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# Developing a Social Media Strategy: A Professional Association Perspective

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# Developing a Social Media Strategy: A Professional Association Perspective

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## Abstract

Relationship engagement is the cornerstone of social media, hence the word “networking” in social networking sites. Social media sites can make excellent communications vehicles for many not-for-profits since building and maintaining relationships are fundamental to their existence. This social media strategy audit and case study examines the best practices for organizations, in particular, non-profit professional associations, and proposes a social media strategy for a national Canadian professional association. The study found that while many professional associations are using social media to engage with their members and other stakeholders, there are a number of key elements that need to be considered when associations develop social media strategies including: implementing a social media policy for staff and members; allocating proper staff resources, including training; tying social media activities back to the strategic plan of the organization; ensuring consistency of messages and content across platforms; and finally making sure social media activities are measured with both quantitative and qualitative measures.

*Keywords:* social media, strategic communications, professional associations, communication metrics

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## Introduction

Associations exist for two reasons: to meet member needs today and in the future. In order to have a future, attracting and retaining members is critical for the long-term sustainability of professional associations. Creating strong and vibrant communities based on mutual interest and career development is part of managing a professional association. Bacon (2009) insists that a community cannot exist without a sense of “belonging”. Associations often have numerous stakeholders who are ‘communities within the larger professional community.’ These include: individual professionally certified members; their employers (large, medium and small organizations); product and service providers; academic partners, and other strategic alliances. Each of these communities have different reasons for working with and/or being a member of a professional association.

Canadians use of social media platforms continues to grow Techvibes.com reports that over 60% of all Canadians have significantly increased their social media use in 2011. In

particular, there has been a huge uptake for Twitter (19% – 1,900% increase from 2009) and LinkedIn (14% – a 233% increase from 2009).

Professional associations do not really have a choice on whether they as organizations want to be involved with social media activities since many of their members are already using social media and likely want to interact with them if they were provided with the opportunity. The choice is really about how well a professional association will engage its members and stakeholders once it implements a social media strategy (Qualman, 2011).

### Case Study Problematic and Research Questions

The purpose of this social media case study is to examine and determine the best practices for organizations, in particular, non-profit professional associations, and to propose a social media strategy for a national Canadian professional association (to be known as *CanAssoc*).

Along with a literature review and examination of documentation and archival records, the author conducted interviews with other professional associations about the success and challenges of their social media programs in order to provide insights that will assist *CanAssoc* in developing and implementing its own social media strategy. The professional associations that were interviewed were of similar membership size and scope, and are also key *CanAssoc* stakeholders and/or influencers.

The research questionnaire was designed to gauge:

- The impact social media strategies have had on professional associations' and their engagement with members and other stakeholders; and
- How and to what extent professional associations are measuring their social media strategies to ensure that they are achieving their specific goals and objectives in relation to their overall strategic plans?

## Literature Review

Relationship engagement is the cornerstone of social media networks, hence the word “networking” in social networking sites; therefore social media sites are an excellent communications vehicle for many not-for-profits since building and maintaining relationships are fundamental for these entities, in particular professional associations (Waters et al., 2009; Boyd & Ellison, 2008). While there is literature on general social media issues and practices along with a growing pool of literature on social media adoption with not-for-profit associations in the United States; there is little Canadian specific research on social media use by associations.

### *Social Media Participation in Canada*

The top three social media networks being used by both associations and other organizations in Canada and the United States are Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Bulmer & DiMauro. 2009). Adoption of social media has been swift since all of the major sites are less than a decade old – LinkedIn (2003), YouTube (2005), Facebook (2005) and Twitter (2006) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The literature review revealed that Canadians have continued to increase their participation on social networking sites over the past 12 months (Techvibes.com, 2011). With respect to the major social media platforms, in Deloitte’s white paper “Enterprise 2.0 – Harnessing Social Media,” the authors categorize the mediums into the following spheres and discuss the reach (i.e., number of individuals using the specified platform) of each in Canada: virtual community and/or conversation – Facebook (79%), LinkedIn (9%), Blogging (43%) and Twitter (13%); and entertainment – Youtube (67%) (Kopee & Uppal, n.d.). Ganim Barnes & Mattson’s 2009 study of the 500 fastest growing companies showed that while social media use is growing, some initial social media platforms such as podcasts,

message boards and wikis have declined, in favour of newer platforms such as Twitter and blogging.

