**TRB** TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD

## Strategic Approaches to Developing a Social Networking Page

It seems like everyone is jumping on the social networking bandwagon. Professional organizations have pages on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, and some are gaining hundreds (sometimes thousands) of fans, members, and followers. But, is using social media right for your committee? We will explore 6 steps that you should consider prior to developing a social networking page. If you already have a page in place and you are looking to strengthen it, these steps could help you enhance the content or maintenance of your page.

**Why do I need a plan first prior to creating a social networking page?**
We all have limited time and limited resources.  Social networking will take both time and resources to make it a successful tool for your committee.  Planning your strategy first before developing a social networking page will help a committee:

1. Find the right tools to communicate information, including social media or conventional tools like email and websites.
2. Determine the type and frequency of content that will be posted.
3. Establish responsibilities about who will be responsible for maintaining the page.

**Six questions to consider prior to developing a social networking page**

Prior to developing a page, consider the six questions listed below.  These questions are designed to help guide you towards the right social networking tool, or alternatively towards nonsocial media communication strategies that may be more effective to help you meet your goal.  While these tips focus on the activities of a TRB standing committee, they should also be helpful with evaluating social media usage for your agency or organization:

1. **What are your committee's goals?**

   Before selecting tools and setting up pages, consider your committee's goals.  TRB would suggest that a committee outline its goals.  After your committee's goals are identified, your committee is encouraged to determine the strategy that it would use to achieve each goal.   Your committee may have outlined its goals in its Triennial Strategic Plan.  You may also consider discussing your committee's goals during a brainstorming session.  When it comes to prioritizing goals, the fewer priorities there are, the easier it will be for your group to tailor your communications strategy.

   Social networking isn't a goal unto itself.  Creating or maintaining a page may not necessarily grow your audience or help them become more engaged with your committee.  The committee should specify how social media or other tools can help achieve the committee's goals.  If a committee's goals refer to one-way information dissemination, then your committee may want to explore and invest time into developing tools such as a website or newsletter.  Websites and newsletters would provide a controlled message from a committee, driving a message one-way from the committee to the audience.   Your intended audience members would be readers, rather than producers, of content.  However, if your committee's goals include interaction and feedback, social networking pages would enable both the committee and its audience to produce messages.  The committee and audience member interactions would be the focal points of the message.

   Keep in mind during this process that social networking may not be an appropriate tool for your committee to use to achieve its objectives.  Social networking pages differ from other websites in that they provide various levels of interaction and discussion.  Members of social networks join these platforms because of their desire to interact and form communities.  Committee goals that include interaction and feedback would benefit from a social networking page.

Quick tips:

- Determine what the committee's communications goals are.
- Keep the goals simple.
- Use social media to generate interactive discussions or engage with others.
- If your committee is more interested in one-way communication, consider developing non-social communication tools like websites and newsletters.

2. **Who is your audience?**

If interaction is included as one of your committee's goals, determine who your current audience is. Who is on your mailing list and attending your meetings, workshops, and conferences?  What social networks do they use, and what would they use for committee interactions? You may want to consider polling this group.  Include an answer choice for poll respondents to select that they may not want to use social networks to receive committee-related messages.

Asking your current audience what they would use to receive your information may yield surprising results.  For example, TRB surveyed its TRB E-Newsletter subscribers and asked, "Which Social and/or Professional Networks Do You Use?" TRB also wanted to know if TRB audience members that used social networks would be inclined to use a social network to receive TRB information.  TRB received a total of 2,738 responses to the E-Newsletter survey.  The results were as follows:

