Paper 318-2011

Getting Personal but not too Personal

Stephanie R. Thompson, Independent Consultant, Memphis, TN

ABSTRACT

So, have you tweeted, friended someone, been dug, used a Wiki, blogged, created a network, or shot a video to post online? No? Maybe you think these tools are just for the youth of today and not for the professionally minded. Au contraire. Social media in the broad sense has a wide range of tools that you as a professional can leverage and benefit from. There are some things to look out for since there is a danger of crossing the line between personal and professional. This paper covers some of the more common social media sites as well as some tips on what to put out there for the world to see.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a professional virtual presence takes some practice. There are so many avenues out there to consider. Which are good choices for the technical professional? What type of information should be for the entire world to see? In order to narrow down the entire virtual world, the focus here is social media (SM) sites. This is just a subset of what is out there. SM is a growing trend that you can learn to take advantage of.

"Software tools that allow groups to generate content and engage in peer-to-peer conversations and exchange of content" (http://www.bottlepr.co.uk/glossary.html) is a great definition for SM. The focus here is two-way communication. If you are planning to jump in to SM, you need to be prepared to keep the conversation going. This is not like a static web page to provide passive information. You want to engage and inform.

You can make a statement or share information via SM then others can continue to pass the information around. It can be re-Tweeted, cited in another blog post, or liked. People, or fans, can even reply to you directly and provide feedback or ask for clarification. The predominately static information on a web page does not engage the reader in this way. They may get the information they came for, but it is a multi-step process for them to pass it along or contact the author.

Some of the information provided in this paper is from the author's active participation in SM. Other information is part of the consumption of SM. Sometimes it is good to sit back and see what is going on to decide what you like or do not like. There are so many possibilities that it makes sense to choose the ones that you are comfortable with. In addition, observing helps you to learn the online norms for a site or group of users. You would not want to jump in and use language that is inappropriate. Not the way to make a good first impression. Some sites or administrators will block users who use inappropriate language or violate posting rules (e.g., advertising your business on a strictly non-commercial discussion forum).

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SITES

There is a multitude of different types of SM sites. Some are for sharing something specific like Flickr for photos or YouTube for videos. Twitter is geared for sending out brief statements. Other sites are designed for more lengthy content that may use a combination of ways to connect. LinkedIn is a good example of this type of site. LinkedIn has its own set of individual content, interactive groups, and method to update with Twitter. When making a selection on which SM sites are for you, consider what and how often you plan to share. If you take a lot of pictures than a picture sharing site might be the best choice. If you write a lot, a standard blog might be a better choice than the 140 characters allowed in each Twitter tweet.

You Tube has been gaining popularity for more technical topics in addition to the cute animal videos. Just type "SAS Global Forum" in the search bar to see all of the conference related videos. Some even use the site to show tutorials or teach a mini class. This is a site with a very wide variety of topics.

Sometimes the best way to see what would work best for you is to visit a variety of sites and see what is appealing. Is it easy for you to navigate? Do you like the look? Does it keep your interest? If you can answer "yes," to these questions then it might be an appropriate site to set up shop in. If you only join a site since everyone else is on it, you may not get the results you anticipated. The lack of enthusiasm may come across in your tone. Are you posting just to post? Are the posts boring and mundane most of the time? If you find it boring, your readers probably will too. Finding the right site may take trying a few on first.

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT THEY GET

Another item to consider is who can find you or see your information on a site. Some sites allow anyone to see or find you. Here, everything you put in your profile is completely visible. Others require you to make an active choice to allow someone to see your information. Your picture and / or an abbreviated profile may be visible to everyone but you can choose who can see more. Facebook is a good example of this dual approach. Everyone on Facebook can

be seen and show up in searches. However, you can set your privacy settings to make some information visible to everyone or only to your friends. Getting these settings right can save you some trouble later on. Employers are beginning to run web searches on potential interview candidates. You want to make sure that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas except for the people you want to share it with. Just because you have a Facebook or MySpace page does not mean you should repurpose it for business. I know many of my friends are not that interested in my professional life and those that are can find me professionally on other sites.

