Not so social media: Twitter use in the conference sector

Abstract
This research forms part of a larger project funded by Meeting Professionals International (MPI) focusing on the future of business events . In this paper we investigate the motivations for social media use within a professional event context. Twitter use was tracked before during and after seven diverse conferences and from this the top tweeters and organisers were identified. Fifteen interviews were conducted to gain insights into both the organisational strategy and individual motivations for tweeting and these were analysed alongside interviews with five well known 'general' social media experts. The research highlights several potential areas of conflict. Social media use tends to be focused on broadcasting information rather than encouraging dialogue. People only tweet if they gain personal or individual professional value from doing so and event organisers need a deeper understanding of what that value is. Monitoring social media to gain customer insights and develop a more responsive customer service strategy is not yet happening although it is recognised as a necessity. The silent majority (passives) need to be far better understood and catered for through social media use. Overall this sector, which successfully creates social interactions offline appears to be failing to do so online. A more strategic and resourced approach to social media is needed if its potential is to be achieved.

Introduction

Based on the tracking of Twitter at seven events as well as in-depth interviews with the event organisers, top tweeters and social media experts (see Appendix A) the research provides evidence that social media use is a vital part of the event experience. However, this use varies in significant ways providing insights into individual motivations for engaging in these media and suggestions for organisational strategies to achieve more from them.   The summary presented here focuses on one section from a larger study funded by MPI (the international professional association for conference/meeting planners) as part of the Future of Meetings ongoing study.

Not all media are created equal

The first part of this research involved monitoring Twitter activity. This was then summarised for each of the conferences and used as the basis for the interviews with event organisers and top tweeters. Appendix B provides a summary of this data.

Most interviewees agree that Twitter is the most appropriate for quick and easy commentary with regard to conference/meetings, with LinkedIn used as a prospecting tool but not for communication with any immediacy. LinkedIn is used to connect to a specific group but not to comment. As we would expect Facebook is seen as for friends, family and consumer events with wider appeal. A survey undertaken recently within the events industry highlighted the use of Facebook for mainly consumer events and Twitter for B2B (Amiando, 2011). An exception to the focus on Twitter was provided by KME, one of the tracked events, who were trying to reach a younger audience and chose Facebook as their main social media tool (tweets were posted on Facebook along with photos and discussions).

This focus on Twitter within the conference sector may mean missing out on the more engaging and dialogue-enhancing aspects of other platforms. Perhaps this focus is due to the quick and easy nature of tweeting (according to EBCC top tweeter) compared with the more difficult planning of a Facebook campaign. As one top tweeter explains "Twitter supports the real-time aspect of the event whereas Facebook is more a repository of images… a way to solidify the culture around the event.. a sense of a shared community that transcends a specific moment in time". Although one benefit of social media content is its immediacy it can also add value by providing the delegate with the opportunity to read through posts and tweets at a later date. A 'timelock' as one interviewee suggested that 'is better than the standard proceedings as it adds a little informality and the views of a range of people'.

Although a rapidly growing platform Pinterest was not mentioned by any interviewees. As use spreads to professional areas this is likely to change as it fits well with the increasing desire for visual rather than word heavy information. One of the social media experts interviewed, predicts a change from the 'social graph' to the 'interest graph' with platforms such as Pinterest leading the way. "Pinterest represents the first of many interest graph implementations. We're both planning a wedding; we are both interested in curtains; we are both interested in baseball and therefore we follow one another based on our interests, not on our social connections. I think you're going to see more and more of that type of use of social media in the next few years. I'm always going to be interested in following people that love the New York Mets, because I love the New York Mets and always will. I'm not at all interested any more in what my second cousin has to say". (Kerpen, 2012).

However, it's also worth remembering that social media is still small in comparison to other communication platforms. For example for EBCC (with 3877 participants) only 2.7% tweeted whereas 47% downloaded the conference app with delegates visiting the web page 22 times on

average including an average of 5 times during the conference. The increased use of apps which allow for delegate to delegate interaction is a trend set to continue with the focus on creating online customer experiences that translate into customer lifetime value' (Anderson et al, 2010). This connectivity between all platforms is vital ensuring that each medium complements and integrates with the others providing both consistency and credibility.

