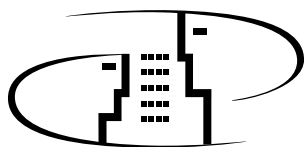


The New Communication Tools for Economic Developers

A practical guide to social media, blogs and
email campaigns



EDAC / ACDE

Marketing and Communications

White Paper Series

September 2009

Communication is changing... but don't worry, it's a good thing.

The days of controlled messages, one-way marketing campaigns and careful spin are over. Although that can be scary for economic development marketers, it can also mean new levels of interaction and measurement that were impossible with traditional marketing methods.

Gone are the days of shot gunning thousands of brochures out into the abyss and wondering if they landed in the recycling box. Now it's about targeted electronic efforts that tell you exactly whether your communication earned you a "click through" or an "unsubscribe".

Social media in particular has democratized marketing and communication, providing real-time feedback on your brand and the effectiveness of your latest marketing efforts. Transparency and personality are applauded in the social realm, and corporate speak and PR spin are harshly punished.

It's a whole new world out there. This white paper will offer a practical guide to get you started with social media, blogs and email campaigns – the new communication tools for economic developers.

Many economic developers are already using these new tools

In February of 2009, BusinessWeek wrote:

"For companies, resistance to social media is futile. Millions of people are creating content for

the social web. Your competitors are already there. Your customers have been there for a long time. If your business isn't putting itself out there, it ought to be."

The same is true for economic developers. A quick search of Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn (to name a few) yields hundreds of results for municipalities and regions already building their social media presence. Blogs are supplementing, and even replacing, the traditional "news" sections on city websites, opening the door to two-way communication via comments from readers on individual stories and posts.

When it comes to email, economic developers are getting smarter by enlisting professional tools that measure deliverability and effectiveness of their campaigns. They are automating list management, allowing people to subscribe from their website, and segmenting and targeting content based on the performance of past campaigns.

According to our 2009 EDAC Members Marketing Survey:

- 59.3% of EDAC members are using email campaigns.
- 28.1% of EDAC members are already using social media. It is the top new marketing activity planned for 2010 for those that aren't.
- 92.8% have a website specific to their organization, yet only 7.3% have a blog.

It's clear from these results that economic developers are embracing these new tools. The real question is, how many are getting it right?

Later on in the white paper, we'll offer 8 tips to ensure you are managing your electronic and social presence with the same care you manage your brand in other aspects of your marketing.

But first: A primer.

Getting acquainted with the new tools and why you should consider them

Email Campaigns

Email campaigns may take the form of newsletters, announcements, press releases or a myriad of other applications traditionally done in print or in person. We are seeing this shift towards electronic communications with our audience for a number of reasons:

- It's green – less paper reflects a commitment to sustainability.
- It's fast and cheap – As we tighten our marketing purse strings, email allows us to get messages out quickly without incurring costs for mailing or printing.
- Audience preference – many people now prefer to receive communications electronically, and to be able to complete tasks like renewals and registrations online.
- “Warming up” your cold calls – Who clicked? Let's follow up! Establishing interest is that simple with sophisticated email campaign tools.
- Measurability – Today's tools help you find out what content is most popular, who is subscribing or unsubscribing, and which stories your audience is forwarding on to others.

Blogs

While email campaigns push content out to your audience, blogs must give your audience

a reason to come to you. Blogs usually consist of posts that appear in reverse chronological order, that can be further categorized and tagged with keywords.

They require a good deal of care and feeding, but research shows they are well worth the effort. According to Hubspot, the average company that blogs has:

- 55% more visitors
- 97% more inbound links
- 434% more indexed pages

Unlike your primary website, there is an expectation that your blog be updated frequently with a variety of content. Blogs are a vehicle for thought leadership, for providing links to other resources and for offering free advice and tools to the readers, in addition to self-promotion.

Social Media

Social Media is a nebulous term to define, but it basically refers to user communities that have more to do with networking and conversations than they do with traditional marketing. Examples of social media sites include Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn and Twitter, to name a few. Some argue that the term “social media” is actually a misnomer, as it operates very differently from traditional media. We'll use it anyway for the purpose of a common language, and leave that debate for another time.

What isn't up for debate is the increasing popularity of social media sites. As of 2009, 67% of global users visit member communities and 10% of all time spent on the internet is on social media sites. Although these new platforms can be a little overwhelming, with their “tweets” and “@replies” and “fans” and “friends”, it is clear that they are here to stay.

8 pointers to help you get started

Now that we've covered the basics, let's look at some ideas, etiquette and advice for getting started with these new tools. Regardless of whether it is email, blogging or social media, there are some basic tenets to consider that will ensure you are successful.

1. Have a strategy and integrate it

If you hear your colleagues exclaim: "We need to get a Twitter!" or "Let's get at least 100 Facebook friends!" or "Let's buy a third party email list so we can show big distribution numbers!", then you don't have a strategy, you have a big, big problem.

True, these tools are growing in popularity and importance, but aiming wildly at the flavour of the month is not the way to take advantage of them. Like any marketing channel, you must answer basic questions like "Who do we want to reach?", "What message do we want to send?", "What is the goal of this activity?" Once you've got that figured out you can decide on the tool that will get you there.

Your strategy in these new areas must also work with your overall marketing strategy. Too often, marketers neglect the important potential of cross-pollination that comes from social media, blogs and email. How can you use them to leverage each other and your other marketing efforts?