On Twitter, anyone who chooses to follow you can see your tweets. You do not have control over who follows you. I think this is why it is so popular. You can follow celebrities, athletes, politicians, and even astronauts. The only caution is to make sure it is the real person that you are following. Is it really Ashton Kutcher or someone pretending to be Ashton? As a bit of an aside, you can follow topics on Twitter as well as individuals. Using the hash tag (essentially prefacing a word with the '#' symbol), you can keep up with the discussion about #SASGF11, #analytics, #lasvegas, or even #seenonmyrun. Using the correct hash tags in your posts can help people find what you are saying on a topic in the context of the conversation. This can make you visible to a wider audience than your devoted followers.

DEVELOPING A PROFESSIONAL SM PRESENCE

LinkedIn is a good place to start to create a professional SM presence. Set up your profile and join some groups. This site is nice since it will seamlessly link to your Twitter account if you have one. One update, two sites. LinkedIn is designed for the professional. In essence, it is an online resume. It also has a section for recommendations. Employers can search for possible job candidates or look for consultants. There are statistics on how many times your profile was viewed in a given period and how many times you appeared in a search. You can also have connections on LinkedIn. Similar to a Facebook friend, you want to connect with people you truly know. Some users attempt to connect with everyone on the site or are part of a group they belong to. It is OK to say no to or ignore an invitation from someone you do not know.

You can boost you visibility on LinkedIn by joining an aforementioned group or two. Groups are where users pose questions and can have discussions. It is a nice way to share your knowledge. One suggestion is to watch the discourse in a group before jumping in. You want to make sure you say fits in with the style of the group and its norms.   Groups can either require approval to join or allow anyone to join.

Go to where the other SAS users are: sasCommunity. This is a great site for SAS tips and general SAS information. You create a profile and then go from there. Here you can build connections and create a blog.

What is a blog? Well, a blog is a place where you can easily share your thoughts and ideas. It does not require HTML coding on a web site. You just type. Many blogs, like those hosted by BlogSpot, allow you to create a style template and then start blogging. You will receive a custom URL that can be part of your web page or a link in an email. Some blogging software can be embedded into an existing web site. This is a bit more technical and outside of the scope of this paper. It is just something to be aware of.

Like any other site mentioned, Twitter also requires a profile. Twitter has a limited profile so after a quick set up you are ready to tweet. Twitter is considered a micro blogging site due to the limited number of characters available. After a while, you will need some sort of mechanism to keep track of all of you user ids and passwords.

HOW TO CREATE ANOTHER "YOU"

Maybe you already have a Facebook account and think all you need to do is just start adding some discussions of SAS and analytics and you are good to go. You may want to reconsider this option. Sure, you may have friends that are SAS users but think of it the other way around. Do you want your SAS clients (or prospective clients) to know where you went for dinner or that you like death metal? Facebook can be a good tool but instead of sending them to your personal page, consider sending them to your business page.

Facebook allows the creation of business and organization pages. Use your discretion as to whether or not this is the best place for the business you. Facebook and MySpace are social sites and may not generate the right traffic for a SAS professional. It may not hurt to create a presence there and then use it to direct people to another site for more active dialog.

Most sites require an email address and user id to start an account. You can have different Twitter personalities for example by using your business email for one account with a professional name and then another using your personal account for your other interests. Again, remember that people who you deal with professionally may not need to know as much about you as your friends do.

Segregating your accounts and user names keeps business business and personal personal. Yes, it is more login information to keep track of but it is a smart choice.

HOW TO AVOID T.M.I. SYNDROME

Now that you have all of these new accounts and passwords to remember, what should you share? Remember to keep it professional. Professional associates do not want to what you had to eat for lunch (except on very rare occasions) or where you child is playing football in the evening. Offensive language is never appropriate for your professional presence. The last thing you want to do is turn off a possible professional connection by sharing more than what you should. Being "unfriended" can hurt. Keep your thoughts on politics, religion, the weather, or anything that could be overly controversial to another forum. Debates on whether or not to use a SQL join or a DATA Step merge excluded.

Another good practice is not to go overboard on self-promotion. Mentioning a paper you have at an upcoming conference or a webinar you are conducting is a good idea. Announcing it everywhere you have a presence every chance you get is going too far. You want to inform and not overload. Also, try not to make your messages come across as advertising. Your knowledge, skills, and abilities should be the promotion. This is a little different for retailers and restaurants. In their case, SM is advertising in the pure sense. Tweets that promote discount codes for pizza and hotels or a Facebook promotion offering coupons to all the new friends who clicked like in a day makes sense in these cases. It is not easily translatable to the SAS professional. Again, use your judgment.

