

What It Takes To Start A Social Media Program, And Why You Need To Do It Now

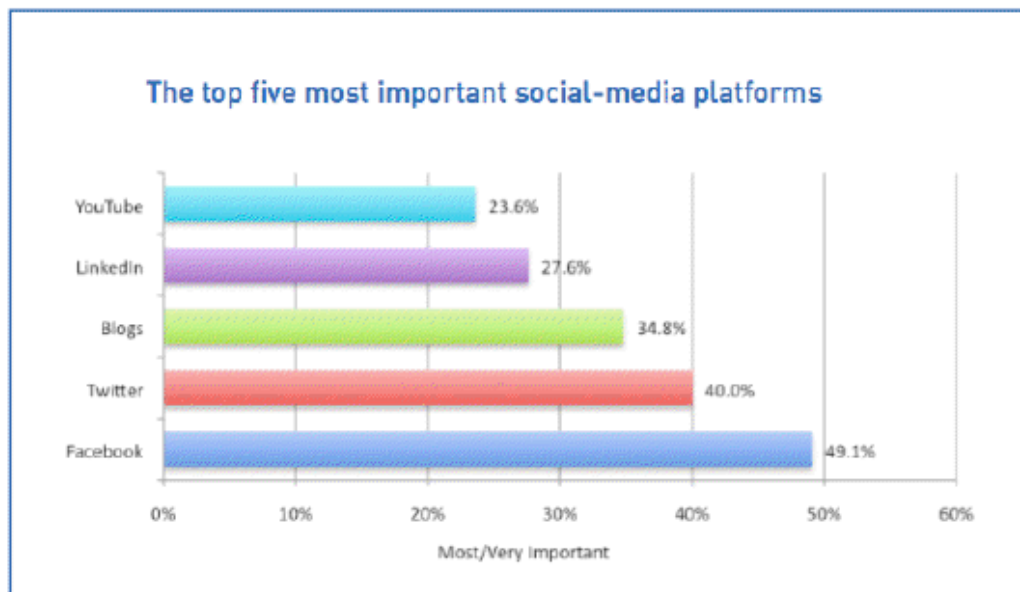
by Cathy Ann Sauer

If Social Media 2010 did one thing, it threw a bucket of ice water on anyone still in denial about how the new media is changing the way companies do business. The utilization of social media channels for B2C and B2B is on fire.

In June of 2010, over 6,000 executives were part of a study by SmartBrief, Inc. to determine social media usage by businesses. The results provide statistics regarding why and how companies are adopting and integrating social media into their mix.

Here are a few key points:

- 66.5% of companies surveyed adopted social media in the past 18 months
- It takes time for companies to incorporate social media effectively
- Brand building is currently the primary purpose for business social media usage
- Lack of management support and confidentiality concerns top the list of obstacles to social media adoption
- Companies are focusing on the “big five” platforms: YouTube, LinkedIn, Blogs, Twitter and Facebook



From [The State of Social Media for Business 2010](#) by SmartBrief, Inc. & Summus Limited

Social media entrepreneur Peter Shankman states that it doesn't matter if customers have a

BlackBerry, iPhone, iPad, TV, or computer; they are going to go where they can get information quickly.

“It’s about how people interact with information they can get from you, when they need it. Can they find what they need, when they want it, wherever they are? For the hospitality industry - hotels - it’s never been more important.”

When it comes to the hospitality industry, nothing is bigger than TripAdvisor. With over 40 million reviews posted, hoteliers obsess over rankings and reviews. Despite the recent spotlight on TripAdvisor with regard to whether they can be held liable for customer comments and speculation that reviewers are offered incentives by hotels, in the hotel world, TripAdvisor is the poster child for social media. Its existence sums up why hotels are scared of social media and why they cannot ignore it.

"We often hear from travelers that how a property responds to criticism has more influence on their booking decision than the criticism itself."
- April Robb, TripAdvisor **

The Only Thing We Have To Fear...

Now is the time to sweep uncertainty and fear out the door and get with the social media program. That’s because today’s business climate demands you take hold of every opportunity or risk getting lost in the stampede. Social media offers these opportunities, in spades.

“Your audience is going to go to the place where it is easiest to get information. If they can get it from Hotel A quicker than Hotel B, they are going to use Hotel A every time. If you’re Hotel B, you’re out of luck.”
- Peter Shankman

Keep in mind, the days of the wild, wild west - when you might just jump in and test it - are over. Being online and engaged is more sophisticated than before. Just as with any company endeavor, you need to have clear goals and objectives, determine how you will approach it, manage it, measure it.

