

Process to Develop Organizational Voice

Communicating Effectively and Consistently

- Step-by-step Process for Developing Organizational Voice
- List of Goals to Work Towards in Implementing Voice
- Analysis of Steps and Tips Towards Developing Organizational Voice



One of the most sought after elements of a social campaign is the establishment of Web-based communication channels with large groups of constituents. Whether each channel is a podcast, blog, Twitter account, Facebook profile, or a traditional e-mail newsletter, organizations are coming to realize the power in being able to communicate and converse frequently with no distribution costs to millions at a time.

This capability has driven the need to create an organizational voice that can be used to engage in a conversation or simply disseminate information to a chosen group of people. We have now learned that for this unique voice to be effective, it needs to have a humanistic tone and feel. It is no longer effective for this communication to be conveyed or interpreted as corporate speak. Your voice must be authentic and intriguing but down to earth and direct. It can no longer be solely self-serving. In order to entice the audience of readers/listeners to invest their “in-demand” mind share, the stream of conversation/information must hit home in a clear, interesting, and valuable way.

Although this may appear to be common sense, there are thousands of established organizational voices that have become a waste of time for both sides of the conversation. At the same time, organizational voice can be a risk because anything offered under this “brand banner” is searchable, mostly permanent, and difficult to disclaim. To this end, one might ask, “Is it wise to invest the necessary resources into building a powerful, effective organizational voice?” Supporting case studies and research have proven and supported this tool repeatedly and absolutely across a myriad of industries for businesses large and small. These successes are rooted in rewards such as brand equity, revenue increase, and improvements in online reputation. Ultimately with rewards being so great and risks at a relatively high level, this



social tool demands a process strategy with the best opportunity for success while mitigating any foreseen risks.

Goals



- 1. Create at least one profitable voice channel** – The voice you create and maintain is all about building an ongoing connection and conversation with a constituent group. You want to at least be able to do this in a financially feasible way, meaning at some point there must be a call to action that is easily executable and quantifiable.
- 2. Institute a process for managing the creation and discovery of content to provide** – Because sharing compelling content is one of the major keys to providing value, you need to prove you have a process in place to gather and create it. This will drive readership and maintain social relevancy organically.
- 3. Choose a team of people that can support and monitor the voice long term** – If you are going to establish and sustain a long-term organizational voice channel, you must have a team of people ready to create, edit, promote, and measure it effectively and consistently. This team must be able to accomplish these tasks as a normal part of their job and not become overwhelmed allowing things to fall by the wayside.
- 4. Develop policies and guidelines for delivering the voice in a low risk way** – Your organizational voice channel(s) should be implemented with clearly written assignment guidelines and directives that spread involvement and ensure consistency among even the newest members of the team. This will keep your channel(s) from being dependent on only a few contributors making heroic efforts.



- 5. Gain ability to measure and analyze outcomes of establishing and maintaining the voice** – You need to be able to analyze the effectiveness and market penetration of the voice channel. This includes being able to gauge the strengthening of customer relationships, drive action when requested, and understand the impacts on branding.

Process



We've developed a series of eight steps to help you develop an Organizational Voice and then implement it in your organization; this will take you from finding constituents, picking your channel of reach, selecting tone, and then using it.

Step One – Study potential constituents to establish conversation, determine what preferred methods of communication will be, and articulate the content stream that will

be most valuable to them – It is not a good policy to assume what your constituent audience might want to receive, or what channel is best for them. You can do a formal survey or simply call a handful of target audience representatives and have an ad hoc discussion with them. Ask them what content sources they like most or would like to see, and what benefits they wish to derive from accessing such content. This will provide an understanding of the types of content they value. Also, study what percentages use which channels of distribution so you are aware of the most highly trafficked avenues for the type and style of content you plan to produce. This type of research on the front-end can dramatically shorten your learning curve to success. Additional thoughts to consider:

- Ask constituents the one thing you could provide that would make them read your content every time – then provide it if possible. Clearly identify the unique content



mix of elements that would lock them in – Dell is effective with coupons, JetBlue offers airfare discounts, Whole Foods delivers recipes, and Zappos keeps its base current on new styles and trends. Outside the retail world, the IRS keeps its audience lured by providing changes to tax laws, and Entertainment Tonight delivers the latest insight into the lives of celebrities. The lists of groups reaching their constituents through these tool effectively goes on and on. Reviewing these examples and others will serve to determine which trends in content your audience will tune in to follow most.

