

In Their Own Words

How Social Media Became the Go-To Communication Channels

By Gundi Jeffrey, Managing Editor



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With a huge part of the world's population now using a variety of social media, most organizations and businesses have also begun to rely on this type of communication to

broadcast their marketing messages, with the hope of raising brand awareness and improving communication and interaction with their key audiences, clients and customers, and staff. They want to be accessible to their staff – especially in these times of remote work forces – to those who are interested in their services and products and to become known to those who are not yet aware of them.

It is not surprising, therefore, that CPA Canada and the country's accounting firms have incorporated the use of social media – such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and YouTube – into their own marketing strategies. But the use of social media is not a “one size fits all” solution – each entity has its own ideas of how to present itself to its chosen markets. So, what is Canada's accounting sector doing with social media? Which tools are CPA Canada and accounting firms using? Whom are they targeting? And what kinds of results are they seeing?

ThinkTWENTY20 spoke to CPA Canada and two different-sized accounting firms about their experiences in this new era of communications. Specifically, we had input from Phil Boughton, Principal, Digital Marketing Channels, Marketing, Communications and Public Affairs at CPA Canada, Adam Rodricks, National Lead, Digital Marketing Services, KPMG in Canada, and John Nagy, a director at RHNCPA in British Columbia, who is passionate about technology and its application to accounting.

ThinkTWENTY20: *When and why did you start using social media for marketing/communication purposes and what were the first tools you used? Who were you aiming to reach? With what results? Were the results what you expected or hoped for?*

CPA Canada's Phil Boughton: We have been using social media at CPA Canada since the organization was founded in 2013, following the unification of Canadian accounting bodies. Social media provided a valuable platform to build recognition of the value of the Canadian CPA profession as well as to share relevant updates and news with members and other

stakeholders, while also providing an additional channel for our members to engage and communicate with us. The initial results were modest, though from an early stage we recognized that building a community on social media takes a lot of time and dedication.

Phil Boughton



Now, social media provides a strong communications presence for CPA Canada and the accounting profession. When warranted, that presence is further amplified by utilizing social media channels in conjunction with earned media from news outlets and services.

KPMG's Adam Rodricks: We've been using social media for marketing at KPMG in Canada for well over a decade. Our corporate Twitter account was among our first branded social accounts to be created in 2009, with an aim to increase the discoverability of our thought leadership. To say our strategy has expanded since then would be an understatement.

RHNCPA's John Nagy: We began using social media seriously in 2014 starting with LinkedIn. Our target audience was small to medium-sized businesses who might not have known what they needed in terms of accounting and tax services.

ThinkTWENTY20: Can you describe how you continued to incorporate social media into your marketing/communication strategies? What led you to choose the social media you used?

Boughton: Each social media platform is in a constant state of development, so we, too, have evolved our approach to social media management over time. It has been likened to learning to drive a car while it's being built – which feels quite accurate! Careful curation and centralized management have been essential in helping us to build a strong community and following on each channel. Over time, we developed a great appreciation and understanding of our audience's interests on each channel and how best to integrate social media within marketing or communications strategies.

The use of social media is not a “one size fits all” solution – each entity has its own ideas of how to present itself to its chosen markets.

Rodricks: It's incredible to see how much more legitimized social media marketing has become as a lead-generation tool in recent years. It used to be that the lion share of meetings devoted to social media consisted of lobbying for buy-in to use them as tactics in marketing campaigns.

Now, those same meetings consist of questions like “where” and “how much” rather than “should we.”

Nagy: Our marketing strategies have expanded to include Facebook and Twitter (in addition to LinkedIn). We have reengineered our website twice since we started the social media push and have made it easier for people to search for us. Our approach is still to establish ourselves as industry experts but also to show the human side of our firm.

ThinkTWENTY20: *What were you, and are you, hoping to achieve through the use of social media? And what are the primary messages you would like to send to your members and target audiences?*

Boughton: We promote content and resources that aim to provide Canadian CPAs and the business community with the skills, resources and support they need in an ever-evolving economy. The knowledge and expertise of our members is also promoted via social media to a broad stakeholder audience to reinforce the influence, relevance and value of the Canadian CPA profession – a profession that contributes to all sectors of the economy.

