

# Social Media Community Management: Implications for Business Communication Curriculum

Barbara J. D'Angelo  
Arizona State University

## Abstract

As businesses adopt social media to communicate and interact with customers, clients, and other stakeholders, they are increasingly turning to and hiring social media managers to administer their social media presence. But what are the skills and abilities needed to be an effective social media manager? Are businesses searching for individuals with technology skills to manage tools and platforms? Are they searching for individuals with communication skills? Job or employment ads provide a rich source of information about the types of skills and expectations businesses search for in social media managers as well as job functions employees are expected to perform in these positions. This paper shares the results of an analysis of job ads to reveal the types of skills businesses are looking for when hiring social media managers as well as expected job functions. The paper discusses the potential implications for business communication curriculum and pedagogy.

## Introduction

In a discussion on the Teaching Business Communication group on LinkedIn, Courland Bovée asked "Should coverage of social media be included in a business communication course?" (Bovée, 2010). Bovée points to sources which describe the increase in business use of social media. A study by the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (Barnes & Mattson, 2009), for example, found that 91% of Inc. 500 companies were using at least one social media tool in 2009, an increase from 77% in 2008. Further, 48% of respondents to the Center's survey reported using social networking tools to recruit and evaluate potential employees. A study of the Fortune Global 100 companies found that 79% use social media to communicate with customers and other stakeholders (Burson-Marsteller, 2010). In addition, a study by the Center for Excellence in Service at the University of Maryland's Smith School of Business found an increase in social media use by small businesses from 12% to 24% between December 2008 and December 2009 (Social Media, 2010).

While this data may indicate that social media is increasingly used in business environments and should be included in the business communication course, the question of **how** to include it remains unanswered. Is social media an extension of traditional media, requiring the same foundational communication skills? Or is social media somehow different, requiring different or additional skills?

One way to understand the trend in social media and whether business communication courses are adequately preparing students for jobs which incorporate social media tools is to look at job ads for social media positions. Jobs specifically related to managing social media strategy and communities are on the rise. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* does not recognize social media jobs as a category; however, a search of job boards and the Web indicate that it is a fast-growing and evolving role within corporations.

Though these jobs are increasing, they are not new. There has been an interest in how to effectively use online communities for business since the advent of the Internet and Usenet newsgroups. Gil McWilliam (2000), for example described the importance and advantages of online communities in a text-based online world for brand identity and relationships with customers. He highlighted the importance of community management and leadership and listed the skills and the primary responsibilities of someone undertaking such a position: goal setting, marketing, training and supervising volunteers, content development, legal and regulatory compliance, attracting visitors and encouraging interaction, and overseeing events. More recently, Jeremiah Owyang (2007) conducted an analysis of 16 community manager job descriptions and categorized the roles and responsibilities of community managers: community advocate to represent the customer; brand evangelist to promote events, products and upgrades; savvy communicator responsible for editorial planning and mediation using communication tools; and strategist responsible for information gathering and relationship building between the community and corporate entities. Though the tools and technology have changed since McWilliams' analysis in 2000, the role itself has not changed much.

Yet the question remains, how is it that business communication courses can help prepare new graduates for these careers? To begin to answer this question, I analyzed 28 job descriptions to uncover the types of responsibilities and activities expected in these positions as well as the skills and abilities required by employers.

### **Methods**

To retrieve job ads for social media positions, monster.com and careers.com, two of the largest online job posting boards, were searched on May 11, 2010 using "social media" and "online community manager" as search criteria. In addition, ads on job sites specifically related to social media (mashable.com, socialmediajobs.com, indeed.com, socialmediajobhire.com, and newmediahire.com) were searched (using the same search phrases) or browsed. In addition, job ads posted on @socialmediajobs on Twitter and on LinkedIn.com were browsed for those related to "social media community manager."

