

Social Media in Government

High Level Adoption Guidelines

Information Technology Authority
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Introduction:

In line with the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in April 2011, to develop communication channels between government institutions and citizens, and in line with the e.oman strategy in implementing the eGovernment vision, the Information Technology Authority (ITA) has prepared the E-Participation Guidelines for Using Social Media in Government. These Guidelines are to be used by all government entities in Oman, as guidance in implementing modern social media technologies in communicating with citizens. The channels and tools are simple, easy to use, cost effective and use the latest of technologies, resulting in better documentation of data bases, easy access and more transparent dialogue.

ITA is taking the leadership to advise and train all government entities in the use and implementation of social media in Oman.

What is Social Media?

Social media is a set of online technologies, sites and practices which are used to share opinions, experiences and perspectives. Fundamentally it is about conversation.

Social media is different from traditional media -- such as print, TV and radio – as it is not a broadcast medium.

Social media is a dialogue that happens between Government and its citizens. This means that the level of control assumed from traditional media is replaced with a deeper level of engagement with the public. The main benefit of social media for governments is that well-considered and carefully implemented social media can create greater transparency, an interactive relationship with the public, a stronger sense of ownership of government policy and services, and thus a greater public trust in government.

The potential uses of social media are wide and varied. The Government can use social media to raise awareness of certain issues, build credibility with specific audience groups, engage Oman in policy consultation, or serve as an internal communications tool to improve collaboration between government agencies or within a single agency.

Core Social Media Tools:

The five core social media tools are:

1. **Social networks** – A term often used to refer to the websites used to connect and interact with other individuals. Interaction is often informal and entirely web-based. Examples include Facebook and Twitter.



- 2. Media-sharing networks** – Websites that allow users to share video and images. They also allow users to comment on their own media and the media uploaded by users. Examples include YouTube and Flickr.
- 3. Blogs** – Short for weblog. A blog is a content-managed website that presents its entries in reverse chronological order and allows visitors to comment. Blogger and WordPress are examples of popular blogging tools.
- 4. Wikis** – Web-based applications which allow users to add content to or edit a web page. The most popular example is Wikipedia.
- 5. Forums** – Online applications for holding themed discussions between groups of participants.

Benefit and Risk Analysis

As with any communication channel, there are benefits and risks to using social media. Before your organization actually starts using the tools, it is important to assess these benefits and risks adequately.

Benefits:

Social media can bring a variety of benefits in supporting government communications and wider objectives, including:

- Increase audience reach and improve the accessibility of Government communication;
- Reflect the communication channel preferences of Omanis;
- Meet public expectations of modern service organizations and enhance reputation;
- Promote transparency in Government;
- Support more involved relationships with citizens, partners and other stakeholders;
- Enhance Government response to quickly adjust or refocus communications;
- Improve the long-term cost-effectiveness of communication;
- Benefit from the credibility of non-government channels;
- Increase the speed of public feedback and input;
- Reach specific audiences on specific issues;
- Reduce dependence on media and counter inaccurate press coverage;
- Lead Omanis directly to online transactional services; and,
- Create and develop content written by citizens.

Risks:

Because social media is an evolving area of government engagement, there are risks. These can be cultural, technical or reputational and must be factored into planning. But they should not dissuade you from using



social media. Over time, as experience build and case studies provide us with precedents, risk will be more easily identified and reduced.

Risks in using social media include:

- Government activity in some social media websites and forums may not be welcome
- A post by government employees may be inaccurate or inappropriate, creating legal or reputational risk
- Some sites may be open to manipulation by interest groups or those with malicious intent
- User generated content may be difficult to check for accuracy
- Negative impact on a community when a public figure has to pull out of a debate
- Greater resource requirements than expected
- Comments may unintentionally inflame a situation

There are appropriate mitigations for these risks.

Before you start

Would your agency pay for a radio advertisement without thinking about what the goal of the advertisement was? Would you commit to writing a monthly newsletter without determining your audience, key messages, and a list of possible topics? Of course not.

Radio and newsletters are channels for communication, just as social media is. Before embarking on a social media project you need to consider things such as:

- your goals and objectives
- your target audience(s)
- the benefits, risks and mitigations for those risks
- the ongoing resources required
- your measure for success.

Of course, if you are targeting pensioners on a fixed income, you are less likely to have an effect with social networking than if you are targeting teens. Social networking may be fashionable but it is not the best communications channel in every instance or for every audience.

Resourcing

Resource planning for social media is especially important. Blogs that haven't been updated in months can make your agency look incompetent and disorganized. The same can be said of Facebook and Twitter accounts that don't get updated.

Social networking is not a 'quick win'. It takes time to build a community. You're in for the long haul, and resource commitments need to reflect this.



Forums that debate specific policies, however, may be time-specific. Resource planning should take that into account.

When calculating resources, be sure to consider the need to publicize your social media investment.

Promotion work can be done by adding links from your corporate website, doing marketing campaigns, or simply leaving comments in forums and blogs with links back to your social media profile. However, you decide to publicize, there will be resource implications.

Resources may also be needed to create back-ups, transcripts, and other records of social media activity.

