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The Utilization of Social Media: A Case Study of the U.S. General Services Administration Experience

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**The Utilization of Social Media:
A Case Study of the U.S. General Services Administration Experience**

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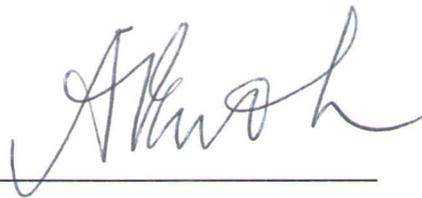
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The Utilization of Social Media: A Case Study of the U.S. General Services Administration Experience

Executive Summary

With 73 percent of people 18 and older actively using social media, it is becoming a mainstream method of communication for the American public (Lenhart et al. 2010, 18). If the government wants to effectively engage the public, it must leverage this opportunity. There is an apparent need for the government to keep up with the media shift by incorporating the use of social media into its traditional communication methods. Social networking sites have offered a way for the government and the public to engage each other in a two-way communication because they allow interaction among users. If the government effectively uses social media to reach out to the public, its efforts could better address the public interest, learn from the community, and improve relationships.

This case study uses Murdough's (2009) social media metrics and construct to examine the social media program that was implemented in Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). Data from the region's primary Twitter account were measured to determine if the region is effectively reaching and engaging its target audience, which are the American public and federal employees. Overall, the results from this case study reveal the region's progress thus far. The study also discusses strengths and weaknesses of the current program. While the analysis provides recommendations for the region's social media program to better serve its audience, the findings from this study serve as a benchmark.

**The Utilization of Social Media:
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The Utilization of Social Media: A Case Study of the U.S. General Services Administration Experience

Introduction

During the 2008 election, President Obama utilized social media in an unprecedented way, which many believe to be the major factor that contributed to his win (Qualman 2011). Not only did this prove that social media are powerful and influential tools, it also served as an opportunity to encourage the federal government to utilize these tools to strengthen its relationship with the public. In January of 2009, the President distributed a memorandum to heads of executive departments and agencies calling for transparency and open government. Agencies were given 120 days to provide recommendations on how they will proceed with this initiative (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration 2009, 4685). The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), an independent agency in the administrative branch of the federal government, was one of many agencies that complied with this request.

Administrator, Martha Johnson, introduced GSA's Office of New Media to head up the agency's centralized efforts to utilize social media on a national level. In 2009, the agency signed terms of service agreements with multiple social networking sites. Originally, all social media communications were centralized and controlled by GSA's Office of New Media. Within a short time, there was a recognized need to for regional offices, which are located throughout the nation, to use social media tools to communicate with local communities and stakeholders. This was particularly true for the Region 4 office located in Atlanta, Georgia. The Regional Administrator, Shyam Reddy, encouraged the use of these tools and the President's initiative was further enforced within the agency. The terms of service agreements along with GSA's social media policy provided a framework for Region 4 to experiment with these new communication

tools. The region was allowed to create a presence on social networking sites with approved terms of service agreements except YouTube, which is still controlled by GSA's Office of New Media.

There was excitement that came with the region's ability to use social networking sites. In many aspects, the agency was exploring a new terrain for communications. GSA needed to find a way to incorporate government business into inherently social sharing mediums. The agency followed best practices of businesses and other government entities. Region 4's social media efforts were off to a deliberately, yet cautious start as the organization tested the waters and slowly utilized these tools to communicate with the region's stakeholders. As time passed, the need to measure the effectiveness of the region's efforts communicating with and engaging the public was realized. In a sense, there was no established way to measure the region's progress or results from using social media. As the region creates its presence in the world of social media, there needs to be a way to determine its progress. This case study will explore Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration's utilization of social media tools to determine if the region effectively uses social media to communicate with and engage the public and federal employees.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to examine the current social media program that was implemented in Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration to determine if it is effectively reaching and engaging its target audience. In this case, the target audience is the American public and federal employees. The findings from this study will serve as a benchmark and provide recommendations for the region's social media program to better serve federal employees and the public.

This study reviews the relevant literature on social media in order to develop a case for government to utilize social media as a communication tool. The literature is foundational to analyzing the social media program in Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration. In this case study, data from Region 4's primary Twitter account are evaluated using Murdough's (2009) social media metrics. The results discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this communication tool, and provide recommendations for improvement. An additional discussion provides insight on how the region's use of social media aligns with the democratic values and public administration principles.

Literature Review

The importance of government communicating with and engaging the public remains a critical element to building relationships with citizens and addressing the public interest. Only recently, two-way communication between government and its stakeholders has been considered an option for building and maintaining positive relationships (Wilcox et al. 2005). Historically, the government has utilized one-way communication, which essentially is just the dissemination of information to the public (Martinelli 2006). Bureaucratic layers often interfered or deterred the government from communicating in an engaging, collaborative forum (Horsley, Liu, and Levenshus 2010). However, the introduction of social media as a viable tool has modified this bureaucratic thinking and offered a way for the government to include a two-way communication medium with the public.

The government capitalized on the social media movement and its corresponding emerging technology to embrace a two-way communication approach. As technology became more accessible, the digital divide was almost nonexistent. With 74 percent of adults in the United States using the Internet with minimal discrepancy based on race, income or community

type, social media tools offer a means for the government to communicate that were not available ten years ago (Rainie 2010, 2). Social media tools, on the other hand, offer an opportunity for a two-way communication mechanism with stakeholders. This is what the government needs to improve and adjust in its business operations in order to enhance its relationships with the public.