Ads selected were posted between mid-April to the search date (May 11) using the following criteria:

- Only ads for entry-level positions which required no or minimal experience (less than three years) were selected for analysis since new graduates are more likely to be hired into those positions that require minimal to no experience (or did not state experience as a requirement). This criterion resulted in a significant weeding of positions since many required considerable experience either in corporate communications or marketing (five years or more). This was especially true of positions posted on Twitter and LinkedIn.
- Ads were eliminated that were clearly traditional marketing positions with social media as one tool to market products or services (as opposed to establishing a brand or user community or developing a social media strategy).
- Ads were eliminated that were clearly focused on technical aspects of developing and managing social media since they were more focused on high level technical skills such as programming or system administration rather than communication or the community aspect of social media.

- Location, geography, or salary were not used as criteria for selection.

A total of 28 ads from 28 different companies (Appendix A) remained for analysis. Following selection, content analysis was conducted of each ad to categorize job functions and qualifications.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 lists the position titles and frequency of each for the 28 job ads that I analyzed. In Table 2, categories of job functions are listed. Table 3 lists required job qualifications. In Appendix B, Table 4 lists desired qualifications and Table 5 includes the desired majors for those ads that required an undergraduate degree.

### **Position Titles**

“Social Media Specialist” appears to be emerging as the position title of choice, with “Social Media Manager” a close second. Positions were split between those focused on promoting, maintaining, and monitoring brand or company image and those more focused on community by engaging their customers in conversation, responding to customers, and providing service. Intent or purpose of the positions in both cases appeared to be the same: to promote the company and sell products or services; however, the method of doing so differed between the passive approach (push information) vs. the active approach (push and pull). Positions with “community” in their title focused more on the active approach with more emphasis on engagement with stakeholders instead of simply pushing information to them.

**Table 1. Position Titles Used in Social Media Job Ads**

<b>Position Title</b>	<b># of positions</b>
Social Media Specialist	9
Social Media Manager	5
Online Community Manager	3
Social Media Coordinator	3
Social Media Community Manager	3
Community Manager	2
Social Media Contributor	1
Social Media Talent	1
Social Networking Media Specialist	1

### **Job Functions**

Although communication plays a large role in these positions, I chose to classify the different forms of communication within broader categories representing major job functions. For example, community management includes interactive communication with customers or users while writing and editing of content falls under the broader function of content development. Clearly, functions are inter-related and inter-dependent; researching of relevant content is related to writing and posting content, for example.

**Table 2. Job Functions**

<b>Job Function/Responsibilities</b>	<b># of ads</b>
Community Management	
Engage/participate in user discussions	13
Respond to users (questions, complaints)	10
Recruit/retain users	7
Coordinate/plan/hold events or activities	7
Develop/monitor/enforce guidelines	2
Content Development	
Write/post content	14
Edit content	9
Write external content	8
Maintain consistency	8
Create media	3
Management	
Strategic planning	18
Internal collaboration	17
Integration with brand/mission	11
External collaboration	9
Training	6
Supervision	2
Legal compliance	1
Fundraising	1
Research and Analysis	
Metrics/SEO (reporting/accountability)	15
Research relevant content (from external)	7
External conversation about brand/service	5
Product/Service (own) for improvement	2
Competition	1
Technical	
Administer software (backend)	3
Manage user interface	2
Administer user accounts	1

Based on the results from the 28 ads analyzed, management functions were highly sought after, in particular strategic planning (18), collaboration (17 internal and 9 external), and research and analysis using metrics (15) for reporting and accountability purposes. These three functions were linked to the purpose of the positions so that the focus is on setting direction for the use of social media in addition to the daily development and management of it. To some extent, this would seem to imply that social media is a subject expertise or knowledge area required to perform the job rather than a specific skill since the emphasis was on planning and collaboration. Technical functions were minimal in these ads; however, there is an implied technology competence related to other functions. It would be difficult, for example, to write content for Twitter without some knowledge of the conventions of its use. Only two ads required supervisory skills. Yet, only the Social Media Contributor appeared to be a position in which one person would be responsible for content production; the remaining appeared to be positions that would work in collaboration with other content and technical personnel.

