Building Thought Leadership Through Business-to-Business Social Media Engagement at Infosys

We present a framework for building thought leadership with key stakeholders through business-to-business social media engagement. We use this framework to describe how Infosys, an early adopter of social media, has strategically engaged with its customers to manage its brand, inform overall market directions and guide the company’s future strategy.¹

1 Bill Kettinger is the accepting senior editor for this article.
2 For example, see Gallaugher, J. and Ransbotham, S. “Social Media and Customer Dialog Management at Starbucks” and Gangi, P. M., Wasko, M. and Hooker, R. “Getting Customers’ Ideas to Work for You: Learning from Dell how to Succeed with Online User Innovation Communities,” MIS Quarterly Executive (9:4), December 2010.

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Thought Leadership Through Social Media Engagement

Organizations are increasingly using social media as an important competitive tool that enables them to actively participate with key stakeholders. Recent studies demonstrate how business-to-consumer (B-C) organizations can benefit by engaging with consumers through social media.² To date, however, there is little guidance on how business-to-business (B-B) organizations can engage with stakeholders through social media to derive strategic benefit.

The B-B social media space contains multiple important stakeholders for an organization, including current and potential customers, potential employees, shareholders, competitors, industry thought influencers and casual observers. Meaningful and focused social media conversations on ideas or issues of mutual interest to an organization and its stakeholders form the basis for strategic engagement. Organizations can engage with stakeholders via social media in a way that allows them to manage their brand and influence demand for their products and services, impact overall market directions and guide future strategy.³
Strategic engagement in social media affords B-B organizations an opportunity to build thought leadership on ideas and issues important to them and their stakeholders. Thought leaders educate, innovate and influence. In the words of Prince and Rogers: "A thought leader is an individual or firm that prospects, clients, referral sources, intermediaries and even competitors recognize as one of the foremost authorities in selected areas of specialization, resulting in it being the go-to individual or organization for said expertise. A thought leader is an individual or firm that significantly profits from being recognized as such."  

While the advantages of thought leadership are known, knowing how to build thought leadership through social media engagement is less clear. To successfully pursue thought leadership through social media, organizations must sense and seize the opportunities that reveal themselves, and engage with those that are strategically important for the mutual benefit of themselves and their stakeholders.  

Given the scope and dynamic nature of an organization's social media environment, pursuing thought leadership in this way is challenging. Organizations must determine:

- Which ideas are strategically important
- How to engage with those ideas to build thought leadership
- How to evaluate the effort.

This article examines how a B-B organization can address these issues so it can build thought leadership through effective social media engagement. We first provide a framework of five essential steps for building thought leadership through strategic engagement in social media. Then, we describe how Infosys, a global IT firm that designs and delivers business solutions for Global 2000 companies, uses social media to build and pursue thought leadership through strategic engagement with its customers. We also provide examples of how Infosys has addressed two customer engagement challenges: converting critics to champions, and selective escalation of customer conversations that have the potential for co-creating value. Based on the insights gained from the Infosys case, as well as the authors' other research and practitioner experience, we then offer recommendations that other B-B organizations can use to pursue thought leadership through broader social media engagement with their stakeholders in general. (Appendix 1 provides more information about Infosys, and Appendix 2 describes the research methodology used for this study.)

**Framework for Building Thought Leadership with Stakeholders Through B-B Social Media Engagement**

Social media enable conversations among peers on ideas and issues of shared interest. The semi-transparent nature of social media affords organizations unprecedented access to key business intelligence on the ideas and issues being discussed by their stakeholders, shifts in stakeholder opinions or perceptions and emerging ideas and trends. By tuning in to these social media conversations, organizations can marshal the business intelligence to identify strategically important ideas and issues and act on them to build thought leadership. In the sections that follow, we describe the five essential steps of sensing, seizing, developing, deploying and evaluating that are necessary to achieve thought leadership through social media engagement (the five-step framework is depicted in Figure 1).

**Step 1: Sensing Ideas**

Organizations can sense what is taking place in social media by scanning and monitoring conversations interesting to them. Scanning is often based on keywords, which might include the name of the firm, its brands or its competitors. Similarly, the organization might be interested in word associations, such as those between its brands and various positive or negative terms. Once potentially interesting conversations are identified, the organization must analyze what is being discussed, and by whom, to evaluate their potential strategic value. Often, the identity of the people discussing an idea is an important
component of determining its value. Are they current or potential customers? Are they thought influencers?