- Be sure to study what competitors are doing to establish and promote their organizational voices. By observing their progress, you will find patterns to apply and replicate, faults to avoid, or ways of differentiating your content and related offerings.
- It is a HUGE mistake to create one organizational voice to cover all bases and be a catch-all for audiences that are dissimilar. This will force you into a situation where you deliver fragmented content to multiple channel groups and dilute the value of your voice. If applicable, create multiple voices across a mix of channels so you can focus content appropriately.

Step Two – Choose the appropriate channel(s) to deliver the voice – A tragic mistake some companies make is choosing a channel that is not a good match for their audience. An example would be using Twitter to address an audience that is not computer literate and has a comparably low adoption rate of the platform. A few factors to consider when choosing the best channel include the required upkeep of the delivery mechanism, the frequency by which the audience will seek out the information (five times a day, once a week?), and the volume of information that needs to be delivered at any one time. Blogging is great for topics that



require a page or two of content, but if your audience has no time or patience to read it all you are wasting your time. You are going to invest lots of time and energy into creating content and support for your channel(s), so be sure to choose wisely on the front end. Here are some additional thoughts to consider:

- The type, frequency, and desired impact of your content will have to be factored into the equation. If you want to deliver a constant stream of resources and comments, Twitter is the way to go. If you want to deliver editorials and explanations of happenings in the industry, blogging might be best. If you have content you wish to go viral and be shared many times over, you may consider using video posted to YouTube.
- If you want to drive specific actions from the voice you are creating, time is a key factor. Twitter, for instance, can be used as a real time news stream people will be able to read soon after a post is made. If you send an email or blog post however, you will find that people sometimes take days to read the content. To this end, running a 24-hour special through a blog makes little sense, whereas Twitter would produce a quick turnaround.
- The content created for each channel differs in ways that is not always interchangeable. At times, blogging is attractive because the content created can be used in other places. Twitter posts however, are much more specific and not as portable. A more versatile medium is video clips which can be used across multiple platforms and have a longer life than blog posts in some cases. Keep this in mind when making your decisions on the channels you want to support.



Step Three – Choose the right team that will be responsible for managing the voice and providing the content

– It is a difficult and dangerous task to assign one person responsibility over implementing the entire organizational voice process. It is difficult because various parts of the process require unique skill sets and it is rare to find one individual capable of them all. For example, the skills it takes to discover and create valuable content are very different from the marketing skills needed to promote the organizational channel. Another issue with assigning responsibilities to a team of one is the danger in lack of oversight, mutual accountability, and sharing of ideas that comes with a larger team. And losing the one person at the helm of this process could silence your organizational voice altogether.

One supporting factor to consider when identifying a broader team is that spreading the work out across a number of evenly tasked people allows for the channel to be built without the addition of specialized staff or unfair workloads. In large organizations, the organizational voice may become so well connected and valuable that a dedicated individual is a must. Even so, it is a good idea to spread responsibility so dependency does not fall on one person. The team can share responsibilities to include content creation/research, editing, analysis, promotion, etc. Additional ideas for team assembly include:

- Seek to form a team with people from a mix of different departments (such as marketing, sales, operations and HR) so resources, accountability, and support have a wider base.
- In some cases, the CEO or another leader will represent the organizational voice. Even in this case (and especially in this case at times) a team approach is needed. Do not allow or force the leader to take on this communication stream alone. It will result in gaps and inconsistencies in the content when they become busy, or a total vacation on content submission when the leader is gone.