Social media is, of course, just one part of an integrated digital marketing strategy. Our audience engages with us across multiple channels and understanding the connections between social media and other channels, like organic search, can be really beneficial. For example, this year we provided key updates to members, businesses and the public on government stimulus measures relating to the Covid-19 fallout. While social media was initially the key channel for these updates, it evolved to play more of a supporting role as our website content achieved strong ranking on Google.

Rodricks

Rodricks: Social media is all about conversations. With everything we have done and aspire to do with our social media strategy, our primary objective is to generate quality engagement between our firm, our employees, our clients and potential clients. If we aren’t sparking meaningful conversations online, we haven’t done our job.

Nagy: We are very client-support oriented and we looked to LinkedIn as a tool to establish ourselves as an industry expert. Our second motivation was to attract new employees to the firm. Focusing on LinkedIn was the way most firms (with our history in the business) use the media for the purpose of making our name familiar to the target audience and to those other organizations who might not have heard of us before. This was not a perfect approach to achieve the desired outcome, but we did see an up- tick in traffic to our website.



ThinkTWENTY20: *How has the use of social media changed the way you approach and interact with your members/audiences?*

Boughton: It has really helped to inform the organization of our members' and other audience preferences and interests. Social media provides an incredible real time focus group as some content proves more popular than others. Within one hour of a social media post going live, you can immediately see if a product, article or video will resonate with the audience. We are always seeking ways to improve our social media content and campaigns – testing different approaches and identifying improvements that can enhance the member experience.

Social media is also a powerful complement to traditional news media as it is often faster and can be more targeted. Platforms such as Twitter are extremely important among journalists, with tweets being picked up and used as commentary or considered for story ideas. Timely social media, run in conjunction with a traditional media approach, can greatly assist an organization in achieving first-wave coverage – the key period when perceptions are established. Accuracy cannot, however, be sacrificed for speed.

Rodricks: We reach our target audiences in new places and with more accessible content than ever before. Some of the best feedback we've received online has consisted of how accessible we've made our thought leadership, which, more often than not, comprises fairly complex topics.

Nagy: We have worked hard to create content on our website that is useful to existing and potential clients, through the use of blogs and updates that we push out through social media. We are creating an approachable and ease of conversation opportunity.

We are always striving to be a trusted resource people and businesses can depend on while establishing ourselves as industry experts. We are here to help. Our clients love the fact that we have the answers to the questions and concerns they have that “keep them up at night” and what they did not know they needed to ask. We want to help other small to medium-sized companies (as well as individuals) better understand their financial position.

ThinkTWENTY20: *Which social media tools do you tend to use, and for what purpose? Are some more important than others? Which are your favourite and why? Are there any not suited to your members/audiences?*

Boughton: We have a presence on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Each platform has its unique value and we see different engagement patterns and preferences across the channels by specific audiences. LinkedIn is a priority channel for our communications and marketing. The platform has evolved beyond its initial focus on recruitment and networking into professional development and business content – which is an ideal match for CPA Canada and its members and other stakeholders. In recent years, we have seen tremendous growth in our following and engagement levels on LinkedIn as it has become an ideal platform for sharing CPA Canada's thought leadership and editorial content.

We also use social media to gauge member and stakeholder perspectives on key issues of the day, such as taxation, audit and assurance, financial literacy, etc. This is extremely beneficial as it helps to identify emerging challenges and opportunities faced by the profession.

Rodricks: We use tools that enable us to source, curate, schedule, publish and analyze posts, as well as tools that enable us to perform activities such as social listening. We also have an award-winning employee advocacy tool that we use internally to help activate more of our people's voices. What's of particular importance to us at KPMG is software that enables us to work seamlessly behind the scenes, so if, for example, someone mistakenly @-mentions the wrong KPMG firm instead of KPMG in Canada, we can queue up the proper response from the Canadian handle to provide the optimal user experience.

Not all content is created equal and neither are all tools. The tools we tend to shy away from are the ones that put emphasis on functionality that we don't prioritize, e.g., social listening on Tumblr.

Nagy: The social media tools we use depend on our intended audience and the message we want to put out. During COVID, we shifted to blogs that are full of up-to-date information that was released about government assistance and reporting. During our recruiting season, we push the lifestyle component to RHN.

I think the favourite depends on the target audience. We currently have a Twitter account but it is not as easy to use for blog articles, so we do not find it as appropriate for our approach. We will use it for promoting the firm socially.

