



Older People and Social Networking

This Viewpoint challenges the view that social networks are only for younger people. In fact, more older people than ever are using social networks; and not just to keep up with what their friends and family are up to. Social networks are an important communication tool and organisations working with older people find that social media are an effective way of engaging and interacting with their customers. Some organisations say that social media help build trust with customers and engender a sense of belonging. From an older person's point of view, social media allow them to have their say, on their own terms.

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Introduction

The onward march of social networks sometimes seems to be endless. Once only associated with youth culture, the networks are now seldom out of the public eye.

Some of the major players in social networking can attract tremendous worldwide interest. At the time of writing, Lady Gaga topped the Twitter international followers table with Liam Payne^{1,2} topping the UK league.

Twitter is said to have over 500 million active users worldwide. Facebook claims more than 30 million users in the United Kingdom. Worldwide, 800 million unique users visit YouTube each month.

Commentators have attributed impacts for Twitter in organising revolutions, outing straying footballers and in spreading breaking news in emergencies. The numbers of older people using social networks to communicate are growing too. In a recent Guardian³ online article, Adam Wilson of Connect Assist said that statistically the over 60s 'are the fastest growing demographic accessing the internet and slowly, but surely more older people are using social media. As our current population ages, the uptake will naturally increase with time, so consider adding social media channels and promoting them clearly alongside the more traditional ones.'

What are social media?

Social media is a term used to describe relatively straightforward ways of creating and publishing material on the internet. The term also describes the media that individuals and organisations use to publish and access material on the internet and to share it with other users.

The media also enables access to the material that other users have posted. The process generates comments and feedback from other users with access to the material.

The content or material posted can be in a range of forms that include 140 character texts, blogs, photographs and video. The growth of social media use has caused organisations and individuals to consider how and what they communicate. The 'social' in social media is sometimes taken to refer to 'social life', but many believe that this interpretation of 'social' is rather unhelpful, because the scope of social media embraces a social interchange on almost any subject imaginable.

Just as social media have transformed the way in which individuals communicate with each other, they are also transforming the ways in which businesses and customers communicate and interact. There is the potential to give a voice to people who were not heard before or who found it difficult to get a hearing. The internet itself has changed from being a one way communication to a medium where anyone can comment or express their view and share it with others. As one commentator put it, 'It's the political tract and the coffee house all rolled into one'.⁴

The influence of social media

The worldwide growth of social networking is evident not only to users of networking sites like Twitter or Facebook, but to anyone who picks up a newspaper, where there are frequent references to social networking sites and often several stories and news pieces based on Twitter conversations or Facebook postings. It sometimes feels as though 'the person in the

¹ Of boy band One Direction

² <http://twitaholic.com/>

³ www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/2012/jun/28/social-media-charity-advice

⁴ <http://socialmedia.21st.cc/the-guide/what-is-social-media/>

street' has finally taken hold of the means of production – at least as far as news is concerned. The traditional differences between public and private are now blurred.

As our current population ages, the uptake of social media will naturally increase with time, and as many of today's social media users become the older users of tomorrow it is time for businesses and other agencies to consider adding social media channels and promoting them clearly alongside the more traditional ones.

In the year to September 2010, over 57% of adults in the UK used a social network. 18% of people over 65 said they used a social network, up from 9% the previous year.⁵

Aren't Social Media for Younger People?

Social networking sites are not just the province of the young. In 2009, the New York Times claimed that Twitter did not appeal to just younger people and that Twitter's popularity was driven by a 'decidedly older group'.

The same article claims that YouTube initially appealed to young adults and senior citizens.⁶ Jamie Carracher⁷, a digital health strategist in Washington DC, makes the point that as Baby Boomers age they will redefine what it means to get old and this will generate a rethink of how we use the web and how we engage older people with new technologies.

PC World has claimed that the top four reasons why older people use social networks are; reconnecting with someone they had known in the past, connecting with other people who also have a chronic disease, bridging the generation gap and gaming. There are even websites devoted to the older gamer.⁸

The Office for National Statistics⁹ has reported that there have been significant changes in the way that people connect to the internet in recent years. This is important in the way in which people are able to express their views and feelings to a wide audience. There is no need now to scribble down a sudden important revelation on whatever has replaced the proverbial fag packet. Your views can be available on the internet within seconds.

In 2011, almost half of internet users connected to the internet used a mobile phone, when away from the home or office. While 70% of Britons aged 16-24 accessed the internet in this way, less than 10% of people over 65 did. Overall, social networking was slightly more popular with women.

Using the internet to sell goods or services saw a large growth in 2011. 31% of internet users sold goods or services online. Overall, 21% of internet users made telephone or video calls online and older groups showed similar patterns to younger groups, with 17% of people over 65 using this technology in comparison to 22% of those under 24.