Look who's talking

The data and interviews suggest that although many delegates will have accounts in all of the main social media platforms it is a relatively small number who will actively produce content, add commentary or even retweet or pass on information. In the seven tracked events we found that the majority who produced content were either paid to provide commentary, in that many had a clear interest in promoting the conference for professional reasons (immediate involvement with its organisation, paid PR consultants, etc). Or, used the conference tweets as a way of building their own profile e.g. 'because I'm building up my own network in this sector and tweeting about the show raised my own profile'. One conference offered a holiday reward to the top tweeter to get people tweeting.

Several of the top tweeters we interviewed had more than one account and used one professionally and the other personally. For example at AISB and EBCC the two top tweeters were the same person, tweeting professionally before the conference for promotion purposes, as part of their professional role and during the conference under a personal user name. At MMI one third of all tweets were generated by the conference organiser to publicise the event, followed by one of the speakers (using an employee to tweet on his behalf). This very differing use of social media (publicise event versus publicise self) illustrates the complexity of managing content on these platforms.

According to social media experts this compartmentalisation of identity is set to increase in the future, we can already see this developing. As one interviewee pointed out there is a difference between following a hashtag (for the 'in the moment' information) and following a person (for professional output). This tweeter is one person to those who want to know about the conference, or when she publishes a paper and another when discussing conversational things that are happening at that moment in time. The two types of content suggested here can both be of benefit to the conference organiser adding personality as well as content to the event.

As the graphic suggests there is a useful overlap between the reasons why people use social media. This is illustrated by one of the top tweeters who explains the reason for tweeting as "to increase my brand, increase my reach, to network, to make it clear what I offer and what I do". The focus on self-promotion stands out especially when related to the tweeter's own business activities and not necessarily the conference. However, this self-promoting activity also benefited the conference which provided the vehicle and subject matter through which this person could network. Publicity was therefore gained through his tweets and blogs extending the reach of the conference to the tweeter's networks. Meetings already rely on prosumers , co-creators and advocates. These are people

working together either formally of informally to further a cause, industry, their careers, their businesses (Toffler, 1980). Social media provides ideal platforms to enhance and increase this activity creating benefits at personal, inter-personal and organisational levels

In all of the seven conferences the largest number of tweets came directly from the conference organisers or their agents. These were partly to promote the event and generate publicity through wider media but also to make the event content accessible to those who couldn't attend and therefore extending the reach of the event. The need to provide information that could be picked up by the media was also a driver. Some of the top tweeters were journalists (with relatively high Klout scores) using platforms such as Twitter to mainly provide a sample of what they intended to produce in more detail on a blog or other medium.

Not so social

The analysis shows that social media isn't that social in this context. It appears to be very much a monologue rather than dialogue. Several top tweeters stated that although their tweets were being read and sometimes retweeted, more often than not no one had replied to them. This rings true with other recent research which shows that the use of social media by both organisations and celebrities has far more in common with broadcast one-way media than conversation (Page, 2012). Creative ways to encourage dialogue are needed and the most effective way to do this is to ensure that those conversations are of value to the participants.

Research in other industries shows a similar pattern with the majority using social media platforms as one way communication channels (Kwon and Sung, 2011) for sending out media kits, newsletters, reports and web links (Lovejoya et al, 2012). Whereas, proactive use for environmental scanning and customer research coupled with reactive use for customer service responsiveness is where the value lies. The four phases of social media use in sales offer useful lessons (Andzulis et al, 2012). The comments in our research suggest that the conference industry may be largely operating in stage 1 (establish presence and flow from firm to customer). The greatest present and future value lies in achieving stage 4 where social media are employed to facilitate processes, value is co-created, real time service is offered and it is fully integrated with marketing strategy.

The main obstacle to achieving this more sophisticated engagement was reported by the interviewees as time. The desire is there, as one of conference organisers states, 'if we had more energy to sit and actually engage with users one to one, so if somebody tweets something then we actually read it, follow it, monitor it, respond to it and engage in conversation. We don't have the resource yet to do that dialogue'. Resourcing this area effectively allows the organisation to respond in a public manner to both positive and negative comments. As one interviewee put it, 'they have given you the opportunity to showcase your customer service'.

In order to encourage both original posts and retweeting social media needs to be integrated into the planning and programming of the conference. The conference with least Twitter activity amongst those tracked explained that this was because social media activity 'wasn't integrated into anything that was particularly happening at the show… it was kept very separate and used more as a broadcasting tool rather than a participatory tool' . This is clearly is one role of social media, spreading the word to wider networks, but does not leverage the most value from this type of media. One top tweeter also suggested that retweets may be less for conferences which represent a fairly 'closed community' in that all those who are interested in the subject area tend to be at the event and therefore don't see the need to retweet to their wider networks. Conferences with more general content or content of wider interest are likely to be retweeted more. This is echoed by research into conference back-channels which found that the use of Twitter at conferences allowed the community to expand communication and participation in events amongst its members but that some social media communities were close-knit and therefore intimidating for those new to the field or conference (Ross et al, 2011).