Which Social and/or Professional Networks Do You Use? Select As Many That Apply*
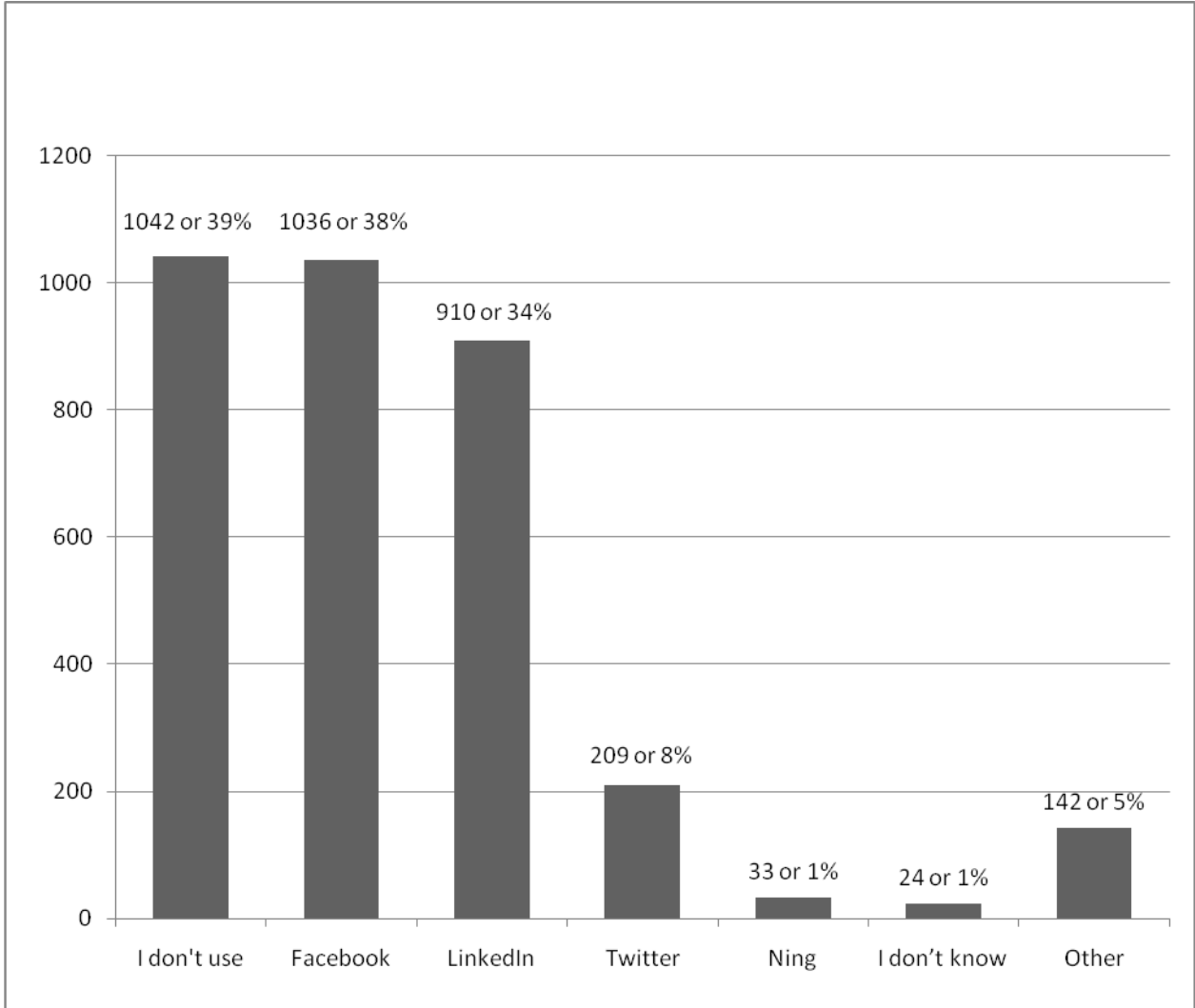


*Percentages do not add up to 100.  This question allowed for multiple responses, since respondents could be using multiple social networking programs.  We calculated the percentages based off of an estimated response of 2,700 to this question.

| Responses: | Number: | Percent: |
|---|---|---|
| I don't use | 1042 | 39% |
| Facebook | 1036 | 38% |
| LinkedIn | 910 | 34% |
| Twitter | 209 | 8% |
| Ning | 33 | 1% |
| I don't know | 24 | 1% |
| Other | 142 | 5% |