The implications for business communication courses are unclear. On the one hand, social media could be viewed as simply new genres with their own evolving conventions to be taught (how to write a Twitter post, how to compose a Facebook page, etc.). However, reading through the list of functions in these ads that a typical social media specialist is expected to fulfill seems to indicate that more is required than learning genre conventions. It appears that employers are seeking a fuller understanding of the contextual and rhetorical use of social media both in terms of planning and content development. The number and type of functions and responsibilities in these 28 ads confirms earlier findings by McWilliam and by Owyang that the individuals in these positions fulfill complex roles as strategists, managers, content developers and writers, and customer service representatives. Further, it is clear that communication plays a significant role in these positions—both written and oral.

### **Qualifications**

Communication, collaboration, and knowledge of social media technology skills were the three most sought after required qualifications, with project management skills next. Given that strategic planning was a function for 18 of the 28 positions, it is somewhat surprising that project management and leadership skills were not explicitly required in more ads.

Job ads did not specifically define communication skills (beyond “written” and “verbal”); however, descriptions of job functions combined with required skills provide a good picture of the communicative aspects of the job. Many required development and writing of new content while others require the individual be able to edit content written by others; most required some combination of the two. Only one ad included listening skills as required of applicants despite the high number of functions related to engaging users and responding to users or customers in some way. It is possible that listening was conflated within the broader context of oral or written communication. Or, given the textual nature of responding to customers using tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, “listening” may not be a skill that employers identify with reading and responding.

In a study of 354 managers reported on by Maes et al. (1997), oral communication, problem-solving, and self-motivation were identified by managers as the most important competencies sought in entry-level employees. In a follow-up to identify specific oral communication skills sought, the four ranked as most important were: following instructions, listening, conversing, and giving feedback. However, when the same managers ranked frequency of use of oral communication skills, the top four were: listening, following instructions, conversing, and communicating with the public. The authors acknowledged that importance given to specific competencies and skills changes over time. The same skills, however, are prominent in the ads I analyzed. Given the prevalence of social media use in today’s business setting, it would seem appropriate that listening, conversing, and communicating with the public are equally if not more important than they have been in the past and should be a focus of our courses in business communication.

Teamwork and collaboration skills are also highly sought after by employers based on the ads for these 28 positions. In most cases, teamwork was listed as required for both internal purposes (working in groups, collaborating with members of other departments, and with technical staff) and external purposes (facilitating discussions with customers, working with vendors, suppliers or other external stakeholders). The number of job ads requiring collaboration or teamwork skills is not surprising given the managerial or leadership role these individuals are expected to take within the organization to set direction for social media use and to collaborate internally with other departments (information technology, marketing, etc.). In addition, the nature of social media by definition is collaborative and

interactive. It is clear that a significant component of these positions is the ability to engage with others and to facilitate discussion and communication among members of a group.

**Table 3. Required Qualifications**

Qualification	# of Ads
Undergraduate degree	17
Communication	
Written	22
Oral	15
Synthesize Information	2
Listening	1
Analytical (analysis, critical thinking, problem solving)	7
Creativity	8
Project Management	
Organization	10
Detail-oriented	9
Meet deadlines	9
Self-motivating/independent worker	8
Multi-tasking	7
Event Management/organization	1
Leadership	5
Team work/collaboration skills	14
Research	9
Subject/Content Knowledge	9
Marketing Knowledge/Experience	8
Social Media/Technology	
SM Tools specifically	16
Other tech skills (generic computer/specific programs)	12
SM Understanding/Knowledge	11
SM Passion	7
HTML/CSS	5

Whether or not business communication courses provide students enough opportunities to learn to work in teams and on collaborative writing is an open question. Management students interviewed by Schneider and Andre (2005), for example, argued that more collaborative writing assignments are needed in academic settings due to the common nature of such writing in the workplace. Further, earlier research suggested that those not used to working collaboratively and receiving feedback had difficulty when expected to write collaboratively in the workplace (Freedman and Adam, 2000; Locker, 1992). Certainly teaching students to work collaboratively is not the sole responsibility of the business communication curriculum. However, given that social media is an interactive collaborative tool, instructors may wish to consider how their courses can help students to learn to work and communicate in teams.

