Practice #3: Specialized Spokesperson Roles

Practice Description

Organization handpicks select group of employees possessing issue-level expertise and social credentials to serve as credible online participants in niche policy debates; designated spokespeople are assigned discrete policy "beats," are given greater license to speak, and receive regular training to enhance their effectiveness as online influencers

Situation

Organizations desiring to inflect issue-level debates online find that using an institutional voice can foil efforts to form meaningful, two-way social dialogue. Communications staff, who might be called upon for support, can lack the bandwidth and specialized expertise required for acceptance as credible participants in issue-specific conversations.

Action

Organization designates select individuals from across functions—individuals possessing great storytelling abilities, as well as issue-specific knowledge related to the organization's policy priorities—to serve as social media spokespeople. Spokespeople represent the organization and its positions online, and are aided in building a strong online presence and rapport through regular training sessions and group learning exercises. Moreover, regular meetings enable the sharing of best-found practices for inflecting niche community discussions.

Result

Though the program is still in first two years of operation, a number of spokespeople have been able to distinguish their voices in active policy debates and make new connections with top influencers.

Laws of Social Media in Action

- ☑ Community Contribution
- ☑ Transparent Motivation
- ☐ Anonymous Critique
- ☐ Cocktail Etiquette
- ☐ Crowd Arbitration
- ☐ Collective Narrative
- ☑ Short Distances
- ☐ Quick Bursts
- ☐ Conservation of (Personal) Energy
- ☑ 'Selfish' Sharing

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Conclusion #79
Although many have been content to track issues and influence in social media to date, a great number of advocacy professionals now are actively speaking online—developing a voice for their own organizations and issues

Conclusion #80
Effective voice in social media reinforces a sense of genuine connection with the community by using a variety of conversational strategies—dedication to the advancement of ideas and dialogue, anticipatory acknowledgement of bias, and avoidance of "hierarchical" behavior (deeply frowned upon online)

Conclusion #81
The same rules apply to organizations (read: messaging from a corporate account) as to individuals; irrespective of platform, the voice must sound human—not like a press release—to promote sharing and dialogue

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Attributes of a Voice that Carries

How to Be Heard on Social Media

Profile
Come As You Are

- ❑ Disclose your employer, location, background
- ❑ Do not use a generic avatar; personalize your identity

Content
Add to the Mix

- ❑ Balance personal and professional messages; be human
- ❑ Change topics from time to time
- ❑ Contribute original ideas
- ❑ Add new and relevant angles on issues
- ❑ Focus on issues of emotional resonance for audience
- ❑ Play to the Zeitgeist

Sharing Pattern
Reciprocity Rules

- ❑ Be polite in back-and-forths
- ❑ Source content and give credit where due
- ❑ Don't tweet the same message repetitively

Tone and Language
"No Snark" Zone

- ❑ Use common (outside) language
- ❑ Be emotive, alluring... but not distasteful
- ❑ Be personal
- ❑ Be humble, not hierarchical
- ❑ Show your "fun gene"

Especially important for being heard by policymakers; topics where congressional staff apply stringent "hacks and flaks" filters when listening online

Source: National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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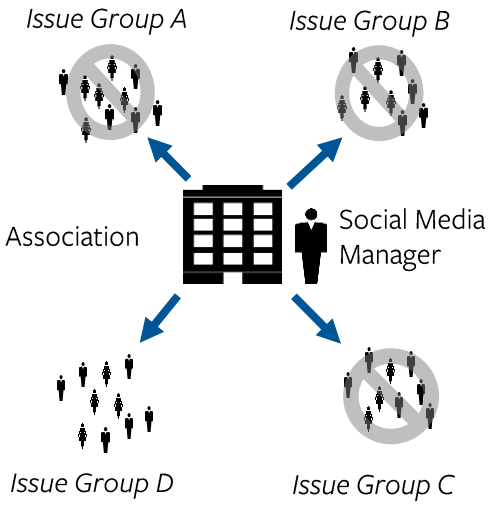
Conclusion #82

Organizations that lack either dedicated expertise for communicating policy specifics, or the human (vs. the institutional) voice required to gain purchase in important niche conversations, will often times find themselves shut-out of relevant online discussions

Trouble Accessing Issue-Level Debates

Confronting a Trust Deficit and Resource Limitations

No Purchase in Important Niche Conversations



Reason #1: Lacking Expertise

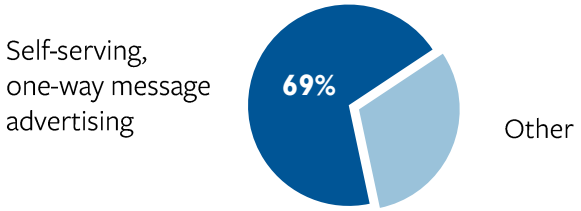
Communications Department's Limitations

"What has been hard for us is finding time to become regular contributors in all of the niche discussions—the ones that ultimately feed and influence broader debate—happening at the issue level. And frankly, even if we did, few on our team have the expertise to be credible voices in those debates."