A recent study into why bloggers blog provides useful insights to help encourage tweeters. It was found that the main gratifications from blogging came from three sources; Process (emotion management, self-improvement and enjoyment); Content (life documenting, commenting, promotion, advertising, entertaining others, enlightening others); and Social (discussion, communication, finding friends, image management, vanity, getting support) (Chen, 2011). Providing potential bloggers with the material and tools to perform these tasks needs to be considered as part of any event's social media plan.

Planning to increase social media use may involve gamification - promotion or competition. One conferences larger number of tweets over a longer time period was created due to this type of pre-planned activity. Although, in some cases, this generated tweets which were of lesser value (less meaningful content) it undoubtedly acted as an incentive and generated buzz. One challenge is to find innovative ways to incentivise social media use whilst avoiding perceived ingenuousness in the content. It may be difficult to 'keep it real' 'keep it of value' if the incentives make it appear more like flogging than blogging.

The silent majority

Although the focus here has been on the minority of tweeters it is the 'friends of fans' (the followers, passives, readers) who may form the greatest potential. Organisations can realize significant untapped benefits by understanding and focusing on reaching these 'friends' (Lipsman et al, 2012) as well as the tweeters/opinion leaders.

The tweeting/posting minority

The reading many

The hidden non-engagers
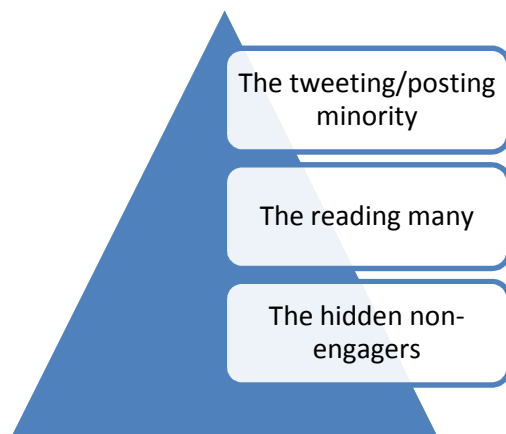
To do this it's necessary to join the silent majority and read the content. The greatest untapped value in social media is its use as an information resource, as a customer research tool. This is worth investing in. For example, Accor Hotels track 40,000 specific hotels, 8000 competitors (in eight languages) and from this produce a global dashboard, 40 regional dashboards and 4000 specific hotel dashboards which are updated weekly. Using this tool they can identify underperformance and respond quickly to negative comments. Their return on this has been increased brand equity, satisfaction and bottom line bookings (Poynter, 2011). As one social media expert explains "whether you engage or not as a business, I think it is very important that a business at least knows what's being said about it and where… Companies need to have a monitoring strategy in place that is essentially a reputation management strategy. That's the bare minimum", (Hambly, 2012).

Interviewed social media expert, Cohen (2012) suggests that this doesn't have to be resource intensive. She recommends, like others, that "you must be monitoring your brand" , but also suggests that "most things don't have to be answered. Consumers will answer other consumers. They'll find out information. It's mainly idle chatter. What you need to know is what you have to respond to and it's usually about 2%, that seems about right". Ideally the longer term strategy should be to remove the conference organiser from the social media driving seat and inspire others to take control, respond to queries and add the content.

A long term study looking at the development of online communities over six years provides useful insights in how best to facilitate and encourage organisation-sponsored communities. The authors conclude that managers need to "bring the right people together, provide an infrastructure in which communities can thrive, and measure the community's value in non-traditional ways" (Porter et al, 2011). One way to do this, they suggest, is to use Twitter hyperlinks effectively to guide users to interactive spaces such as Facebook, blogs where online communities can form, rather than to a relatively static and formal organisational website (Lovejoya et al, 2012; Furlong, 2012).

No respondents mentioned attempting to measure value in terms of longer term actions (contacts made, bookings) and there seems to be little customer research being done into the value of social media to clients and delegates. Asking which tweets, posts were valued and why (by readers) and what activities prompted posts and why (by contributors), must become a standard part of social media planning (Wood and Lanham, 2012). This need to monitor is recognised but is not yet seen as a priority, "we try to track – if followers increase or if people are interacting, whether they're writing about what we're doing but I would say that just making sure we disseminate everything is the main objective".