There were a low number of research/analytical qualifications required given high number of ads with research as a job function. Over half (15), for example, list the use of metrics and/or search engine

optimization to research the effectiveness of social media strategies for reporting and accountability purposes as job functions. Yet only nine specifically identify research and/or analytical skills as a required qualification. For academics, research and analytical skills can be viewed in the context of information literacy, which has received increased attention in workplace context (Crawford and Irving, 2009; Cheuk, 2008; Lloyd and Somerville 2006). In fact, Katz et al. (2010) argued that "...integrating information literacy and business communication could provide researchers, teachers, and practitioners, with a model for strengthening core communication practices in anticipation of workplace performance." (p. 136) Yet, it is not clear how many business communication (or other business courses) include research skills beyond the type of academic research typically associated with university education. It may be more appropriate for business communication courses, for example, to introduce students to tools and methods such as analytics and metrics to help them recognize the types of research, methods, tools, and analysis they may be expected to do in the workplace. Since one reporting role for community managers is to evaluate the effectiveness of social media strategies which rely heavily on communication, it would seem appropriate for business communication courses to teach students how to measure the effectiveness of communication.

Technology skills were sought after by more than half of the employers represented in the ads analyzed with 11 requiring knowledge of social media tools and 12 requiring competency in other technical areas, typically a specific type of software (word processing or spreadsheets, for example). Eleven ads required an understanding or knowledge about social media rather than competency in specific tools and seven required a "passion" for using social media. The high number of technology skills included as required qualifications can be seen as an underlying understanding that technology skills are necessary in order to perform function as mentioned earlier. Given that the jobs are focused on social media use, an understanding of it is a logical requirement for performing the job. Further, 16 of the positions required skills in social media tools indicating a preference on the employers' part to hire those who are already familiar with their use rather than train someone. If this is the case, then it has significance for business communication (and business programs in general) for making decisions about the types of media and genres we incorporate in our courses.

### **Conclusion**

In a Spring 2008 survey of 505 business communication instructors nationally, Russ (2009) found that the topics most covered in business communication courses are written communication (good news/bad news messages, formatting, grammar and sentence structure), public speaking (presentations, visual aids), persuasion, ethical communication, mediated communication (email) and resumes and cover letters. Topics covered least are communication theory, negotiation, and other types of mediated communication. In addition, the assignments most required are letters, memos, email, reports/papers, presentations, quizzes and exams. In his discussion, Russ notes that his findings are similar to previous studies of business communication courses in terms of the emphasis on written communication; however, his survey showed greater emphasis on oral communication, persuasion, ethical communication, and email. Though Russ' survey did not cover every business communication course in the country and incorporated data mostly from full-time instructors, this survey is revealing in that it demonstrates that business communication courses as of 2008 focused on fairly traditional genres and media. Russ' data is now two years old and much may have changed in how business communication courses approach teaching media beyond traditional print genre. However, social media is becoming prevalent in the workplace as shown by the surveys cited in the Introduction to this paper. Whether our students will enter jobs such as those analyzed for this paper or whether they will use

social media as a tool to facilitate their work, the types of skills and job functions uncovered in the analysis of the job ads indicate that business communication should be addressing social media in courses.

The question remains, though, of how. Based on the analysis of 28 ads for this paper, it appears that employers are seeking both communication and technology skills. Definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from one analysis of 28 job ads; more understanding of how social media is impacting business communication is needed. Preliminarily, however, we can begin to understand the functions and skills associated with these jobs and how to adapt our courses so that they stay relevant to today's fast-evolving workplace. For example, given the highly collaborative nature of social media use, we may wish to incorporate more team work in courses. Other examples of how we may adapt courses may be to incorporate more project planning, teach research methods other than traditional academic-style research, and facilitation or negotiation. In addition since positions such as this are closely tied to branding, courses may wish to place more emphasis on the rhetorical concept of *ethos* as it relates to corporate identity and corporate communication.