As the interests of an organization’s stakeholders necessarily overlap those of the organization, locating conversations that involve the ideas and issues important to the organization will identify the social media platforms where its stakeholders are interacting. In the B-B context, organizations might already have a strong inclination that its stakeholders frequent one or two specific social media sites. Organizations must routinely monitor conversations on sites where their stakeholders regularly interact so they can identify ideas and issues important to their stakeholders and learn about their opinions and perceptions. Sensing provides organizations with insights into what is taking place in the social media environment—which ideas are gaining traction, who’s saying what, what the buzz is.

**Step 2: Seizing Ideas**

An organization must determine which of the ideas sensed in social media can and should be acted on to build thought leadership. Does the idea mesh well with organizational capabilities? Is it aligned with strategic goals? Is the idea one that the organization must engage with to be a thought leader? Are strategically important people discussing the idea? Is the idea resonating with stakeholders? These are critical questions that an organization must answer to know which ideas to act on.

Determining which ideas to seize involves filtering technological, market and competitive information about the idea to understand the cost of engagement and its strategic implication. To build thought leadership, an organizations management must react to strategic opportunities identified through social media. But the transparency of social media allows peers to observe which ideas an organization engages with and which it ignores. Choosing to ignore certain ideas conveys as much about the organization’s values as does choosing to engage with an idea.

**Step 3: Developing Ideas**

Once the decision has been made to act on an idea, the organization must develop relevant expertise and social media content that demonstrates its credentials as a thought leader. This might involve committing internal or external resources and expertise to research and develop the idea, or making available existing proprietary content on the idea or issue. Having the flexibility to invest in research and development is characteristic of thought leaders, and part of a larger business strategy that values innovation.

**Step 4: Deploying Content**

Content must be deployed into social media. To build thought leadership on an important
idea or issue identified through social media, an organization must deploy content both into the social media channel where the idea originated and into other relevant social media channels. Deploying knowledge, insights and expertise to social media is a strategic act that must be informed by the organization's overall market strategy, including thought leadership.

Deployment might involve positioning new knowledge or expertise about an idea that is attractive to potential customers, collaborators, experts, etc. Alternatively, it might involve positioning knowledge, insights and expertise to seed invited blogs, or to execute other strategies that create opportunities to directly engage with stakeholders and build the organization's reputation as a thought leader.

**Step 5: Evaluating Thought Leadership Success**

Evaluation involves assessing the degree to which an organization's peers in social media turn to it for information and insight about a particular idea. To evaluate the success of thought leadership, an organization can, for example, measure:

- The number of requests for information it receives related to an idea
- The number of downloads of whitepapers or the number of views of relevant pages or PDF files
- The number of comments to a blog
- The number of visits to its website.

Evaluation also involves scanning the target social media to determine the strength of association between the organization's brand and an idea, as well as the context of that association. Through these and similar measures, the organization can evaluate the impact of its efforts to build thought leadership through social media.

**Pursuing Thought Leadership Through Strategic Social Media Engagement at Infosys**

Infosys Ltd. is a global leader in information technology and consulting services with annual revenues exceeding $7 billion. It provides business consulting, technology, engineering and outsourcing services to Global 2000 clients in over 30 countries. Since 2006, Infosys has actively pursued strategic engagement in social media to build thought leadership and is recognized as one of India's premier thought leaders. Our case study of social media engagement at Infosys is an example of an organization building thought leadership by engaging with its customers as stakeholders.

Infosys defines thought leadership as "The ability to understand customers' business and provide genuine insights on how technology can be used for competitive advantage in the customer's business in the immediate and long term." Strategic engagement with customers through social media is a key aspect of the company's thought leadership strategy.

According to Infosys' Global Head of Digital Marketing:

"The big umbrella message in social media is to establish awareness of Infosys as a thought leader. This is pursued to manage our relationships with customers—current and future. We use social media to generate and manage awareness of Infosys for the various market segments.

"When a customer buys from us, the key differentiator is 'opinion.' Every competitor has similar services and offerings. So technology is not the differentiator. The main issue is 'What is the experience of the customer?' That is what positioning as a thought leader is all about."

Infosys identifies and engages with ideas in social media that are most important to its customers, and develops expertise in these areas. As a thought leader, Infosys positions itself to participate in meaningful conversations about the ideas with interested customers. Management selectively escalates important conversations and dedicates internal expertise to engage with them. This helps Infosys manage the scope and scale of its social media engagement, narrowing the breadth of the potential engagement to the subset of conversations important to its relevant stakeholders.

Social media are highly dynamic, with the membership and ideas being discussed constantly

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in flux. To exploit social media’s potential, organizations must match this dynamism with their own dynamic capabilities. For Infosys, this involves following the five-step framework shown in Figure 1 of sensing and seizing opportunities in social media, developing and deploying expertise around ideas and evaluating the success of their efforts.