Older people are important players in the marketplace, although a report published in 2010 concluded that despite this, many companies were still ignoring older people as consumers.¹⁰

Perhaps predictably, people over 65 were the only age group not to report clothes and sporting goods as the most popular online purchase. 29% of this group favoured the online purchase of flights, car hire and transport tickets. The downloading of films/music, books and

⁵ Quoted in the Daily Telegraph on 25 June 2012

⁶ See www.nytimes.com/2009/08/26/technology/internet/26twitter.html

⁷ <http://mashable.com/2011/04/06/baby-boomers-digital-media/>

⁸ www.game-veteran.co.uk/ and www.theoldergamers.com/

⁹ Statistical Bulletin – Internet Access Households and Individuals, Office For National Statistics, London, 2011

¹⁰ David Sinclair, the Golden Economy, Age UK, London 2010, www.ilcuk.org.uk/images/uploads/publication-pdfs/pdf_pdf_155.pdf

reading material was driven by the older age groups. There was also an increase in the oldest groups downloading books and reading material (23%).

According to NewMedia TrendWatch¹¹, 60% of internet users in the UK will use social media by 2014, with the most popular social networks in September in 2011 being:

- FaceBook (share of visits – 51.94%)
- YouTube and (22.5%)
- Twitter (3.4%)

According to a survey¹² sponsored by Umpf, more than half of UK adults of pensionable age are on Facebook with more than a third using YouTube on a regular basis. Ofcom¹³ has reported that 76% of UK adults have broadband and that 51% of UK adults use social networking sites. 34% use mobile broadband. 91% of UK adults personally own/use a mobile phone. 94% of UK homes have a digital television.

It is worth noting however that many aspects of social participation decrease with age and, according to Age UK¹⁴, this includes, owning a mobile phone and using the internet/e mail. For example, around 85% of people aged 60-69 own a mobile phone, but only 20% of people aged 90+. Organisations using social media to communicate need to take this into account.

The Characteristics of Social Media

The general characteristics of social media sites can be said to be immediacy, communication, free expression, information exchange and social interaction. However, while any posting on any social media site could be classified as a communication, it may not necessarily receive a direct response. Its impact or influence cannot be definitively gauged. Social media sites are often defined as web and mobile-based technologies used to turn communications into an interactive dialogue between individuals and between individuals and other individuals directly representing organisations.

Importantly, posts on social networking sites are in a public domain, insofar as they can be accessed by other registered users of the site. There are pros and cons here. It means that the poster's communication is being published and can (and may) be read by other subscribers who have opted in to receive the poster's messages, or even passed on (retweeted) to followers of the original recipient who has decided the message will be interesting to a wider audience. Social media sites are potentially powerful tools for communication between individuals and peers, but this form of contact does not necessarily simply replace traditional forms of communication. It will certainly enhance them and it will definitely produce new ways of communicating.

Communicating by and with organisations

Twitter for Business¹⁵ gives some good tips for using social media in businesses. For organisations wanting to communicate with older people, the lack of a direct response does not mean that the communication has been ineffective, or that the lack of a response has anything to do with the recipient's age. Effectiveness needs to be measured in a different way.

¹¹ www.newmediatrendwatch.com/markets-by-country/18-uk/152-social-networks-and-ugc

¹² www.umpf.co.uk/blog/social-media/social-media-usage-in-the-uk-the-findings/

¹³ <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/facts/>

¹⁴ Age UK, The Golden Economy, Age UK, London, 2010. www.ilcuk.org.uk/files/pdf_pdf_155.pdf

¹⁵ <https://business.twitter.com/en/basics/best-practices/>

For organisations looking to use social media to communicate with their customers, there is the prospect of increasing reach and accessibility at a low cost. For most staff and customers familiar with web and mobile platforms, social media sites do not require a lot of skills and training – just a bit of familiarity to get going.

From an organisation's point of view, social networking offers the possibilities of enhanced engagement with customers. This is important to the housing and care sector and can be transformative in terms of the relationship between individuals, landlords and service users.

The Smart Guide to Engagement¹⁶ is a good example. The specific purpose of the guide is to help clinical commissioning groups to interact with service users, stakeholders and commissioners through social media. A specific objective of this approach is to establish a more direct approach to engagement.

The guide says that a new project using social media needs to be clear about:

- What you are trying to tell people;
- What you want them to tell you;
- How you will handle what you learn.

Social networking is a two way process and whilst it gives a perhaps unheard voice to the respondent, it does not always produce the messages that organisations want to hear. This needs to be viewed as positive feedback.

