



Role of Social Media in Public Accounting Firms

Brenda Eschenbrenner¹(✉), Fiona Fui-Hoon Nah², and Zhiwei Lu²

¹ University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE, USA
eschenbrenbl@unk.edu

² Missouri University of Science and Technology, Rolla, MO, USA
{nahf, z1kh2}@mst.edu

Abstract. Social media has been widely used for both professional and personal communications. Businesses recognize the importance of social media and are using them to fulfill various business objectives. In this paper, we focus on analyzing the business objectives of public accounting firms that have both a firm-wide main page and a career page on Facebook. More specifically, we compare the business objectives they are achieving with their firm-wide main pages versus career pages. We not only find differences in the objectives that are being achieved, but also identify other objectives that are not actively being pursued on either page but may be considered in the future.

Keywords: Social media · Public accounting firms · Business objectives

1 Introduction

Social media refers to a wide range of Internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content [1]. Social media provides a platform for content consumption and interaction [2]. The rise of social media has paved a new way for the expansion of social networking and communication, from which both individual and institutional users can benefit. Businesses are utilizing social media to revolutionize various aspects of their business, such as marketing, advertising, and promotions [3].

As professional service providers, public accounting firms strive to maintain long-lasting, beneficial relationships with clients and employees. The level of competency of their employees is important to their firms' success because it contributes to the quality of service and reputation of the firm. Public accounting firms have increased their social media presence in order to accomplish some of their objectives. To better realize their business objectives, it is common for a firm to manage different types of social media accounts on more than one social media platform, and some firms operate multiple accounts on one platform to reach different audiences.

In this paper, we examine the Big 4 public accounting firms' social media content to explore the business objectives associated with their use of social media. We chose Facebook for our analysis because Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms used by Fortune 500 firms [4]. We compare the differences in social media usage between the main and career pages (or accounts) of three of the Big 4 firms that

have both types of pages (or accounts) on Facebook. The results indicate that even though *Knowledge Sharing*, *Socialization and Onboarding*, and *Branding and Marketing* business objectives were the top three objectives fulfilled by the Facebook social medium, their usage differs between the firm-wide main pages and the career pages. For instance, more *Knowledge Sharing* messages were present on the firm-wide main pages than the career pages, but there were more *Socialization and Onboarding* and *Branding and Marketing* messages on the career pages than the firm-wide main pages.

2 Background and Review of Literature

Social media has brought substantial and pervasive changes to communication through functional elements such as identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups [5]. Organizations are experimenting in social media to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. Social media can be used to improve ways of serving customers, monitoring the market, attracting job candidates, and connecting partners in their value chain [6]. The utilization of social media can affect customer loyalty and brand identification.

Social media can also be used to support recruitment, build employee engagement, and facilitate communication. Employees also use social media as a knowledge-sharing platform [7]. Ployhart summarizes seven business objectives that organizations can achieve with social media. These seven business objectives are: *Recruitment and Selection*, *Socialization and Onboarding*, *Training and Development*, *Knowledge Sharing*, *Branding and Marketing*, *Creativity and Problem Solving*, and *Influencing Organizational Culture/Change* [7].

The *Recruitment and Selection* objective is intended to increase the speed of recruitment, the effectiveness in recruiting candidates, and the conversion rates [8]. The *Socialization and Onboarding* objective relates to enhancing employees' assimilation into the organization, as well as employee commitment and engagement [8]. The *Training and Development* objective relates to providing a platform where training can be carried out more efficiently and effectively [7]. The *Knowledge Sharing* objective refers to both reducing the cost of and accelerating the circulation of information and knowledge [7]. The *Branding and Marketing* objective enhances customer loyalty and promotes the brand to potential customers [7]. The *Creativity and Problem Solving* objective increases accuracy and velocity of resolving problems [7]. The *Influencing Organizational Culture/Change* objective refers to the strengthening of or modification to organizational culture [7].

Previous research has shown that *Knowledge Sharing*, *Branding and Marketing*, and *Socialization and Onboarding* business objectives were the top three objectives fulfilled by firm-wide main pages of Big 4 public accounting firms on Facebook [9, 10]. Other firms have also utilized social media to achieve business objectives. For example, SAP has been a prominent user of social media to communicate with customers and General Electric Co. has been utilizing social media to enhance and support its training programs [11]. Social media has been found to increase the performance of organizations in terms of enhancing customer relations and customer service activities, improving information accessibility, and reducing costs in marketing and customer

service [12, 13]. An empirical relationship between social media usage and customer relationship performance has previously been demonstrated [14]. Also, the literature has found a relationship between social media usage and employees' performance that relates to creativity and problem solving [15, 16].

