Social Media, So Easy a Kid Can Do It

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes some of the fundamentals of new social media, and how they can be applied to the challenges utility communications staff face. The objectives are to define terminology for this new media, explain differences between some of these new channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, offer guidelines on how utilities can benefit from these new media channels, and to provide current examples of how utilities are leveraging these new tools.

Social media is not just a passing fad to be ignored, or something to be feared. Many utilities are using these tools to expand their communications options, learning more about their customers and providing better customer service.

Social media is also not a silver bullet to solve all your problems, but it does open up new ways to reach demographic groups you may be struggling to reach, and may prove more effective than other channels for certain functions. Properly executed, it is a good way to reach younger customers, who are unlikely to respond to traditional marketing.

Although the forms will certainly change in the coming years, it is a safe bet that social media in some form will be with us for a long time. As traditional media like newspapers are steadily losing readership, social media communications continue to explode.

Introduction

Currently, many utilities are asking the question, "Should we be on Twitter?" (or Facebook, YouTube, MySpace or the latest craze). That's probably the wrong question. You shouldn't be on Twitter just for the sake of being trendy. The better approach is to ask what gaps exist in your communications with customers and other stakeholders. Are there demographic groups you aren't reaching? Do you need a more cost effective way to communicate energy efficiency information? Do you need a new channel to disseminate outage or other crisis information? Do you want to strengthen your connections within the community? Depending on those answers, there may be a very good fit for some of the new media.

Social media provides another advantage over traditional methods. The development of an online community can greatly increase the impact of your message, reaching well beyond the perception of an advertisement. The participatory elements of social media, while uncomfortable to our conservative nature, expands your reach and access to those most likely to ignore other channels.

Background and Definitions

The web has evolved from the early days of a one-way, tightly controlled communication to a much more dynamic and participatory medium. Often defined as "Web 2.0", the new generation of web communications includes much more user generated content, a clear break from the Web 1.0 world of a content publisher, such as a retailer or other business, providing static content to users whose only role was to receive that content.

AOL was an early web pioneer, and while they opened up the internet to many new users, their service seems primitive by today's standards. Their model was called a walled garden, as they controlled what internet content could be accessed. Within a few years, a more open access model had developed with freer access to content, and search engines such as Google and Yahoo became dominant internet forces. The next step, which came to be known as Web 2.0 involved the participation of the web user as a contributor of content, not just a recipient. Various forms of interactive applications evolved, including blogs, web broadcasting, social networking sites, and online photo and video sharing.

More recently, these applications have migrated to mobile devices such as smart phones, increasing the access and traffic on the applications as communication through these media are no longer constrained to a computer.

The most striking thing about the new social media is the cost, in most cases free, at least for the dissemination of the information. There are still the internal costs associated with producing and approving content, these will vary with your objectives and internal controls. The downside that accompanies this cost advantage is the advertising present on the web applications. Corporate users may not like the ads that would appear alongside their messages. Most of the applications use some type of intelligence, so the ads are driven by geography and interests of the individual user and most web users are accustomed to these ads, so much so that they are nearly invisible.

Some of the most common tools available for use are described below, and summarized in the table that shows the attributes:

Media/ Channel	Communications Niche	Two Way?	Select Recipients?	Select Contributors?	Difficulty to Implement
RSS Feeds	Outbound messages pushed to subscribers.	No	No	NA	Easiest
Facebook	Share information and invite comments from friends	Yes	Yes	Yes	More difficult
YouTube	Post videos online, users can comment and forward links	No	No	No	Easy to post, harder to produce content
Blogs	Online discussion formats, which can be moderated for content	Yes	No	Can be moderated or restricted	Requires time to produce content and moderate replies
Twitter	Broadcast of short messages, can reply to all subscribers	Yes	No	Can block users	Requires time to produce content and moderate replies

RSS Feeds—a one-way opt-in communication path which allow users to subscribe to various news sources, and receive updates from those sources. The news postings are listed in a browser or separate applications. From the user perspective, you can choose your desired media sources, and receive only those updates you

