

# What's Your Personal Social Media Strategy?

Soumitra Dutta, HBR November 2010

The CEO of a global technology firm was invited to lecture at a local university on the future of the internet. After his presentation, a student in the audience asked him for his views on network neutrality: the idea that internet service providers shouldn't base their prices on the content their customers access. The CEO answered candidly, arguing in favour of price discrimination based on content; there was an engaging exchange; and he left satisfied with his visit.

Little did he know that, in the coming days, his semiprivate comments would enter a very public realm – the blogosphere – unleashing a storm of controversy around him and his company. (For confidentiality, names have not been revealed.)

The executive had no active social media presence – no profile on Facebook or LinkedIn, no Twitter account, no blog on the company's website. He had decided that social media weren't "his thing." In fact, he became aware of the buzz over his comments only after some people in the company alerted his communications group. There were lengthy discussions about whether and how to respond. Customers and other stakeholders were participating in the debate online, arguing strongly in favour of net neutrality. Employees were watching. Should the company issue an official response to comments in a private setting? Could the CEO wade into the public discussion when he had never been active in the blogosphere and had no other social media platform? In the end, he and his team did nothing, leaving everyone feeling frustrated and helpless.

For a comparison, consider the ease with which Tom Dickson, founder and CEO of small U.S. blender manufacturer Blendtec, uses social media. Until 2006, few people had heard of Dickson; today there aren't many business owners who haven't. That's because Dickson is the star of the *Will It Blend?* Series of YouTube videos, in which he subjects a host of objects (marbles, computer games, an iPod, an iPhone, an iPad) to the sharp blades of his products. Thanks to the campaign's popularity (the iPhone-blending video has been viewed more than 9 million times), Blendtec's sales have increased sevenfold in the past three years – impressive when you consider that each video lasts only about two minutes and is produced for a few hundred dollars.

Dickson, a grandfather, had no idea what YouTube was when his marketing director pitched the video idea. Now he is an internet rock star – a popular radio and television guest (with appearances on *The Tonight Show* and *Today*), a sought after speaker on viral

marketing, and a frequent participant in music videos and other companies' advertising campaigns. Thanks to the internet's global reach and his affable, down-to-earth manner, Dickson has developed a strong personal brand. Employees are proud of the recognition Blendtec has received, and thousands of fans have sent suggestions for his next video. How many CEOs of the *Fortune 500* can claim such connection with the people they want to influence?

## A Connected World

It's no secret that social media – global, open, transparent, non-hierarchical, interactive, and real-time – are changing consumer behaviour and workplace expectations. As a result, the best businesses are creating comprehensive strategies in this area to support their goals. However, my research on the organisational implications of social media and consulting work with dozens of companies in America, Europe, and Asia suggest that it is taking longer for corporate leaders to consider what the new paradigm means for them personally.

Take the world's leading CEO's as a sample. According to data from Fisheye Analytics, the top 50 chief executives (as identified by Morten T. Hansen, Herminia Ibarra, and Urs Peyer in "The Best-Performing CEOs in the World," HBR January – February 2010) are increasingly discussed in online venues, but few are using social media to spread their own messages: Only 19 were on Facebook only six had LinkedIn page, and only two – Google CEO Eric Schmidt and former Norilsk Nickel CEO Mikhail Prokhorov – were tweeting or blogging (although some used their corporate pages for blog). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the story is the same for leaders below the CEO level and that even those who have a social media presence aren't using it strategically. That is a mistake.

Today's leaders must embrace social media for three reasons. First, they provide a low-cost platform on which to build your personal **brand**, communicating who you are both within and outside your company. Second, they allow you to **engage** rapidly and simultaneously with peers, employees, customers, and the broader public, especially younger generations, in the same transparent and direct way they expect from everyone in their lives. Third, they give you an opportunity to **learn** from instant information and unvarnished feedback. Active participation in social media can be a powerful tool – the difference between leading effectively and ineffectively, and between advancing and faltering in the pursuit of your goals. You can use this tool proactively, as Dickson did, or reactively, as the technology CEO could have done.

In addition to exploring the benefits of a personal social media strategy, I offer here a framework for developing one that fits your goals, desired audience, and resources, and I

outline the challenges of wading into this developing territory.

## **The Three Realms of Social Media Leadership**

Social media (as defined by social media website Wikipedia) are “Media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques [and] web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues.” Virtually everyone has heard of such global platforms as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, but there are others popular in particular countries or regions – such as Orkut in Brazil and Tuenti in Spain – as well as company –and industry-specific networks, such as Medscape’s Physician Connet and Epernicus, for medical researchers. All social media platforms have grown in size and importance in recent years, as exemplified when Facebook, the most successful, hit 500 million members in July 2010.