The fears businesses struggle with as they consider the social media world are understandable. Fear of negativity. Fear of time assets. Fear of dollars spent. Fear of control. The reality is, if you do not have a social media program for your hotel, here’s the one and only fear you should have – everyone else is there, and you aren’t.

To help initiate your social media program, take a look at how one hospitality company took the plunge over the past 12 months.

Orange Lake Resorts, home to Holiday Inn Club Vacations, is in the midst of a multi-tiered adoption and roll-out of a social media program for their brand. Their due diligence is a

strategic primer in the careful consideration it takes to successfully enter the social media arena. From the early discussions of “Do we?” to the “Yes we do, and this is how,” the company is engaged in a phase by phase program integrating social media into their marketing and operations mix.

“Making the decision as a company to enter into social media is not an easy one. But when considering the number of conversations that are taking place and the opportunity to be a part of them, then the value of engaging with social media becomes clear. Once a company decides to participate in these conversations, it’s important that the organization as a whole is ready to embrace it, and that the company’s voice will be both genuine and consistent.”

- Don Harrill, President & CEO, Orange Lake Resorts

Where Does It Live?

Although Orange Lake Resorts was in agreement as a whole about initiating a social media program, the nuts and bolts beginnings were bred out of the corporate communications department. Headed up by Stacey Sutherland, Vice President, Corporate Communications, the department includes Brooke Doucha, Senior Manager, Corporate Communications, and David DeJesus, Manager, Web and e-Commerce. As part of the process, Keith Strickland, Social Media Specialist, was brought on board last summer.

Sutherland: “While our brand is Holiday Inn Club Vacations, our product is the Club, and we felt the best way to launch the program was with our flagship product, Orange Lake Resorts. Since this resort has equity in its 25 year history, and was founded by Kemmons Wilson, it made sense to start there. Although we are a time share company and a developer, we market the brand to vacationers, with the idea that once you’ve stayed here, you’ll see all it has to offer.”

Once the decision was made to move forward, the team came up with list of social media questions it asked of itself, its executives, and its business units:

- What is it?
- How does it work?
- Why should we participate?
- Why now?
- Where should it live?
- Who should we hire?
- Who needs to be involved?

Doucha: “It was essential for us to first develop a strategic plan. We wanted a clear roadmap for success, our guideposts and guardrails. This was a necessary step prior to moving forward with hiring a social media consultant or employee. We needed to establish goals and objectives, which are: create advocates, increase brand loyalty, and

drive utilization. Today the goals are the same, but the path is evolving.”

Strategy:

The long-range strategy of Orange Lake Resort’s social media engagement program is to leverage both established and emerging online social and user-generated content platforms as new, official communication vehicles that will assist in establishing the Holiday Inn Club Vacations brand and its credibility for consumers to “consider us.”

Goals:

While each social media initiative is shaped by individual business unit goals, Orange Lake Resorts is looking to social media to holistically:

- Create more advocates for our product and company
- Increase brand loyalty
- Shrink the emotional distance between Holiday Inn Club Vacations/Orange Lake Resort and its current and potential customers
- Identify new touch points as a means to possibly increase revenue

Approach:

1. Discovery/Research

- Identify audience
- Conduct competitive assessment
- Identify tools

2. Research Analysis

- Desired audience
- Competitive analysis

3. Business Objectives/Parameters

- Identify social media business objectives
- Identify stakeholders
- Establish internal business rules and responsibilities
- Resources

4. Content Strategy

- Define positioning statements for each key audience
- ID tools, create channel-specific communication strategy
- Develop content and delivery schedule for each tool
- Develop communication plan for social media presence

5. Going Live

- Create company profiles for each social media tool

- Activate Social Media communications plan
- Monitor content and efforts and adjust as needed

6. Success Metrics

- Determine key performance indicators

Who Will Help Us Bake The Bread?

The next step was to hire a professional. The choices considered were an in-house employee, outside consultant and/or agency. I know because I was among those who went to speak with the group. It was at that time I saw the level of thought put into designing the program, and I hoped they'd agree to share some of it in the future.

Sutherland: "What we determined is there is no so-called 'social media expert.' The realm changes daily. So our executives said 'Who knows our business better than us?' That is when we decided on an inside-out program. We had already interviewed consultants and agencies and determined an in-house staff person was a better fit."