Director of Communications
Large Trade Association

Reason #2: Suffering a Trust Deficit

Perceived Corporate Motivation for Using Social Media
Survey of Public (N = 1,000)



Source: Allstate - National Journal Heartland Monitor XIII: Networked Nation, June 2012; images from the Noun Project; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Conclusion #83

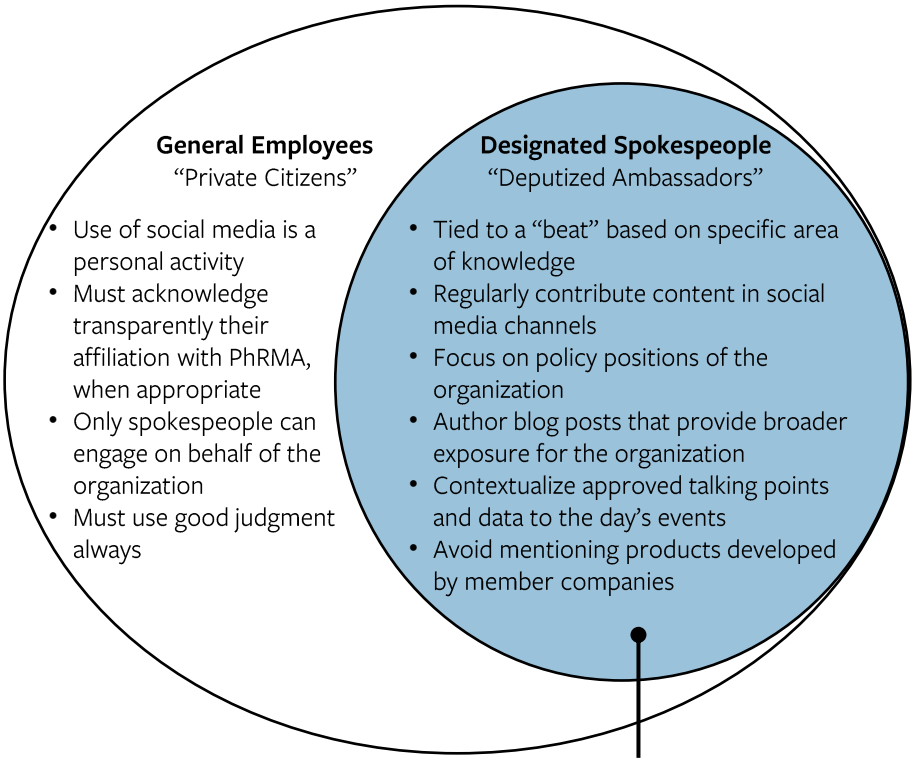
One Solution: Assigning specific employees—those with both topic expertise and social credentials—to speak on the organization's behalf in digital conversations of importance; notably, most-successful models do not weigh heavily on the Communications staff, but rather on any employees capable of humanizing and giving credibility to the organization's positions

Validating and Humanizing Organizational Positions

Recruiting Employee Experts with Voices That Carry

A Two-Tiered Social Media Policy

Roles and Rules for Speaking Online



Majority of spokespeople are based outside of communications function and contribute ~5-10% of their time to the spokesperson role

Characteristics of Handpicked Spokespeople

Expertise

- ☑ **Subject Matter Depth:** Possess deep knowledge and existing relationships in assigned beat area
- ☑ **Broad Organizational Knowledge:** Represent a variety of functional areas (Law, Research, Government Affairs, etc)

Social Credentials

- ☑ **Storytelling Capabilities:** Capable of translating dense policy dialogue into compelling human voice
- ☑ **Social Media Disposition:** Comfortable communicating over social media platforms
- ☑ **Passion for Cause:** Believe strongly in the mission of the organization and beat issues

Case in Brief

Profiled Organization: PhRMA
Organization Type: Trade Association
Headquarters: Washington DC