Tom Dickson’s success shows the tremendous value of social media for personal branding. Starting from relative obscurity, he used a low-cost, accessible, no-barriers-to-entry platform to become, for a lack of a better word, famous.

Branding can also be more limited – within an industry, for instance. Consider Robert Scoble, a technology executive currently working for Texas-based web-hosting company Rackspace. When Scoble worked in sales support at NEC Mobile Solutions, he set up a blog to provide technical help to customers and solicit their feedback. Microsoft took notice and hired him to be a professional “spokesblogger.” But he used this corporate platform in a personal way, not only promoting Microsoft but also sometimes criticizing it and praising its competitors. In 2005, he started his own blog, Scobleizer, and he has since been poached by PodTech, *Fast Company*, and then Rackspace. He tweets, too (an average of 21 times a day, according to a 2008 study) and is now so well known that he is parodied – an April Fools’ spoof on British tech-news website The Register claimed he has an IBM bot.

Perhaps the easiest way to build your brand among colleagues is through internal corporate networks. In their book *Empowered*, Forrester Research’s Josh Bernoff and Ted Schadler point to the story of Frank Goudsmit, an underwriter in Chubb’s life sciences unit who was one of many employees to submit a business idea to Idea Central, an internal site launched by the company to spur innovation. Out of 608 suggestions, his was one of the few pursued, earning him new respect from colleagues and superiors and the opportunity to work with the IT group on a million-dollar project.

Social media also help executives engage with an array of contacts – both internal and external – in order to strengthen and leverage relationships; show commitment to a cause, profession, company, or product; and demonstrate a capacity for reflection instead of just

action. With 70 million members, LinkedIn is known as a place for job seekers to find employment and for entrepreneurs to raise funds. Jeff Epstein was hired to be the CFO of Oracle after a recruiter found him on LinkedIn, and Ger Hartner, founder of Irish software company Goshido, and his team used the network to send 700 messages to potential investors, raising \$230,000 in eight days.

Executives can also use social media to engage with employees, customers, and investors. In 2008, when Ben Verwaayen was appointed CEO of Alcatel-Lucent, he started blogging on the company's internal website, asking for input from all 80,000 staff worldwide and responding to their comments. He describes the blog as a "fantastic tool" that allows him to get beyond "corporate speak" into a direct dialogue with employees. Verwaayen believes that this open and clear communication positively influences their motivation and support for him.

The third reason for using social media is learning. Verwaayen, for example, has used his blog to seek feedback from more than 9,000 employees on his company's strategic plan. This not only improved the strategy but also helped bring everyone on board, thereby smoothing the implementation process. Andre Schneider, COO of the World Economic Forum, uses LinkedIn discussion groups and the postings of Facebook friends to learn about emerging trends and issues, filtering the feedback to retain the "few gems". He has also used local social media tools to learn about potential partners for events in China.

Padmasree Warrior, CTO of Cisco, uses Twitter to take learning one step further. A social media pro – whose tweets range from news and thoughts about her company to short poems she has composed – Warrior has often considered the views of her 1.4 million followers when developing industry presentations.

## **Your Next Steps**

Now that you understand the benefits of developing a social media presence, where should you start?

It helps to look at the two spheres of social media activity – personal and professional – against the target audience – private and public. These dimensions are represented in the exhibit "Finding the Right Presence." If your goals are in the far left box, you aim to build stronger bonds with friends and family members. If you're reading this article, you probably want to do more than that, but even this limited presence can help you as a leader by strengthening your social network. In the next box, the focus is on representing yourself as a team player through collaboration and communication with colleagues. In the third box, the purpose is to build a personal brand by engaging with people in your community and in

society at large. And the goal in the far right box is to win recognition within your profession, building networks and broadcasting your competence. This exhibit also outlines how branding, engagement, and learning can be achieved in each area, and lists some social media tools that can help.

To formulate your personal social media strategy, you need to answer the following sets of questions:

1. Are your goals personal, professional, or both? Are there conflicts between how you want to present yourself in the two spheres? If so, you must decide which is most important. Think about the three realms of social media leadership – branding, engagement, and learning – and what you are hoping to achieve in each. Make sure that your online profile does not contradict your activity in the “real world” and that your messages are authentic.
2. Is your desired audience private (a limited set of friends, family, and colleagues) or public (your industry or even the world)? Social media activity will necessarily increase your presence and make it easier for others to Google you. How big do you want that presence to be ?
3. What resources do you have? Does this project require your own time and money, or can it justifiably be done using office time and tech-team support? (For example, Blendtec helped Diskson reach a large audience by building a dedicated Will It Blend? Website and creating a YouTube channel.) Please note that outsourcing is not an option. In social media, authenticity in your message is key, and only you can provide that.