*Are professional associations and/or not-for-profits using social media?*

Yes, many not-for-profit organizations which encompasses charities, trade associations and professional associations are using social media – however many have jumped on board without serious consideration to why they should be engaging their members and other stakeholders using social media, just because they didn't want to be left behind (Pelletier, 2011). This is similar to studies where senior executives at business organizations felt that while social media and having a social media strategy was an important part of their communications/marketing mix, almost half (47%) said it was “not a strategic priority,” along with the 19% who said it was “simply not necessary,” (emarketer.com, 2011).

One of the main research sources on associations' social media activities is the 2011 Benchmarking in Association Management study on social media completed by the American Society of Association Executives' (ASAE) Center for Association Leadership. Their study found that both larger associations and individual based associations (i.e., professional associations like the *CanAssoc*) are more likely to be using social media than small or trade associations. This is similar to the findings by Curtis (2009), which found that the majority of their non-profit respondents were also engaged in some form of social media activity (one concern about the validity of these surveys is: did the other associations that don't do social media just not respond?). The majority of organizations that use social media say that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube are their primary outlets. For associations that do not currently have a social media strategy in place, most are planning to design and implement one within the next year. In Waters et al.'s (2009) study of how non-profits are using Facebook, the researchers found that while associations had Facebook profiles, most did not take full

advantage of all the applications offered by this social media application.

Like many organizations, not-for-profits are concerned about how they will deal with online social media postings that are inappropriate, violate copyright and/or show the organization in a negative way (ASAE, 2011). Staff resourcing and other budgeting constraints for social media are also concerns for most organizations. Large associations (like the *CanAssoc* with over 30 full-time staff) are on average devoting 50% of one or more staff's time to social media activities; however these same organizations are only spending \$5,000 or less (no staff salary allocation) on maintaining, marketing, measuring or managing their social media programs (ASAE, 2011).

*Why should professional associations have a social media strategy?*

Individuals belong to a professional association either as voluntary or mandatory choice (depends on designation requirements) and they generally share a common occupation, training, networking and resource interests with their fellow members (Humphrey and Pealow, 2005). Social media allows associations to interact in an even more targeted way with staff, volunteers, members, potential members and other stakeholders by providing more open two-way communications opportunities. Social media also allows associations to build specific online communities for different stakeholders such as boards of directors, government advocacy interests, regional volunteers, specific industry or other task force groups, to name just a few. Just like other organizations, professional associations need to be wary that individuals who use social media primarily to network or gather information to ensure that their social media activities are not just a sales opportunity for the organization (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2009).

### *Retention and Attraction of Members*

Most associations have multiple stakeholders and members who belong for different reasons – education, networking, resources, and advocacy (or because it’s a requirement). Keeping the members you already have is less expensive than recruiting new members, even though most associations also generally want to continue to grow their membership base on top of retaining current members (Humphrey & Pealow, 2005). Associations often rely on member-to-member recommendations or member-get-a-member strategies to grow. The concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) influence is critical to an association’s social media strategy to retain (and sell more services to existing members) and grow the membership base through establishing and maintaining online relationships through “trust, homophily, tie strength, and normative and informational influence” (Chu & Kim, p. 53). Applying a social media strategy to membership management or “social customer relation management (social CRM)” can contribute to efficiencies in monitoring and responding to member questions; creates opportunities for new member lead generation by adding followers on social networks; allows for social profile mapping of members’ social media activities (particularly if the association uses a private social media network option); and provides for enhanced content distribution (Dryer and Grant, 2011, p. 4).