There is a strong need for government to be actively involved in social media. Not just because of the presidential mandate, but also because “it allows for a government to be more in tune with the country and to truly run as a democracy by stripping away the politics and getting to the core of what matters” (Qualman 2010, 78). Moreover, the use of social media by the public has continued to increase and does not seem to be slowing down. In 2010, the Pew Research Center found that 73 percent of people 18 and older are active on social media sites compared to 65 percent in 2008 (Lenhart et al. 2010, 18). With that, government must leverage this opportunity to reach out and engage the public. “Just as private companies are learning to embrace social media to manage brand reputations, governments must adapt if they wish to effectively communicate with their customers” (Drapeau 2009, 1).

While there has not been much research about social media in the public sector, there is a significant amount of research exploring social media in the private sector. Most of this research looks at the use of social media from a public relations or marketing standpoint. The agency wants to create a brand for itself and better market its services to its stakeholders. Building positive relationships and providing the perfect customer experience are other initiatives that GSA is focusing on. The agency needs to understand how the public and other stakeholders perceive it, and use that information to improve its reputation and service delivery. Modifying communication methods and providing transparent, engaging communication forums is a great

way for the agency to meet its objectives. Concerns about return on investment (ROI) are also addressed. Generally, the government does not think in a profit-making mindset, however, the government runs on taxpayers' dollars and GSA wants to provide the best value to the taxpayer. Thus, ROI will be important to help avoid wasteful operating costs or behavior. Accordingly, private sector research can be applied to GSA's efforts with social media.

From a public relations standpoint, it is important to know who your target audience is and find ways to attract them to your social networking sites. Since GSA is a federal government agency, essentially every taxpayer and citizen is a stakeholder. When determining the target audience, it is important to look at who the GSA does business with. Primarily, GSA's direct customers are federal agencies, the military, and small businesses. Members of these groups are the people that GSA would need to attract to its sites in order to build its brand and improve relationships through open communications. Although government agencies typically do not market themselves, it is becoming more commonplace to do so. According to Qualman (2011), when social media are used appropriately, they can serve as a great outlet to develop a company's brand. Doohwang, Soo, and Kyu (2011) conducted a study related to marketing and branding through social media. They found that once people join a social network, they identify themselves with that online community and were motivated to become engaged in that group. GSA is in the process of branding itself. Ideally, the agency would need that sort of engagement to build and reinforce its brand as well as improve customer relationships.

One of the inherent purposes of social media is engagement. Nevertheless, how can an organization know if it is effectively engaging its target audience? A measurement tool would need to be in place. Since social media are new and most companies that utilize these tools operate differently, there is no one standardized tool for all measurement purposes to fit every

company's needs. However, multiple tools have been developed to address this issue. Most mainstream social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer internal analysis systems. These systems provide data, along with some analytical tools, that can be utilized to measure progress. Utilizing a measurement index is critical to understanding if social media efforts are effective. Sterne (2010) discusses several different measurement tools that have been created by private firms to measure and optimize social media efforts.

A major incentive to using social media tools is the low upfront costs to creating an online presence (Safko 2010). Safko utilizes a return on investment (ROI) as a measure to determine social media successes. Yet, for social media, calculating the return on a social media investment is more difficult than it may appear. This is because returns are not always tangible dollars. In the case of GSA, its return would be measured in terms of effectiveness, engagement, and improved customer satisfaction. Concurrently, Murdough (2009) believes that determining the outcome of a company's social media efforts will be specific to that company's objectives. In addition, Freed (2010) argues that the ROI of social media can serve as a justification for resources; yet, he recognizes challenges in measuring social media ROI. No matter the company, benchmarks specific to the organization's goals must be created to determine if social media efforts are successful (Murdough 2009).

Methodology

This case study will use analytical tools to determine if Region 4 of the GSA is utilizing social media to communicate effectively with the public and federal employees. The evaluation process will begin by determining the region's status and progress. Using Murdough's (2009) framework as a guide, the region's social media program standing in fiscal year 2011 will be the

basis for the evaluation process. The framework will be applied to the social networking site that Region 4 is currently using, which will serve as the unit of analysis. Important factors that will be analyzed include the number of followers, discussion topics, sentiment of discussions, and timeliness of communications. All these factors play a role in building GSA's brand, deepening customer relationships, and learning from the community, which will ultimately determine the effectiveness of the region's communication.

The social media program for Region 4 of the GSA will be the main point of analysis. Region 4 is composed of eight states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and a small jurisdiction in Mississippi. The regional office is located in Atlanta, Georgia, where the Regional Administrator sits, and regional social media efforts are controlled. Recently, the need was identified for certain aspects of social media to be controlled at a regional, rather than a national, level. Thus, the region has received approval to create and manage a Facebook page, which is in the process of being created. Additionally, the region also has six official Twitter accounts: @US_GSAR4, @r4realproperty, @GSAR4OSBU, @GSAR4CAR, @GSAR4NSD, and @R4FASProperty. While these accounts were created to represent the region, most of the account holders have decided to consolidate accounts with counterparts from GSA's Central Office. The account that will remain as the primary representation of Region 4 is @US_GSAR4. The region's use and interactions on this Twitter account will be analyzed. The research from the literature review is foundational in evaluating the effectiveness the region's social media efforts. While the social media program is in its beginning stages, the agency is moving to make it a part of everyday business practices. A prudent part of the program's development will be in the integration of GSA's goals and metrics tools as a way to measure the program's progress.