The answers to those questions can help you choose the right combination of platforms and decide how much time to devote to each. For example, if you want to strengthen relationships with colleagues and industry peers, get active on a company social network and LinkedIn. If you want to share your ideas with the broader community, start a public blog and use Twitter. Your platforms should also suit your location – for example, local networks may be more appropriate in Asian countries.

Continuity is important, so set aside enough time for each activity you want to pursue. A blog might require an hour every fortnight for writing and an hour or so every week for reading comments and posting responses. Twitter requires less time per interaction, but the frequency might be high for you to establish a meaningful presence.

## **The Risks of an Online Presence**

The risks of using social media can be grouped into three categories.

The first risk is how you manage social capital. With whom do you connect? The boundary between personal and professional spaces, and between private and public audiences, is

blurry. For example, should work colleagues be your Facebook friends? If so, how do you ensure that your non-work friends don't post pictures or comments that could hurt you professionally? If not, how do you tactfully decline requests to connect? No one should assume that a private social media presence will stay that way. On the flip side, opening yourself up to public poses its own risks. How do you vet the people with whom you are connecting? How do you respond to inaccurate or abusive posts? My advice is to build your audience slowly and be selective about your contacts.

The second risk is about managing intellectual capital. What do you communicate about? Corporate communications and legal departments tend to worry about employees who are active online. One concern is that the company's message will be muddled; another is a possible breach of industry guidelines or government regulation. Still another is concern over intellectual property: The law is tricky when it comes to ideas developed on a social network. The personal/ professional and public/private divides also come into play. Seventy-five percent of U.S. recruiters and human resources professionals say they research candidates online, and tales of employees fired by bosses who disapproved of their Facebook or blog content are common. What you say online matters, especially because it can be very difficult to erase (at least until the future that Eric Schmidt envisions – the one in which people can start fresh with new profiles at age 21 becomes reality). Set some guidelines about what information you should and should not disclose. Be authentic and consistent across spheres, online and in other media. And remember that anything you want to keep private and maintain control over should not be posted on a social media platform.

The third risk is managing your progress. How do you maintain momentum? The success of your social media strategy will depend on your resources and the quality and authenticity of your message. But how do you ensure you're not wasting your time? It's easy to tell how many Facebook friends and Twitter followers you have, but, depending on your goals, you should also consider social media monitoring tools, such as Google Alerts and TweetDeck (both are free) or Radian6 and Fisheye Analytics (both charge a fee). To evaluate whether you're engaging and learning effectively, keep track of how many useful connections you make each month or the number of ideas you develop as a result of social media interaction.

Social media are here to stay. They are changing the way we do business and how leaders are perceived, from the shop floor to the C-suite. And they give leaders a new, low-cost tool for personal branding, engaging in conversations with stakeholders, and learning from new sources. By looking closely at your goals as a person and a professional, your target audience, and your resources, you can choose the platform

that's right for you and head off any risks.

## Finding the Right Presence

<b>Personal and Private - Family and Friends</b>	
<b>Message</b> I want to keep in touch with you	<b>Goals</b> Brand: Show commitment to your relationship. Engage: Strengthen your ties. Lean: Keep abreast of changes in your social network.
<b>Sample Social Media Tools</b> Facebook	
<b>Professional and Private - Work Colleagues</b>	
<b>Message</b> I am a team player, and I want to collaborate with you	<b>Goals</b> Brand: Enhance your image at work. Engage: Collaborate; boost productivity and effectiveness. Lean: Leverage your colleagues' input.
<b>Sample Social Media Tools</b> Yammer and other corporate platforms	
<b>Personal and Public - Society</b>	
<b>Message</b> I am passionate about ideas and want to share them with you	<b>Goals</b> Brand: Become known for your ideas. Engage: Find new outlets for your passion. Lean: Leverage others' ideas and viewpoints.
<b>Sample Social Media Tools</b> Blogs, YouTube, Twitter	
<b>Professional and Public – Professional Peers</b>	
<b>Message</b> I am competent and growing professionally	<b>Goals</b> Brand: Build peer recognition. Engage: Find new opportunities; show commitment Lean: Boost industry knowledge; develop yourself
<b>Sample Social Media Tools</b> LinkedIn, Twitter, and sector-specific communities	

## **Social Media Must-Dos**

### **Google Yourself**

It sounds obvious, but do it regularly and then compare your results with those you get from searching your peers.

### **Protect Your Identity**

Purchase an internet domain in your name and use it to open accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

### **Create a Business Profile**

Choose a broad network such as LinkedIn or an industry-specific one. Join relevant groups and communities.

### **Use What You Have At Work**

Contribute to platforms set up by your employer. Reach out to colleagues.

### **Post Public Content**

Update your Facebook and LinkedIn pages; participate in a discussion group thread; tweet; upload a presentation to YouTube.