

How IT Professionals Are Using Social Media



**and How Marketers
Can Join the
Conversation**

A WHITE PAPER PRESENTED BY





Introduction

Social media has changed the way most of us communicate and collaborate, not just personally but professionally as well. IT professionals are no exception – in fact, in some areas they are leading the charge.

Consider the relatively insulated nature of the IT community: In the past, the best ways to interact with peers came primarily through professional associations or industry events. These interactions, while fruitful, were usually too infrequent to facilitate any meaningful, sustainable dialogue.

Fast forward to present day, where the emergence of social media platforms has dramatically altered how IT professionals share information not just with their peers, but also the extended groups of influencers that interact with those peers. Social media enables valuable direct and indirect connections across and among friends, peers, colleagues and other useful sources. It is no surprise, then, that nine out of 10 IT professionals say they visit at least one social or business networking site monthly, according to new IDG Audience Engagement research.

The Audience Engagement research, along with a separate Social Media Trends Survey from ITworld, offer new insights on how IT professionals are using sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and even YouTube to discover information and exchange it with their expanding communities. These insights are critical to content publishers and marketers alike that are looking for new ways to engage with IT professionals – in ways that few would have anticipated even a few years ago.

Rewriting the Rules

The two IDG research studies show that social media use among technology professionals is pervasive – and growing. For example, in the Audience Engagement Research, among the 92% of IT professionals that visit one or more social or business networking sites monthly, 60% classified themselves as active users of or active participants in social media. Those numbers were even greater in the ITworld Social Media Trends Survey, in which 65% of the respondents said they were active users or participants – with an additional 8% defining themselves as “thought leaders” – a frequent contributor with a following.

These IT professionals are doing more than simply updating their Facebook status. In fact, 28% of IT professionals are using social or business networking sites to share IT-related news, blogs, product information, or tactical/how-to resources with peers. They use these methods to share content they believe is relevant, informative, newsworthy or, occasionally, humorous.



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IDG AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STUDY



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JOHN GALLANT, CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER, IDG ENTERPRISE





So where are IT professionals finding this content? In many cases, the source is fairly traditional: technology content websites. Three-quarters of the respondents in the Audience Engagement research said they rely on technology content sites for tech-related information, trends, news, reviews and opinions — far surpassing other sources including technology-related print publications (55%), tech vendor websites (45%) and technology-focused community and forum sites (41%).

IT professionals say they find the content on technology sites to be far more trustworthy and, therefore, more valuable than other sources. Nearly eight in 10 (79%) rated the information on technology content sites as extremely or very valuable — outpacing research firms (60%), tech communities (45%), vendor sites (43%) and other sources — including the social media sites themselves, which only 9% of IT professionals cited as providing valuable content.

The results suggest an opportunity for content sites to re-think their publishing strategies around communities and social sharing.

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Raising the Stakes – and the Level of Conversation

IDG is making a significant push into social media across the portfolio of titles in its Enterprise business. With its newly architected ITworld site, for example, the company believes it has developed a model for the new, more socially oriented face of technology content publishing. Gallant calls ITworld “the most socially enabled IT news site,” and its new design and site architecture confirm the assertion. The site offers IT professionals a variety of new methods for sharing content, participating in discussions, and finding and following peers on the site.

The site now includes several key features that facilitate social sharing of content and other peer interactions. For example, visitors can register on the site via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Yahoo and Google, which simplifies the sign-in process while also incorporating their social profiles on the site. IT professionals seem accepting of this approach; in the Social Media Trends survey, 67% of respondents said they were comfortable with using authentication credentials (such as OpenID or Facebook Connect) to access social sharing, commenting, forums or other social features on a website.



Two-thirds of respondents (67%) noted that they frequently or occasionally use sites where they can ask or answer technical questions.

ITWORLD SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY



To encourage participation by the ITworld audience, a new Answers forum allows members to ask and answer questions of one another. This will be a key feature for the two-thirds of respondents (67%) in the ITworld Social Media survey who noted that they frequently or occasionally use sites where they can ask or answer technical questions.