2. Do your homework

This white paper will not offer a magic bullet when it comes to selecting from the suite of tools available to you. While Twitter may work for some, the openness and frequency demanded by that platform may not be right for others. An in-house email solution may be the route

for you, while your neighbour may choose to leave the technology up to an outside agency. It is incumbent on you to research what is out there and decide what, if any, tools you want to integrate with your current strategy.

Using these tools may seem like a cheap way to go, but what you save in hard costs you will incur in the time required to keep your content fresh and interactive. Think carefully about what you will have the time to sustain.

3. Don't jump right in

Once you have decided on the channels you'd like to integrate, it's time to... sit back and take notes? Yes. Many social media platforms have their own vernacular and etiquette. Watch how your peers are using these tools, and note how audiences are responding.

Email, blogs and social networks are fickle mediums, as it takes very little effort to "un-follow", "un-friend" or hit delete. Be sure to get a good grasp of how to make the best impression and build trust and credibility. You will only get one shot.

4. Measure

One of the greatest advantages of these new tools is how well they lend themselves to measurement. Set goals and constantly measure your progress in order to tweak content and determine which channels are working for you so that you can allocate your resources accordingly. Some ideas for measurement include:

- Traffic: Use a free tool like Google Analytics to see what efforts are increasing traffic to your website or blog. You will be able to see what content is most popular, where users are being referred from and how often they return to your site.
- Comments and other interactions: Which blog posts get the most comments? What Facebook updates spark the most

user interaction? What LinkedIn discussions get the most responses? Use interactions as a measure of engagement and make note of what is generating conversation.

- Email Metrics: If you consider pasting 300 email addresses into your “bcc” field an “email campaign”, then it is time to check out some of the new tools that allow you to track specific user behaviours, compare campaigns to one and other and see what content is most popular. Email metrics are powerful, and can be used for specific events as well as ongoing communications.

5. Be human

There is an expectation with blogs, social networks and emails that content is more conversational and personal. Remember that you are being invited into someone's inbox or personal network, so don't regurgitate your media releases and mission statement. Share advice, offer resources and don't be afraid to add some personality to your writing. Being interesting is more important than strict adherence to corporate taglines and rigid grammar.

6. Listen

When you open yourself up to interactions with your audience, be prepared to listen. You may need a thick skin sometimes, but it's critical not to censor or try to control the conversations that happen as a result of a social presence. You may get a harsh “What a crock!” to one of your blog posts, or a snarky comment on Facebook, but you'll earn a lot of credibility for letting the conversation happen without trying to steer it. You may also find that other users jump in to defend you, which is far more powerful than a rebuttal from you. More importantly, the things you may not want to hear are the exact things you may need to be hearing:

“At a talk about a year ago, one audience member stood up and asked a question. Her

company wanted to use social media, but they were scared about what would happen if people said bad things about their products. As a result, she asked how they could minimize negative comments on the web about their products. In her search for a way to control the message, she missed the most basic solution: Fix your stuff.”

Eric Karjaluo, SmashLab

We used to pay big bucks for focus groups. Social networks provide a focus group of sorts for free, and the responses are often more spontaneous and honest than those you get around a board room table or in a town hall forum. Be sure to listen to how your community can “fix its stuff”.

7. Quality over quantity

It takes a long time to build a good network, and trying to find shortcuts will not serve your goals. It may be tempting to purchase an email list, but before you do, think about the last time you received an unsolicited email. Likely, your reaction was one of confusion and annoyance, not one of relief that someone sought you out to tell you this great piece of information. Further, privacy practices dictate that you cannot send emails to people that don't explicitly give permission or implicitly give it by having done business with you within the last two years.

Social networks and blogs are similar. Many treat them as a popularity contest, but the most valuable friends, followers and subscribers are those that look forward to your posts and engage in conversations with you. In short, it may be tempting to try to push up your numbers, but do you really want to be talking to people that don't want to listen to you?

8. Put the shoe on the other foot

There are no hard and fast rules for how often to post to a blog or send an email newsletter. The one rule you should heed however is to never waste your reader's time.

Before you put a message out there, put yourself in your audience's place and ask if this is going to add some value to their day. If it's not, it's better to wait until you've got something to say that will build your credibility and leave them wanting more.

In closing

Like any other industry, economic development marketing is moving towards new tools for communication that rely heavily on technology, transparency and measurement. Used correctly, they can greatly enhance your community's brand in the market, and can facilitate business development, job growth and civic pride. Take the time to figure out the best strategy for you, respect the practices of these new platforms, and you will reap the rewards as you grow this area of your marketing strategy.

About the Author

On Three Communication Design Inc. is a creative agency specializing in promoting places not products. For more information and insight, visit them at www.onthree.ca or read the blog at <http://blog.onthree.ca>.

Fast Facts

Social networks and blogs are the 4th most popular online activities, including beating personal email.

77% of active Internet users read blogs.

67% of global users visit member communities and 10% of all time spent on the internet is on social media sites.

In 2009, email marketing is predicted to return \$43.52 for every dollar spent.

If MySpace were a country it would be the 5th largest in the world.

100 million Facebook users log in at least once a day.

As of September 2009, there have been over 4 billion "tweets" on Twitter.

As of June 2009, Flickr hosted 3.6 billion user-generated images. It was launched in 2004.

133,000,000 - number of blogs indexed by Technorati since 2002