Learning the Ropes

One of the best ways for staff to learn how to use social media is to start off using it themselves. Setting up their own personal Facebook or Twitter profile or starting up a personal blog in their own time will help them to learn the ropes with minimal risks, and without the added weight that comes with representing the agency in a professional manner. Once staff have 'learned the ropes' they will be better prepared to start using social media professionally.

Staff should only engage in social media on behalf of the agency if they have received the authority and, where necessary, training to do so. See 'Codes of Conduct'.

Trusting Staff

Social media tools require quick responses and direct communication with stakeholders, often in real or near-real time. Successful social media projects are ones where delegated staff are trusted, after proper training, to understand and manage the risks around release of information. If information needs further verification or is potentially contentious, staff need to be trusted to escalate as appropriate – and those escalation paths must be quick and efficient.

Nothing kills the effectiveness of a social media project more quickly than slow response times where each and every statement or 'tweet' needs to go up the chain of command to be approved before publication.

Passive, Active, Engaged

There is a spectrum of involvement in social media. Your organization doesn't have to jump in boots and all on the first day. You can start with a passive involvement and move through to becoming more active and finally fully engaged with the audiences you have identified.

Passive

One of the first things your organization can do in social media is simply to listen. What's being said about you?

Social media monitoring tools can help you discover what's being said about your organization. You can, for example, do a twitter search for relevant terms (your organization name, or the name of a specific issue relevant to your organization). There are also services which can send you alert emails every time a certain



term is mentioned in blogs and other social media tools. One example of such a service is Social Mention (<http://www.socialmention.com/>). Other examples include Trackur, Klout, and NetVibes.

At a minimum, government communicators should find and assess the social media tools that their target audiences are using. This landscaping can then be used to inform strategic plans, future communications, or budgets for greater participation in social media, if necessary.

Active

Once you've listened for a while and understand the tone and concerns of a social media community, you can begin becoming more active. You can post links to information to help people answer questions they have, or you can actively correct an inaccuracy on a blog, forum or a wiki.

This sort of activity can be done in 'other people's houses' – that is, in the blogs, forums and wikis that others have established. Make sure you follow the 'Basic principles' and always identify yourself as a public servant if you are responding on behalf of your organization.

Engaged

Finally, your organization can become fully engaged. You can set up a group on a social networking site and regularly introduce content for discussion, or you can establish a Twitter profile and begin contributing and actively posting and answering questions.

Be aware that once you've become fully engaged, you have a responsibility to be a good custodian. You'll need to post regularly, moderate comments as appropriate, and check regularly for messages that require a response.

Basic Principles for Agency Staff

There are some common principles shared across all forms of social media. Knowing these basic 'rules of engagement' will serve employees well, whether they are simply contributing to or actually managing an online community.

- **Be credible** – Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
- **Be consistent** – Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Be cordial, honest and professional at all times.
- **Be responsive** – Answer questions in a timely manner. Share your insights where appropriate.
- **Be integrated** – Wherever possible align online participation with other offline communications.
- **Be a public servant** – Remember that you are an ambassador for your agency. Wherever possible disclose your position as a representative of your department or agency.



- **Be a good custodian** – If you've introduced and/or are managing your organisation's social media profile or blog, make sure that you're posting content and checking messages regularly. An untended and out-of-date account looks unprofessional. Also ensure that information is created, kept and, if necessary, disposed of in accordance with organizational policies.

Codes of Conduct

The Code of Conduct for your individual agency apply to staff participation online as a public servant. Staff should participate in the same way as they would with other media or public forums such as speaking at conferences.

- Seek authorization to participate in social media on behalf of your agency. Do not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activities on behalf of government unless you are authorized to do so.
- If you are participating in social media on behalf of your agency, disclose your position as a representative of your agency unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. Never give out personal details like home address and phone numbers.
- Always remember that participation online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media.
- Stay within the legal framework and be aware that defamation, copyright and privacy laws, among others, apply.
- If you're using social media in a personal capacity, you should not identify your employer when doing so would bring your employer into disrepute.
- Keep in mind that even social media sites restricted to your 'friends' are in effect public, as you cannot control what friends do with the information.
- Always make sure that you are clear as to whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity. Be aware that participating online may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care regardless of what capacity you are acting in.

If you have any doubts, take advice from your manager or legal team.

Special Advice to Chief Executives

As social media use increases, many Chief Executives are considering whether or not to participate in social media in a professional capacity themselves – for example, using Twitter or Facebook under their own name and as a representative of their organization.

When undertaking any new communications strategy, all channels should be considered, and if social media is deemed appropriate, Chief Executives need to consider the risks, benefits, goals, and audiences before



directly participating. A Chief Executive's presence on social media should be considered part of the larger communications strategy.

While social media has benefits, it needs to be actively managed if the benefits are to be realized and the risks minimized. One of the most serious drawbacks for Chief Executives is the amount of time social media takes up and the risk that, if they are not familiar with social media, Chief Executives might come across as too formal and, therefore, 'inauthentic'. Consideration should be given to resourcing or delegating to a social media expert within the organization.

As with any media tool, Chief Executives should ensure they are adequately trained in using social media before they begin participating. It is a public forum, and should be considered as such at all times. Content posted in error in social media often cannot be withdrawn and may damage the organization's reputation, as well as the professional reputation of the Chief Executive.