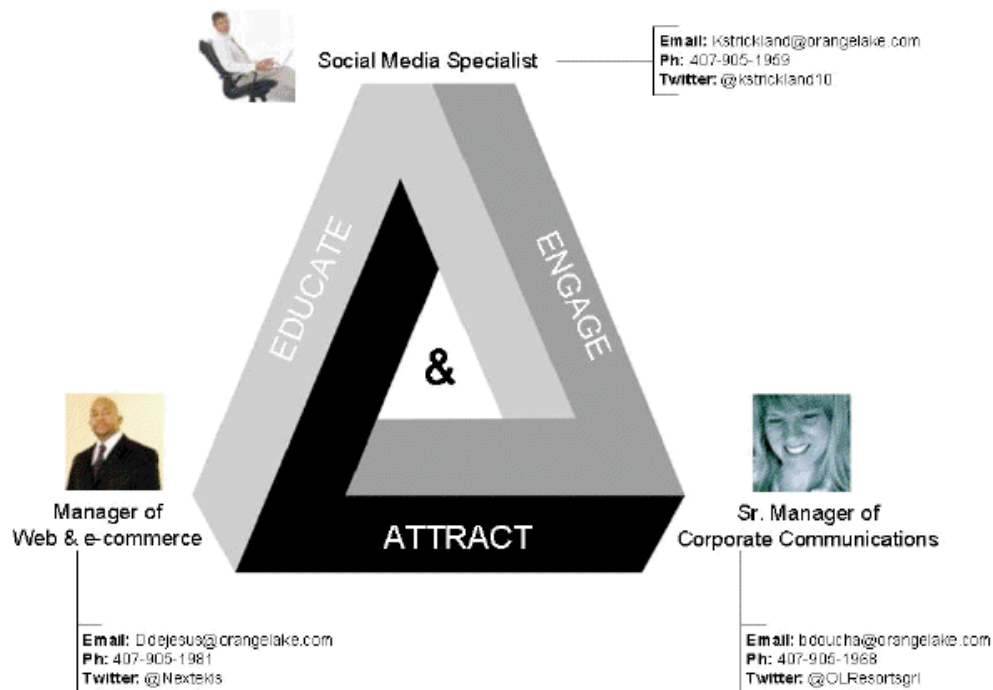
The perfect fit was Keith Strickland. A seasoned communications pro with a background that involved both corporate and agency experience in PR and guest relations, Keith brought both credentials and chemistry to the table.

Strickland: "My background is PR and guest relations on both the agency and corporate side, so the fundamentals of communication are there. I already understood the value of social media from an internal standpoint. Today there is an intersection in the web of communication where PR and SM meet. You need to recognize that and understand what it takes to make it a success."

Doucha: "We put Keith through an intense two week "on-boarding" process in order to minimize the learning curve. We wanted him to learn who was who in Human Resources, Operations, the Club, Market Rental. Each business unit was asked to share their goals with Keith and advise how we could help. Then we sent him to enjoy a three day vacation at the resort. We wanted him to be able to speak from experience. The entire process was a kind of boot camp."

Strickland: "It was a whirlwind indoctrination, but I have to say, the stay at the resort was the single most important aspect because it allowed me to experience the resort from the guest's point of view."

Once Keith was immersed in everything about the resort, the team came up with an interesting concept. They decided upon a "triangle" approach to their social media effort.



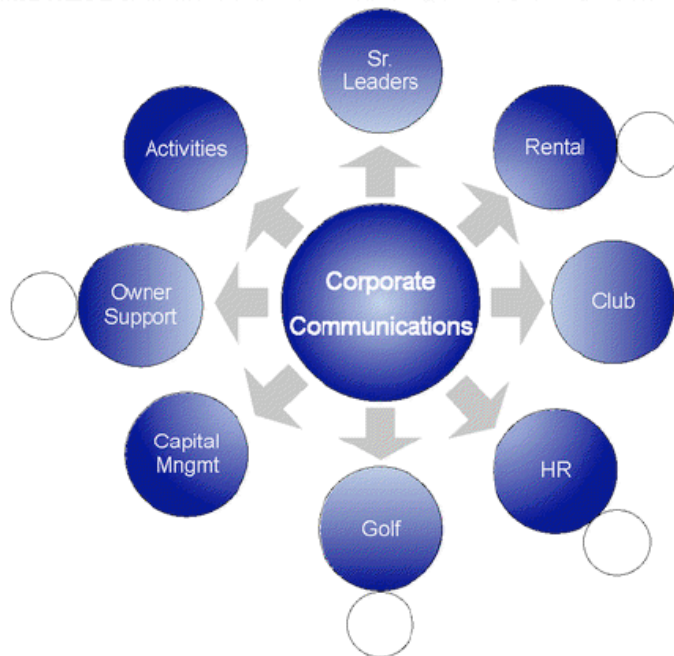
Doucha: “After a lot of thought, we felt the effort should be a shared responsibility that would be best managed by a “triangle team” that includes David, Keith, and myself, overseen by Stacey.”