In her 2006 review of business communication past, present, and future, Du-Babcock noted that we are in a transitional period in which we are learning how to adapt teaching to an evolving, complex, globalized, and multidisciplinary environment. "As teachers of business communication, we must learn how to teach in this changing communication environment, in which the basic communication process and underlying communication process remain constant but individuals are communicating via cell phones, videoconferences, and so on, rather than...and in addition to...via letters, memos, and face-to-face meetings." (p. 257) In this evolving environment, business communication instructors must recognize the new roles and responsibilities and functions that our students may be asked to perform in the workplace, such as those uncovered in the analysis of the job ads studied in this paper. Ultimately what stands out is that employers are not only seeking good communicators and collaborators who can engage with stakeholders, including customers. They appear to be seeking individuals who know how to use social media tools and they appear to be seeking individuals who **understand** social media and are able to apply that understanding strategically to integrate it with corporate mission, marketing, and communication strategies. In her discussion of the future of business communication, Du-Babcock (2006) emphasizes that we need to stress the fundamentals of effective business communication while introducing new approaches to adapt to changing environments and professional genres. Russ (2009) points out that business communication courses have adapted to changes over time, pointing out the increased use of email as it became prominent in the workplace and increasing emphasis on ethics to adjust to changes in the business environment. However, his study also found that mediated communication was one of the least covered topics. Given that social media is becoming such a widespread factor in workplace communication, mediated communication would seem to require a more prevalent place in our courses. With its close links to branding and marketing, social media may also provide business communication faculty with an opportunity to collaborate with business faculty to coordinate curriculum related to the skills needed in today's workplace.

Certainly many students will not enter jobs that are solely focused on social media and it is unreasonable to suggest that traditional business genres such as letters and reports should be replaced by learning social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Even those whose jobs are primarily focused on social media such as those analyzed in this paper mostly likely also write letters, reports, and other "traditional" genres. However, as new technologies evolve how communication is conducted in

the business world, business communication courses and pedagogy must also evolve to ensure that student needs are met as they enter the workforce.

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**BARBARA J. D'ANGELO** is Assistant Clinical Professor of Technical Communication at Arizona State University. She received her Ph.D. in Technical Communication and Rhetoric from Texas Tech University in May 2008; her dissertation focused on outcomes assessment of undergraduate technical communication majors using capstone portfolios. Dr. D'Angelo coordinates the business communication course at Arizona State.

**Appendix A**  
**Companies Represented by Ads**

Allstate  
American Public Media  
APX Alarm Security Solutions  
The Creative Group  
DemandForce  
Diapers.com  
EatNation  
EMC  
GMS  
Hilton Hotels  
Imagination Publishing  
Landry's Restaurants  
MetroStar Systems  
Microsoft Game Studios  
Move, Inc.  
PC Connections  
RedEngine Digital  
Secura Insurance  
Shane Co.  
Spectrum Brands (Rayovac)  
Starcom MediaVest Group  
Superior Group  
This Life, Inc.  
Tire Rack  
Tokii  
Veterinary Pet Insurance  
WRNN-TV  
Unspecified (1)

**States Represented in Ads**

Arizona  
California (8)  
Colorado  
Connecticut  
Georgia  
Illinois (2)  
Indiana  
New Hampshire  
New Jersey  
New York (4)  
Texas  
Utah  
Washington

Washington, DC (2)  
Wisconsin (2)  
Any US or European office

**Appendix B**  
**Desired Qualifications and Degree Majors**

**Table 4. Desired Qualifications**

<b>Qualification</b>	<b># of Ads</b>
Undergraduate degree	2
Team skills	1
Subject expertise	1
Technology skills	3
Marketing experience	1

**Table 5. Degree Disciplines Listed as Desirable**

<b>Discipline or Major Desired</b>	<b># of positions</b>
Marketing	8
Communication	7
Journalism	6
English	3
Public Relations	2
Business	1
Conflict Analysis/Resolution	1