**Sensing: Identifying Strategic Opportunities**

Infosys “holds its ear to the ground” to sense opportunities in social media. For example, digital marketing at Infosys routinely scans the social media where “VPs hang out,” such as Forbes.com, so it can sense conversations and participants on social media platforms frequented by executives to identify ideas of strategic interest related to the company’s core competencies. Infosys’ sensing strategy targets specific social media platforms “where these people hang out—you go where they are.”

“We realize this is important. It can be in any context—for example, ‘building tomorrow’s enterprise.’ Who are the stakeholders? Who are the decision makers? Who are the C-level officers and their subordinates. We can get an ear into a group and learn what is important ... the micro-trends. There is no discussion about selling. They are talking about their pain points.” Global Head of Digital Marketing

“Infosys’ groups listen to the buzz on social media and evaluate the content from two perspectives: Does this have value for marketing and is there an opportunity to interact? We keep an ear on who is talking and what is being talked about.” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

Once Infosys has identified where important conversations are taking place, it monitors these conversations to understand their context and significance. The aim of sensing is to increase the company’s understanding of the ideas that shape its social media ecosystem.

Infosys uses a combination of external agencies as well as its own Social Media Command Center (SMCC) to regularly identify issues in social media that warrant action.

Practice leads and architects in the SMCC observed:

“Issues come in from social media [monitoring] firms on a daily basis and we make decisions on whether the issue requires a response. For ones that require a response, we find the right subject expert and the interaction is initiated.”

“Weekly reports focus on categories [concepts] that we are tracking the momentum of. Monthly reports focus on key parameters and concepts including positive and negative conversations. Every two to three months, we scan our presence and perceptions vis-à-vis key competitors.”

Table 1 summarizes the sensing activities that Infosys carries out.

**Seizing: Determining Opportunities for Action**

Selecting which social media content to engage with is critical to the success of meaningful and manageable thought leadership.

“Any organization, including Infosys, has to figure out which conversations to be engaged in and how much it should be engaged.” Global Head of Digital Marketing

Infosys actively senses and seizes opportunities for engagement that promote its efforts to be recognized as a thought leader.

“Groups of potential customers may engage in conversations with other customers when they are assessing us. The groups that subscribe to the notion of Infosys as a thought leader may be more engaged for the long term and organized around the common areas of interest. Both of these influence demand generation—through word of mouth or more directly.” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

At Infosys, the decision to act on a particular idea or issue is determined by criteria that elevate its importance. Do negative comments about the brand require a response? Is the issue directly aligned with a strategic objective at Infosys? Is the issue being raised by one or more of Infosys’ customers? Is the idea strategically important

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Table 1: The When, What, How and Why of Sensing Social Media at Infosys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real Time</td>
<td>Phrases or keyword associations that require rapid response.</td>
<td>Scan and identify issues that the organization must give an immediate response to.</td>
<td>To ensure that positive messages propagate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Broad scan of small list of keywords.</td>
<td>Assign threat levels to individual topics and react immediately.</td>
<td>To ensure that negative messages about the organization do not resonate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily/Weekly</td>
<td>Track social clusters and communities.</td>
<td>Identify topics and their prevalence in communities of interest.</td>
<td>To identify topics and clusters of interest in relevant social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scan known clusters and communities.</td>
<td>Identify the relative importance of the conversations and longevity of topics and ideas.</td>
<td>To develop plans for engagement.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify momentum shifts in conversations.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify important stakeholders for further engagement.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Brand audit.</td>
<td>Generate “heat map” for brand and topics of strategic interest.</td>
<td>To measure the effectiveness of positioning strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Assess success of competitors in social media.</td>
<td>Compare perceptions of Infosys brand vs. competitors in social clusters around topics of strategic interest.</td>
<td>To develop performance assessment of competitive positions to inform business strategy.</td>
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 Infosys extracts actionable intelligence by sensing dynamic conversations in social media that include specific keywords or relate to its stakeholders or to ideas of importance to the company. It seizes opportunities to engage that will promote its position as a thought leader. Actionable intelligence can also reveal the need for immediate responses to negative messages that have the potential to resonate and cause damage to the brand. Sometimes, Infosys propagates positive messages about the brand by cross-pollinating messages across multiple social media platforms, including Infosys and third-party blogs, and Twitter.

"We listen for the key words associated with Infosys, such as fairness. We need to know of these very fast and respond immediately to manage the momentum. The traditional way was to create the content in house and do one-way communication—now you cannot do that. You have to participate back in the social media where your voice is also heard." Global Head of Digital Marketing

Infosys also seizes opportunities for engagement with ideas that have strategic potential.