The concept of social media will be defined as “web-based, interactive tools and media, oriented primarily to... engaging user experience. In social media, users add value to the content and data online” (U.S. General Services Administration 2010). The social networking sites allow for a two-way communication process between the agency and the user, who is often a stakeholder or customer. The interactions that occur on the site should be a collaborative forum where the agency can learn more about what the public wants and modify its actions based on the public interest expressed via the social media site. In addition, “Social media includes various online technology tools that enable people to communicate easily and share information... text, audio, video, images, podcasts, and other multimedia communications” (Social Media Apps 2011). Popular social networking sites include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Flickr. These sites, when used properly, can be forums for collaboration and help build relationships between an organization and its customers.

Data Sources

Data for Region 4’s Twitter account was collected from the HootSuite Social Media Analytics. HootSuite is a social media dashboard site that provides its users with a one-stop shop to monitor and manage its social media accounts. Social Media Analytics is part of the HootSuite program, and provides the metrics and raw data for user accounts. While HootSuite Social Media Analytics offers raw data, there are indexes that will provide additional methods to analyze the data. Murdough’s (2009) social media framework assists with categorization of measurements. The framework organizes ways to measure interactions to deepen the relationship with customers and learn from the community, which are two important structures for the region’s program. The data provided from the HootSuite Social Media Analytics was applied to this framework to determine the region’s progress in the areas of customer relationships and learning from the community (Murdough 2009; see Appendix A). An

additional metrics under this framework measures the use of social media to drive the purchase intent, which does not apply to this study and will not be utilized as an analytic tool.

The next step of Murdough's (2009) framework is to organize and categorize the data into the three Pillars of Social Media or the Social Media Analysis Construct (see Appendix B). These pillars are used to analyze data from of the region's social media efforts into categories of reach, discussion, and outcomes. Using this construct, the data from Region 4's Twitter analytics was organized and measured with this tool. Once the data were organized, this tool also helps determine areas in the program that could use improvement.

An additional benefit to running these measurements centers on the fact that the data often provide the derivative of the program's return on investment (ROI). Vital tools, such as HootSuite Social Analytics, can assist with determining the ROI of social media. Often times, with a social media program, the non-financial impact is stronger than the financial impact. With government, the non-financial impact is an important part of the return because the government does not think in terms of profit. Some non-financial returns for Twitter include the number of retweets, followers, lists, social mentions, amount of feedback, and sentiment of comments. The non-financial returns for these would be building trust and stronger relationships with the customer, which in this case are the public and federal employees. Generally, there are minimal upfront costs. If communications through social networking sites are effective, that can lead to improved customer service and loyalty, enhanced agency reputation, and increased serviced utilization.

There are several potential benefits from this case study. The main benefit would be that GSA would have a strategic method to measure and analyze the effectiveness of its social media efforts. Since there is no established measurement tool for the region, this initial assessment

would provide a benchmark or starting point for understanding the effectiveness of its social media program. One proximal outcome would be to have an understanding of how the social media program is engaging the public. The region will be able to understand its progress and decide where the organization needs to focus its efforts for improvement. The alignment and allocation of resources for social media to be as effective as possible will be another outcome of the study.

Distal outcomes include the region realigning its communication efforts to better meet its goals. This includes building its brand in such a way that the agency has an improved reputation and customer loyalty, which in this case converts to public support. Since the region does not have a strategy for its social media efforts, the results can help dictate a plan to move forward and ways to improve its work with social media. Ideally, the study will help the organization design tactics and optimize its efforts.

This study will utilize analytical tools and frameworks to analyze GSA, Region 4's social media efforts. By analyzing these data, a determination can be made to whether or not Region 4 effectively uses social media to communicate with and engage the public and federal employees.

Study Limitations

While the social media program in Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) is in the beginning stages, the minimal activity on the sites did not provide a significant amount of data to analyze. However, the available data allowed for determinations to be made about the region's progress. In addition, results exposed areas for improvement. As the region's social media program continues to grow, it will be critical to monitor progress and adjust the program to meet the needs of the agency's audience.

Findings

In this section, the overall results of the case study as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the region's social media program are discussed. HootSuite Social Media Analytics provided data for the @US_GSAR4 Twitter account, which is the primary account for Region 4 of the GSA. Data were collected over the time period from October 1, 2010 through September 30, 2011, which is also the agency's fiscal year 2011. After the data were compiled, appendices A and B were used to categorize the data and determine if Region 4 has effectively reached and engaged the public and federal employees with its social media efforts during fiscal year 2011.

The summary for the status of @US_GSAR4 showed the audience by region, the number of followers, number of listings, number of accounts @US_GSAR4 is following, top referrers, follower growth, mentions by influencers, clicks by region, top referrers, and the most popular links. Additionally, the HootSuite Dashboard compiled data for the number of mentions and the number of times another Twitter account retweeted comments from @US_GSAR4. Based on the HootSuite Dashboard, this account largely retweets news from other Twitter accounts, such as @GovExec, @GovNewMedia, @RevoceryDotGov, and @AP. The account also retweeted information from other GSA Twitter accounts controlled out of its Central Office or other regions, as well as retweeted posts from other federal government agencies. Hence, there were few original tweets created and posted from Region 4's primary account.