TRB Has a Twitter Page: TRBofNA.  If TRB Could Expand Its Social Networking Efforts in One Other Area, What Page Would You Follow?
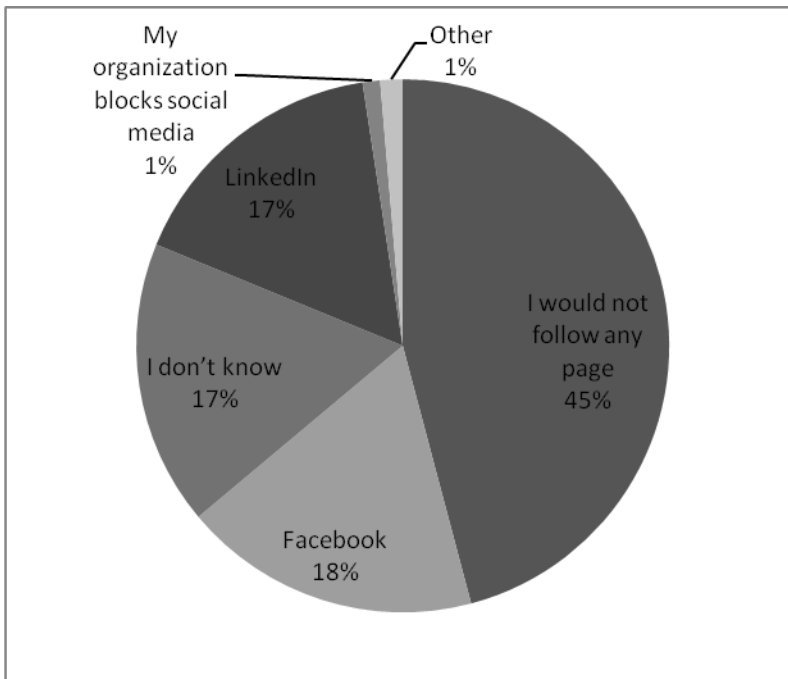


| Responses: | Number: | Percent: |
|---|---|---|
| I would not follow any page | 1215 | 45% |
| Facebook | 478 | 18% |
| I don't know | 458 | 17% |
| LinkedIn | 434 | 16% |
| My organization blocks social media (write-in response generated by respondents) | 28 | 1% |
| Other written responses | 36 | 1% |

A majority of our respondents did not want to follow TRB on a social networking page, or were not sure what page they would follow if we did create another page.  About the same number of people would follow TRB using Facebook or LinkedIn, even though Facebook has more than 500 million users, while LinkedIn has more than 75 million users.  Please note: TRB's demographic is broader than a committee audience.  TRB's audience members may prefer using LinkedIn over Facebook, but these results may not translate into what your demographic may prefer.

Consider developing your page to serve the needs of your current audience first before expanding it to outsiders' needs.  If a couple of frequent users start posting content on your page, their friends will receive  a notification on their "news feed" or homepage about a post or discussion comment made by one of their friends.  As friends view each other's activities, your committee will likely attract friends-of-friends, and your connections may grow.  In addition, consider publicizing the page at conferences and meetings, through your committee's e-newsletter if you have one, and on your website if you have one.  Conversely, if your current audience members aren't using a social networking tool, others outside your current audience will not use it, either.

Are you a user of a social networking page? If not, you may want to consider joining as an individual prior to representing a group.  Learn how you use your personal page.   If a committee decides to use a social networking tool, committee members should be open to using a social networking platform as a way to communicate information.  Buy-in from committee members will make the tool more active, and the page will appear more useful to audience members and outsiders that you're trying to attract to the committee.  Try to use your social networking pages, in addition to email and teleconferences, to communicate with committee members.  If the committee is not willing to use the page, then audience members or outsiders may not see value in using the page, either.  If a page is not updated or comments are not posted on a page, it's less likely that followers will interact with the committee on this forum.

Search for other similar groups that are using social networking pages.  What techniques are they using to build their online community?  Consider adopting those techniques to develop your page.  Also consider following TRB committee pages to learn more about ways to use social networking tools.  View a list of committees that are currently using social networking pages (Note: this will include hyperlink online, this list is currently at the end of this document).

