

Social Media Interns: You Need the Help. They Have the Skills.

Only dabblers will tell you that social media is free. A social media plan, even the most basic, takes time. Lots of time. That means you need help. Fortunately, this is a perfect opportunity for interns.

This paper draws on the success of our own intern program and also on the programs of three other professionals:

- Angela Lussier, owner at 365 Degrees Consulting
- Dan Green, president of The Green Internet Group
- Aaron Uhrmacher, author of the blog *Disruptology*

Step 1: Set Goals and Develop a Clear Job Description

As our social media consultant, Val Nelson, often says, “You can’t reach a goal you’ve never set.” Your answers to two questions will create the basic framework for your internship job description, although the details will likely need to be revised over time:

- What are you trying to achieve by hiring an intern?
- Where do you see your company benefiting from social media strategy?

Here at Bidwell ID, our internship program involves tasks such as:

- Social media planning and implementation
- Market, prospect, and client research
- Office, organization, and miscellaneous duties
- Individual goals completed by intern

Angela Lussier uses a creative technique to begin her internships. She starts with two lists of expectations, hers and the intern’s, and

creates a collaborative job description based on the similarities.

Step 2: Find the Right Intern(s)

Letting go of complete control over your company’s messaging can be scary. How do you trust interns to represent you in a medium where large audiences may be watching? It starts at the hiring process. A careful, thorough process that reveals the qualities you need in your social media interns can begin to establish that kind of trust. Here are traits that we’ve learned to look for in our candidates.

Can represent the personality of the company.

Each company has its own personality. Often its style, method of communication, and image tie directly into the brand. At Bidwell ID, we pride ourselves on maintaining an attitude-free agency, and interns we hire must share this value. They also need to relate ideas and contribute to the learning process rather than work against it. If your company plans to maintain a blog, find an intern who is interested in its focus.

Good understanding of social media. Applicants do not have to be experts, but those who have used social media themselves are better equipped to determine what is appropriate content. For example, they know what constitutes a good, or a mundane, update.

Strong communication skills. Effective communication is crucial to all social media efforts. You’ll find it easier to let interns be the voice of your company if they are already good communicators who grasp the importance of public relations and writing for business. Get a writing sample during the hiring process; it can help you

determine whether candidates have the necessary communication skills.

Ability to contribute to conversations. Most of your interactions on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and various blogs will be with business connectors and influential people. Having something valuable to contribute is essential to directing traffic and interest. Interns easily handle topics requiring less expertise, such as Twitter re-tweets, but you'll want to let them do more than that. How well can they hold a conversation? What is the value of their contributions?

Readiness to learn and to take constructive criticism. With every new social media internship, trial and error is what will foster a healthy work environment. You should be able to critique interns' posts on the Internet and suggest adjustments. Likewise, you should seek out their feedback. Learn from each other and use your different perspectives to your advantage.

Organized and detail-oriented. Many details go into social media efforts: analyzing traffic, choosing keyword tags on the company blog, researching influential connections. Interns who are focused on such details and able to present their findings effectively will further the company's overall objectives.

Good researcher. The right intern will have a solid grasp of conducting research. Keeping track of the competition, researching new tools, conducting web analysis, and other research tasks are essential.

Driven. Driven candidates will take your feedback and run with it. Dan Green looks for interns who are independent, inquisitive, experienced, exhibit high self-esteem, and are clear on their goals. Angela Lussier looks for creative individuals who have a high level of curiosity.

Step 3: Foster a Living Social Media Plan

Develop your social media mission. What is your social media mission? It can be as simple as raising awareness. Or maybe you want to reach a specific group. Goals toward that end might include increasing credibility, starting conversations, gaining clients, or becoming a thought leader in a subject.

Outline the mediums or hubs through which the intern will communicate. For example blog, web page, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. An outline of the social media tools at your disposal should naturally follow the mission statement. For each one, determine the target audience, how you will measure your success, what tactics will be used, and any other strategic plans. What do you have to say, and how will you say it? While some social media tactics may be effective in reaching your audience, others may not. Test, and go with what works.