Part of the value

The non-contributing majority of delegates may well see online social media as a limiter to face-to-face networking. Consider the number of people who now connect (via tablet, smartphone) to the outside world during conference breaks rather than the person sat next to them (Singer, 2012). So social media use during the conference requires a very different strategy to its use before and after. During the conference the organisers need to encourage social media use without intruding on the value gained from being there, listening and talking. There has to be the space and time to use social media and the incentive to do so when appropriate.

 It is useful therefore to view social media as an enabler within a greater process rather than a solution in its own right (Rodriguez et al, 2012). The social media experts interviewed reflected this view. Beuker (2012) states that "social media is a tool not the solution. It's really getting into the next stage of client-driven brands, CRM-driven brands. And social media is just a layer around it. It can facilitate that and help you, but it's not social media that is the solution. The solution is becoming a better brand". Taylor (2012) suggests that "most brands have jumped in without strategy. It's really more about being a customer loyalty vehicle and most people are trying to use [social media] as an acquisition and prospecting tool". And Kerpen (2012) advocates investment now in "a chief listening officer, a chief social media officer ..who's dedicated to social, because they not only have to be dedicated to planning the social now, they have to understand what's coming".

Conclusions

In summary the findings from the interviews with tweeters and social media experts suggest that at the moment conference organisers are attempting to drive social media engagement through the 'pushing' out of content and this activity is focused in a relatively short time period immediately before and during the conference. More value is likely to be added if this activity is driven by community members and extends and strengthens the connections made after the conference has taken place.

Social media contributors (the actives) do so for a variety of personal and professional reasons. If event organisers can provide the material and impetus to get them tweeting this will lead to mutual benefits. Social networks will help move social interaction offline into more positive and effective face-to-face interactions.

Social media use is driven by ordinary people finding new ways to engage, no longer simply following people they know or admire, but people following other people who simply share their (sometimes disparate) interests. Many will have more than one social media identity and this compartmentalisation of identity is set to increase in the future. Event planners need to pre-empt these changes, join in and above all plan strategically to provide value regardless of the technology or platform. This can only be achieved by having clear objectives, selecting the right online and offline tools and measuring what has been achieved.

Overall then the trick seems to be to find the value that is shared by all (organiser, speaker, delegate, and media). As one specialist in social CRM puts it "we are no longer satisfied to serve as passive targets for marketing activities…[We] want to interact with companies on our terms using the tools we choose… [we] want to participate in the definition of value but also want to serve as active co-creators of that value" (Trainor, 2012). Perhaps it is time for organisations to become passive social media users but active social media planners.

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Appendix A: Social media experts interviewed

Igor Beuker, founder of community agency LaComunidad, online video metrics company ViralTracker, and social marketing agency SocialMedia8
Heidi Cohen, one of the Nifty Fifty Women on Twitter and a Top 100 Marketing Professor on Twitter
Chris Hambly, digital veteran and MD of social media company SMiB
Dave Kerpen, the co-founder and CEO of Likeable Media and best-selling author
Lori Taylor, social media technologist and one of Forbes' top 50 social media power influencers.

Appendix B: Summary of tracked events

Event	Event duration	Tweeting duration	Total tweets	Total tweeters	No. of people at the event	% tweeting	Tweets per tweeter	Average [1]klout score	Highest Klout score
International Association of Conference Centres, Texas USA (IACC)	4 days	76 days	313	33	NA	NA	9.5	18.3	60
European Cancer Organisation, Vienna, Austria (EBCC)	4 days	75 days	405	106	3817	2.8%	3.8	21.2	58
Music, Mind, & Invention, New Jersey, USA (MMI)	2 days	31 days	102	22	200	11.0%	4.6	25.3	54
Conference and Hospitality Show, Leeds, UK (CHS)	1 day	77 days	3364	173	400	43.3%	19.4	20.6	52
Korea MICE Expo, COEX, Seoul, Korea (KME)	3 days	116 days	93	26	3837	0.7%	3.6	18.8	62
AISB/IACAP World Congress 2012 Birmingham,UK	5 days	76 days	143	41	219	18.7%	3.5	25.2	58
World Education Congress 2012, St. Louis , USA (WEC)	4 days	162 days	9183	1048	2175	48.2%	8.8	28.9	69