Quick tips:

- Ask your users what social networks, if any, they would use to receive your information prior to taking the time and effort to create a page.  They may want to receive your information via email, websites, social media, or a combination of approaches.
- Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are popular tools now, but there are hundreds of other tools that can be used for social networking.  Planning will help you pick a tool that your audience is interested in using.
- Before choosing a tool that is familiar to you, or popular to the general public, consider the information that your current audience members want to receive and what tools your audience wants to use to find your information.  If you use a tool that attracts your current audience, then your audience members will use that page and your audience will grow over time.
- Become a user of social networks as an individual prior to creating your committee's page.  You'll get a better sense of how to use the tool.
- Prior to starting a social networking page, ask the committee, "If we developed a social networking page, would you use it?"  If the answer is "no," then you may want to consider using another communication tool that they would use.
- Learn from other groups' successes (and failures).  Follow similar groups and other TRB committees to see how they engage their audience members.

3. **What are your resources and how will you maintain the page?**

A key element to a social networking page is making sure that a committee member or members are designated as administrator of the page, in order to make sure that the page is monitored and updated.  Prior to creating a page, create a plan for maintaining the page.  Who is available to act as a page manager, and how often can they post information to the page?  If the page manager is not available to make updates, consider who will be available to act as a back-up to post information.  Pages must be regularly monitored to make sure that the content posted by others is appropriate for the group's message.

Your committee may want to consider distributing the responsibilities of page maintenance among several committee members.  Your committee may want to consider creating or using a general committee email account to create the social networking page profile.  This account name and password will be able to be shared among committee members, and accessed in case a change needs to be made to the social networking profile.  However, if no one on the committee is willing to take on the duties of a page administrator, then it is best to use a different tool.

Quick tips:

- Designate an individual to manage your social networking page.  You may also want the responsibilities to be distributed among several committee members.
- Make sure you have a back-up page administrator in case the primary administrator is not available.
- If no one in the committee is interested in managing the page, it's best not to start a page.

4. **What content does your customer value?**

Successful pages with a significant number of followers typically have interesting content, interactive discussions, and are publicized and updated regularly. If you build it they may not come—creating a page without updating its content may actually hurt your brand and reputation.  People now use social networking pages for news and information, and they expect these pages to be updated.  If your page goes months without an update, potential users will not follow or use the page to communicate with your group.

Consider the content that your site can provide that makes your page stand out from others.  Consider asking committee members about what content they think is important to post and make a list of ideas.  If it doesn't appear that the committee has enough content for regular updates, consider another tool to disseminate your information. To determine content for your site, view what your friends, fans, or followers are talking about.  Join in their discussions, or ask for their opinions.

Depending on the tool used, the page administrator will be posting content and feeding information into discussions that have been started by other site members.  The page manager should balance the number of posts that he or she creates about committee-related information with content that is generated from other followers, since the purpose of the page is to enable interaction.  Friends, followers, and connections should have some way to start discussions on your page or with your brand.  Social networking can provide timely, important information; however, also try to include entertaining content to generate conversation among users.  In TRB's experience, Twitter followers enjoy watching videos and viewing pictures of transportation infrastructure on its Twitter site.  Since TRB is using Twitter for general information dissemination about transportation, these posts are in line with the organization's goals.

In order to increase the visibility of your message, consider the frequency that you will be posting content.  Fans, followers, friends, and connections will first view your posts on their news feed (or homepage) that they see when they sign into their social networking site.  If the link is interesting to them, they may go to your page or your link to find more information.  Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other tools display content in different ways on your followers' news feed.  For example, posts made on Twitter will be visible on a follower's news feed for a few hours.  Posts made on Facebook may show up

in a fan's news feed for approximately 24 hours.  LinkedIn posts and discussions may be emailed to connections each week.  It's possible that your followers may visit your page directly for information; however, posts and conversations that show up on news feeds will entice your group members to learn more about your content.

Remember that when you are administering a page for a committee, you will be seen as representing the committee.  Be respectful and professional in your comments and replies.  If you are considering posting something that gives you pause, then it is best not to post that item.