Murdough's (2009) social media metrics framework categorizes the communication on social networking sites. For this purpose, the compiled data were run through this framework to be categorized (Murdough 2009; see Appendix A). Deepening the relationship with customers is the first goal of the framework, which is broken down into two subcategories: achieve a critical mass of audience through social media, and encourage ongoing interaction with the brand. The

former is a quantitative measure based on the number of followers and the number of comments. Based on the current data, @US_GSAR4 had 202 followers at the end of fiscal year 2011. Over the length of one year, this number has remained fairly steady. At no point over this period was there a spike in the number of followers.

The first subcategory for deepening the relationship with customers is also evaluated by the number of comments. For Twitter, this translates into both the number of mentions and the number of retweets. A mention is when another Twitter account posts a comment that mentions @US_GSAR4 and creates a link to Region 4's account. For example, on March 17, 2010 @GSA sustainable mentioned Region 4's account in this tweet, "hey @US_GSAR4 - who's your #sustainability guru? The theme team wants to connect with your council!" Throughout fiscal year 2011, @US_GSAR4 received 16 mentions; these came from other GSA Twitter accounts and independent Twitter users not associated with GSA. The number of retweets also contributes to this measure. A retweet is when @US_GSAR4 creates a tweet and another Twitter account reposts the tweet to share it with his or her followers. The purpose of retweets is to spread news and information to a new or different audience. If someone finds a tweet interesting, this person can retweet it to inform more followers. This not only quickly disseminates information, it also captures a wider audience that may not be following the original Twitter account, which in this case would be US_GSAR4. During fiscal year 2011, the total number of retweets for @US_GSAR4 was six, and only one Twitter follower reposted each retweet.

Encouraging ongoing brand interaction is the second subcategory for deepening the relationship with customers. This is based on follower's comments and advocated influence. For @US_GSAR4, this would also be determined by the number of retweets, as well as mentions

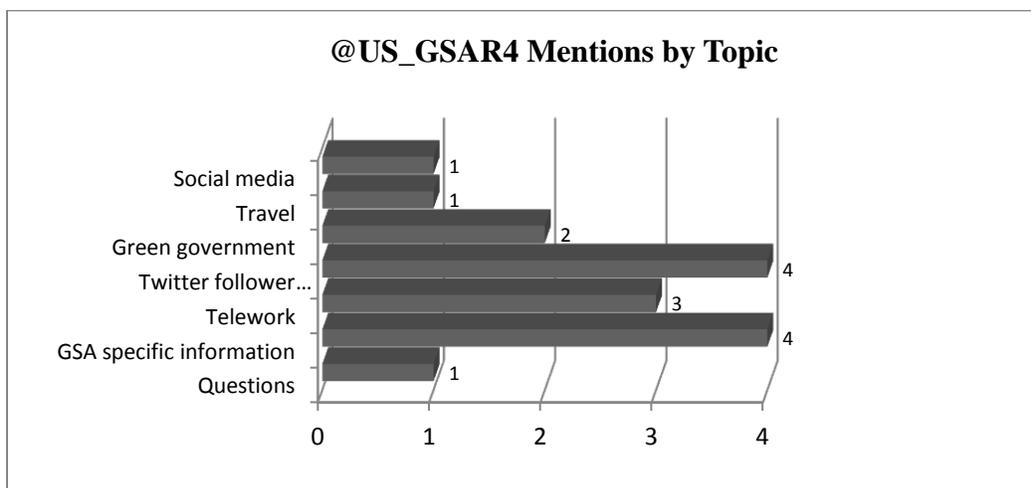
by influencers and click for the most popular links. Since the number of retweets has already been determined, mentions by influencers would be the next measurement. However, throughout fiscal year 2011, @US_GSAR4 received no mentions by influencers. Therefore the 16 times Region 4's account was mentioned, it was by non-influential Twitter users. During fiscal year 2011, there were three most popular links posted by @US_GSAR4 that received five, two, and one clicks, respectively. The first link referenced job announcements. The second and third links were announcements for idea forums and webinars for small businesses. This shows that there were interactions with followers for Region 4 of the GSA's brand. However, the interactions were minimal.

The first goal of the social media framework to deepen relationships with customers is not being reached to its potential. In the case of Region 4 of the GSA, its customers are the public and federal employees. With a geographical range spanning over eight states, @US_GSAR4 can capture a larger audience. Based on the clicks by region, all Region 4's followers are located in the United States. Hence, the critical mass of audience is neither following nor actively engaged with Region 4's Twitter account. In addition, agency's brand is only slowly being built through social media with minimal interaction among followers.

The second goal of Murdough's (2009) social media framework is to learn from the community. This is a qualitative measure that looks for patterns of sentiment and commonalities among the community of followers when they interact with a social media account. The rank of topics discussed and the sentiment of those discussions are important to this measure. For this metric, @US_GSAR4's most popular links will be utilized in conjunction with any themes among the 16 mentions and six retweets. It has already been established that the most popular links were related to jobs and small businesses. The number of mentions was broken down into