"When you are discussing things around what you can do or are doing for the customer—customers have issues, we have a solution. You discuss those things and they take the message forward."

"... if you have strong content on subject matter and you get subject matter experts aligned to that content participating, you will get customers to engage with you. People engage around an idea ... It [social media] is a huge market research vehicle with very fast timing and requires transparency." Head of Online Marketing: Products, Platforms and Communities

Developing Content: Marshaling Internal and External Resources for Engagement

At Infosys, the development step involves marshaling internal and external expertise to create content that can foster long-term and meaningful co-engagement with social media peers and further thought leadership.
“Content is developed by designated internal competence centers and R&D at Infosys to manage awareness of our competencies. Content is co-created with existing partners and customers as blogs and whitepapers to highlight success stories and relevant competence. These are shared with stakeholders using LinkedIn or other social media.” Practice Lead, Social Media and Technologies

Development requires that ideas be matched with staff with relevant expertise and capable of acting successfully on them.

“Today my blogger is not a spokesperson; he is a content expert—when a journalist wants to talk to the content expert, it cannot be handled by PR. That is a very big challenge. [Developers and content experts] have to learn new responsibilities—sometimes there are policies or guidelines... but right now it is a chaotic time. Global Head of Digital Marketing

Developing social media content relating to strategically important ideas and issues enhances Infosys’ position as a thought leader. It involves committing organizational resources to create new knowledge through active research. While thought leaders are not expected to offer solutions to unsolvable problems, they must actively engage in advancing the ideas and issues important to their stakeholders through social media.

Deploying Content and Expertise to Social Media

Infosys deploys the content it develops relating to strategically important ideas seized from social media back into social media to foster meaningful engagement with its stakeholders.

“In social media, you have to formulate and position the message differently for each group. So, if you are targeting C-level executives, you will focus on company strategy and fit. If you are targeting line-of-business executives or IT managers you will develop content that will be valuable for issues they deal with daily. You then position the content on social media avenues where these groups ‘hang out.’” Global Head of Digital Marketing

As well as content, deployment often involves making content experts available to particular social media sites.

“People need to see your face—they don’t want to talk to an intermediary; you have to be there. The client takes a first-hand feel of things. People do not take collateral on face value. There is an expectation that you are there—transparently and directly, not just on your site, but on topical sites also... if you say you are a thought leader, then you need to be on the topic’s social media.” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

Making its expertise, engagement and accomplishments visible to stakeholders in social media provides evidence of Infosys’ thought leadership.

“Engaged customers offer their experience to others as part of the positioning strategy for thought leadership—this helps our positioning and perception as a thought leader.” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

The challenge is to continually deploy fresh and relevant content to keep stakeholders engaged. Infosys strategically deploys content to social media such as LinkedIn, where it creates and moderates multiple communities dedicated to specific topics. Here, like-minded peers (including Infosys) co-engage to build new knowledge relating to key issues. This reinforces Infosys’ role as a thought leader.

“Blogs reinforce the thought leadership perceptions, particularly for the BPO [business processing outsourcing] community. Creating a following is not a challenge—the challenge is meaningful engagement to generate insight.” Practice Lead, Social Media and Technologies

Current and potential customers, along with internal and external content experts, engage with each other on social media platforms and generate new insights and solutions. As well as deploying the content it develops on the social media platforms, Infosys deploys it on its own blogs.

“You engage in discussion, give your perspective and share that perspective
along with research and recommendations to inform the conversation. Then you will see the value coming out of it. That is how Infosys as a thought leader can move forward.” Process Specialist

Stakeholders from public social media are also invited to participate on Infosys platforms.

“We want the outside to know what the community is doing. We effectively use LinkedIn groups to give a broad sense of what is happening in communities ... social media becomes the medium ... we get participation”.

“We don’t want the size [number of members] to increase—participation is not a problem, it can easily get too much. We look at how active the members are and try to give them value. It is important to invest time and effort ... that is a challenge and we are trying to achieve that.” Principal Architect

Evaluating Outcomes of Social Media Engagement

Infosys recognizes that measuring return-on-investment (ROI) for its thought leadership social media activities is difficult. Customer interaction occurs across multiple channels. Strategic engagement in social media is driven by senior management’s belief that anything less than full-throated participation is not an option. Stakeholders expect to find them here.

Infosys is more concerned with its social media Return-on-Engagement (ROE), which Hoffman and Fodor suggest is as an appropriate measure of the success of a social media strategy. They describe ROE as “The social media investment one’s customers make as they engage with the marketers’ brands.”