Quick tips:
- Your page must have content. Sharing content from other pages is acceptable and encouraged, but you should also try to post unique content.
- Create a list of items with your committee about content to post on your social networking page.
- Content is initially generated and regularly maintained by the page administrator.
- Include items that are related to committee news and events as well as entertaining items that are on-subject with your overall message.
- Consider how frequently you would like to post messages and choose a tool that would showcase your content to your audience.
- Be respectful and courteous when replying to other messages.

5. **How will you scope your message and what level of access will the public have to your social networking page?**

In order to keep the conversation relevant to your committee, keep the conversation to defined topics and avoid conversing about off-topic subjects.  Consider defining what information you plan on posting to your page.  For example, a page on TRB's website defines the content that it will post to the Twitter page.  Your committee may not need to publicly address what it plans to post, but the committee should have a general consensus about what topics are acceptable to discuss on your committee's page.

While creating your development plan, your committee may want to consider starting with one network first prior to expanding into more sites.  Each tool takes time to create content and engage followers.  At first, growth on these networks will be slow.  The committee may not see a gain in followers or discussions generated as soon as the site launches.  Instead, these sites need to be developed by the page manager.  Dedicate yourself to developing one network well before expanding into other social networking services.

Your committee should also discuss the level of openness that it would like the network to have.  Your options range from having a public network where anyone can join your page, post comments, and start discussions.  Or, your committee may be more comfortable with a closed network.  Closed social networking pages require followers to receive permission to read status updates, comment, and start discussions.  Regardless of whether you have an open or closed social networking page, page managers should attempt to engage audience members so they have a voice in the discussion.  There are benefits and risks to both approaches, and the committee's goals should be considered prior to choosing to administer a more open or closed social networking page.

Open networks enable the general public to start or participate in discussions.  People may be able to find the network easier, since the comments are more visible to the public.  The risks in using an open network include the ability of the public to post off-topic, negative, or inappropriate comments about a committee, person, or event.  Committees that use open networks will want to discuss how to address off-topic, negative, or inappropriate posts.  Publicly addressing negative comments and removing inappropriate posts are ways to address these concerns.

Committees that choose to create a closed network allow only the people who are invited or permitted to join the page to see the comments on that page.  A closed network provides a committee with control in what will be posted.  However, closed networks may face challenges with growing their number of followers.  Likewise, conversations may be slow to start or may stagnate if there is little or no interaction among users.

Quick tips:
- Keep the topic relevant to the committee's activities.
- Keep the workload manageable—do not develop more social networking pages than you can realistically update.
- Discuss with the committee how open or closed the network should be for the committee's activities.

6. **How will you measure success, increase followers, and facilitate interaction?**

Before evaluating whether your page is working, first review your goals.  For example, if your goals include increasing interaction among committee members, you may want to count how many discussions are being generated on your site by your followers, friends, or connections.  Or, perhaps you are attempting to attract people to a meeting that you are organizing.  You may want to determine the number of clicks that the registration page information has had on your network, or the number of followers you are attracting to your page.

For example, some of TRB's goals include information dissemination, direct interaction between TRB and transportation professionals, and providing information about TRB's Annual Meeting.  TRB uses the social networking page, Twitter, to help achieve these goals.  TRB uses metrics to measure the success of its efforts.  These metrics include counting the number of TRB Twitter followers, the number of times someone mentions TRB in their posts, the number of clicks TRB receives on the links that it posts each day, and the number of times people mention the TRB Annual Meeting in their posts.  These metrics are measured daily by TRB.  TRB measures success by determining if the numbers of followers, mentions, and clicks on links are growing.  During the Annual Meeting, TRB uses Twitter as a way to have a pulse on the conversation of the meeting.  TRB monitors the feed.  If people are having good experiences, TRB considers that good marketing for the meeting.  If people have a concern or complaint and they post it on Twitter, TRB can address that complaint publicly and personally, thus enabling TRB to manage its brand.

Social networking takes work.  Each page needs to be managed so that the number of followers grows and communication is facilitated among followers.  Page managers may want to track the growth of followers, number of discussions or mentions, topics that are popular with the audience, or others related to its goals to determine how useful the page is in spreading information.  The page manager should check the committee page daily, or be alerted to new posts, to ensure that the content of the

site is sharing appropriate information.  The page manager should also make sure that the page is regularly updated with new content.