In addition, a new Activity Stream provides real-time views of what other ITworld community members are doing on the site including what members are reading, asking, answering and discussing. Members have complete control over what activity they share or not and may opt not to be included. However, the more that members participate, the more they will be recognized as valued contributors, through a “Trusted Voices” designation that readers will earn based on the frequency and value of member posts on the site.

The new and innovative ways in which technology publishers are tapping into the social aspect of their audiences raises an important question for IT marketers: Where do we fit in? Much like publishers, technology vendors are also looking for new ways to engage and interact with IT professionals. But first, they will need to build more trust with these communities; remember that only 45% of respondents in the IDG Audience Engagement study said they rely on vendor sites as sources of tech-related information.

Joining In: Best Practices for IT Marketers

Traditional advertising is evolving, but the value of brand awareness and all aspects of the marketing mix now must be interwoven into a larger fabric to help IT marketers engage with a target audience in the hopes of moving them into the purchasing funnel. As social media becomes a more important part of this process, IT marketers must explore new methods for joining the formal and informal conversations that are occurring across the social Web (and increasingly, as the ITworld redesign has shown, on technology content sites).

So what’s the right approach? Consider these three proven practices.

1. Create good content.

IT marketers are beginning to redefine “marketing collateral” as they realize that good content extends beyond white papers and brochureware. On the social Web, good content means any type of information that is useful, trusted and occasionally actionable (or at least shareable). The best part (or the scariest, depending on your point of view) is that the community is now in a position to provide instant feedback on whether the content suits their needs. Today’s IT audience has higher expectations for the information they consume and share — forcing IT vendors (as well as publishers) to raise the bar on the quality of the content they create.

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Social media also provides more options for IT vendors to contribute to technology content sites, beyond traditional methods such as microsites and “advertorial.” On the new ITworld site, for instance, a subject matter expert from a technology vendor can be designated a “Trusted Voice” — just like any other member of the community — as long as he or she is contributing information that the community perceives to be valuable.

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2. Align with good content.

IT marketers have always sought out technology publishers that provide quality content to an audience that aligns with the vendor’s goals and objectives. It’s no different on the social Web. In fact, in an environment where virtually anyone can publish anything, forging quality content partnerships may be more important than ever for IT marketers. In the IDG Audience Engagement study, 73% of respondents said that association with a known, familiar source increased their trust in information they read online.

Traditional display advertising and sponsorships are common ways IT marketers can align their brands with trusted content technology sites. ITworld has gone a step further, adding sponsorship opportunities to its new Social Hubs, where vendors can target specific IT capabilities and services, such as virtualization, networking or mobility. Social Hubs provide topic-specific forums for more detailed discussions among peers and the site’s editorial staff where the vendor can showcase their own social outreach efforts such as their twitter streams, blogs and Facebook activity to encourage readers to become part of those communities.

3. Add to the conversation – but don’t drive it.

The ultimate goal for IT marketers is to become part of the conversation – without attempting to control it. Encouraging subject matter experts to actively participate in community forums — with credible and compelling commentary, not thinly disguised marketing speak — will go a long way toward establishing a brand as a trusted source of information.

“This is not an environment where you want to talk at people,” says Gallant. “You want to participate by sharing your expertise and your content. That’s what we’re trying to get the audience to do: share content that we create, but also other content from around the web. By sharing their expertise, vendors will provide something that IT professionals value.”



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Conclusion

Social media has changed the way IT professionals discover and share information. It’s a movement that will only gather steam as younger professionals enter the workforce. In the IDG Audience Engagement study, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were cited by 42% of 18-34 year-olds as a preferred platform for exchanging technology-related information among — surpassing even technology content sites (40%) among that age group.

Clearly, IT publishers and marketers alike need to go where their audience is: on the social Web. But publishers also have an opportunity to bring the social Web into their own sites, integrating a social experience that provides the best of both worlds: a broad and deep repository of trusted content, and the ability to easily share it across social communities. IT marketers can come along for the ride as well, with meaningful contributions that build credibility and increase engagement. A rising social tide can truly lift all boats.

For more information on how you can join the conversation, contact Sean Weglage, SVP/Publisher, ITworld, at sean_weglage@itworld.com.

This White Paper references research studies sourced as IDG Audience Engagement Study, 2010 and ITworld Social Media Trends, 2010.



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