ThinkTWENTY20: *How have your members/audiences reacted to your use of social media, both when you first began to market and communicate this way and then as it became more ingrained?*

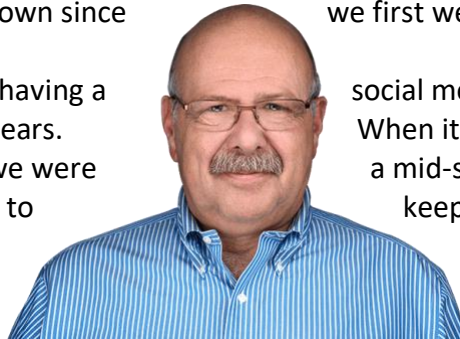
Boughton: One of the most powerful things that social media can enable is a sense of community. It can provide a space for members and other stakeholders to discuss shared learnings and insights and also allow for the identification of issues or challenges that the profession is facing. Recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic as I noted earlier, it became a space where individuals raised a lot of questions and concerns regarding government stimulus measures that were being introduced. We collated this feedback and liaised directly with the federal government and the Canada Revenue Agency to address the issues directly. Social media was an invaluable platform for sharing these key updates and gathering real time feedback from members and other stakeholders.

The use of social media is extremely beneficial as it helps to identify emerging challenges and opportunities faced by the profession – Boughton

Rodricks: We've seen a tremendous shift in audience reception, particularly on our live streams. Early on, we worked hard to differentiate our content strategy and establish a unique voice that adds value to our followers, regardless of their industry sector. It's no easy feat when you have a presence in as many industries as KPMG does.

Everything "clicked" for us when our content strategy became people-centric. We often draw praise for the level of authenticity we bring to our streams on Instagram and Facebook. They really are unscripted and give an unprecedented level of access to our leaders, which is why viewership has steadily grown since we first went live in 2017.

Nagy: The expectation of having a social media presence has ebbed and flowed over the last few years. When it first started, there was a daily need to be active. Given we were a mid-sized firm, it was difficult to dedicate a specific person to keep up with posting and developing content. It has become more acceptable to have a social media presence that is less frequent if the content is valuable. We have found a happy balance.



Nagy

ThinkTWENTY20: *Has the use of social media, and the types of media you use, changed since Covid-19 took over the world? That is, what impact has the Pandemic had on how you now communicate with staff, members and key audiences?*

Boughton: One trend that has been highlighted since Covid-19 struck is the increase in video consumption. This growth has been notable for the last number of years, but Covid-19 has accelerated the trend. Nielson in the US reported recently that consumers are spending 25% cent of their TV viewing time consuming streaming video content. For organizations and brands, YouTube is really the best opportunity to engage users with longer-form streaming video content.

We, too, have seen a big growth in engagement with video content this year. We created longer-form video webinars for YouTube to provide essential updates on Covid-19 government stimulus measures and policies for our members and the broader business community in Canada. These videos have become some of our top performing on the platform. This has been a key learning and takeaway from the pandemic. As we move into 2021, we are looking at

opportunities to develop more longer-form video content to serve our members and other stakeholders.

Since the advent of Covid-19, we have hosted all of our member conferences and events this year in a dynamic, fully virtual format. This has allowed us to offer accessible and affordable online learning options to our members. It has been a great opportunity to innovate and grow in new ways, together with our membership.

Internally, we embraced live video calls as a means of engaging with our staff during the pandemic. We hosted all staff meetings on Zoom, led by our CEO and senior management team. The engagement with these meetings has been terrific – in fact, we are seeing more dialogue and staff participation than ever before. It has allowed us to connect frequently with the entire CPA Canada team, providing a great platform for dialogue and discussion. Sometimes, temporary solutions can offer great long-term opportunities and benefits.

Rodricks: The tremendous change in the usage of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic is most evident among the skeptics; many professionals I've worked with who were reluctant to activate on social media held this viewpoint because they prioritized in-person interactions. To quote one of those leaders, "my book of clients has been built on handshakes and phone calls, social media does little for me to deepen that." Since the pandemic however, I've seen that reluctance dwindle and a willingness to learn leading to wider adoption, particularly on LinkedIn, where our number of individual employee profiles has spiked.

The pandemic has changed the tools we use. We've added a slew of virtual collaboration tools that aim at preserving authenticity in how we communicate. We're looking more closely at metrics in this area as well: for example, can we use attention-tracking KPIs to determine which portions of a presentation are strongest, and which need to be improved? The analytics say yes, and this strategy previously applied to video consumption on social media platforms has become platform-agnostic for us.