Professional associations are often content rich with a variety of information and other resources available for members. Leveraging content across various platforms from traditional (magazines, newsletters, in-person meetings), online (email, website, e-newsletters, web seminars) to social and user/member generated (blogs, Twitter, podcasts) can provide consistency of the organization’s key messages and enhance its reputation by engaging with members and other key stakeholders in a variety of ways (these individuals can also choose how best they want to interact with their association) (Kelley, 2011). What is critical to successful integration of



social media within the communications mix is determining which social media platforms an organization should be using based on the needs of its members and other key stakeholders, along with how social media activities contribute to the organization's strategic plan (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Many associations have found that using social media has attracted newer and younger members to their organizations, who previously may not have found value in the cost of membership within the traditional association framework (Johnson-Greene, 2009).

### *Volunteer Engagement and Management*

Social media's online communities have also provided associations with another opportunity for volunteer engagement beyond the traditional in-person or local networking. In particular, some individuals who may never have volunteered for their associations previously are becoming important ambassadors or "heroes" for their organizations through their activities such as online comments to articles, blogging, survey participation and tweeting (Pelletier, 2011; Bulmer et al, 2009, p. 97). Seltzer and Mitrook's (2007) research on weblogs also found this social media tool provided more dialogic communications and that it had the potential to create stronger relationships with members (and in particular volunteers).

### *Staff Management and Assigning Responsibility for Social Media Strategies*

The reality is that associations need to build in costs for social media – both in staff time along with other resources for their social media strategies – it's not all free. Some social media management and measurement tools have costs; as well as the costs associated with private social media networks, if an association decides to implement one (Dreyer & Grant, 2011; Steggles, 2010). Social media activities can how-

ever level the playing field between large, medium and small organizations (including non-for-profits) by giving smaller organizations the opportunity to engage customers and/or potential customers which they might not have been able to previously reach due to budget constraints (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Curtis (2009) also found that associations with public relations departments were more likely to engage in social media activities than organizations which did not have communications staff. This is consistent with other studies that have shown communications, marketing and IT staff often share the responsibility of an organization's social media efforts (Kinsman, 2009).

*Are Professional Associations Measuring Their Social Media Activities?*

The ASAE study confirmed that while many associations have a social media strategy, few have full policies in place for social media use for staff, volunteers and/or members (ASAE, 2011). The good news is the three-quarters of associations using social media stated they track both "members' and/or key constituencies" participation along with the content of that participation (ASAE, 2011, p. 13). My big question regarding this study was that the researchers did not ask additional questions about measurement by drilling down to find out exactly how these organizations were tracking participation (an opportunity lost). The article "Web 2.0: How Associations Are Tapping Social Media" (2009) indicated that the majority of associations (80%) are actively keeping track of user comments about the organization on their social media sites. Other studies have also shown that organizations (not specifically associations) monitor what's being said about them online, and they also measure their social media successes through hits, comments, leads, and sales (Ganim Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

Beth Kantor's blog, "Beth's Blog", which focuses on social media for non-profits, includes a number of discussions

on everything from building to measurement. In particular, she offers a common-sense model for associations to follow when developing their own social media strategies – the “crawl, walk, run, fly” model – which reminds organizations of the importance of testing and evaluating on a small scale first, since that will likely lead to a more successful implementation later (Kantor, August 4, 2011).

## Methodology

The three individuals interviewed for this case study, were from national professional associations of similar membership size and scope to *CanAssoc*:

- *Assoc-1*: the first individual was a Senior Manager of Public Relations from a U.S. individually based professional association
- *Assoc-2*: the second person was a Senior Communications Consultant from an individually based Canadian professional association; and
- *Assoc-3*: the third interviewee was a Vice-President of Marketing and Membership at another individually based Canadian professional association.

In addition to the interviews, secondary research was collected by reviewing the information and archival documents from these professional associations through their websites (publically accessible sections only) and social media sites (publically accessible sections only including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube). Only one association did not have a Facebook site (*Assoc-3*).

## Results

### *Background of Interviewees*

These three professional associations were chosen for this study by the author because of their similar member size and

scope to the *CanAssoc* and also because of their relationship and influence on the Association either as an international sister organization and/or strategic alliance. All of these professional associations also offer similar member benefits such as publications, resources, and certification, professional development, and networking opportunities.