choose. Utilities can set up a single RSS feed, or break it out by topic such as community relations, conservation, or investor news.
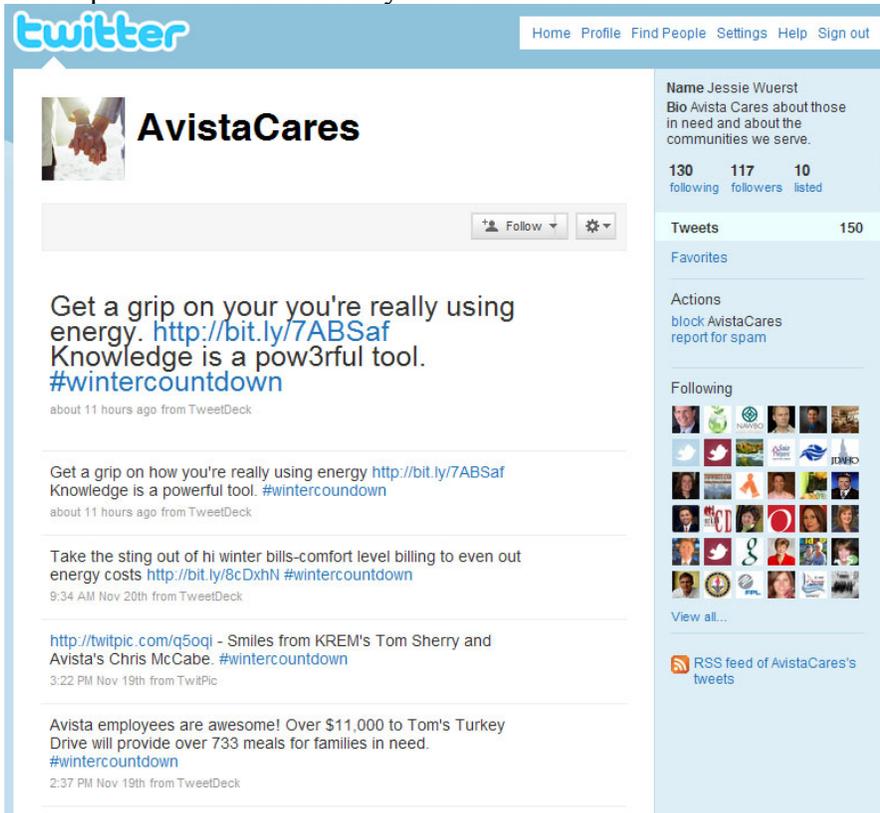
Facebook—the most common social network site today, with over 300 million active users. Participants create their online identity with varying levels of information, and invite "friends" to opt in to exchange information. Users post information to their Facebook page, and their network of friends can see the updates when they access their Facebook account, or can set up notifications when updates are posted. Only those who are approved by the person running the Facebook page are allowed to contribute material. Corporate sites operate similarly, but use the term "fan" instead of friends for those who are subscribed to receive the updates.

YouTube—the most common site to post and view video files. Although many corporate IT departments discourage or even block access to YouTube, it is the easiest way to share video files. It requires no software downloads or special skills, and doesn't consume bandwidth like other video hosting options. Videos can be embedded in a webpage, or set up on a company YouTube channel. Early adopter utilities are using YouTube to share weatherization tips, promote community events, and post messages from their officers.
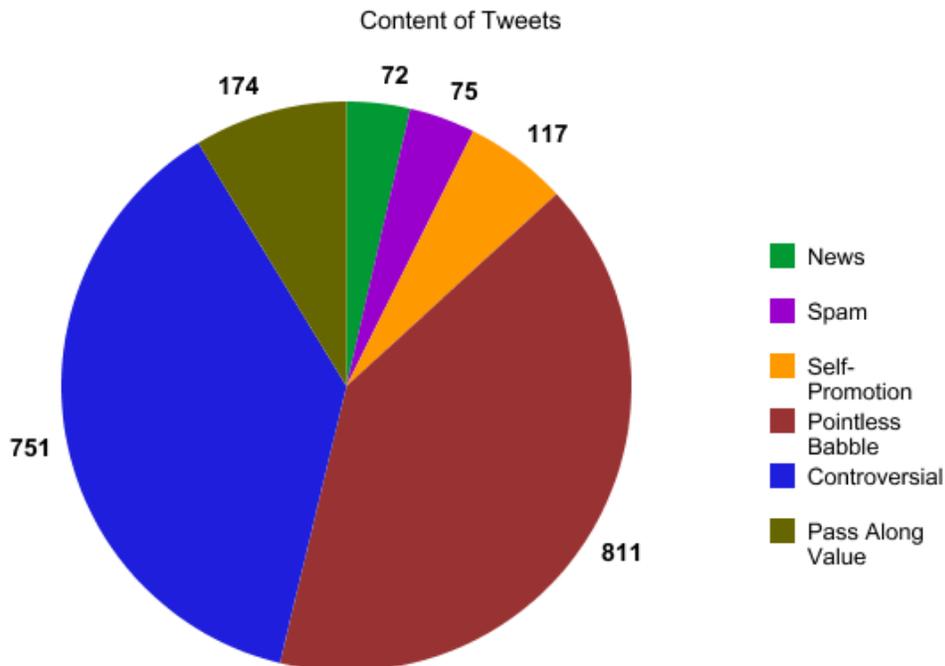
Blogs—a very common way to post content, and invite comment from anyone who is listening. You can exercise editorial control over the comments you get, but at the risk of devaluing the communications. If it's perceived as a pure company line, interest will be limited. Although it feels very risky, it is usually best to allow reasonable dissenting opinion and respond in a responsible, transparent and genuine manner. Better these comments are on your blog than elsewhere, because they will show up elsewhere anyway.

