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Scott Cytron • Nov. 01, 2009

From the Nov. 2009 Issue

Once upon a time, there once lived an accountant who, by his very nature, preferred the solitude of crunching numbers and calculating tax returns to the boisterous roar of his firm's social events, area networking functions, and even business lunches with prospects and clients.

Is this a fairy tale or something much more real? Do accountants really have this kind of reputation or are they secretly social beasts waiting to stampede run out of the starting gate?

The best attribute about social media is that it forces us to become "social" and share information. The worst thing about social media is that it allows us to become "social" and share information.

A contradiction? Yes! So far, social media, which experts agree is still in its infancy, explodes with possibilities for an accounting firm because it enables the firm to project itself in ways that were never this easy or more fun. Yet, many firms remain skeptical as to the advantages of participating in social media.

Based on the current environment, and visits with a firm and an accounting information provider, here are several areas of discussion a firm wants to explore before deciding whether it should stick its toe in the water.

The Big 3: LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter

Most everyone uses social media without really knowing it — while these tasks may seem basic, sending and receiving e-mails and visiting websites are

examples of social media. However, what we now think of as today's social

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a regional firm with offices in York and Hanover, Penn.

“Our staff benefits by getting involved and learning to understand the mechanics of social networking. It's important to be there if someone is searching for us and the services we provide. We're a very tech-savvy organization, but if we don't carry that through in the public's perception of us, it's a pretty big omission.”

If accounting has the Big 4, then social media has the Big 3: LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Stambuagh Ness uses all three to publicize its software, tax and payroll seminars. Will anyone attend because of the firm's presence on all three? Hake says that's one of the firm's goals; but on a more specific level, LinkedIn helps the firm understand the relationships among its own people and those in other organizations.

“It (LinkedIn) also keeps us (and them) updated on what issues everyone is dealing with and working on. That's pretty important given all of the fast changes we are going through in our business environment. The strategies for the next phase of leveraging LinkedIn are currently being studied and developed.”

The firm first used Facebook as part of its recruitment strategy, asking interns some two years ago to set up a Facebook Group to appeal to college students. To date, the firm hasn't recruited anyone specifically because of Facebook, but Hake feels the page gives the firm a presence and proof that it is in sync with the new ways of staying in touch.

“Since then, we expanded our reach to join other groups, including a group for Deltek Vision software, which we resell to architectural and engineering clients,” says Hake. “When a partnership prospect searched on the term Deltek and extended a plea for someone to get in touch with him, we

immediately

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our internal newsletter, and some of the information generates ideas for articles for our weekly external newsletter. Information overload is a great possibility, so we make use of it in small chunks.”

Hake says the firm also learned that an organization can be judged not only by whom it follows, but also by who is following the organization. “If you’re serious about business, it’s best to encourage participation by those businesses in your service area, and it’s good to have the media tuned into your tweets, as well. It’s easy to block followers who are not business-minded, and we do that without any hesitation.

“Twitter is like Brussels sprouts; it’s better to just taste it than try to understand why people either love it or hate it — and it’s probably going to be good for you.”

Establish Measureable Goals

Accounting firms exist to provide clients assurance on a variety of levels – and any firm will tell its prospects and clients that it goes into all engagements with a very defined set of measurable objectives and goals to complete the engagement with the highest quality.

Defining goals and making them measurable is another component of using social media wisely, but many firms neither take the time to do this in a logical, thought-out manner nor link them to marketing initiatives.

“Like anything else that needs to be managed, setting goals for social media efforts helps get things done,” says Barry Friedman, CPA, CEO of BizActions, a B2B executive e-mail newsletter service. “This is even more

important within a tax and accounting firm because social media is a new effort

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within the firm. Annual goals are too far out to be managed effectively, and monthly goals may be too frequent. Send actual results compared to the plan to all groups. Peer pressure becomes the ultimate goal manager instead of a marketing department that usually has no direct responsibility of staff or partners.”

SEO Through Social Media

Social media is very useful for SEO (search engine optimization), because LinkedIn, Facebook group sites, firm blogs and other applications, including YouTube, can be found through search engines. There are many tasks associated with ensuring SEO is optimized on a site or application, all with the end goal of getting noticed. Friedman, for example, optimizes BizActions.com for SEO.

“Google has complex algorithms that determine the placement of your firm in a search request; for your firm to get noticed, it must be on page one of the Google results page,” he says. “That’s not so easy because there are generally millions of potential sites to be considered.”

One factor Google uses to determine a firm’s importance is the number of links other sites have to your site, says Friedman. Another important factor is whether a site is mentioned in any social media sites. If the firm is mentioned or linked when a keyword or phrase is searched and that site is part of a social media program, then the perception is that the firm must be worth checking out.

“Blogs are a form of social media; people can leave messages and communicate around a particular site,” he says. “BizActions started an aggressive program of blogging around keywords that make a difference to our firm. We have all departments blogging at least once a week, and in the last three months, we’ve created more than 60 blog entries.” On certain keywords, BizActions occupies three to four positions in the top 10.

“That’s very significant to our business because we get more clicks

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way from writing a policy to govern social media.

Social media policies help employees understand how to use social media, how long to spend using social media during the workday, and the sensitivity associated with posting personal and/or proprietary information. While this might sound like Big Brother intervening, the policy is usually written in an employee manual the same way a dress code would be included.

The problem with this approach (and the reason firms hesitate to write a policy) stems from the wants and needs of younger employees.

“Some organizational policies are more crucial than others, and setting a social media policy has not been an urgent need at this point,” says Hake. “We have set overall guidelines about Internet use, and we occasionally include reminders to exercise professionalism and good taste when representing Stambaugh Ness, but we expect our staff to live up to our expectations.”

Prepare for surprises. When questioned, Hake says the firm’s newest and youngest group of employees expressed reluctance to get involved in Twitter, and there was a degree of misunderstanding about it. For example, employees did not know if it was possible to effectively use Twitter only on a computer versus their cell phone.

“They felt it invaded their personal lives,” he says. “If anything, our challenge has been to educate our staff about social media instead of setting detailed limitations. Our president introduced social media via his internal blog by using the simple, well-done YouTube presentations by Commoncraft.

Taking the time and effort to develop an official policy would detract from other, more urgent endeavors we have in front of us. If we need a policy to do that in the future, we will.”

Still, some sort of orderly pursuit prevails. Hake encourages firms to designate

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For more than 20 years, Scott H. Cytron, ABC, has worked with CPAs and accountants, providing public relations, marketing and communications services, and teaches firms how to use social media more effectively. Author of The CPA Technology Advisor's MarketingWorks column, he tweets, and is on Facebook and LinkedIn. Contact him at scottcytron@cpata.com.

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