The interviewees were with the most senior people responsible for social media activities at their respective associations; with the exception of *Assoc-2*. The associations also have been involved with social media activities for less than five years; with most only having all of their current social sites up and running for less than 2 years.

*What social media outlets are these professional associations using?*

The interviewees indicated that they use the following social media outlets: Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. Only one association, *Assoc-3* was also using a private social media site exclusively for members. With regard to placement and promotion of their social media sites both *Assoc-1* and *Assoc-2* had access to all of the social media sites from the main page of their websites; only *Assoc-3* did not. They only had a link to their private social media site from their main page. *Assoc-1* was also the only association to have a dedicated page about their social media activities on their website.

The author also looked at the announcements and news room sections of these associations to determine if they used traditional media communications to launch or discuss any of their social media activities. Only the website of *Assoc-2* had one archived media release on the launch of their new Facebook page in August of 2009. However the *Assoc-1* and *Assoc-3*'s news rooms did not have a full archive of media releases so the researcher was not able to determine if they used media releases to promote their social media activities.

*RQ1: What impact has social media strategies had on professional associations' and their engagement with members and other stakeholders?*

The interviewees all indicated that social media activities have been an ever increasing part of how they communicate with their members and other stakeholders. Member communications were the first priority with these associations, but they have also found that using social media sites has also expanded their reach to other constituents. *Assoc-2* stated that social media is:

Just an awesome way to reach out, to both listen and to communicate with members, students, and the wider public, a lot of potential members and students. That's obviously...our mandate is to help grow the designation and part of that is to be in the play, right, you have to be part of the conversation.

*Why are professional associations engaging in social media strategies?*

Member growth and retention was mentioned by all three professional associations as a key reason for social media participation. *Assoc-3* indicated that expanding to social media was critical for them to interact with their members because they have peaked at a 30% email open rate, and the cost of print is increasingly too high to mail all but a few items (i.e., magazine) to members. They also stated that this means "seven out of ten of my members are not receiving communications from us, and they don't really understand or appreciate the benefits of membership because they're not hearing about them." For *Assoc-2* it is also about garnering better interaction with their student population (future certified members) and academic alliances through social media: "it's a lot easier to convey information to hear what others are saying and to have a conversation through social media than it is to try to do it by telephone or email." *Assoc-1* discussed how social media was creating better two-way communications so that

they could build “trust and make our members feel like they were more a part of what the association is doing.”

*Do professional associations have separate social media strategy plans in place? Or are their social media tactics integrated into their communications plans?*

All of the professional associations said they have some form of social media plan in place: one stated they had a separate social media strategy along with their regular communications plans; while the other two said that their social media strategies were integrated into all of their communications plans. However, *Assoc-3* announced they have just received approval from their Board of Directors to develop a full social media strategy for the association (to be developed for 2012). *Assoc-1* is also in the process of setting up a social media committee consisting of staff and volunteers to continue to plan and evaluate the association’s social media activities now and in the future. Two associations have also seen the value of private social media sites – *Assoc-3* has one in place, while *Assoc-1* is looking to implement one in the near future.

*The Main Challenges Professional Associations are Facing With Respect to Their Social Media Strategies*

All three interviewees discussed that resources and content were their main constraints with social media. The other word the author heard over and over again was “consistency” from all of the interviewees – from consistency of messages on various platforms to consistency in making sure the staff resources were spending time on each site monitoring the discussions. *Assoc-1* stated consistency as “the goals may be similar, but how you achieve those goals are so different, especially from a messaging standpoint.” *Assoc-3* has individuals in each department who have become the social media ‘champions’ within the association, but social media activities were all additional tasks on top of their pre-existing

job descriptions. The associations also stated that most social media activities were add-ons to the existing staff complement, with the exception of *Assoc-2* who had a communications staff member dedicated to digital communications (website, email, Twitter, etc.).

