

interact

Social Media for CPAs

Social media means different things to different people. And because it's a concept that can be difficult to wrap one's hands around, many people choose to sit on the sidelines rather than jump in and take advantage of the opportunities social media presents.

Two common definitions of social media are:

- The collection of online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives.
- Word-of-mouth marketing

Both of these are valid, and the interactive component is the common thread between them. Unlike old-school advertising and marketing, which is about broadcasting your message to as many people as possible, social media is a participatory medium about sharing and interacting with your customers and prospects.

And to interact means you must get in the game so others can find you and you can find others. Whether it's Google, Bing, Yahoo or some other search tool, people are using the internet to find everything from restaurants to dry cleaners to, yes, even CPAs. If you're not playing the social media game, you may be missing out on potential customers.

Think of social media participation as scattering popcorn in as many different places as possible. The more you scatter—participate—the more likely it is that you will be found.

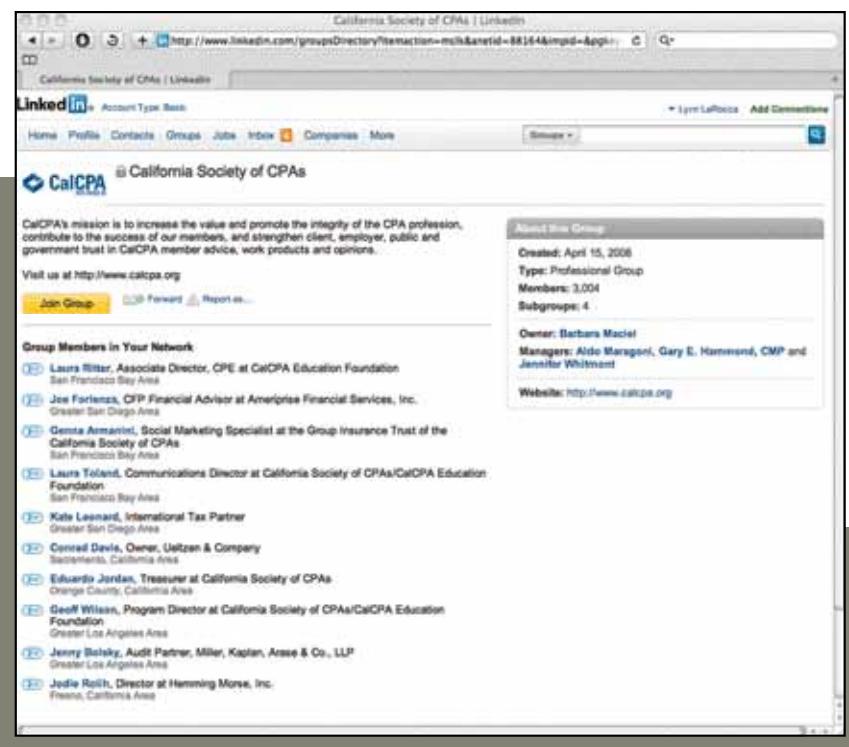
Why Should I Care About Social Media?

Not to use the "everyone is doing it," reasoning, but consider that three out of four Americans are using social media today, and more than two-thirds of the global internet population visits a social media site each day. Social media is democratizing communications across the board and 93 percent of social media users believe that a company should have a presence in social media (www.coneinc.com/content1182).

More than stats, though, social media puts control of your message in your hands and, for the most part, is free. In most cases, the only investment needed is in time—yours or that of your staff.

Why Should CPAs Use Social Media?

For CPAs seeking to grow or improve the quality of their practice, consider how you are attracting new customers today. It's probably through your customers sharing with others via word of mouth. A tried and true method, to be sure. But how would you like to ramp



up that word of mouth without spending money? The intelligent use of social media is the answer.

Other reasons to use social media include increasing exposure for your firm or your personal brand, being perceived as a knowledgeable expert and boosting the chances of getting found on the internet. Social media greatly enhances each of these while improving the chances that your brand and message will be found.

What Should I Do First?

With so many different social media tools and services available, it can be daunting to know where to start. Before jumping into a respective social media channel, be it Facebook, Twitter or some other, identify your goals and measurable objectives for getting involved. This will help focus your efforts.