- A team creating, finding, and vetting content always results in a more robust body of work. There are more opinions, ideas, and contributions and that helps the unified voice have more texture than would otherwise be generated by a single person.
- Asking one person to act as a content editor for what will go public is a good idea. This creates a single filter point that can serve to assure nothing inflammatory or embarrassing is mistakenly published. This individual can also act as the arbitrator to check for consistent tone of voice.

Step Four – Decide on the tone of the voice, content mix, and frequency of content delivery – At the end of the day, the success of your organizational voice will come down to a valuable stream of information, an engaging tone, and the right frequency of content to garner the most timely response.

If you think about a newspaper and how it navigates these issues, you will notice the tone is intended to be neutral, the frequency is daily and predictable, the content mix has something for everyone, and it is generally consistent in layout. Too many organizations are sloppy and self-serving when it comes to publishing and promoting their web-based voice. They deliver content that is hard sell, and they rarely consider the readability or interest factor for their constituents. Instead of thinking like newspaper publishers, they think like door-to-door salespeople. You must ask yourself (and your readers) what content stream would be valuable enough to be recommended to others. This is the measuring stick which must be used because the only way your voice will have enduring impact is if it is valued greatly. Consider the following when cultivating your stream of content:



- The tone of voice could be reflective of a past or present leader. It is often simpler to define and replicate a voice by tying it to the style of a real person. This method can create consistency if your brand has an established or equitable tone you wish to portray.
- Document a series of adjectives that describe the tone so everyone writing content for your channel is clear on how it should sound. Examples of these adjectives could include: sarcastic, sharp, funny, clever, intelligent, friendly, or serious.
- Don't be afraid to mix content into your recipe that has nothing to do with your company. As long as it is engaging or entertaining to your constituents, you should be successful. Remember, you are trying to create a valuable stream of information and this can often be enhanced from an interest standpoint as well as a value perspective by including less biased information.
- Keep in mind you can create a valuable stream of data simply by filtering information down to a concise focus for the readers. For example, it would be valuable to create a Twitter feed that sends out the five most popular videos on YouTube each day. You do not have to create these videos but value is provided by filtering them so your followers don't have to. Then, while they are on your web property looking at videos, you can attract them to some of your content.
- When trying to judge the frequency of delivery, keep in mind that overwhelming people with content will make them lose interest and tune you out. Conversely, delivering too infrequently could cause them to forget about you and ignore you when you do post. For each audience, there is a perfect balance between modes and substance of content and how often you should post to maintain a healthy level of engagement.



Step Five – Run a test of the voice with a limited number of readers/listeners – As with many new projects, it makes sense to test your new voice channel with a small selection of readers and request feedback to identify areas of improvement. There is a danger with gaining too much momentum at the beginning and getting thousands of people to subscribe, only to have them lose interest while trying to find the right mix. Instead, it is best to progress slowly early on as the right balance is tested. Additional points to mention:

- Be as scientific about this as possible. This means controlling the test group so you have a good demographic mix. This way you will be able to survey a variety of opinions from a realistic scope of constituents.
- Poll often – every week for example. You can do this informally by calling them on the phone. This is a more personal and efficient method for accurately learning preferences than via an online survey.
- Once you have thousands of followers, do not make big changes to your graphic look or style without first sharing your plans with loyal readers and getting their opinion. Frequent visitors get attached to the layout of information and can get annoyed when “improvements” are made.

Step Six – Develop a measurement system for gauging progress – What gets measured gets done, so developing a good set of analytics will help you turn each of your channels into something even more valuable. The measurement systems should help you understand areas like growth velocity, the ability to direct subscriber action when clickable links are presented, and the channel's gross return on investment.