*Assoc-1* also discussed how their product and service providers can create a negative atmosphere with respect to advertising on the association's social media outlets, so that the staff have to regularly remind this stakeholder group that social media is about engagement and not selling, "not that we don't want them to ... you know engage and be part of the discussion but we want it to be a meaningful discussion." What was also surprising to *Assoc-1* was the number of members who were concerned about using social media because they want to keep their professional lives as practitioners and their personal lives separate. That is why they are looking at launching a private social media site for members in 2012 – for those members who otherwise would not participate on a social media site.

*RQ2: How and to what extent are professional associations measuring their social media strategies to ensure that they are achieving their specific goals and objectives in relation to their overall strategic plans?*

Both the *Assoc-1* and *Assoc-3* indicated they conducted formal and informal research with members about their social media interests and activities prior to launching their social media sites. *Assoc-2* did not conduct any research prior to launching their social media sites. *Assoc-1* asked:

Members their opinions on social networks and what they use, what they value, what they understand about the sites and everything else. And really what that did for us is that it steered our strategy discussions as to which sites would bring the most value for the association and for our members, and that was actually really effective.

*Are professional associations achieving their initial social media strategy goals and/or their ongoing goals?*

All of the interviewees stated that they have achieved (and exceeded) their initial goals for their social media activities. These successes have generally been measured by the uptake in participation to each of the social media sites launched. In the case of *Assoc-2* they now have “2,500 members on Twitter, nearly 1,900 on LinkedIn, and 1,300 on Facebook... for example, Facebook, in one year, we’ve gone from zero to 1,300.” For *Assoc-1* they wanted to achieve a 10% following for each social media outlet – they have achieved that goal with thousands of members on each site. With respect to *Assoc-3*, they have over 3,000 members on their private social media site (15% of their membership in less than 9 months), 6,600 members on LinkedIn, and other 2,000 on Twitter.

*What tools and benchmarks are professional associations using to measure their social media success?*

All of the professional associations said that they measure their social media activities. The most basic measurements included the number of individuals linked to each social media site, the number of retweets on Twitter, and the number of ‘fans’ and ‘likes’ on Facebook. They are also looking qualitatively at the online comments, as well as traditional member measurements such as retention, growth and engagement. *Assoc-1* and *Assoc-2* also use systems to manage their Twitter accounts; while *Assoc-3* uses a daily monitoring service which “pulls all references to *Assoc-3* in real time and provides reporting” for the organization. *Assoc-2* is also currently testing out another social media analytics system.



*What has been the biggest success(es) with social media strategies for professional associations?*

All of the associations reiterated that social media has been another layer in their conversations with members and other key stakeholders, and feel that their social media activities have: contributed to their associations' growth; enhanced and expanded member communications; and provided new opportunities with respect to advertising, sponsorship and other revenue from its existing products and services. For *Assoc-3*, Twitter has primarily been used for events promotion prior and during their annual conference and trade show (where over 1,500-2,000 participants attend):

Nothing is as good as Twitter in terms of creating crowds and supporting event activity, so we've used it a lot that way. So first to create awareness of what's going on at the conference, and then within the context of the conference to let people at the conference know that in the next 30 minutes there's going to be a book signing over at the *Assoc-3* booth, for instance. And that's been very successful.

The author also asked each interviewee if there was a single piece of advice they would give another professional association looking to develop their own social media strategy. All of them indicated that starting out small, testing and evaluating what members are interested in was critical for success. *Assoc-2* also said that social media takes time:

It is not a short campaign. It's something that you have to build on, you have to be patient, and there's a little bit of trial and error in terms of the kinds of things that engage people. And some things work and some things fall a little flat and, over time, you just try to figure that out. But I would say it's been absolutely well worth our while.

## Analysis

The interviewees and literature review for this case study clearly showed that having a social media strategy can help associations promote awareness and expand member and stakeholder engagement, as well as increase membership and volunteer base. Various social media platforms can be used to attract and retain members, provide learning and networking opportunities, and promote services and events. With a comprehensive social media strategy, associations can expand their profile, spread knowledge and achieve their strategic objectives (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2009; ASAE 2011).

The literature and interviews have also shown that a successful social media strategy is generally composed of a mix of organizational and user-generated content that encourages two-way communications between the association and its members and stakeholders (and also allows for member-to-member, member-to-stakeholder or stakeholder-to-stakeholder engagement). Currently the most used social media platforms by professional association are Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube (Technovibes.com, July 26, 2011).