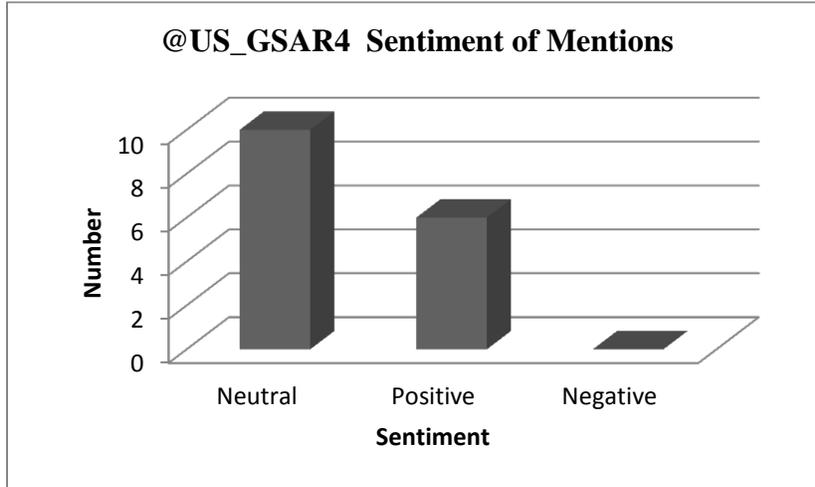
categories based on tweet content. These topics include questions, GSA specific information, telework, Twitter follower suggestions, and green government. Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of these topics. Both GSA specific information and Twitter follower suggestions received 25 percent or 4 mentions, followed by telework, which received three mentions. Green government received two mentions and the other topics received one mention each.

Figure 1. Breakdown of Twitter mentions by topic for fiscal year 2011.



The sentiments of these topics were categorized into positive, negative, or neutral. Figure 2 illustrates the categorization of the sentiment for @US_GSAR4's mentions. The majority of the mentions have neutral sentiment. There were six mentions with positive sentiment while no mentions had negative sentiment.

Figure 2. Breakdown of sentiment for Twitter mentions for fiscal year 2011.



The same categorization and breakdown of topics and sentiment for @US_GSAR4 retweets was conducted. Figure 3 illustrates the retweet topics and Figure 4 shows the sentiment of those retweets. The retweet topics were categorized into four topics: property, innovation, budget, and jobs. The most popular topics were jobs, which had three retweets, while property, budget, and innovation each had one retweet. Five of these retweets had positive sentiment and one contained a neutral sentiment. None of the retweets has a negative sentiment.

Figure 3. Breakdown by number of Twitter retweets by topic for fiscal year 2011.

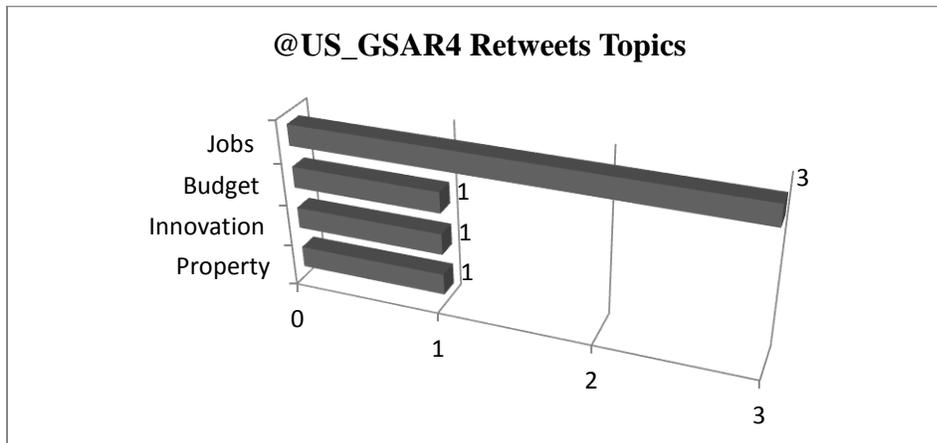
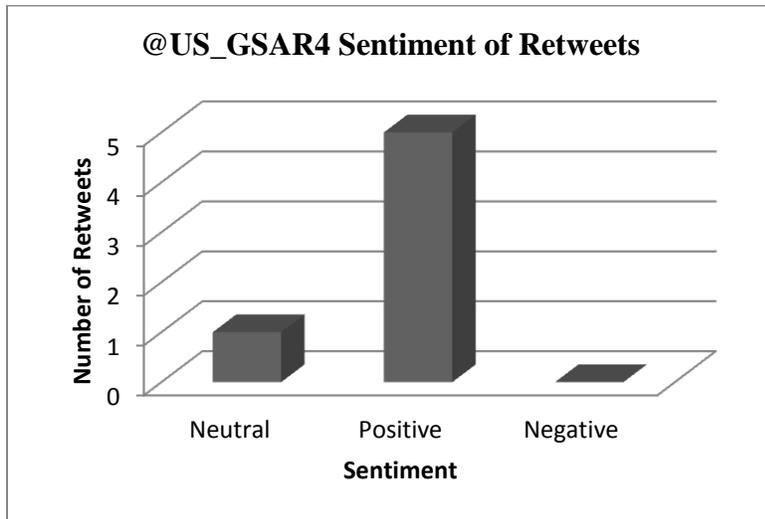


Figure 4. Breakdown by sentiment of Twitter retweets for fiscal year 2011.



Based on this analysis, discussions on jobs and GSA specific information received the most interaction from followers. Telework and green government ranked second and third among retweets and mentions. This analysis is indicative of the current audience and its interactions. The GSA specific information interactions were only pertinent to current GSA employees. Discussions on jobs, telework, and green government engaged both the public and federal employees. For both mentions and retweets, @US_GSAR4 received either positive or neutral sentiments. However, Region 4 of the GSA is not utilizing its Twitter account to capitalize on its followers' interests and learn from its community. The minimal amount of interactions and engagement makes it difficult to actively learn from and cultivate a relationship with the public and federal employees.

