



Article from

Reinsurance News

March 2016
Issue 84

Reinsurance Girl

By Mairi Mallon

@Reinsurancegirl. It is a catchy name which gets remembered. With a large following on Twitter and well-read blog, reinsurance girl—aka Mairi Mallon—tells us about why she has had such online success, and gives some pointers as to how we can all get digital.

I never started out to be a (sector-specific) mini-phenomenon on social media. Back in 2008, when my husband Stephen Breen and I set up rein4ce, a niche public relations company serving insurance and reinsurance companies, neither of us knew anything about social media apart from the odd dalliance into Facebook.

Back then, there was very little sensible business-to-business interaction online, and the dialogue was dominated by so-called “social media gurus”—to me a bunch of kids barely out of school in skinny jeans advocating “fun” stuff to do to sell your products. None of it resonated with the sober financial services sector we worked in, or demonstrated any thought leadership (or much thought at all).

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What we did realize, even back then, was that social media had the potential to be an extremely powerful communication tool—and that these channels weren’t going away. As a communications company, we realized that we had better learn how to use these tools properly otherwise we would be going out of business.

The first few times I tried Twitter, I wanted to throw my computer out of the window. LinkedIn seemed very spammy, and Facebook full of lifestyle pictures. Very few blogs resonated at all.

But we persevered, found blogs like that of Bill Marriott, the silver-haired patriarch of the Marriott hotel chain, who interspersed congratulatory blogs on his staff with his critiques of restaurants

and bars he had been to on his travels. Who would not be interested in what he would say about that? When I called his team to find out about it, I found out he used a Dictaphone on his many plane journeys across the Atlantic to speak about his experiences. Back at HQ, someone would type them up, tidy them up and post them. This was something of a Eureka moment—the realization that any executives, even in the rather staid world of financial services, could also use social media effectively.

I remember hitting 50 followers on Twitter and being super excited. Finding out what a hashtag is was revolutionary (a hashtag helps people sort of bookmark themes—check out #reinsurance #epic-fail #rims2016 #actuary). Discovering Hootsuite helped me control and sift through the vast amounts of information that was pouring in, and schedule the data that I was putting out.

We experimented with content on our blog, and worked out ever better ways to share it. We collaborated with others in our profession trying to find a way through this communications blind spot—we emailed and chatted on the phone, met up, and scratched our heads. Professionals who would normally be rivals put aside their differences to collaborate on global projects to promote insurance and reinsurance. Even actuaries got in on the scene. Check out the “What Is An Actuary Song” on YouTube posted in 2010 for a laugh. And so, the small community has grown, our knowledge has expanded and developed together, and those of us who started out back then are now called on by those trying to make sensible decisions on what looks like an uncontrollable form of communication.

It still makes me laugh when at a conference or talk, I’m stopped and people say in awe, “you’re reinsurancegirl!” I don’t tweet about much apart from insurance and reinsurance, and—confession time: I’ve not blogged in an age (watch this space, new website and blog postings coming soon), but the following is strong and people remember who I am. I’m up to just over 7,500 followers on Twitter (which gives me a better readership than some of the trade magazines). I have nearly 2,000 connections on LinkedIn and when I blog, we get an extraordinary number of visitors to the rein4ce website, who stay on the site on average for 4.5 minutes—and that is a lot of time, by the way.

There is no other way I could have built up such a strong brand without social media. I run a small public relations team in a relatively neglected part of the financial services sector.

So. Here is a guide to your own social media success:

PERSONAL BRANDING

I hate the term “personal brand,” but it does capture what you can do if you are focused on what you do. You can increase your personal profile on social media in a way that really would be impossible to achieve without a large wedge of money and a lot of effort.



Get on, Google yourself, tidy up your profiles. If you don't have them, get them—on LinkedIn and Twitter at the very minimum. Make sure you have a good picture and a summary that explains what you do. Think of your summary as a searchable CV, so make sure it is peppered with industry-specific information that might help someone in your sector find you when searching online. When you post, make sure it is material that is relevant to you audience. In the same way you would dress in a certain way for your job, make sure you look good online. People really notice. And check what your company says about rules of engagement—they may even help you get to where you want to be.

BIG CORPORATES ON SOCIAL

If you are not there ... oh where do I start? From a risk management perspective, it is damaging to not have at least bookmarked your pages, decided a company-wide strategy, engaged HR and have integrated social into your crisis communications strategy. How do you know what is being said about your brand if you are not part of that world? Check out epic fails such as BP in the Deep Water Horizon disaster when they went by the book on traditional media and got wiped across the floor on Twitter. Check out epicfail campaigns such as #coalisamazing in Australia to show you what happens in this space without common sense or a decent plan.