- Handpicks employees to serve as online spokespeople for the organization; tasks representatives with contributing regular blog content
- Requires spokesperson training and discussion to cultivate a voice that is credible and welcomed in exclusive and powerful online communities hosting niche, issue-level discussions

Source: PhRMA; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Conclusion #84

Periodic group sessions exploring the makings of blockbuster social media content allow for teasing-out best practices on infusing personality into messaging; deep-rooted tendencies to speak in an institutional voice are most-effectively resolved through regular education, discussion, and insistence that content pass a "personality test" prior to posting

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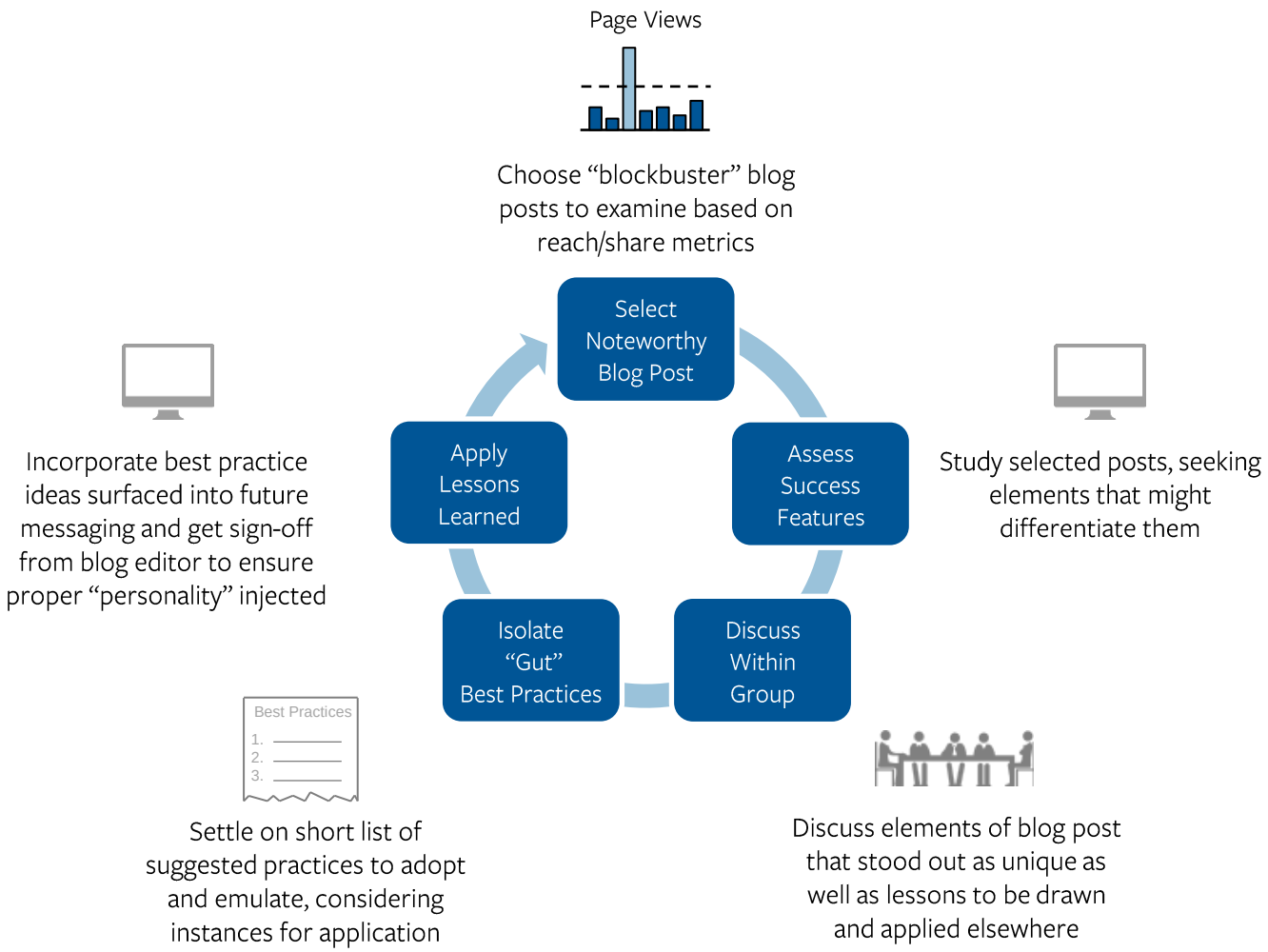
Modeling Effective Voice for the Social Web