The next step of analysis is to apply Murdough's (2009) pillars of social media to determine areas where the program can be improved (see Appendix B). Reach, discussion, and outcomes are the three pillars for this evaluation.

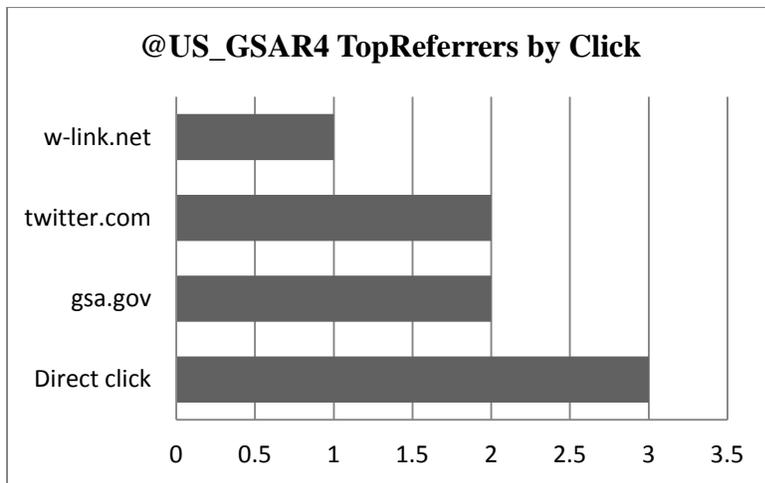
The reach pillar looks at influential followers to determine how far a message is reaching based on mentions and retweets. In the case of @JN_Seattle, who accounts for two of the sixteen mentions, has 841 followers and he is a member of 69 lists on Twitter; being listed on Twitter is similar to a group that shares information on a common subject matter. Regarding @EileenKent, who accounts for two of the six retweets, has 69 followers and is a member of one list. Essentially, the reach ends with those users' followers and lists. For @US_GSAR4, the quantity of reach is miniscule when compared to the millions of people and lists on Twitter. The quality of reach is mainly by individual users. While they are not celebrities or political leaders, their messages do have some quality and reputability with their followers and lists. In addition, @GSARRegion5, the Twitter account for Region 5 of the GSA, is active in mentioning @US_GSAR4. The quantity of the reach from Region 5 is small as @GSARRegion5 has 164 followers and 9 lists. However, their quality is more reputable because they are an official account for GSA. Overall, Region 4's reach is not substantial and it is an area where its social media program can be improved.

The discussion pillar uses sentiment and topics to determine areas for improvement. While popular topics and sentiment have already been determined based on retweets, mentions, and popular links, this pillar examines the tone and discussion surrounding those topics. Essentially, the discussion pillar looks at how those social media interactions influence people's feelings about Region 4 of the GSA and if those feelings are in line with how the region wants people feel. Thus far, @US_GSAR4 has not encountered interactions with negative sentiments. However, the majority of mentions and a small portion of retweets have neutral sentiments. Ideally, the region would want the primary sentiment to be positive. Yet, that is only true for

retweets. Since the discussion around topics is so minimal, this is an area that the region could improve upon.

The outcomes pillar is focused on the site traffic and purchase intent. The top referrers for @US_GSAR4 are via direct click on the page, referrals from Twitter, referrals from gsa.gov, and worldlink (w-link.net). These referrers are driving traffic to Region 4 of the GSA’s Twitter account. Figure 5 illustrates the breakdown by number of click from those sites to Region 4’s Twitter page. The breakdown shows eight click-throughs, which is a number that can be enhanced. As discussed earlier, the use of social media to drive purchase intent does not directly apply to this study and will not be utilized as an analytical tool. Thus, site traffic is the primary focus for the outcomes pillar.

Figure 5. Breakdown by number of clicks for top referrers for fiscal year 2011.



The analysis using Murdough’s (2009) three pillars of social media measures highlighted areas where Region 4’s social media program can be improved. In effect, all three pillars, reach, discussion, and outcome, could stand to see enhancements.

Implications for Further Research

While these results are indicative of a program in its beginning stages, the analysis suggests that Region 4's social media program needs more interaction and engagement. It will be important to continue monitoring and measuring the program to determine if Region 4 of GSA is effectively communicating with federal employees and the public. It is recommended that further research be conducted as the program expands to include other social networking sites and additional resources.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the data, the agency is not effectively utilizing social media to communicate with the public and federal employees; however, this can be improved. The simplest way to do this would be to expand beyond Twitter. "Among adult profile owners, Facebook is currently the social network of choice" (Lenhart et al. 2010, 18). In addition, Fox, Zickuhr, and Smith (2009) found that people who already use sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace are more likely to use Twitter. With that, the region is in the process of creating a regional presence on Facebook. Nevertheless, it will be important to maintain a presence of Twitter because the number of Twitter users continues to increase. From November of 2008 to October of 2009, the number of Twitter users was up ten percent (Fox, Zickuhr, and Smith 2009, 6).

Region 4 of the GSA jumped into social media very quickly without a solid plan on how it would proceed or what the region was hoping to achieve from the program. Moving forward, it will be critical for the region to develop a purpose and outline a strategy for the social media program. In addition, the region needs to create goals and have an understanding of what it

would like to achieve from the social media program. Without a plan, strategy, and goals, there will be no way of knowing if the region will meet its social media program objectives.