Sutherland: “The triangle forms the nucleus of the social media effort at the resort. Then for the overall organization of it, we decided upon a collaborative model. The engagement starts with us.”

Strickland: “We knew it would take a collaborative effort of internal resources, for instance our customer support team. We need everyone on board to make this a success.”

The collaboration model the team selected is an amalgamation of other organization models they studied. The key emphasis of the model created is that each business unit can operate independently.

Organizational Structure: Collaborative



The Rules Of The Game

Since the social media program extends beyond the corporate communications nucleus, it was important to establish a social media policy for the company. The policy details specific guidelines for employees defining what social media is to the company, the official use of social media, employee use of social media, and a company liability statement. This is a must-have document for any company engaging in social media.

The cornerstone of the policy is what the company calls its “Five Guiding Principles”:

Authenticity

Being real and sincere in our actions and intentions. The company does not condone the creation of “fake” destinations and posts designed to mislead followers and control a conversation.

Respect

Respect the expressed views and opinions of others and demonstrate respect for the dignity of the company, its owners, its customers, its vendors and its employees. This also applies to the respect of copyrights, trademarks, rights of publicity, intellectual property and proprietary information.

Credibility

This is what drives the trustworthiness, believability and integrity of our Company and its messages. All social media solicitations, postings, replies and third-party endorsements are to be accurately cited, and any Company affiliations are to be fully disclosed.

Transparency

Helps others feel connected to the Company and is essential in expressing our culture of openness and accountability. We aim to remain visible to all of our audiences to ensure that these Online Social Media Principles remain current and reflect the most up-to-date and appropriate standards of behavior.

Responsibility

To protect our consumers' privacy as well as our Company, its brands and business practices. We also have a responsibility to conduct ourselves appropriately, listen to the online community and engage according to best practices.

Doucha: "When you adopt social media, you adopt transparency. You say 'I am willing to be responsible.'"

Sutherland: "We are in the final stage of polishing the policy as it goes through a legal review and then it will be rolled out company wide."

So the goals and objectives are clear, the plan is determined, the social media person is on board, the organization structure is set, the social media policy is drafted. What's next?

Adjust the plan.

Listen And Learn

The initial roll-out phases of the Holiday Inn Vacation Club's social media plan came down to these three themes:

Phase One – Listen, learn, educate

Phase Two – Engage, involve, incentivize

Phase Three – Introduce, influence, like

Strickland: "One of the most important aspects of social media is being able to listen. That's what we do. Listen to our business units, listen to our customers."

Doucha: "In order to create and test our framework, we felt a great starting point was Trip Advisor. We did a lot of listening in Phase One. We knew that one of the risks involved in social media is anything negative to our brand, so we wanted to listen and respond to every Trip Advisor comment. As our first official entry to engagement this was

our moment to establish the company’s online presence and personality, while ensuring a positive, public-facing reputation.”

Components of each phase are framed out by an engagement plan. There is an engagement plan for Trip Advisor, one for Twitter, and so forth. These are what the company calls their “formulas for success.” Each includes an executive summary, business rules, operating procedure, best practices, etc. Below is the engagement plan for the company’s first Twitter account - @orangelakegolf - which was one of the last components of Phase One.

Formula for Success...

- Executive Summary & Goals
- Business rules
- SOP's
- Best practices
- Workflow
- Metrics & reporting (Radian6)

Strickland: “We decided that a good way to test Twitter, which we launched in October, would be with our golf club. The engagement there is another simple, low risk step into a social media presence.”

twitter

- Build awareness of Orange Lake Golf Brand
- Promote four, public courses
- Increase local traffic
- Convert followers to golf rounds



DeJesus: “Phase One also included the implementation of Radian6. We look at how many mentions, in what channels. Radian6 is very robust, very scalable. The amount of information we receive from the service is almost overwhelming and you need to learn how to make sense of it, but it’s phenomenal. We see a competitive analysis, we learn who our audience is and what channels they use. From an organic standpoint, you name the channel, they report on it – Twitter, YouTube, etc. But specific to hospitality, for instance Trip Advisor, they don’t include at this time. I have been told they are working on it.”

