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ARE YOU LONGING TO BE “LIKED” ON FACEBOOK?

Or tinkering with the idea of tweeting on Twitter?

If you want your practice to have a digital media strategy but don't know where to start, we've got a few tips

Like at first site

By Mary Teresa Bitti

Andrew Wall, vice-president of operations at accounting firm CA4IT

knows a thing or two about social/digital media. In fact, he has conducted professional development workshops for accountants on how to use LinkedIn to grow business thanks to his success doing just that. In many ways, the digital media strategy he launched three years ago is hitting a sweet spot. Thanks to an active presence on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, new client acquisitions at CA4IT, which provides accounting services to IT consultants, were up 20% in the first quarter of 2013. “Our average client invoice is about \$2,000 as opposed to \$20,000 for other firms,” says Wall. “Social media was the most affordable and effective channel to reach them.”

Having a digital presence is table stakes in today's business landscape, says Mitch Joel, president of digital marketing company Twist Image and a leading authority on social-media marketing. “Of course it's right for your business because we live in a hyper-connected world. Every single day for the majority of the day, we are staring at some form of a screen looking for information. The intranet of yesterday has all but given way to Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. That's where your target audience is,” says Joel. “I think every accountant trying to build his or her practice and every firm trying to build its organization has no choice but to be part of this social ecosystem.”

illustration by JOHN UELAND



A little history: prior to 1979, the rules of professional conduct for accountants prohibited self-promotion and advertising largely because it was determined that it was not in the public interest for accountants to win accounts based on big advertising budgets. Today, social media is leveling the playing field.

For smaller firms in particular, creating a digital media strategy is a way to build their brands up and down the supply chain to be seen and gain credibility. "If your customers, competitors and professional-development providers are on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube, you will be conspicuous by your absence and miss out on opportunities," says David Phipps, executive director of research and innovation services at York University. "Twenty years ago we were wondering if we needed to invest in enterprise email systems. Today, you wouldn't consider going into business without one. We're at that same tipping point with social media where you have to be there."

How you get there depends on your specific needs and goals; there is no one-size-fits-all road map. That said, there are a few key best practices to help you create your digital media strategy.

Build your digital media strategy into your overall business plan. What

are the goals of the business and how can social media help you get there? This goes beyond promoting a product or service, says Joel. "Social media is about creating something to be as shareable and findable as possible. It's about establishing thought leadership. It can be a channel to disseminate information. It can be a way to connect to the media. It can be a way to build your reputation and your résumé," he says. "When you look at it from within the accounting world, are you trying to build up the reputations of individuals within the practice to showcase them as authorities on a given topic? Are you trying to create a level expertise into niche verticals? Be specific."

Take a holistic, connected approach and track performance. Digital is broader than social. It includes everything you are doing online, says Christopher Dippell, president and founder of Vellum Marketing Management. "A digital strategy is most effective as part of a broader traditional content marketing strategy," he says. "It should not operate in isolation." That means looking at how your brand is being communicated and identifying opportunities to augment what you are already doing through social media channels. "The content you develop is the same you might

Tweeting as an accountant

FOR PATRICIA HARRIS, a forensic accountant, chartered business valuator and partner with Fuller Landau LLP, a midsize accounting, tax and advisory firm in Toronto, social media has proven to be a place to build her personal brand and expertise and to see what others are doing. She initially joined Twitter as a way to keep on top of the Nortel trial. "I wanted access to information in the quickest possible way."

She got that and more. Today, via her Twitter account, Harris has aligned herself with lawyers, business valuers and journalists who operate in her market space. "I get up-to-date information and links to articles relevant to my work." She also contributes to the knowledge base, tweeting daily with postings relevant to her 115 quality, or engaged, followers

who are likely to exchange value with her or use her services. "I hosted a seminar on construction fraud and I used Twitter to attract attendees. It builds my profile and credibility." She is also using LinkedIn to build relationships with people whose practice areas are aligned with her own. "I posted a judgment related to a valuation issue to a LinkedIn group and started an amazing discussion with professionals across North America. I now have contacts in the US. It's a great way to expand my network."

Harris' advice: keep your postings technical and relevant. "As accountants, we have to make sure we are accurate in what we post, adhere to professional standards and don't give advice," she says. "Twitter and LinkedIn are great spots to start a discussion, connect and access information but they are not the places to give professional advice." — MTB

use for article submissions to a publication, for your newsletter or on your website; you're just leveraging that content to its fullest because you're posting it on your blog, tweeting about it, emailing it via an electronic newsletter and cross-promoting it," says Dippell. The key is to make sure the user experience is consistent. And just as social platforms are optimized for mobile devices, your website should be, too. Translation: more imagery, infographics and shorter articles so the information is easily digestible. As well, Dippell recommends ensuring your site is easy to navigate and has social buttons linking relevant information to your other media channels. "To ensure your strategy is working, set tangible and subjective goals and monitor and measure performance," he says. "You want to see what's working and refine as necessary. It's all real time so don't get too obsessed. Check on key metrics each month."

Choose the right channels. Once you know what you want to accomplish, you can choose channels to achieve those goals. "Most people are chasing likes on Facebook and trying to get as many followers as possible on Twitter or LinkedIn and that's not necessarily the game," says Joel. "As [an accountant] you need to find the people who are most interested in the services you are providing and make them readers of your blog, etc. Create relevancy. The numbers will follow because we're all connected to so many networks. In the world of searchable and findable, by having that presence, you get the Google juice to move to the front of the line for people who are looking for what you have to offer."

Take control of your brand and spread the word. Register your name on as many digital channels as you can so no one else can create an account with a name that could be associated with your company. Registration is free for most sites. Even if you choose not to be active on certain channels, point people to where you are active, says Phipps. "Every company should have a corporate LinkedIn account. It's a great way to disseminate information but the power isn't in the 1,000 followers of your corporate account, it's in the 10,000 people following the personal accounts of your people."

Establish a social media policy for your employees to manage risk. Everyone should understand what can and can't be talked about in terms of the company on social media. To ensure staff is operating within that framework, build an approval process so content is consistent with business goals and values. Going viral can be good or bad. And in many ways making a mistake in the social arena is a rite of passage. You need an approach to manage that.

Commit. Having a social media presence takes time and effort; it has to be in someone's job description. "In our case, I started the program and last year we hired a junior person to help out," says Wall. "I find it helps having a younger person who has grown up with social media assist with the planning. We now have a community manager to help grow our social media presence and reach." He also recommends developing a social media calendar so you are regularly posting and identifying sources of conversations to track and participate in. "It's about being present so you are front of mind with people," he says.

Perhaps the biggest lesson Wall has learned is that social media is about building relationships and adding value. "You shouldn't be trying to sell something. That should happen organically because you've built trust, a relationship and added value to the community." CA4IT launched its digital media strategy with a YouTube channel featuring videos to help IT consultants improve their soft skills, particularly interviewing techniques. "We had these videos we wanted to share and we needed a medium other than our website to share them," he says. The success of the videos led Wall to set up a business and personal profile on LinkedIn.

"My personal profile has been the area of focus. I've grown it to 3,200 contacts from 20 by joining groups and putting out posts with links to content we developed for the community." That consistent presence has put Wall and CA4IT on recruiters' radar, which has turned into referrals and revenue. "I think every company needs a social media presence. It's a matter of how much time and energy you invest in it. Every time we put more time and energy into it, it's come back tenfold in business."

Mary Teresa Bitti is a freelance writer based in Oakville, Ont.