For example, a CPA's goals could include:

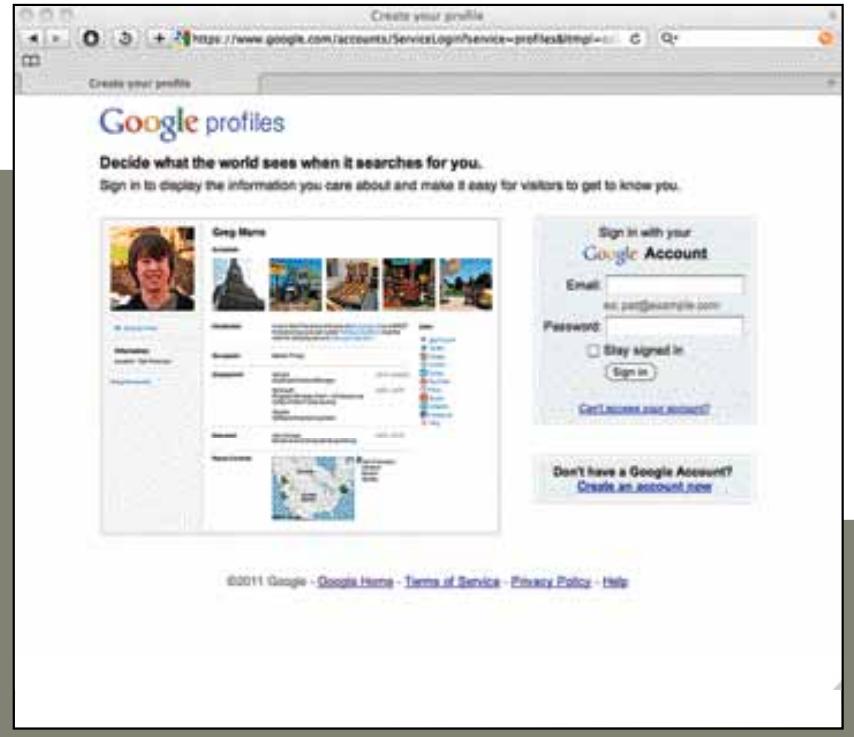
- Demonstrate thought leadership in the income tax and estate planning areas.
- Retain existing clients by sharing relevant and topical information.
- Reach out to potential high net worth clients by having an inviting and current site.

And measurable objectives:

- Increase traffic to our website and social media properties.
- Increase mentions of our firm on the Internet.
- Increase search rankings for our website.

How Do I Get Started with Social Media?

For some social media tools and services, most of the effort is expended at the beginning of the process. For other tools, the effort will be continuous and ongoing. Since there's a wide continuum of how involved you can get with social media and the effort involved, here are some quick hits and ongoing efforts to consider.



LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com): Think of this as your giant Rolodex. LinkedIn has more than 100 million users worldwide and is the most used professional networking site. LinkedIn profiles also get very high rankings on Google search. Treat LinkedIn as your permanent electronic résumé and make sure that your work, education and interest profiles are completed as fully as possible. In addition to having a complete profile, Tom Hamburger wrote a blog post (www.calcpa.org/MaxYourProfile) that identifies the top five steps to get your profile in order:

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The quick hits will make sure that you can be found while the ongoing efforts will build you as a brand and increase the number of ways that people can find you.

Quick Hits: Create and Update Your Profiles

Once you've identified your goals and objectives, it's time to get started on your social media journey. This step ensures that you can be found on the internet and that your professional presence is consistent across all major platforms. Creating and updating your profiles should take about eight to 10 hours for most users.

Before beginning this process, do a Google search on you and your firm. This will give you an idea of what others can find out about you and in some cases, what others are saying about you.

Of the many social media tools out there for professional services firms, let's focus on LinkedIn, Google, Google Places and Yelp, which are the most popular and will get you the most bang for your effort.

- **A professional picture:** I continue to be surprised by the number of people who don't have a picture in their LinkedIn profile, as this is the best way to show that you are a real person, and that you're serious about putting forth a professional appearance.
- **Update your status:** There's a status field on LinkedIn that most people never update. The good thing about updating your status is that it will appear in the "connection updates" for your connections, which makes it a great way to announce what's going on with you professionally.
- **Get recommended:** LinkedIn lets you ask your connections for personal recommendations, and having recommendations in your profile is like getting free advertising from your best customers.
- **Add your website links to your profile:** You can add up to three website links in your profile.
- **Personalize your LinkedIn URL:** This is easy to do. For example, Tom's LinkedIn URL is www.linkedin/in/tomhumbarger.



E-newsletter: Many people would probably not consider an e-newsletter to be a part of a social media toolkit as they are neither new nor sexy. However, a monthly or quarterly newsletter will go a long way to keep your brand in front of your customers on a regular basis. The newsletter does not—and should not—be long, and you don't have to create a lot of fresh content to be successful. Plus, there are several free or low-cost newsletter services to try, including Mailchimp (www.mailchimp.com) and Constant Contact (www.ConstantContact.com) that make it easy to create professional e-newsletters and maintain your subscription base. E-newsletters are also easy to share with others, which adds to their viral appeal.

