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Terri L. Griffith

Santa Clara University, tgriffith@scu.edu

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By Terri L. Griffith, Ph.D.

Get Serious About Social Media

General and supply chain-specific tools can connect people and companies while providing business intelligence.

Supply management is a social profession, where cross-functional interaction and team-based problem solving are the norm. We look to our coworkers and supply partners for information in their areas of expertise, and reach out to colleagues in the industry for advice. Facilitating this communication is technology, evolving from the telephone, to email and

and harness their potential.

The boundaries around these tools are fuzzy and dynamic, however, with permissions and privacy broadly or tightly controlled. Platforms can also offer many capabilities or be tightly focused. They range from Facebook and Twitter (which are considered consumer-grade tools), to Google (with both consumer and enterprise versions), to Jive, Moxie, Salesforce

a report, *An Emerging Social Paradigm in the Retail and Consumer Markets*, describing current and future social media effects in retail supply chains. The use of social tools is playing a positive role in their respondent companies' outcomes. Given the results, it's not surprising that across supply chain activities in these industry sectors, 44 percent are using social media in their work and 37 percent plan to do so in the next two years. The question is: "What are the other 19 percent thinking?"

Early adopters in supply management are using the full gamut of social tools, from consumer-grade, to enterprise-built, to supply chain-specific. One expert in the use of social media tools designed specifically for supply management thinks of companies as the "nodes" in social media rather than people, as is normally the case. The focal use of social media, then, is not on "friends" but on businesses and supply management processes and procedures.

The tools available in the marketplace vary by offering. But some supply management-specific tools can leverage the social media stream of

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now to social media. What social media and networks accomplish over other forms of communication technology is connecting vast users across a global landscape.

In the United States alone, 143 million residents between the ages of 18 and 64 are on Facebook — a staggering number with social media experience that can be a springboard for your organization's work. Thus, most employees, regardless of age, can adapt to an array of social media tools

Chatter, Socialcast, Socialtext, Yammer and many other "built for the enterprise" offerings. Regardless of the tool used, the goal is to help supply management professionals ascertain who knows what, who needs what information and how to coordinate to get the job done.

How Are Social Tools Affecting the Supply Chain?

Aberdeen Group's Kevin Permenter recently authored

information to manage bid proposals, business intelligence and general collaboration across partners.

Effectively Manage All These Choices

How can supply management professionals manage social media tools in their complex business interactions and global operations? Supply managers must always be evaluating and designing with people, organizational processes and technology tools simultaneously. There is no silver bullet. Three practices provide a repeatable method for managing this juggling act:

1) **Stop-look-listen.** Pause, and then look across your organization for the best

opportunities to leverage social business. Find out if there are grassroots efforts, and listen to how you might leverage the learning from these early adopters. Look for opportunities to support your key business initiatives (the heart of your business) through real-time demand tracking, expertise discovery, communities of practice and enhanced collaboration.

2) **Mixing.** Mixing is a formal process. It should look like a win-win negotiation made up of your available human, organizational and technical options. We all know how to negotiate. The trick for effectively mixing social media use is to put issues

on the table. These include how much and what type of training is needed (human dimension), which technology features are most important and what incentives to provide for participation. As with most new initiatives, a strategy for how to remove roadblocks and encourage participation (from an organizational standpoint) is essential, as well. Greater training needs may affect which technology features you choose.

3) **Sharing.** Share your goals and practices with your collaborators to let people understand what you're doing and why. Over time, this will increase the

efficiency and effectiveness of your work together. You will all become more plugged in and gain greater value from social business.

The supply management community is well-positioned to take advantage of growing technical and human sophistication around connecting and collaborating. By managing through the three practices listed here, procurement professionals can find a social media solution to meet the needs of their unique situation. **ISM**

Terri L. Griffith, Ph.D. is professor of management at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, and author of *The Plugged-In Manager*. For more information, send an email to author@ism.ws.

A Mix of Tools

Social media is revolutionizing how supply chains function and expanding the possibilities for information sharing. The following are several social media tools companies and supply partners are leveraging:

- **Wikis.** A wiki is a website that can be revised and added onto by users rather than by formal web designers, with Wikipedia being the most well-known. Supply management solution providers, for example, may host wikis around the use of their software.
- **Shared documents.** Shared documents work in a similar way, where all documents, including presentations and spreadsheets, can have several people working on them simultaneously — possibly with an online chat running alongside the document for coordination. As with most social tools, the owner/originator can restrict who has what editing privileges.
- **Microblogs.** These are postings of succinct content, such as those found on Twitter, with its 140-character limit. While brief, Twitter and microblogs can act as a quick notification system between companies and suppliers. One truckload brokerage company uses Twitter to post available loads, for instance.
- **Social news.** Crowdsourced news sites such as LinkedIn Today curate your news feed based on interactions and what your connections are posting on LinkedIn. Social media can be used to stay on top of news in supply management and as a tool for business intelligence.
- **Forums.** These are discussion boards, organized by topics, which occur over time and can provide excellent knowledge bases. For example, recent posts on Supply Chain Focus, an online global forum for supply chain discussions, included questions and answers about how to control the rejection of materials. Topics can also be divided by projects with access granted to all involved parties.
- **Repositories.** These specialized platforms are built for sharing files from slidedecks (for example, Slideshare) to video (for example, YouTube). Repositories are essentially online file systems for retaining and referencing project and process documents.

