

Asphalt Institute and Social Media



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Social media is an essential component of the Asphalt Institute's (AI) overall communications strategy. Most of us have our preferred "channels" to receive news or to keep up with current events. For some the time-honored newspaper can fill this role. For others it is the evening news on television. Maybe you subscribe to a weekly news magazine. The offerings in a digital world are different so we need a coherent strategy to manage all these delivery channels and to integrate them into our communications plan.

Digital devices offer a new dimension we may not think about too much – that of a conversation on any given topic – hence the term social media. We're sharing, hence social, but also exchanging ideas or views. It is the modern day version of the letter to the editor, but immediate.

For us to succeed in our communications goals, we must have consistent messages across all platforms. For the Institute, this means that our magazine Asphalt, its website version and all of our other communication vehicles must align. We have a presence on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube for our direct social media content. Together with our internal, member-only communications, these vehicles help form a complete communication suite for our audience.

One of our first full-scale social media efforts was a marketing initiative called FavoriteRoad.com. This website, supported via other social media vehicles, is where we aimed to provide a space for drivers to share the story of their favorite road. Our bet was that most drivers would share the experience of driving on a smooth, safe, asphalt surfaced road en route to a favorite destination or along a particularly scenic highway. This website, and its social media connections provided the forum for the conversation and was initially quite successful. Ultimately, it became more road-tourism focused and digressed from our marketing strategy.

Through FavoriteRoad.com, we learned a lot about social media – here are a few nuggets:

- Multiple formats (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube for example) must align for clear messaging
- The conversation is beyond those of us in the industry – participants can be anyone!
- Photos and video mean a richer participant experience
- Links in short media (like a tweet) which take you to a website are less effective
- Real time posts or messages are far better than scheduled ones
- Repeated messages can turn off your audience as being "machine like." What's social about that?

Today we use social media for a host of reasons including the promotion of our time sensitive educational offerings or to announce a new publication release. It is also very useful to share content with a broad and often international audience and to manage the brands of the Asphalt Institute.

We're using tools to target specific audiences – for example, all departments of transportation in a set region of the country, or a state's pavement design engineers. Targeted messaging is an important aspect of effective use of social media. Executed properly, it can avoid high numbers of unfollows due to over messaging.

We're also expanding the dimension of our messages by including others in the conversation. Our 2015 Asphalt Institute Chairman joined twitter as have many of our members. They are part of our planned expansion of the conversation in this arena. We are blending these multiple identities, with consistent messages to help inform, educate and advance our industry. Our goal is to foster deeper relationships with our audience and to move people up the ladder of engagement.

Social media isn't without challenges. Any organization must think about how rouge posts are handled, planning hashtag use and ensuring the feeds are actively monitored. We've seen one example at an industry show where a poorly publicized hashtag was overrun by a rouge poster who had a very large following. That particular poster was generally negative and cast an enduring gloom over the event.

Internal policies for employee use of social media must be considered. We need to encourage its use, yet set guidelines for employee interaction and appropriateness. We must still manage our corporate brand and identity.

How are you using social media as part of your communication plan?