Infosys measures engagement in terms of the number of queries, mentions, references, mash-ups, downloads of whitepapers and requests for information it receives. It uses ROE to assess the effectiveness of its strategic social media engagement, believing it is a good indicator of long-term benefit. Infosys has seen engagement that originated in social media leading to engagement in other channels, and ultimately to sales. Management at Infosys believes that positive relationships with current and potential customers ease the resistance to sales. Evaluating the company’s standing as a thought leader requires Infosys to sense how engaged its stakeholders are with the content it has deployed in social media.

“We look at a wide range of things—visits from the target audience, visits from companies in our target market, repeat visits we get, are they downloading papers? Are they contributing content, opinions, issues? The kinds of queries coming in based on content distributed. Are they identifying themselves, and their willingness to talk to us or about us to others?”

“We position content to the sites and track views and responses. We mine visits and see how many people are listening to our message. If there are visits, we assume they are listening. For example, we look at RSS consumption—what feeds are consumed? Are they being mashed into other content? We look at visits from social media to our blogs and track repeat visits. This helps us figure out who is listening and what they are listening to.”

“We have had a lot of success with blogs. We use Twitter and Facebook and LinkedIn and Slideshare to supplement. We are experimenting with Google+. Other blogs mention [our] analysts’ opinions and best practices.” Global Head of Digital Marketing

Conversations may center on technical competencies within Infosys or on areas where Infosys is developing competencies to position itself as a thought leader. Measurement evaluates whether Infosys has provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate its position as a thought leader. Are participants looking to Infosys for answers? Social media transparency benefits the organization in evaluating the effectiveness of its thought leadership strategy.

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The overall perceptions of the organization result from the interactions in social media between participants, including the organization itself. This interaction is in sharp contrast to the control organizations are accustomed to exercising over their messaging in traditional media.

“We measure the perception shifts online. The changes in the conversations in clusters that we monitor or participate in and the time duration for the perception shift provide an indication of the perception shift momentum.

“Everything we measure is participation—the number of people that are looking at your content, the likes and ‘Thumbs Up or Down’... it is not difficult to assess the awareness. The overall ‘following’ of content is tracked to measure ‘awareness generated.’ Responses are read to understand the awareness and perceptions in terms of our perceptions as a thought leader.” Head of Online Marketing: Products, Platforms and Communities

At Infosys, the Digital Marketing function is charged with managing the overall social media presence of the brand. Additionally, this function serves the specific needs of various business units in the organization (verticals) through its SMCC. Inquiries received from social media are seized by the SMCC and appropriate expertise is garnered from Infosys' vertical functions to develop content and engage, as described in our five-step framework. Strategic initiatives can also originate from the verticals. In these cases, the SMCC facilitates, while the vertical takes partial responsibility for scanning. In each case, the SMCC depends on the internal customer (vertical) or the external customer to decide what is important. Governance of the social media engagement efforts are shared between the leaderships of Digital Marketing Strategy, the verticals and the Online Marketing for Products, Platforms and Communities.

Executing Social Media Engagement to Build Thought Leadership

Thought leadership strategy at Infosys strives to create a fully engaged customer who values Infosys as a thought leader. Infosys’ Global Head of Digital Marketing explains that “The overall marketing effort centers around four main objectives: managing awareness, managing perceptions, customer engagement and demand generation.”

We offer two specific examples to illustrate how Infosys executes social media engagement to build thought leadership. The first, converting critics to champions, describes how Infosys responds to negative comments in social media to foster positive social media perceptions of the brand. The second, selective escalation of meaningful conversations, describes how Infosys matches the intensity of its engagement with its potential value. In each of these examples, Infosys intends to foster relationship building and advance its position as a thought leader.

Converting Critics to Champions

“A potential client visited Infosys headquarters for a sales meeting about a product. After the meeting, she tweeted her negative impression of some functionality in the product. The tweet was picked up by the SMCC and passed on to appropriate personnel in the related vertical, and to digital marketing and customer relations. We take this very seriously—it represents a core aspect of our strategic business. We seized the opportunity to develop targeted content and contacted the potential customer to get feedback on potential improvements within hours—before she got on the plane. We worked with her on how to improve and deliver the functionality she needed. We were able to meet her needs and change her opinion. She talked about her experience on the social media.” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

Infosys’ social media engagement strategy attempts to manage perceptions of participants...
so they become champions of the brand, though this is not always possible. At a minimum, the company seeks to actively address issues raised by critics and increase positive perceptions of the brand.