Excerpt from a Social Media Plan

Bidwell ID's *Synaptic Branding* blog is the company's media hub. Virtually all other social media tools are designed to bring people to the blog.

Blog Goals

- Help others get to know John Bidwell of Bidwell ID as a thought leader in marketing and branding
- Express views on neuromarketing and branding
- Generate meaningful interactions with influential people

Target Audience

- Marketing professionals
- Thought leaders in marketing and blogging worlds
- Leading-edge large businesses

Success Measures

- Blog rankings in places such as Yahoo InLinks, PostRank, and AdAge
- Subscribers
- Comments

- Page views
- Re-tweets

Strategy

- Be unique and real
- Use evidence
- Be helpful
- Interact and respond
- Have fun

Set standards for frequency of updates, posts, and interactions. Setting standards for how many times an intern should update or post is helpful for time management and ensures that the proper amount of content will come from the company. Adjust your frequency as you find what works for you. Here is a list of some update frequencies we use at Bidwell ID. We don't always hit these targets; it's a guide:

- Twitter: 3 to 10 times per day
- Facebook: 1 to 4 times per day
- LinkedIn: 1 action per day/week
- Blog: ideally, 1 post per week
- eNewsletter: every 2 to 3 months

In addition, we have found that these general principles about frequency help us create the most meaningful connections:

1. Space out updates to help keep things going.
2. Don't overwhelm people with too many updates (especially on Facebook and LinkedIn).
3. Engage in conversation. Self-promotion should be no more than 10 percent of your online interactions.
4. Take the time to format posts for each medium. Posting the same update through all your networks may be viewed as impersonal.

Include a list of action steps. Now that you have established frequency for updates and interactions, create a list of action steps.

If you are blogging yourself or wish to draw people to your web content, contributing to other blogs and media is a great way to attract attention.

John Bidwell authors the *Synaptic Branding* blog, and these are our interns' steps to maintaining online interactions.

Sample Action Steps for Blog Interactions

1. Respond promptly to any comments made on own blog
2. Follow relevant blogs, thought leaders, and influencers using a subscription service such as Google Reader
3. Suggest blog topics based on current news and trends
4. When commenting, be helpful and provide your name, e-mail, and website
5. Actively pursue guest posts on influential blogs

The keys are to be helpful, to interact, and to embrace the idea that you get what you give.

Orient interns on company Internet hubs, blogs, and communication. Despite their familiarity with online life, don't assume that interns are familiar with all online tools and platforms in which your company operates.

Encourage ideas. To gain new ideas, Angela Lussier has new interns read her book, *The Anti-Résumé Revolution*, and asks for constructive criticism. She says this fresh perspective is invaluable to her. This step also gives her a chance to orient the interns on her values and simultaneously evaluate the interns' ability to contribute to existing conversations. Dan Green suggests using writing exercises to define your brand clearly so that there is no confusion on how the intern should interact on behalf of the company.

Establish the social media plan as a working document, allowing interns to add and change information as needed. You need to teach your interns the basics before they go out. New ideas will arise throughout the internship, and it is important to let the interns be part of developing them.

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Aaron Uhrmacher advises in “10 Social Media Tasks for Summer Interns” that you “instruct each intern to create a 30-minute presentation on the social media platform of his/her choice that includes an overview, how it’s used and how your business might participate.” This can be an effective technique to use with your intern when new ideas arise.

Documentation should be a priority when new procedures, passwords, and other information come into the plan. We make a habit of dating our social media plans for reference. A table of contents and page numbers will help interns navigate lengthy documents.

The more developed the plan, the more you can let the interns run with it. When in doubt, consult the plan. We find ourselves meeting with the social media plan in hand as a reference. It’s great for reminding yourself why you are spending time on social media efforts and for keeping you on track to meet goals. Allow constructive, judgment-free criticisms of the plan and make note of them.