Maximize LinkedIn: You will need to use some of LinkedIn's advanced features to take full advantage of your profile and frequently update your information. These advanced features include joining and participating in LinkedIn groups (including www.calcpa.org/linkedin), asking and answering questions, updating your status weekly, and, if applicable, linking your Twitter and blog accounts. It's also important to build your network of LinkedIn contacts by adding new acquaintances, prospects and customers to your connections, and then reaching out to them when you need to do some marketing.

Google Profiles: Once your LinkedIn profile is completed, set up a Google profile (www.google.com/profiles). You will need to set up a free Google Gmail account and much of what you created for LinkedIn can be repurposed for Google. For an example of a completed profile, you can check out Tom's profile at www.google.com/profiles/thumbarger#about.

Google Places: You can think of Google Places as the new Yellow Pages for your business. You can claim your business at www.google.com/local/add/businessCenter so it will appear in local search and on Google maps. A great side benefit from using Google Places is that they provide you with statistics tracking how many times someone is searching for you.

Yelp: Yelp is the most frequently used consumer review site and chances are that your business is already listed. You can create a free Yelp business account at <https://biz.yelp.com> and claim your business listing. Yelp listings also receive very high rankings on Google and give you another avenue to showcase your business.

Finally, the most important part of this first step is to make sure that you link each profile to the profiles on other sites and add the links to your website's "contact us" page, too.

Ongoing Efforts: Create and Share Content

After upgrading your professional social media profiles, focus on the social media tools that will enable you to create and share content. You don't need to jump into all of these at once. Take one or two at a time, as there is a time investment involved. And as you dive into deeper social media waters, you may find that certain efforts may have more impact than others, which will allow you to further focus your efforts.

Tweet, tweet: Twitter (www.twitter.com) has boomed in the past couple of years to boast 18 million users in 2010. It's a great way to share articles and information you find interesting and build up your professional reputation. Almost all tweets include a link back to an article or blog post. Twitter also can be used as a filter to track important information and its search feature allows you to locate relevant information. It may take you some time to get comfortable with Twitter and to build up a base of followers. There are several Twitter directories that will help you find interesting people in your field to follow, or you can start following people that you find from performing Twitter searches. Make sure that you select a Twitter username that reflects your personal name or brand instead of a cute name that doesn't sound professional.

Slideshare: This document sharing site (www.slideshare.net) can be used to post PDFs of articles, blog posts or presentations. One of its best features is that users can view the material without having to download. Also, the content can be embedded in your website or blog. Slideshare gets high search rankings from Google as it indexes every word in what you upload. A final benefit is that Slideshare tracks how many times your content has been viewed.

Blogging: This is probably the most time consuming activity listed here, but it can be the most fruitful and fulfilling. If you're going to start a professional blog, you first have to be comfortable with writing. And then you need to commit the time to post frequently—at least one or two posts per week. It's a good idea to incorporate the blog into your website to maximize the traffic to your brand, so you may have to redesign your website. In the short term, you could get started by using a free blogging service, such as Wordpress (<http://wordpress.org>) or

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Blogger (www.blogger.com), which will allow you to build up a library of posts.

Some experts may also suggest getting a Facebook Fan Page for your firm, but we would counsel that it makes sense to hold off on Facebook for the time being for most CPA professionals. While Facebook lets anyone set up a Fan or Business page, the effort required to create a viable presence is probably not worth it unless you are a large regional or national firm. The big risk is that you will set up a profile on Facebook and will not be able to maintain it in a professional manner, and that could cause damage to your social media capital.

How About Some Key Tips?

Utilize social media resources: There are many great social media resources, including Mashable (www.mashable.com) and ReadWriteWeb (www.readwriteweb.com). Paying frequent attention to these sites will provide you with valuable tips and information on the latest trends and techniques.

Start slowly: Social media is a journey and there's no need to try to do everything overnight. Social media is also a habit that needs to be learned—especially if you're not used to freely sharing content.

Use technology wisely: Remember that technology is your friend, and take advantage of the many free social media tools that can simplify your approach. One such tool is Hootsuite (www.hootsuite.com), which can be used to manage your Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and other social media channels. Hootsuite has a great browser plugin that makes posting to Twitter painless, and it also lets you schedule tweets. Another great tool is Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts/manage), which lets you set up alerts for any mentions of your company or for other topics that interest you.

Don't forget to measure: Since this article is addressed to CPAs, measurement should come as second nature to most of you. Consider creating a spreadsheet where you can track a number of statistics on a weekly basis, including information on your website, Twitter account your LinkedIn profile.

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