As mentioned previously, employers or even clients may search for you online. If your professional SM presence is distinct form your personal persona you have an outlet for all of your thoughts and opinions. With the sheer volume of SM messages out there, keeping it pared down and relevant will keep people coming back.

In addition, once something is out there it is gone. You can delete posts or recall messages but it may not be gone. It could have been re-tweeted, cached, or copied. Keep that in mind as well.

BUILDING YOUR LEGIONS

Ideally, you want people to read what you have to say. Sending out tweets with no followers or posting videos that no one watches is an exercise in futility. Let your close business contacts know about your SM presence so they can join you. Another option is to start following others that you know. If you are following a group or person, they may decide to follow you.

Groups are a great way to add to your followers. They are available on many SM sites. The more engaged you are the more people will want to hear what you have to say. Many LinkedIn groups have hundreds of members who will see the postings and announcements. Users can also subscribe to a daily digest style email that gives the highlights from the day's group activity. They do not even have to log in to see what is going on. However, if something catches their interest, the site is just a click away.

Keep up the conversation. If you blog or tweet try to get responses from others. Ask questions since people love to share their opinions. Then it seems more like a dialog instead of a monologue. People can lose interest if you do not seem to have much to say.

Provide solutions. If you offer information of value, then there is reason to come back. Have a great little snippet of code or a new way of doing something? Share it. Then turn it in to your next paper for SAS Global Forum.

Re-tweet or re-post within reason. If the only things you have to say were already said by someone else, why follow you? Spreading information from others is helpful if it is relevant and part of your overall communication strategy. It just should not be your only strategy. Never take someone else's information and claim it as your own. It is too easy to be found out and it is unethical. Give credit where credit is due.

Lastly, consider timing. Business users tend to be active during business hours. If you have something important to say, doing so between nine and five can ensure people see it. How many of your followers will see your 2:00 am tweet about the new ODS trick you found? They may see it but be otherwise occupied. Moreover, with the sheer volume of twitter chatter, a large number of messages will arrive after yours and it may never be seen. A late night blog posting or With the evolution of smart phones, people can follow and stay up to date even if their company blocks certain sites.

KEEPING TRACK OF IT ALL

Once you have set up shop and are engaged in SM, how do you keep track of it all? Luckily, sites have been developed to consolidate all of the different feeds. A basic RSS (there a multiple variations on this acronym in use) feed can be read that provides information on new content. The site you are interested in needs to publish the RSS feed and then you need a reader to see what is new. This is a cumbersome method and not the most user friendly. It is better suited for news sites than SM.

As mentioned before, some sites send out group summaries and updates. LinkedIn has a good assortment of these. You receive a daily email with the most active discussions for each group you request updates from and about once a week you will get an email summarizing all of your connections updates. You will see who has updated experience, changed, jobs, and their most recent tweets.

Maybe you want to see continuous updates from all of your SM sited on one page. Now there are aggregating programs that will do that, iGoogle allows you to add SM site gadgets or feeds to your other pages. I use this site since I can see weather, airport delays, and SM all on one page. Other options more specific to SM are TweetDeck are HootSuite. Both of these aggregators have desktop, web, and mobile versions. This allows you to keep track to everything in one place on multiple platforms. Another benefit is not having to remember all of your passwords constantly.

LINKS

http://blogspot.com
http://www.facebook.com
http://www.flickr.com
http://www.hootsuite.com
http://www.igoogle.com
http://www.linkedin.com
http://www.myspace.com
http://www.sascommunity.org
http://www.tweetdeck.com
http://www.twitter.com
http://www.youtube.com

CONCLUSION

Social media is a tool worth looking in to as a SAS professional. The two most important things to remember is to find sites that you like and will participate in and to keep it professional. These simple steps can lead to greater visibility and help you expand your horizons. Have fun, do not share too much, and join the movement. See you in cyberspace!

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

    Name: Stephanie R. Thompson
    Enterprise: Independent Consultant
    Work Phone: 901-326-0030
    E-mail: stephanie@datamum.com
    Linked In: Stephanie Thompson, Analytics Professional
    Twitter: @SRT_SESUG
    sasCommunity User Name: Stephanie

SAS and all other SAS Institute Inc. product or service names are registered trademarks or trademarks of SAS Institute Inc. in the USA and other countries. ® indicates USA registration.

Other brand and product names are trademarks of their respective companies.