no one posts to them - or where the guidelines are far too restrictive. At one workplace, those in charge were so nervous about potential controversy that draft tweets had to be emailed around a seven-person "social media panel" for approval before posting - this worked exactly as well as you'd imagine!

So, **do**: create some broad guidelines to help people know what to post and how to respond to potential problems; **don't**: attempt to compose tweets by committee!

Personal touch

Social media accounts, especially Twitter, quickly become very dull if there's no personality involved. There's nothing more boring than a library Twitter account or blog that is nothing but service updates and notifications of opening/closing times. Adding a personal touch can be as simple as the person tweeting introducing himself or herself: I really like the *@NHSgiveblood* account for this. Their staff tweet in shifts, so at the start of each shift the person taking over the account introduces themselves, and signs off at the end.

It's also nice to post interesting/funny things as well as marketing stuff or service updates. We can't all be @OrkneyLibrary, but it's easy enough to throw in the odd link, cute pic or joke to make your feed a bit more interesting!

One organisation I worked at, in addition to having its own social media accounts, encouraged staff to set up their own accounts (if they didn't already have them), put the organisation's name in their profiles, and tweet/blog about what they were working on. The main organisational account often retweeted individual's posts about their work or interesting things they'd come across. That showed a huge amount of trust, and may not be possible for all organisations (I'm thinking in particular of public libraries, who are often very restrictive in what they allow employees to say), but it was very effective in giving the organisation a human face.

My top tips

Finally, I'd like to share the three things I think make social media use most successful, whether in your personal or your professional life.

The first point is to be **authentic**.

There's a lot talked about the need for "branding" yourself (which sounds painful) and creating a consistent online professional persona. Unfortunate neoliberal language aside, I think some of this does have merit, in that it's useful to think about how you are coming across.

However I think this well-meaning advice runs the risk of implying that you should only present approved versions of yourself. I think it's more important to just be yourself.

And that doesn't mean say and do whatever you like without regard for the consequences - obviously it's important to remember you are essentially in public! What I mean is don't try to pretend to be something you're not.

Don't be afraid to talk about something you're passionate about, for fear people will think you're unprofessional. Don't feel like you have to be serious all the time if you're not in person - but equally don't feel like you have to share every cat video even though you don't like cats!

Just be yourself. If people don't respond to that, or respond in a negative way, then they are probably not people you want in your network.

My second tip is be **generous**. Social media is social - it's about people! You only get out of a network what you put into it.

Read or seen something interesting? Share it! Someone written or posted something you like? Tell them! Seen a great opportunity you can't take? Offer it to someone else!

It doesn't have to take a massive effort or lots of time. Lots of micro-interactions are what make up a relationship. Being generous - with your time, with your attention, with your links and shares - is how you build a network of support. Or in less clinical terms, it's how you make friends.

And finally, the most important point - be **kind**.

There can often be a bit of a negative atmosphere on social media. It's very easy to misread people when you've only really got text to work with. So, be understanding. Be patient with people who misunderstand or misinterpret you, and try to pause before reading too much into someone else's posts.

Remember you only see the smallest snapshot on social media of who someone actually is and what's going on in their lives. Someone who's snapped over what seemed to you an innocuous comment may be struggling with something personal that's made it a really difficult topic for him or her.

I really think this underpins both of my previous tips. Being authentic means being open about who you are and what opinions you hold, and that requires kindness. And being generous is also being kind. Social media can really open up a whole world for you, but that it takes effort to make that world a place you want to be.