Nagy: The types of posts we have focused on has shifted to information content and less social. We work hard to clarify information that is coming from the government for our clients and potential clients. Working as translators if you will. "How does this affect me?" and "Where can I get the help I need?"

The use of social media is extremely beneficial as it helps to identify emerging challenges and opportunities faced by the profession – Boughton

ThinkTWENTY20: *Are you pretty much on the same page as your competitors in terms of what you use, and how you use it to market your firm and its products? Or are there tools you use that set you apart from others? (Because CPA Canada is a professional body, it was not asked this question).*

Rodricks: In some ways. We all use enterprise-level CMS tools for content scheduling and publishing. Similarly, we all have access to social listening and media monitoring software that helps us protect the reputation of our respective brands. But we also have unique tools in our arsenal. Our employee advocacy tool is a platform that has set us apart in the industry, and we've been recognized not just for our incredibly high adoption rate among employees, but also the ROI it has generated.

Nagy: When we look at others in our industry, we do better on content than we do on frequency. We look to what information can help someone who is looking for an answer. For example, we are always looking for helpful guides for our clients and, sometimes, if we cannot find them, then we create them ourselves.

We are mainly focused on knowledge-based blog posts that establish RHN as experts you can trust and who will be able to help. Our results are measured in a matrix we can get from Hootsuite as far as engagements, views and contacts. Truthfully, it is best measured through the traffic of search engine optimization. Creating content and putting it on a website to operate efficiently has been a game changer.

ThinkTWENTY20: *For your organization, what is the top benefit you derive from this type of marketing/communicating?*

Boughton: Social media is a really powerful way of connecting with our members and other stakeholders. In recent years, we've increasingly used social media to better understand how we can serve both. We can always seek to deliver more useful, relevant content by engaging all our audiences in dialogue about important issues. Social media provides such powerful data to help inform that work.

Rodricks: Quality social media marketing provides an opportunity to generate awareness of our services, as well as engagement on our content. For example, after we showed our support on #BlackOutTuesday, there was incredibly clear feedback from our social media community: this is a great start, but please let it be just that, the beginning. What followed from KPMG has been a consistent effort to spotlight our black individuals, their stories and the issues that matter most to them through the ongoing #OurExperienceMatters campaign. The campaign resonated with so many – three times our average engagements – illustrating the importance of sharing the experiences of our people in building a truly inclusive and stronger society. Diverse perspectives make all the difference.

Nagy: It is relatively easy to use. We do not need to hire a marketing firm and outsource the content. We are able to create it and distribute it in a timely manner.

ThinkTWENTY20: *How do you see the future of marketing/communicating with social media unfolding? Are there any new tools you'd like to see developed?*

Nagy: We see social media continuing to dominate the marketing scene.

Rodricks: We're excited to play a part in the emergence of the micro-influencer model (people who are highly influential in their immediate networks).

When we look at the characteristics that are slowly making up more and more of our workforce, we notice one big similarity between them, especially with respect to Millennials and Gen Z: they are increasingly detached from institutions.

We aren't fighting this distrust; we're embracing it by showcasing our leaders on social media and providing our followers with direct access to them. We want to have real conversations with real people and help businesses succeed. Authenticity over everything. We feel strongly that looking at things differently makes a world of difference.

In terms of future-forward tools, we'd love to see software that shines the light on "dark social," particularly more robust analytics on expiring content such as Instagram Stories or Snapchat filter usage.

Boughton: I think the growth in video will continue and the gap between mainstream video streaming platforms (Netflix, Disney+) and social media platforms like YouTube will narrow. More and more, brands are investing in long-form video content, with YouTube now firmly established as the platform of choice for video. While costly and resource heavy, there is a reward for those investing in video. YouTube remains a channel where achieving strong organic reach (without paid promotion) is still very much possible.

The evolution of education and social media could also be an interesting space. Research has highlighted how educational marketing can be more important than selling during a crisis, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. We have seen a boom in online learning since the pandemic began. At CPA Canada, we have experienced an increase in members and others attending virtual conferences from the comfort of their own homes. The virtual approach has been extremely well received by participants. Platforms such as LinkedIn have been investing more in online learning in recent years, beginning with the launch of LinkedIn Learning. It will be interesting to see if LinkedIn begins to offer greater integration of e-learning features to publishers on the main LinkedIn platform. It is certainly something we would be interested in utilizing if it was available.