Integrating Best Practices at Regular Intervals

Group Exercise at Training Session



Source: PhRMA; images from the Noun Project; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Conclusion #85
Executed efficiently, a specialized spokesperson program requires less than 10 percent of internal experts' time and, eventually, positions individuals representing the organization as issue-makers rather than voices in the crowd

Conclusion #86
A Place to Start: Individuals and organizations are advised to join important conversations wherever they are already occurring; meaningful dialogue is rarely generated by beginning a public speech on owned platforms and social media streams

Conclusion #87
Planting Seed Corn: Patience is required to reach "valued contributor" status; credibility may take time to build

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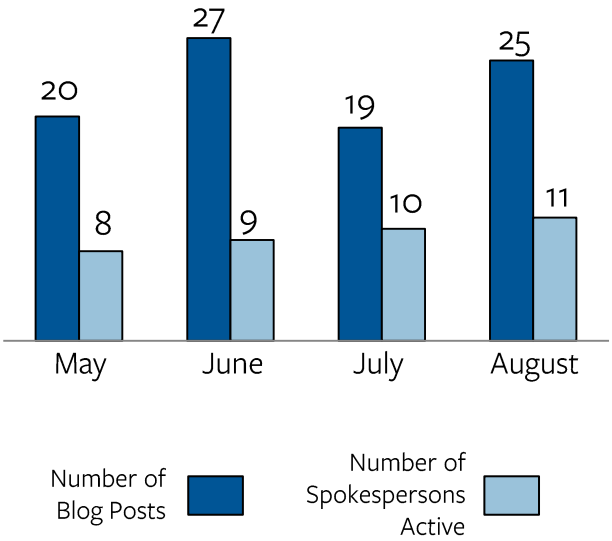
Earning a Place in the Discussion

Monthly Contribution to Blog Activity



Twitter Follower Analysis

Valuing Quality Over Quantity

"Our spokespeople are making great progress building online profiles by developing meaningful, transparent connections with the right influencers. Their success is measured by their impact on relevant conversations, not by volume of posts or followers."

Christian Clymer
Deputy VP of Public Affairs
PhRMA

Source: PhRMA; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Conclusion #88
The spokesperson concept can be scaled to meet the needs of any organization, irrespective of size or financial circumstances; tips below offer suggestions as to how such a program can be executed with minimal resources

Conclusion #89
Among the options mentioned, two are particularly noteworthy for their potential ROI: First, the establishment of a "beat" system can focus the social media commentary of internal experts on areas of highest risk and opportunity

Conclusion #90
Second, borrowing heavily from peer voices in the public domain can represent one way to quickly generate quality content

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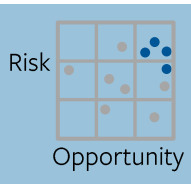
Leveraging the Investment

Elements of Successful Program Implementation

Beat Assignments 	• Prioritize high-risk, high-opportunity policy areas (start small) • Selectively choose credible messengers, timely story lines • Grow team as needs, time, and resources permit
Social Media Etiquette	• Encourage authentic voice that adds to debate • Use positive tone, conform to group norms in all interactions • Avoid provocative or controversial issues (until expert) • Acknowledge value of community-generated content
Group Learning	• Select markers of a great post, and teach through example • Tailor coaching and training resources as performance requires • Offer peer recognition to drive engagement • Incent application of identified best practice; assign an editor
Blog-Twitter "Loops"	• Encourage personalized Twitter handles • Promote blog content on multiple platforms of value to debate • Speed transition from broadcasting to community-building
Third-Party Content	• Borrow stories from individuals you wish were on your payroll • Invite external allies to speak on your platform (more is better) • Reinforce arguments made by friendly voices • Complement, not supplement, peer focus

Source: Images from the Noun Project; National Journal Membership Research interviews and analysis.

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Practice Assessment

Specialized Spokesperson Roles

	Low → High
Time Commitment:	●●○○○
Implementation Difficulty:	●●●○○
Required Degree of GA Involvement:	●●○○○
Impact:	●●●○○

Overall Grade: B+

Worthy of serious consideration by all organizations, though execution is easier for large offices. The most-effective model engages multiple, media-savvy technical experts from different backgrounds and departments, though small offices also can cultivate effective digital voices (from own staff and beyond).

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