“We monitor analyst interactions, media relations, message development, position development and solution development. It is a huge market research vehicle with lots of opportunity—but it requires very fast timing and requires us to commit to transparency. We need to be ready to act as soon as possible. These are the core parts of the overall strategy.” Principal Architect

Interviews with process specialists and practice leads at the SMCC revealed multiple strategies for sensing social media activity relating to relevant topics. Infosys develops a “heat map” of strategically important topics. The SMCC monitors the ideas, the stakeholders discussing the ideas and the platforms where the topics are gaining traction. On sensing activity around a topic by key stakeholders, the company works to actively seize opportunities in social media platforms. Relevant content is developed and deployed on appropriate platforms, including Infosys-owned and third-party platforms. The effectiveness of these efforts is systematically evaluated.

In social media, the organization is one among many peers—an equal. Through proactive engagement, Infosys can exercise some control over managing perceptions of its brand among strategically important stakeholders on strategically important ideas. Regardless of where stakeholder perceptions lie on the continuum from critics to champions, Infosys’ social media engagement strategy seeks to advance them along the continuum toward championing the brand (see Figure 2).

“[A participant either] likes something you broadcast [or doesn’t] like it—the middle space is usually vacant. No one owns the social media. Clients may complain about products and services. We have to be on top of that. It’s not about ‘doing social media.’ Organizations are typically not geared up for the participation that social media demands—especially a large enterprise. An organization is used to command and control, but social media breaks this. The people create the voice not the brand.”

Global Head of Digital Marketing

Ardent critics or champions are motivated to be vocal and highly engaged. They influence momentum about the perception of the organization through their conversations in social media. By contrast, people who are dispassionate or unaware of the organization display low levels of engagement and hold neutral perceptions of Infosys, if any. The most engaged champions hold high perceptions of Infosys as a thought leader.

Active sensing informs Infosys of social media activity that can have direct and rapid impacts on how the organization is perceived.

“We break up the topics of the conversations around different dimensions and see how we should respond based on what the conversation is about, who is talking and what they are saying.”

“Longer-term issues are evaluated on their business value. We look at who in Infosys can use this and what can they do with this information.”

“We could have done this earlier, but social media makes this real-time. I can do brand audits monthly and actually see the brand imaging and its impact and how it is playing out in the media every day.” Practice Lead, Social Media and Technologies

Figure 2: Managing Perceptions Through Social Media Engagement: From Critics to Champions
A continuing challenge is to ensure that the organization reacts very quickly to any negative conversations associated with the brand to stop misperceptions from gathering momentum. Predefined key terms are continually examined by the SMCC. These terms are assigned threat levels and are immediately flagged for action when encountered. Infosys reacts very quickly to terms such as “unfair” or to other negative connotations associated with the organization. Infosys identifies the participants and addresses their concerns, working to convert critics to champions.

Selectively Escalating Meaningful Conversations for More Intense Engagement

Social media provide B-B organizations with the opportunity to participate in meaningful conversations with important stakeholders for mutual benefit. The challenge is to position the brand as a legitimate participant in meaningful conversations and exchange value through content and expertise. This involves committing organizational knowledge and expertise to strategic social media engagement. Selectivity in the choice of the conversations to escalate to higher levels of engagement is critical to efficient stewardship of organizational resources committed to the effort.

“‘The challenge is meaningful engagement to generate insight.’” Practice Lead, Social Media and Technologies

“You have to engage in social media directly—where people are. The challenge is how, and how much, to engage and participate: should it be structured or unstructured; how much structure; who in the organization should engage and how?” Head of Digital Marketing Strategy

The overall strategy of social media engagement at Infosys is to purposefully and selectively escalate the intensity of engagement with selected stakeholders. Such strategic engagement positively impacts the “munificence”10 of Infosys' social media environment, making it more conducive to the pursuit of thought leadership. Through strategic engagement, Infosys garners new insights from its peers and collaborates to solve problems. This, in turn, increases perceptions of the brand and its offerings.

“In the long term, it is the relationship that matters. The thought leadership position helps develop and nurture relationships. For members, the most beneficial [take away] is validated information because a dedicated community of your peers who ‘know’ endorse the information [or not]—they give you information with context and perspective that is useful. In our [social media] communities, valued information is filtered, endorsed and validated across the borders. When the perspective is shared, it has substance.” Head of Online Marketing: Products, Platforms and Communities

Strategically valuable conversations may be escalated to private communities. Infosys and its peers in the private community exercise a greater degree of control over the focus of the conversations.

“Information is huge and time is less; we have to focus on one or two things. Focus on where the value is through very focused and niche communities where we can create value.”