There are many, many great corporates using social to get their message direct to their desired audiences. Some are using Twitter to manage customer complaints and reach journalists, while others are using blogs to showcase their executives' expertise without having to go through an ever-less well read traditional press. And take your message directly to your audience with LinkedIn.

WHICH TAKES ME ON TO ...

Why are you doing this? And what do you want to say and who do you want to say it to? These are the basic questions I always ask about any communication—whether done in traditional formats or online. They sound simple, but they are not. For me it was simple—I wanted to increase my understanding of the platforms, promote my then new company, and at the same time prove my own and my company's knowledge and expertise in communications in reinsurance to insurance and reinsurance professionals and to the people who serve them. In other words, if we were claiming to be communications experts we had to demonstrate we knew how to use the tools.

For corporations, it may be to raise profile, to talk to regulators, ratings agencies and governments, to other "stakeholders" (another bit of jargon I'm not fond of) or existing or potential clients.

For individuals, it may be to talk to peers or customers—or potential customers—and show your expertise.

PLANNING AND GOALS

After you work out why you are doing something, plan out what you want to do. Set timelines, goals, budgets—get your strategy right and it will serve you well in the long run. If you have a budget of \$500, \$5,000 or \$50,000 it will vastly change what you can do online. No budget? Find one. Take the cost of something else and allocate it. Communicating is vitally important today, and how you do it will affect you, your career and your company. Just because it is social, does not mean you don't have to allocate time and money to it. Believe me, you will need to spend a bit of money getting

this right. Then set up at least a six-month schedule—preferably a year—and decide what you would like to achieve in that time and who you would like to reach.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Once you have done the budgeting, planning and setting your goals, decide on what success to you will look like. And be realistic—don't set yourself up to fail. Measuring the impact of something like a social profile is hard to do and the number of "likes" and followers may be a false metric. Your goal may be to reach a certain sector—have you reached them? Has your reputation and profile grown? Have visits to your website increased? Have you pulled in more business as a direct or indirect result of your profile-raising?

DON'T FORGET THE DAY JOB

Social media, for some people, can become a bit of an obsession. Try not to let it. Learn to make it part of your working day, in the same way answering phone calls or doing emails is. Or allocate 20 minutes in the morning. There are tools that can help with the time-suck. Hootsuite can schedule your tweets and postings and help sift through the myriad of information out there and just bring in what you need to read. If done properly, it should save you time, get you more up-to-date information in real time, and help you connect with more people around the world. If done well, it can help your career and your business should see the benefit of it.

REMEMBER WHAT WORKS

Twitter can be a huge distraction. But time and time again, I hear that while many people and organizations spend a lot of time and money on leveraging this platform, the simple truth is that there are many, many more insurance, reinsurance, risk management and actuarial people on LinkedIn. And they are paying a lot of attention. So check your analytics and your numbers and remember what works—and focus on that.

DON'T FORGET BUSINESS ETIQUETTE AND REGULATION

There is a basic rule of thumb. Don't post anything you would not want your mum to see or your boss to read. The same rules that govern our society and our working lives, govern social interaction. Don't talk about race, religion or politics. Remember in the U.S. about the rules on marketing your services. Don't disclose any proprietary information. Ask people permission to post pictures of them. Don't tell any work secrets ... Don't get fired. Learn the rules of engagement. Don't get in an argument online. Just pay attention and be a grown up professional. Cleverer people than you have run amok. If in doubt, ask your line manager or HR. Or if you have that nagging feeling before posting ... simply don't post.

QUALITY

Like most things in life, you get back as much as you put in. This does not mean being online all the time or becoming super social

overnight. Post quality. When once a year Warren Buffett does his letter to shareholders, we all stop to read it. Imagine if he did 12 tweets a year. We'd all read them. Make sure you are posting quality information that people want to read. If you do that, you may just nail this social media thing.

A FEW POINTERS

- Read and listen before posting: understand the tone of the people who are reading your stuff.
- Don't just share your own material. Even if you are trying to be helpful, this can come across as spam. Remember the 7:2:1 rule: out of every 10 posts, seven should be helpful to the general audience without being spammy, two can refer to your own material, and one can be a blatant plug for your product or services.
- Avoid being negative. As a rule of thumb, don't engage in fights, talk about religion, politics or race.
- Schedule material out. Don't send 10 updates all at once. Space them over a day or a week or a month.
- Online content is considered fresh for approximately eight hours.
- Don't just be online when you want something. The more you participate in a community, the more authoritative you will be seen to be.
- If sharing text, do you have any video and imagery to go with it? Do you have it in various languages?
- What are your definitions of success for engagement?
- Are your personal or business goals aligned with it? ■



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