### *Public Versus Private Social Media Sites for Associations – Room for Both*

Public social media networks are more inclusive, where private social media platforms allow associations to restrict access to members only and/or to create groups specific to a project such as a task force or ongoing volunteer chapters (Steggles, 2010). The author believes associations can leverage both options; it just depends on the overall mission, goals and objectives, and member type of the association.

By having a public social media presence, it allows professional associations to increase awareness of their brand, products and services among its members (who are most likely already using these sites), but more importantly non-

members. By hosting a private social media site, professional associations can continue to offer membership value through a closed forum for members and other stakeholders to network and discuss opportunities and challenges. Private social media sites also ensure the protection of members' personal and professional information (and can separate the professional from personal), which is one reason some individuals may not choose to participate in an association's social media activities if only public platforms are used (*Assoc-1* interviewee; Sheldrake, 2011).

*Important Considerations for Professional Associations Developing a Social Media Strategy*

Stop blocking social media sites in the workplace. In order for an organization to have a social media strategy, the employees need to be able to carry it out. Recent studies from Mindflash and Column Five have stated that up to 70% of organizations block some or all social media sites at work; they also found out that 68% of companies who allow social media access have never had a reason to reprimand employees for inappropriate conduct on social media related to their organization or usage at work (Piombino, 2011).

Social media policy for staff and members: All organizations using social media (including associations) should implement a social media policy, which addresses legal and privacy issues, sets the expectations for online behaviour and clearly outlines how unacceptable behaviours such as inappropriate language and disrespect to others will result in comments being taken down and/or blocking the user from participation. The ASAE (2011) study on social media showed that there is a gap between practice and policy for most associations; the good news is that non-profits recognize it and most are planning on creating a formal policy. Associations are not alone; other studies have shown that only 55% of organizations have a social media policy in place (Piombino, 2011). Bacon (2009) suggests using a 'code

of conduct' for online communities that includes things like being 'considerate; respectful; collaborative; when you disagree, consult others; and when you are unsure, ask for help" (p. 41). Since most professional associations already have a code of conduct in place, it would be easy to expand that to cover online social media member participation.

### *Staff Resources, Including Training*

In order to ensure the consistency on the association's social media sites, the reality is time and money need to be devoted to having enough staff and other resources to do the job well. The ASAE (2011) social media study found that larger organizations (like the *CanAssoc* with more than 30 full-time staff) have at least one staff devoted to the social media activities for at least 50% of their time.

Measure, measure, measure: Just like any other initiative, associations need to measure the effectiveness of their social media strategies and sites. Finding ways to measure member and stakeholder engagement is more than just the number of participants, retweets and quality of comments/conversations, it's about tying participation back to the organization's strategic plan through membership renewals, new memberships, event registrations, click-through rates for the content posted on the sites, etc. (Kantor, August 4, 2011; Pelletier, June 2011).

### Conclusion, Limitations and Future Directions

Overall, the results of this case study revealed that while many professional associations are using social media to engage their members and other stakeholders, it is still in the early days for social media use and measurements with not-for-profits, especially in Canada (ASAE, 2011). All of the associations interviewed said that social media has enhanced their conversations with members and other key stakeholders, and feel that their social media activities have: contributed to

their associations' growth; enhanced and expanded member communications; and provided new opportunities with respect to advertising, sponsorship and other revenue from its existing products and services. The author has made a recommendation to the *CanAssoc* about developing its own social media strategy (see Appendix 1).

*Possible Case Study Bias and Future Research Suggestions*

There is the possibility of bias in this case study with regard to social media use by professional associations since the author is currently employed in a communications position at a not-for-profit professional association. Conscious effort by the researcher was made to minimize this possible bias in the development of interview questions and literature review; however some of the interviewees' responses may also have been biased since the associations they work for currently use social media (along with their own personal biases and hands on experiences with social media). This case study could be expanded to include additional professional associations across the country to determine a better benchmark of the use, successes and challenges of a social media strategy by associations in Canada. (On that note, the Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE) launched its first research study on social media use by not-for-profits in September 2011, so there should be a Canadian benchmark available in 2012.)