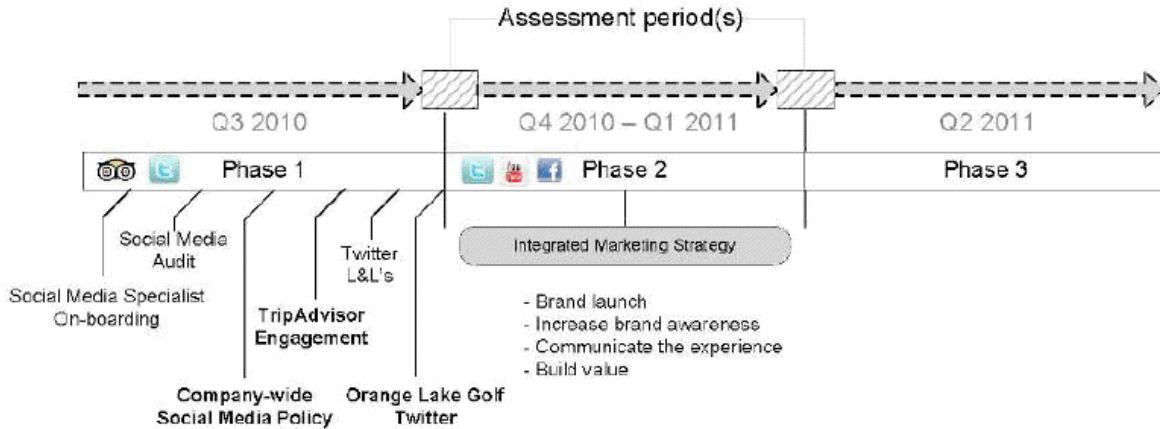
Social Media Target Audience:

Owner/Member Segmentation	% of Segment using Social Media
~ 60% Social media audience	
26 – 45 51%	52%
	52%
	44%
\$50 - \$100k 43%	54%
	53%
	53%



*Source: Acxiom Propensity Study 2010; Quantcast Data, October 2010; Econsultancy Compendium, August 2010

Doucha: “As mentioned earlier, our goals and objectives remain the same, but our plan is evolving, so once we got into it, we decided to accelerate Phase Three and move it to Phase Two.”



Sutherland: “We felt it was important to introduce Holiday Inn Club Vacations to the consumer facing audience sooner rather than later. Now that we’ve had a taste of what “it” is and how it works, we want to begin integrating it into our overall brand marketing. For instance, we just launched our brand on Twitter last month at @hiclubvacations.”

Doucha: “We are passionate about social media. We are learning everyday through our engagement. It’s simply the best way to learn. We are actually leading the charge for many developers in this industry via the steps we have taken in this program.

The Results So Far

Though a lot of work has been done, it is just a beginning. The important part is the foundation is laid. This group has a clear understanding of where they want to go from here thanks to communicating with all levels of the company every step of the way. It just took making the decision, making a plan, listening and adapting along the way.

Some of the plans going forward include integrated badges on the website, e-newsletters, a mobile version of the web site, a Facebook Page, additional Twitter accounts, and geo-location based platforms such as Foursquare.

DeJesus: “We are even toying around with the idea of integrating QR codes into the mix.”

As to what they’ve learned and what they recommend for other hoteliers still sitting on

the fence:

Sutherland: "The process right sizes itself. One negative comment is balanced by a positive comment, so it is not just a platform for complaint, it is about discovery and sharing."

Strickland: "With the real time nature of social media we are improving our response times. Some guests use our WiFi while here to comment. We are seeing upticks on Trip Advisor. We have responded to every comment and have learned a lot. People are full of surprises! What we have learned on Trip Advisor has educated and prepared us for the next level, such as Facebook."

DeJesus: "Define a baseline for your metrics. Have all the proper tools in place, your "toolbox." Having these in place and learning from them not only makes you more social savvy they provide the detail about your ROI."

Doucha: "Be strategic. Get informed about these platforms. Set goals and objectives. We are more about strategic and methodical. We got HR, rental, and other business units involved early so they understand it. To grow it, I suggest growing it in-house, in the organization."

Sutherland: "We have the complete support of our business units and our executives. When we send issues to them that arise in the social media channels, they react immediately. The business managers bring their ideas to us on how social media might help with their challenges. It's not just about the four of us, it's what we can all do with it."

I hope this window into the world of one hospitality company taking on the challenge of social media inspires you to do the same. Grab any opportunity you can to secure and stimulate business for the long-term. Social media is one of the essential keys and should be a part of your marketing mix.

*video on hospitality.net for HSMAI

**from interview with Daniel Edward Craig

All PowerPoint slides courtesy of Holiday Inn Club Vacations