Based on Murdough's (2009) three pillars of social media measurement, Region 4 of the GSA can improve areas in each of the three categories: reach, discussion, and outcomes. There are steps the region can take to improve its reach. The first step would be to increase the number of followers. The region could market its account to attract more followers. Within the agency, support from management would encourage employees to utilize the sites. It could also persuade employees to promote the social media account by adding a line to its signature block or through word-of-mouth to customers. In addition, the region needs to develop original content to post on its account rather than rely on retweets for content, which will attract more followers. Moreover, the information needs to be consistently updated and kept relevant; this may also help attract more followers and encourage more mentions and retweets of @US_GSAR4 content.

The discussion component of Region 4 of the GSA's Twitter account can be improved. This aspect refers to the topics that increase interaction and influence the public's feelings about Region 4. These factors contribute to the government deepening its relationship with the public and federal employees through social media. This case study determines several topics that pique the interest of the @US_GSAR4 followers. The region can use this information to leverage the customer relationships and increase engagement and interactions with followers. In turn, this could also increase the number of followers. Other important aspects of managing a discussion include timeliness, responsiveness, and feedback. Realizing the importance of quick response, constant collaboration, and actually implementing change based on customer feedback will be key to the region successfully managing discussions as well as keeping and increasing followers on its social media site.

In addition, improving the sentiment from neutral to positive can improve the discussion pillar. The region can use the discussion topics that followers are already interested in to build support and increase the number positive interactions. As the number of followers increase, it will be difficult to keep the sentiment positive. However, managing, understanding, and overseeing sentiment of comments is another aspect of managing the discussion.

The outcomes pillar, which is focused on the site traffic and purchase intent, the region can increase traffic to the site and referrers by clicks. One of the top referrers to the @US_GSAR4 is gsa.gov. This is a site that Region 4 has some control over and can use this resource to amplify traffic to the Twitter site. In addition, advertising through employee signature blocks, word-of-mouth, and the gsa.gov site will also increase site traffic.

Currently, Region 4 of the GSA is not utilizing its Twitter account to capitalize and effectively engage the public and federal employees. The minimal amount of interactions and engagement makes it difficult for the region to cultivate a relationship with the public and federal employees.

While there will be challenges as the region's social media program continues to grow, there will also be opportunities to improve the program. Furthermore, there will be ways to improve the agency's return on investment. Since there are minimal upfront costs, social media are effective communication tools and can lead to paybacks such as improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, improved agency reputation, increased serviced utilization, and a stronger brand. The increased use of social media has potential to attract more followers. The region's use of social media has prospective to reduce the cost of communicating with the public and stakeholders because it offers free, innovative forum for a two-way communication process.

Yet to implement these suggestions, improve the program, and get the intended return, the agency needs to commit proper resources in terms of people, time, and technology.

This case study provides a foundation by supplying progressive benchmarks for Region 4 of the GSA's social media program. While Region 4 is slightly behind the curve when it comes to social media, it is taking steps in the right direction to building its brand and improving its communication with the public and federal employees. As the program advances, the region will need to continually measure its progress and align its efforts with the regional social media objectives. Fortunately, the region has several partnerships in federal employees that it can use to learn best practices.

Discussion

Since Region 4 covers an eight state geographical area that is part of a larger, federal agency, it is critical that its social media program be parallel with the mission and goals of GSA as a whole. At the national level, the agency has created a mission and strategic goals. The social media program in Region 4 is aligned with the mission and goals, particularly goals for best value and innovation. Part of the agency's mission is to "foster an effective, sustainable, and transparent government for the American people" (U.S. General Services Administration 2011, 1). Social media are inherently transparent and sustainable means of communications; they allow two-way communication from the American people, and they are technology-based, which fosters sustainability and minimizes waste. When used properly, social media can be effective methods of communication. Since using social media tools have minimal upfront costs and low costs to maintain, the region is using this as a supplementary means to communicate with federal employees and the public. By utilizing this communication method, the region is providing the best value to the taxpayers. Additionally, social media are innovative methods of

communication. The agency is taking hold on a continuously emerging technology that its customers use to communicate.

The roles of democratic values and public administration principles are critical in government functions, especially communications. These principles are equity, efficiency, economy, effectiveness, and public values. It is important to consider the principles during any type of transformation within the government. Thus, these values need to be incorporated into the region's transition to a social media communications platform.

The GSA must be equitable in how it serves people. While Region 4 uses social media to communicate, it needs to be fair and equitable in doing so. In this sense, equity refers to equal access to information regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, etc. One of the great things about social media are that anyone can create an account on a social networking site, and the sites that Region 4 of the GSA uses are all free to the public. While this may not be the primary way that everyone would like to receive information from the region, it is a communication option that the public is encouraged to use.

One stipulation on the equity principle is the importance of public awareness. If the public and federal employees are not aware that Region 4 uses social networking sites as a communication medium, then those people would not know or think to access those sites for information. In a way, if the region does not advertise its Twitter account, then it could be construed as excluding certain groups of people. As the number of followers indicates, the majority of the public and federal employees are unaware that Region 4 of the GSA has a Twitter account. While Region 4 advertises its Twitter account on the regional www.gsa.gov pages, that is where the advertising begins and ends. Although the link and Twitter feed is provided on those pages, word-of-mouth is the only other method of advertising the region's move to social

media. A simple solution for the region would be to increase advertising to make the public and federal employees aware that it is using social media sites to communicate and to draw more people towards those sites. Advertising and driving people to the region's social networking sites will be critical to addressing a potential equity issues as the social media program continues to grow.