Twitter—provides a way to exchange very short (140 character) text messages, known as tweets, along with links to longer messages, photos or videos. This makes it a natural fit to draw traffic to the other tools and to a company website. Anyone can "follow" your Twitter posts, known as Tweets. From your Twitter account, you can choose to follow anyone else on Twitter, and when you access Twitter you will see all the recent posts from the sources you chose to follow.

The content of Twitter varies greatly, and as expected, much of it is "Pointless Babble" to quote the authors of a study by Pear Analytics, below. That said, there is a place for short but meaningful, messages, such as outage messaging.

Content of Tweets

News — 72
Spam — 75
Self-Promotion — 117
Pointless Babble — 811
Controversial — 751
Pass Along Value — 174

Kelly, Ryan, ed. (2009-08-12), "Twitter Study - August 2009" (PDF),
Twitter Study Reveals Interesting ResultsAbout Usage, San Antonio,
Texas: Pear Analytics. http://www.pearanalytics.com/wp-content/
uploads/2009/08/Twitter-Study-August-2009.pdf

The dynamics of social media are very different from typical marketing. The ease of forwarding or relaying content to one's entire network of Friends, Fans or Followers means that a message can quickly be seen by thousands of people—a very important consideration to remember before you post anything! Anything humorous (or risqué but that's probably not relevant here) has a good chance of being passed along, and if you can provide entertaining content, you can get out your message for virtually no cost by users sharing it with their networks.

Current Observations

Most utilities, true to their conservative nature, have been slow to adopt new techniques and practices in web communications, although that is changing. According to a Chartwell report from 2009, over 30 utilities are using Facebook, and that number appears to be growing rapidly. Even more are using Twitter to post short messages, for general announcements, energy efficiency messages, and outage notification. Public power utilities are much more likely to use these new media. This is likely due to stricter controls on communication within investor owned utilities.

Some of the more adventurous companies are taking the first steps into this new media. Nashville Electric Service, a larger municipal utility is a good example. They currently maintain a Facebook page, Twitter account and a YouTube channel. There is a considerable amount of cross-linking between the three, as would be expected, and they post information on general efficiency topics, community events and corporate news.

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative offers the same three media channels, plus podcasts of their audio files including a weekly radio program. They have produced their own video content on conservation topics and community events.

Avista Utilities currently runs a blog and two different Twitter accounts. They use the new media to give their company a personal touch, and supplement their conservation promotions.

What about security?

IT security is a valid concern. Most of the new media don't present any specific concerns with the security of the corporate network, as they operate on the public internet, and wouldn't create any pathway into the intranet or secure areas. There is the potential for generation of SPAM emails based on the information published, but no more so than from information that is available on the existing website. For most uses of social media, they will be reiterating messages on the website, and pointing users to the main website for additional information. There shouldn't be any need to beef up IT security procedures as a result of adding these new communications channels, so long as they are managed just like any other channel.

What's Next?

Many utilities will avoid these new and potentially risky communications media, because they are accustomed to controlling their message, which isn't possible with participatory, Web 2.0 channels. At a minimum, utilities need to at least listen to the often unflattering content that exists today, and from there decide on an appropriate response. It is advisable to proceed with caution, starting in a listening mode, by monitoring what's being said about your company already. From there, you can evaluate how to proceed and produce your own content. A good next step is to use social media to point to your website and other communications; they should be interconnected, feeding each other.

The objective is to build a community. The new media today provide a unique opportunity to inform, improve your service, deal with complaints, and learn more about your customers. It should be a part of your strategy to humanize your company. Many utilities are doing this by including names of their blog contributors, or having the Twitter access assigned to an individual, even if they have support staff behind them.

Summary

The concept of social media is certainly not going away, although the forms will continue to change. These revolutionary communications tools provide a tremendous opportunity to achieve your objectives at very low cost, although they include some risks and growing pains. Our challenge is to tap into social media to solve the increasingly tough task of how to reach our customers amidst all the clutter in media today.