## Appendix 1 – Recommendation for the *CanAssoc*

### Why the *CanAssoc* should pilot and develop a long-term social media strategy in 2012

It is important for the *CanAssoc* to continue to monitor its brand, and listen to what is being said about the association. As an organization, the *CanAssoc* does a good job of garnering feedback from its members and other stakeholders formally through their member survey and other market research; evaluation instruments for all of its products and services; and evaluation for specific public relations campaigns (i.e., MRP and content analysis). However, outside of developing their website (including the members-only section), some search engine optimization and measurement through Google Analytics, and some online advertising, the Association has not spent any time or consideration to online brand and reputation in social media forums (only in the last member survey in 2011, did the association start asking a few questions about member social media use and interest). The reality is the conversation is happening whether *CanAssoc* is listening or not (i.e., *CanAssoc* member driving LinkedIn Group)—and the association cannot manage its reputation if they are not involved.

Social media can be used to help *CanAssoc* fulfill its mission and values, as:

Social media applications facilitate member networking (i.e., building a community) across the country and helps members to meet new professional contacts. Social media can also engage new members who might not have been aware of the association (Bacon, 2009).

By taking an active role in social media sites, *CanAssoc* can engage in two-way communications with more members, more often. It will also allow staff to monitor what people are saying about the Association and protect its professional image by responding appropriately.

By having an active presence on social media sites, *CanAssoc* can increase awareness of their products and services and respond to industry-related questions and issues, promoting the association as the source for the industry.

Social media also helps the *CanAssoc* to achieve the following strategies:

Deliver professional education to respond to the requirements of members and their employers. By communicating and listening to what is being said by today's members about their work and challenges, *CanAssoc* can continue to update its certification and professional development opportunities (and other products and services) to ensure it is meeting demand. It is also an important way to engage the next generation of members who are currently taking or may be interested in taking the *CanAssoc's* certification program.

Retain and attract members by offering services they value: By engaging members through social media, will help increase retention. These applications also provide easy methods to recommend the *CanAssoc* to their friends and colleagues—the number one way *CanAssoc* gets new members. Social media forums are also excellent sources of member feedback, supporting its goal of offering more value-added services.

Before *CanAssoc* jumps feet first into social media, a formal written strategy should be created that supports our strategic mission. This involves knowing who our actual and desired audiences are (beyond just members), setting clearly defined goals for the social media strategy, and integrating the strategy across all our services in a transparent and authentic way. This written strategy also needs to outline *CanAssoc's* online usage for staff and members, as well as training for staff. The author also proposes developing a social media task force (possible future council) of *CanAssoc* staff, volunteers, and key member groups to provide feedback into the association's social media activities based on member/group needs,

and possible concerns (Bacon, 2009). Proposed next steps for the 2012 business plan and budget is for two stages of social media development: 1) pilot LinkedIn and Twitter pages for the *CanAssoc*, and 2) launch private social media site “the *CanAssoc* Knowledge Network”.



Appendix 2 – Interview Questions for Professional  
Association(s)

1. What is your position title at the association?
2. What are your primary responsibilities at the association (including social media)?
3. Does your association have a separate social media strategy plan in place? Or are social media tactics integrated into your communications plans?
4. How long has the association had a social media strategy? When did you first launch or start using social media with your members?
5. What social media outlets does your association use?
6. What was your association's reason(s) for implementing a social media strategy?
7. Who are your key stakeholders that you are trying to engage through your social media strategy? Have they changed since your original rollout?
8. Did you conduct any research prior to launching your social media strategy to benchmark the opinions of your stakeholders about the association and/or their social media activity or interest?
9. How does your association measure its social media success? What tools, benchmarks do you use?
10. What was your initial social media strategy goal achieved? How about your ongoing goals?
11. What are the main challenges you have had with your social media – resources, engagement, measurement, content?
12. What do you think has been your association's biggest success(es) with your social media strategy?

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