Similarly, the digital divide, which was previously a major concern for technology-based communications, has dwindled. As discussed earlier, 74 percent of adults in the United States use the Internet with minimal discrepancy based on race, income or community type (Rainie 2010, 2). Thus, technology-based communications used to cause an equity issue because of unequal access for certain groups. Now, technology-based communications reach a larger number of people without singling out a specific group of people. Both technology and social media have become commonplace for most Americans. As the government incorporates these tools into its communication process, it needs to be aware of and address any equity issues should they come up.

Conversely, there are limitations on what the GSA can communicate on social media sites. The enabling act for GSA, Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 was written before the times of social media (U.S. Senate 1949). Legally, GSA cannot use social media tools to officially create policy. It would not be legal, fair, or equitable for the agency to do so. However, the use of social media for unofficial feedback, opinions, and comments on current or potential policy is equitable and it is a great way to engage the public.

One of the great attributes of social media is that it allows two-way communications between the public and the government. In essence, it provides a forum for public values to be heard and discussed. Social networking sites are an innovative way for the American people to

voice their opinions directly to the government that serves them. In addition, it provides a unique opportunity for the government to address the public's concerns, and potentially make changes based on feedback. While they are an unofficial forum, meaning that laws or policies cannot be created through social media sites, the input and engagement from the public on these sites can prove to be instrumental in expressing the public interest and shaping policy around those concerns.

Effective communication from the government is critical not only because of President Obama's memorandum to heads of executive departments and agencies calling for transparency and open government, but also because when communication is effective it can build trust and relationships between the government and its people. In addition, effective communications by the government can avoid misunderstands and possibly lead to positive change. It can also build a bridge of understanding. There is a tendency for the public to distrust government and layers of bureaucracy can make it worse by causing delayed responses. Therefore, the government needs tools, such as social networking sites, to quickly and effectively communicate with the public.

As the region expands its social media program, it will need to be responsive to be considered effective. While the opportunity to have a two-way communication will be available, if the region does not respond to peoples' concerns in a timely manner then the effectiveness of that communication is lost. The region's level of responsiveness will be essential to determining how effectively it communicates with social media. Ultimately, if the region is not responsive and the public's concerns are not being addressed properly, then the region may lose credibility and trust from the public. In order for the region to effectively use social media, it must be actively involved and responsive on its social media sites.

Similarly, the use of social media promotes efficiency within government. It demonstrates that the government is resourceful in its use of technology and its communication processes. More importantly, social media can reach out to millions of people with the click of a button. This minimizes the common redundancy in multiple communication outreach attempts on one subject. Social media allows the government to reach a much larger audience with significantly less outreach effort. Furthermore, the government knows its followers on its social media accounts, and when a message is broadcasted, the government can determine who the message reached. In contrast, this information can also be used to determine who has not received the message. Then, the government can use a different medium to distribute the information to those who have not received it, which can make the communication more effective, equitable, and efficient. Essentially, social media allows the government to achieve a goal of disseminating information and communicating effectively while using minimum resources.

The government's functions of economy also play a role in this new means of communication. Since social media are communication tools, the government can use them as a means to spread its message to the public, answers questions, and address concerns about economic functions. This is particularly true for the government who is responsible for keeping citizens informed on policy, public goods, and services. In addition, the use of social media as communication tools is a prudent means of communication. The costs to create and maintain any social media site are minimal. This also illustrates a way the government does more communicating with less cost to the taxpayers.

The principles of public administration are an inherent part of the GSA's communication process. Therefore, it will take minimal effort for Region 4 of the GSA to incorporate these

pillars of public administration into its social media program. As the region's program continues to grow, it will be critical to ensure the principles of equity, efficiency, economy, effectiveness, and public values are incorporated into its communication efforts.

Conclusion

The use of social media and social networking sites is a great, innovative way for the government to encourage a two-way communication process with the public. Region 4 of the U.S. General Services Administration is just beginning to dabble into social media and experience the benefits that they have to offer. The region's social media efforts have been examined and analyzed to see if the program is effectively reaching and engaging its target audience. The results from this study illustrate that the region is on the right path to accomplishing that task; however, it is not quite there yet. After examining Region 4 of the GSA's current social media efforts, it has been determined that the region is not utilizing social media to effectively communicate, and engage the public and federal employees. The results and recommendations from this study can improve the social media program within the region. With an expanded presence on different social networking site and an increase in resources to support a larger, successful social media program, the region's efforts will become a more effective communication tool, which will better serve federal employees and the public.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Murdough's Social Media Metrics Framework

Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Deepen relationship with customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieve a critical mass of audience through social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of advocates (Fans, Followers, authors) # of comments posted
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage ongoing interaction with the brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comments/ advocate Advocate influence profile
Learn from the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uncover common themes among interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rank of topics discussed Decipher positive vs. negative sentiment
Drive purchase intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persuade engagement with Web site content and utility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leads to ecommerce partners Retail locator results activity Product brochure downloads

Source: Murdough 2009, 95.

Appendix B

Murdough's Pillars of Social Media



Source: Murdough 2009, 95.