Track performance. Dan Green describes best practices as including:

- Tracking sharing activity and traffic
- Good-talk versus bad-talk ratio
- E-mail signups
- Effectiveness of messages
- Share of voice in the market

Dan Green often looks at the competition to see what they might be doing that his company and clients should be involved with. Tracking progress—analyzing activity quantitatively—can yield interesting insight into social media performance and is crucial to determining what is working and which areas need improvement. You can track views, subscribers, downloads, and followers with a simple Excel template.

We have found these resources to be helpful for analyzing performance:

- Google Analytics (<http://www.google.com/analytics/>)
- Feedburner (<http://www.feedburner.com/>)
- Twitter Grader (<http://twitter.grader.com/>)
- Facebook Grader (<http://facebook.grader.com/>)

Here’s an example of the template we use for our *Synaptic Branding* blog:

Page Views	% Change	Unique Views	% Change	Subscribers	Comments	Re-tweets	% Change
Top 3 Posts this Month							

Be patient with reaching goals. Social media marketing has proven to be effective, but it is not a quick fix to targeting your messaging. Like we said before, it takes a lot of time. Plan to be in it for the long haul, because social media marketing is not going anywhere anytime soon. If you’re serious about reaching your goals, don’t just get your feet wet—take a dive.

In a real-world example of how social media interactions can lead to meaningful connections, Angela Lussier appeared in famous blogger Seth Godin’s spring 2010 reading list by interacting on his networking site, Triiibes. “It took two years of building a reputation [at Triiibes],” she says. This is proof that long-term investment in social media interactions can land you large audiences and meaningful promotion.

Implementation Tips

- First, you need to sell your brand to your interns. They need to believe what they are promoting. Use Dan Green’s tip: write your brand out in words. Refine when necessary.

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- Hire a social media marketing coach or consultant to help with goals, strategy development, analysis, and possibly intern training and supervision.
- Place trust in your interns. Listen to their advice, let them foster—but not be in charge of—the building of the program.
- Let interns bring their voice to your brand. Share the spotlight.
- Encourage them to explore the different social media communities and allow them to speak on your company's behalf when appropriate. This is often the hardest part for businesses. Trust your hiring process and then support the interns you choose. The interns should not be speaking for you, but rather for the company.
- Embrace new social media opportunities. For example, MySpace was the place for a while, but smart businesses focused more on Facebook as that medium took off.
- Meet regularly to discuss new opportunities. Bidwell ID meets a few times a month, often with our social media consultant, to go over new ideas and analyze areas of interest.
- Come up with a system to track activity to determine what is working and what needs improvement (see “Track performance,” above).
- Don't allow interns to change passwords without permission.
- Tap the right sources when looking for interns. Ours have all been great, some exceptional. We get our marketing interns from all over, but most come from the UMass Isenberg School of Management.
- Pay for the interns' time. Dan Green and John Bidwell agree that you get what you pay for when hiring interns. They will appreciate the compensation and perform accordingly.
- Lastly, check with your lawyer about liability issues. Dan Green reminded us that liability issues are a growing, and shifting, issue. You will want to clarify things like:
 - Does your insurance cover you for online/multimedia claims?
 - To what extent do employees represent your company? For example, if an employee runs into somebody while texting from behind the wheel, is your company legally responsible, and if so, are you covered?
 - What about employees' use of company email or social media after hours?

Do your Research and Join the Party

Social media can be an extremely valuable asset to businesses looking to interact with attentive audiences and have conversations about brands, industries, and trends. Consumers and prospects are already discussing your brand online. This is why it is essential to have a voice.

Final advice to business owners wondering if social media is right for them: do your research and join the party. Have faith that your hiring process will produce great interns and then trust them to speak on your company's behalf. Come up with your own methods of return on investment and don't be afraid to try new things. There is a lot to be learned from the process.

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