Training and applications

Training in social media, including guides to using social networks, is available at Digital Unite.¹⁷ Looking Local¹⁸ has designed an app to enable Facebook members to access local services.

External pressures

External pressures can also encourage organisations to improve their interaction with their customers and to look for more effective ways of obtaining feedback. Housing associations are one example. The changing regulatory requirements of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) may prompt housing associations to be more proactive in the way that they deal with their customers.

While associations have more freedom in the way in which they manage the process, they will need to demonstrate the outcomes they have been able to achieve. Some associations are already seeing social media as a tool to generate better communication. For instance, Viridian Housing Association's resident engagement strategy sees social media as one of the ways in which the views of residents can be more effectively engaged. The strategy has four objectives. These include a resident led process to ensure residents get the services they want. Viridian says that it listens to residents at a local level and resolves issues locally.

Bromford Housing¹⁹ has challenged what it sees as a perceived view that tenant involvement has to be carried out through tenant panels. Bromford is starting to supplement its formal structures for customer influence and complaints with what the housing association is finding to be more effective conversations with large numbers of customers using a range of social media. A news hub on the Bromford Group²⁰ homepage offers access to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Bromford says that the content of interest groups is driven by its users.

¹⁶ Smart Guides to Engagement, Using Social Media to engage, listen and learn

¹⁷ <http://digitalunite.com/guides/social-networking-blogs>

¹⁸ http://blog.lookinglocal.gov.uk/2011_11_01_archive.html

¹⁹ See page 19, Inside Housing 20 April, 2010

²⁰ www.bromfordgroup.co.uk/news-hub/ and @BromfordGroup

Changed Interactions

Social media have transformed the relationship between organisations and customers. There are some good suggestions of how to do this in I&DeA's guide to using social media to support local leadership.²¹ The guide stresses that social media are all about community. They connect people together 'and help them share who they are, encourages conversation and builds trust.' The guide takes the view that 'social media are the most powerful tools available today for building a sense of belonging and collaboration in a virtual, or local area.' This is important, as older people often feel isolated.

In addition, 'making astute use of free tools and more complex services such as SMS text and bespoke social networking software can give councils a scalable, time-efficient way to connect residents together and build community in their locality ... It can be the missing ingredient that makes everything in the community work better.'

Social media can also play a supporting role in making traditional methods work more effectively, particularly through media which are set up specifically to build networks. The I&DeA report quotes the Southwark Circle^{22,23} as an example. The Circle describes itself as a membership organisation that provides on-demand help with practical tasks through local, reliable Neighbourhood Helpers, and a social network for teaching, learning and sharing.

The local council saw the Circle as a way to fill the gap of providing social care to adults of only moderate need. Most people interested in the project wanted a concierge type service and social contact.

Harringayonline²⁴ is geographically based and has up to date posts about local issues and events, but also serves a community function, allowing people, many of whom had not previously known each other, to interact and to pose and answer questions.

Some social networks are devoted to specific issues and MumsNet is probably the best known and is influential, even at the level of Government policy.

It is not necessary to construct formal networks. Twitter contacts, known as followers, create their own ad hoc networks, as do Facebook groups.

Some practical examples

Orbit Charitable Trust

The Orbit Charitable Trust²⁵ has recently published research into how housing organisations and organisations of older people can work together more effectively. The research was managed online through Twitter and Facebook, using project specific sites. Working in this way, the researchers were able to obtain the input of older people, some of whom self-selected their involvement with the work. It was very easy to announce through social media when new research material was available on the website.

Housing associations and Social Media

In March 2011, the Guardian's housing blog²⁶ tackled social media in social housing. Advice on good practice was offered by Louise Vaughan of Acceleris, John Popham, Simon Swanson of Freebridge Community Housing, Helen Jeffrey of the National Housing Foundation and Nick Booth of Podnosh.

²¹ www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=17797214

²² www.southwarkcircle.org.uk/

²³ www.telegraph.co.uk/health/8637156/Full-circle-the-social-network-for-older-people.html

²⁴ @harringayonline and www.harringayonline.com/

²⁵ See www.orbit-trust.org.uk/research-project/

²⁶ www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2011/mar/07/social-media-social-housing-roundup

Their top tips were:

- Don't neglect digital media, especially social networks accessed via mobiles;
- Social media aren't just for news. As well as updates on rents and support services, media can be used in a fun way to attract particular audiences;
- Digital media can increase efficiency and tackle social exclusion:
- Relatively simple actions like texting people to remind them of appointments can be productive;
- Internet access is important. Solihull Community Housing enabled broadband access to six tower blocks;
- Rather than focus on all social media, it is best to start on Facebook and Twitter and then regularly interact. Local news is a good place to start;
- Deal with complaints and negative posts quickly;
- Use different communication methods together to reach everyone;
- Don't forget video and audio;
- Don't rely on just one way;
- Be patient;
- Use different media for different purposes;
- Video is popular and easy;
- Use the forums that your customers use.