“It is about tapping interested people’s knowledge, knowing the pulse of the clients and subscribers. There is a wealth of information. If you can do that in a community, the potential is phenomenal. For example, what is the spend level in individual channels? ... I can get that kind of information in the community.” Principal Architect

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10 According to Wade and Hulland, environmental munificence refers to the extent to which a business environment can support sustained growth. Environments that are mature or shrinking are normally characterized by low levels of munificence, whereas rapidly growing markets are typically associated with a high degree of munificence. See Wade, M. and Hulland, J. “The Resource-Based View and Information Systems Research: Review, Extension, and Suggestions for Future Research,” MIS Quarterly (28:1), 2004, pp. 107-142.
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For example, Infosys founded a Banking Innovation group using LinkedIn to focus on the specific needs of the retail banking community.

“We opened this for CXO levels and let this become the breeding ground for conversations on how to build the banking industry of tomorrow. The group is not Infosys-branded and [Infosys is] not overtly promoted. There are over 600 members in the [banking] group, and there are over 400 members in the Infosys BPO community on LinkedIn.” Principal Architect

Participants in these communities engage in focused or general discussions. Infosys senses and seizes key topics from community discussions and develops insights from them that are useful to the whole community.

“We do surveys of the Infosys BPO community; the results are published only to the community. It is important to know what your peers are thinking.” Principal Architect

Community members, along with experts from Infosys, develop content that is then deployed back to the community. Strategic deployment of content allows Infosys to match the intensity of its resource commitment to the potential value of each engagement. Infosys can then engage with potential customers and with peers using private social media platforms to collaboratively improve their products and services through insights generated and knowledge gained.

“Sometimes, we ask members from the community to co-develop with an Infosys person and Infosys branding and then publish this to the community—members and peers participate.” Practice Lead, Social Media and Technologies

Additional relationships may develop between Infosys and its organizational partners at multiple levels. Mature relationships with potential customers and engaged social media participants across Infosys' product and service offerings provide tangible and tacit benefits of co-creation. The relationship development which arises from co-creation benefits both Infosys and its strategically important stakeholders. The behavior of the participant influences the level of engagement.

“Behavior is the differentiator—if there is co-creation and engagement with the customers, then it makes sense to move to a co-creation mode of engagement.” Global Head of Digital Marketing

This stage-wise selection strategy enables conversations to be filtered based on their potential and keeps engagement manageable. A process specialist from Infosys says:

“The challenge is to continually push fresh and relevant content for engagement. Careful selection is made to identify content and related internal and external experts. This is a very focused effort ... we have over 35 internal blogs and over 500 bloggers from all over the company to populate content.” Principal Architect

Table 2 summarizes the levels of engagement in social media and the potential benefits to an organization.

Summary of Infosys’ Strategy for Building Thought Leadership Through Social Media Engagement

In summary, Infosys' strategy for thought leadership through strategic social media engagement aims to influence its demand pipeline. Through strategic engagement, Infosys raises awareness of its brand, generates insights, and identifies opportunities to co-create innovative content and solutions. The strategy involves sensing ideas and issues in social media, and seizing those with strategic value. The company develops content and expertise relating to these and deploys it back to social media to engage key stakeholders in conversations with the brand. It escalates conversations when the potential exists to convert critics to champions, or to partner in meaningful co-creation and innovation. This fosters relationship building and advances Infosys’ position as a thought leader. The effectiveness of the social media engagement strategy is evaluated in the short term by measuring Return-on-Engagement. In
the long-term, it is measured by the nature and strength of the organization’s relationships with key stakeholders.

**Recommendations for Building Thought Leadership Through B-B Social Media Engagement**

The following insights are offered to B-B organizations that seek to build thought leadership through strategic engagement in social media.

1. **Make Thought Leadership an Umbrella Goal for the Entire Organization**

   To create a culture of thought leadership through social media engagement throughout the organization:
   - Make social media engagement a dynamic capability of the whole organization. Integrate social media expectations, capabilities and strategies into your people and their daily routines.
   - Establish governance to allow proper flow of information from social media to the right functional areas.
   - Facilitate functional areas to develop strategies to build thought leadership around their competencies.
   - Cultivate R&D capabilities that enable important stakeholders to engage with important ideas of strategic interest. This may involve learning or hiring new technical competencies.