You also want to measure the fundamental drivers of success so you can focus on these



parameters whenever you see the need to improve. For example, if a free white paper drives 100 new subscribers every time it is posted you want to be aware so such results can be replicated. Consider the following measurements as well:

- By observing the percentage of times people forward or share links to your content, you can gauge what is most interesting and valuable to your subscribers.
- By creating a custom landing page on the website, you can embed links to your channels and find out exactly how many visitors will click through. A great way to test this is to feature a special or discount for people click through, directing them to the page that delivers the offer.
- In some cases it is beneficial to measure what percentage of your current customer base is connected to each of your channels. However, volume of subscribers and visitors is not always a great indicator of value. If you were a law firm with 500 clients (from the past 3 years to present) you would be doing great to have 400 of them (80%) following your channel.
- On channels like Twitter be careful not to measure strictly by volume or drive up an artificial volume of followers for the optics alone. What really counts is the number of people that will read your content, find value in it, and react positively when prompted.
- If you are using a blog-like channel, measure the number of people who comment. This is a good indicator of your ability to start a conversation or intrigue your audience.
- To calculate the ROI on a channel, you must account for the labor costs to produce the content and then find a way to convert the various forms of derived value into a dollar amount. This is not always easy when the value is something like branding awareness or strengthening relationships with current customers. It is easier to do



when you can measure the conversion rate of people clicking links and buying products.

Step Seven – Roll out your organizational voice to the full audience and develop methods

for signing up as many people as possible – At the point you feel you have fully tested your processes and have a winning asset on your hands, it is time to implement a roll out plan and begin connecting to as many key people as possible. The methods for doing this can vary widely depending on the type of organization you have and the market position you are in. You can bribe people to follow you with the promise of discounts and specials. You can use partners, franchisees, or your local stores to promote these channels at the local level. You can include web addresses on your packaging if you are a retail product company or buy billboards if you have additional funds. Whatever you do, try to be creative. If you have done a great job with your content mix and tone, you will find that success will breed success. Your channel will go viral within your market and people will recommend you to their “friends” and contacts at the stroke of a key. Consider the following ideas:

- In the pre-social media channel days, whenever unique and intriguing content was presented, people shared it with their friends. Now every time someone forwards a link to your content, you reap the benefits of free marketing with the good chance they will sign up to get more.
- Create a list of potential partners or third parties who might be willing to repackage your content or forward your content linked to their audiences. This is the fastest and cheapest way to build followers.
- Once you announce and establish your organizational voice, maintain absolute consistency in delivering content. You cannot take weeks off at a time and expect



that your audience will remain interested and connected.

Step Eight – Never stop refining the content mix, expanding the audience, and interacting with readers/viewers/listeners – For a channel to stay vibrant, valuable, and

relevant you must pay constant attention to it. An organizational voice is a living, breathing resource and the subscribers view it as an extension of your organization. If you are not continually trying to improve it, expand the audience, or respond to comments and inquiries, your channel will be viewed as static. It will become boring and possibly die out once loyal viewers and readers unsubscribe. Information channels do not last long when they go uncared for by the authors. Consider the following ideas:

- There are times when it makes sense to instill new blood into the channel by letting new, fresh minds take over the content creation or editorial aspects. This must be done carefully, however because you do not want to shock readers with a sudden change in style or content.
- There are always new sources of information arriving on the web so it is important to stay aware of new sources which may be viable additions to the content recipe. Remember, you can also provide plenty of value just by filtering and streamlining sources of information for your audience, so any new information source will raise the quality of the end product.
- Never stop polling readers on what they find most valuable within your channel. You must have your finger on the pulse of your constituents so you can make timely, relevant, and consistent adjustments to the content recipe as dynamics in the world change.



Expected Outcomes



The outcomes of this organizational voice process can vary widely depending on how or why the voice is being used. This being said, there are a number of outcomes that will be common to all organizations:

- Each channel of the voice should provide a clear return on investment in some measurable way.
- A new electronic connection with constituents is made that provides the ability to strengthen relationships, expand branding, and drive new revenue.
- You will have a process for producing the organizational voice that is supportable long term, and with a minimal investment of resources.
- A higher level of value of content is created so the volume of constituents is increased through organic e-word of mouth referrals.
- A system for producing a voice that is “safe” so that the organization is never embarrassed publicly by errant comments or content.

Building an organizational voice that provides your organization with these outcomes can be extremely valuable. We hope you’re able to use the 12 steps to develop that voice thoroughly and effectively.

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