In order to manage posts, view what others are saying, and track statistics, you may want to consider using a free social media management platform.  These platforms aggregate several metrics, and enable users to schedule messages to be sent throughout the week.  We've listed some common platforms below.  Please email LMarflak@nas.edu if you find more free tools to manage your social networks:

- CoTweet: enables users to post content, schedule messages, and review content of others on Twitter and Facebook pages
- HootSuite: enables users to post content, schedule messages, and review content of others on Twitter, Facebook, WordPress, LinkedIn, MySpace pages
- Klout: helps track statistics of your overall social media presence.  This tool does not enable users to post and schedule messages.
- Seesmic: enables users to post content, schedule messages, and review content of others on Twitter and Facebook pages
- SocialOomph: enables users to post content, schedule messages, and review content of others on Twitter and Facebook pages
- TweetDeck: enables users to post content, schedule messages, and review content of others on Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn pages

Brainstorm with other committees that have pages about techniques that work for them to manage their page.  A list of committee social networking pages is included below.  Follow other committees and see what works for these groups, and share ideas with each other.

Your social network will not grow overnight.  It will take time to grow your network and start discussions on your page.  Continue to market the page through your meetings, newsletters, websites, and other communications tools.  Develop online connections with other like-minded individuals and organizations; they will also help your page grow.

Quick tips:

- Measure your success in using social media by reviewing your goals and determining metrics that measure these goals.
- Regularly monitor and update your social networking page.
- Don't just talk about the work of your committee; create posts that engage your followers.
- Ask your followers about what's important to them, and encourage them to start discussion or join the conversation.
- Contact other committees that use social networking pages to share ideas on managing pages.
- Post interesting content to get the conversation started.
- It will take time to increase followers or start discussions on your page.

Considering the answers to these questions can help determine if social networking is right for your committee, and if so, what specific social networking tools you may want to use.  Developing a strategy first before creating a social networking page will enable your committee to more effectively disseminate its information.

**Required elements for TRB Committee social networking pages:**

1. State prominently on the page that the views expressed on this page are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the sponsoring committee(s), the Transportation Research Board (TRB), the National Academies, or the sponsors of TRB activities.
2. As an administrator of a social networking page for your committee, engage others by addressing posted comments or posting comments to other groups and individuals.  Be courteous and respectful when commenting, and remember to use discretion when posting comments.  Keep in mind that your comments are made on behalf of the committee.  Before posting a comment, ask yourself if the comment would be acceptable for you to state in a committee meeting or to your other colleagues.
3. Clearly state the goals and expectations for participation on the page, noting to participants that they shall not endorse or market products or private companies, they shall not post copyrighted material, and that their comments will be deleted and their privileges to add future content to the site will be revoked if they post inappropriate material.
4. Prohibit committee members from using a committee's social networking page for personal purposes. For example, page administrators should not market company products or services or appear to endorse products or services on the page.
5. Prohibit the use of the TRB logo on the committee's social networking page.

**How to leverage content from TRB to your social networking page**
TRB issues reports, conducts meetings and conferences, and disseminates information that may be appropriate information for a committee's social networking page.  On the website and in various TRB E-Newsletter articles, readers can select the "share this" icon.  This icon will allow the reader to post the article to his or her social networking page.  On TRB's website, the icons are located on the top, right-hand side of the webpage.  In the newsletter, the icons are located at the end of the text of each article.

**How to close your social networking account**
It's possible that after reading this guidebook, your committee may not see a need to maintain its current social networking page.  Or, perhaps your committee would like to use another social networking tool instead.  These tips from PCMag will help committees disable or remove their pages from various social networks.  When disabling a page, the committee will want to inform its followers or fans that the page is being disabled or removed.  If the committee prefers to use a different social network, then it should communicate the change to page users as well as to other members and friends of the committee.

**Questions regarding social media or other web tools**
If your committee needs assistance with assessing web tools or developing social networking pages, please contact Brie Schwartz at BSchwartz@nas.edu and Lisa Marflak at LMarflak@nas.edu for assistance.