Finding different ways

Older people are finding different ways to do things and, in some cases, this means finding and using technology to be able to communicate. In an article published on the housing and care hub,²⁷ John Genders, aged 75, described how he tackled a sense of isolation by going to a nearby Housing 21 sheltered housing scheme to use the IT and other facilities. He calls for a resolution to get more older people online. As well as keeping in touch with his family Mr. Genders is developing digital photography skills and shopping online. He also uses the virtual extra care service²⁸ to keep in touch with the sheltered scheme when he is at home and using a handheld tablet to keep up with local information on health and transport and receive appointment reminders.

The NHS²⁹ has developed a tool which aims to pick out the key trends and technologies that will effect the NHS' relationships with staff, patients and the public over the next 5-10 years.

The benefits and advantages of social networks are said to be:

- Good way of organising groups of people with less effort and correspondence;
- Group users can share their own information directly, without going through an administrator;
- Helps keep a group together between face to face meetings;
- Easy to share multimedia (videos, pictures,) and links;

²⁷ www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2012/feb/06/digital-inclusion-elderly-housing

²⁸ www.telecareaware.com/index.php/tunstall-virtex.html

²⁹ www.institute.nhs.uk/building_capability/armchair_no_comment/tools.html

- Lots of people use social networking sites already so they are familiar with the technology;
- Social networking enables information and links to be passed on quickly through networks of people.

Risks and disadvantages are said to be:

- Think carefully about which platform you want to use;
- Social networks are not used by everyone – consider how appropriate this is for your group and whether a secondary means of communication is also needed;
- Some people may need basic training on how to use the network.

The Bespoken³⁰ website won an award for its use of social media to connect people and share insights and solutions. The website concentrates on independent living and has a useful question and answer forum and an 'I had this idea' page. The various forums are structured as a suite and there are pages for inspirational stories, new products and for fresh thinking and innovations.

There are social media, with 503 followers and a record of 500 tweets on relevant subjects.

It is interesting to try and gauge how powerful social media are at getting older people's messages out there. One way of doing this is by looking on Twitter to see how many followers some of the people and organisations associated with older people actually have. Here is a small selection.

Department of Health (@DHgovuk) +37,000

Dementia UK (@DementiaUK) 10,000

Joan Bakewell (@JDBakewell) +7,000

International Longevity Centre (@TLCUK) 2,190

Hanover Housing (@Hanover-Housing) 596

There are many reasons why some people and organisations attract more interest than others. The Department of Health covers a wide range of activity and, interestingly, the Housing LIN is not on Twitter. Instead, it encourages its 5,700 members to make best use of its online discussion forum and regional noticeboards – its own form of social media!

Conclusion

We know that older people have an interest in using social networks and that this interest is growing, and presumably will increase as new generations of people reach the age where society classes them as 'older'. We also know that younger people's interests sometimes differ from older people's. We also know that many of their interests and motivations are similar.

People of all ages are attracted to social networking for similar reasons. They want to communicate, not only with friends and relatives, but with people that they don't know, who might listen and have something interesting to say in response or debate. They want the latest news as soon as it happens. Importantly, they also want to contribute. Social networking can only work if users have something to offer and something to say.

Social media sites place a massive amount of information in the public domain. Some of it is boring, some inconsequential and some downright crazy. But much of it is funny, thought provoking, immediate and useful.

³⁰@Blackwood_F and www.bespoken.me

Who would not want to know on their way to the station that there has been another power failure and the replacement buses are due at some unspecified time? Tweeters will also pass news on to their followers, some of whom may be part of the community of beleaguered commuters. Interestingly, the railway company will also be trying to tweet its apology in first.

As for those providing services to older people, social media provide a fast, straightforward medium to pass on messages and information and get feedback. It is increasingly part of housing associations' communications and resident involvement practices. (See also Housing LIN Viewpoint 28 - 'A radical rethink is required in the way we involve and engage with residents of extra care housing') This can be anything from an appointment reminder to photographs of a recent social event, or consulting on new design proposals. Indeed, the number of older people using social media is substantial and growing. They do not have to use the media to communicate just about 'older people's issues', they are also having their say on the issues of the day. Moreover, they are able to consider what other people have to say. Social media traffic is multi-dimensional. However, it is worth remembering, in the virtual world of social networks, users do not even have to declare their age.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'knowledge hub' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

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