2. **Understand Your Organization’s Social Media Ecosystem**

   To determine the social media that strategically important stakeholders use to discuss ideas or issues worth engaging with:
   - Learn which social media venues your stakeholders frequent—i.e., where they hang out. Knowing where to scan will

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**Table 2: Types of Engagement in Social Media and Their Benefit to the Organization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Engagement</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Benefit to Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Awareness</strong></td>
<td>Transformative extensions of traditional strategies to social media engagement. Participants engaged through technology with other social media actors.</td>
<td>Facebook “likes,” Slideshare downloads, downloads of whitepapers from blogs, Twitter followers, traffic to web presence, repeat visits. The organization must react quickly to dampen negative resonance or promote positive perceptions of thought leadership.</td>
<td>Maintain positive engagement in social media. Reputation building along with brand awareness of thought leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insight Generation</strong></td>
<td>Two-way conversations with engaged participants.</td>
<td>Engaged customers generate insights (comments, questions and suggestions) about innovations for products and services. Comments on blogs, Slideshare, direct contact, public forums.</td>
<td>Treat engaged social media communities across common ideas as focus groups to gather business intelligence and insight. Reinforce thought leadership position of organization in social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value Co-Creation</strong></td>
<td>Managed and focused engagement between identified content experts internal and external to the organization and current or potential customers.</td>
<td>Private groups formed based on previous collaboration or strategic importance co-create content on specific topics. Selected stakeholders and internal experts collaborate to solve problems and generate insight for specific issues of common interest.</td>
<td>Enhanced business intelligence and support for thought leadership. Create and enhance thought leadership position through positive network effects and improve organizational capabilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reduce cost and increase the relevance of information gathered.

- Issues that require a timely response arise frequently in social media, so sensing must be frequent and routine.
- For issues related to your core competencies, consider establishing topical communities in social media.
- When feasible, bring sensing in-house. Routine sensing will ensure your engagement remains aligned with strategic interests.

3. Select Ideas and Opportunities with Strategic Short- and Long-term Potential

- Involve appropriate management to identify which ideas discussed in social media can and should be acted on.
- Engage individuals within your organization who are capable of judging the market potential of an idea relating to your products and services, as well as individuals with sufficient authority to allocate the resources necessary to respond to the ideas.
- Focus your strategic engagement efforts on the ideas that have the greatest potential. You cannot be a thought leader in everything.
- Systematically sense and seize the right opportunities by involving informed management. This is an institutional capability required by organizations that want to use social media to present themselves as thought leaders.

4. Purposefully and Selectively Engage with Stakeholders for Mutual Benefits

- Ensure the intensity of your engagement matches its potential value.
- Choose the right talent from your organization for social media engagement. Much of Infosys’ engagement is carried out by internal content experts, whose blogs represent the public face of the organization in social media. Individuals filling this role sometimes need training to learn the new responsibilities of interacting directly with stakeholders.
- Strategically partner with selected stakeholders to co-create valuable content or solutions.

5. Evaluate Your Social Media Thought Leadership Efforts

- To evaluate success of thought leadership on an idea, assess ROE by counting, before and after deploying your social media engagement strategy, the number of requests for information received by your organization, the number of downloads of whitepapers, the number of views of a particular page or PDF file, the number of comments to a blog, etc.
- Assess the intensity, in terms of nature and frequency, of association between your organization and the focal idea. This assessment can reveal new social media channels where your thought leadership could gain traction.

Concluding Comments

Organizations that want to proactively engage with social media to build thought leadership can use the five-step framework and examples provided in this study to inform their strategies. With this framework, organizations can actively engage with relevant stakeholders on ideas critical to their businesses to manage their brands, inform overall market directions and guide future strategy. Organizations can sense and seize ideas that can and should be acted on to build thought leadership. They can demonstrate thought leadership by developing and deploying innovative content relating to important ideas and assessing Return-on-Engagement to measure success. Through these steps, they can build thought leadership with their most important audience—their stakeholders.
Appendix 1: About Infosys

Infosys Limited was founded in 1981. The company defines, designs, and delivers technology-enabled business solutions for Global 2000 companies and also provides a complete range of services by leveraging domain and business expertise and strategic alliances with leading technology providers. Infosys actively engages with its stakeholders via various social media platforms, including corporate blogs, third-party hosted blogs, Twitter, Slideshare, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Appendix 2: Research Methodology

For this case study research, we conducted an interpretative analysis of successful techniques and lessons learned at Infosys. We interviewed key staff and analyzed documentation from a variety of sources within the organization over a period of two years. Specifically, we held multiple interviews with the Global Head of Digital Marketing, the Head of Online Marketing in charge of Products, Platforms and Communities, and the Head of Digital Marketing Strategy. We interviewed the Practice Lead for Social Media and Technologies, and process specialists at Infosys’ BPO organization who work with the Social Media Command Center. We also interviewed senior architects who work with the Social Media Command Center and with the multiple internal efforts in social media that have externally facing interfaces with clients.

One author has been a research scientist at Infosys for over 10 years and all authors have considerable research and practitioner experience in the field of social media engagement. Study findings were validated with the interviewees through follow-up sessions that focused on obtaining feedback on results and validating the conclusions from multiple points of view.
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