The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and its Private Companies Practice Section team surveyed accounting firms to assess their top issues and challenges [17]. The top three issues for firms with 11 or more professionals included: (1) identifying qualified employees, (2) retaining qualified professionals, and (3) attracting new clients [10]. These issues are similar to some of the business objectives identified by Ployhart [7]. Identifying qualified employees is consistent with the *Recruitment and Selection* objective, retaining qualified professionals by increasing staff engagement is in line with the *Socialization and Onboarding* objective, and attracting new clients and maintain existing client relationships is related to the *Branding and Marketing* objective.

3 Hypothesis

Businesses may maintain multiple accounts on one social media platform to target different audiences and achieve different business objectives. For instance, three of the Big 4 public accounting firms have a firm-wide main page and a career page on Facebook. We are interested in examining differences in these firms' utilization of different social media account categories, and hypothesize that the business objectives are different between the main and career pages. Hence, our hypothesis can be stated as follows:

H: Business objectives differ between the main and career pages.

4 Methodology

In order to compare the business objectives of main and career pages, we conducted a case study using the content analysis approach. Since only three of the Big 4 firms, i.e., Ernst & Young, KPMG, PwC, have both main and career pages, we only compared the main and career pages across these three firms. In other words, Deloitte was not included in the analysis because it does not have a Facebook career page in the US. We collected all the Facebook messages posted on both the main and career pages of these three accounting firms in the year 2012, and coded each message into one of the seven categories of business objectives identified by Ployhart [7] based on the definitions provided in Table 1 [7, 10]. Two independent coders carried out a subset of the coding and attained a Kappa coefficient of 0.95, indicating a high level of agreement between them. Hence, the rest of the coding was completed by one of the two coders.

After coding all the messages, we used the Chi-square test to compare usage frequencies of the business objectives between the main and career pages.

Table 1. Business objectives of social media usage [7]

Business objective	Description
Recruitment and selection	Improve selection and recruiting of high-quality candidates
Socialization and onboarding	Increase allegiance to and identification with the organization
Training and development	Improve cost efficiencies and training effectiveness
Knowledge sharing	Accelerate dissemination of information and knowledge at low cost
Branding and marketing	Reach new customers, enhance customer loyalty, and increase brand value and marketing effort
Creativity and problem solving	Increase efficiency and accuracy in solving problems as well as innovativeness
Influencing organizational culture/change	Reinforce or change organizational culture

5 Findings

In this section, we will provide the social media usage frequencies of the firm-wide main pages in Sect. 5.1, and the social media usage frequencies of the career pages in Sect. 5.2. Section 5.3 will compare the social media usage frequencies between the main and career pages, and provide the result of the statistical analysis.

5.1 Social Media Usage of Firm-Wide Main Pages

All three firms, EY, PwC, and KPMG, maintain a firm-wide main page on Facebook. Table 2 shows the frequencies and normalized frequencies (or percentages) of Facebook usage by business objective. The *Knowledge Sharing* business objective took up the largest proportion (69%) of the messages, followed by *Branding and Marketing* (19.6%), and *Socialization and Onboarding* (10.1%). Figure 1 shows the distribution of messages across the different business objectives on a radar chart. Messages were focused on *Knowledge Sharing*, *Branding and Marketing*, *Socialization and Onboarding*, *Training and Development*, and *Recruitment and Selection* business objectives, and none of the messages were related to *Creativity and Problem Solving* or *Influencing Organization Culture/Change*. We believe the main reason that *Creativity and Problem Solving* and *Influencing Organization Culture/Change* business objectives were not present in the firm-wide main page of Facebook is that, unlike enterprise social media, the Facebook main pages are outward facing instead of inward facing. The *Creativity and Problem Solving* and *Influencing Organization Culture/Change* business objectives are more appropriate for enterprise (inward facing) social media.

5.2 Social Media Usage of Career Pages

All Big 4 firms, except Deloitte, have a US career page on Facebook. Table 3 summarizes the usage frequencies and normalized frequencies (or percentages) of career page messages by business objective. The *Socialization and Onboarding* business

Table 2. Facebook main page usage frequencies and normalized frequencies/percentages

Firm/objective	R&S	S&O	T&D	KS	B&M	C&PS	IOC/C
EY	0 (0.0%)	6 (5.3%)	3 (2.7%)	93 (82.3%)	11 (9.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
PwC	0 (0.0%)	10 (8.5%)	0 (0.0%)	89 (75.4%)	19 (16.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
KPMG	1 (1.3%)	15 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	29 (38.7%)	30 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	1 (0.3%)	31 (10.1%)	3 (1.0%)	211 (69.0%)	60 (19.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

* R&S = Recruitment and Selection; S&O = Socialization and Onboarding; T&D = Training and Development; KS = Knowledge Sharing; B&M = Branding and Marketing; C & PS = Creativity and Problem Solving; IOC/C = Influencing Organizational Culture/Change

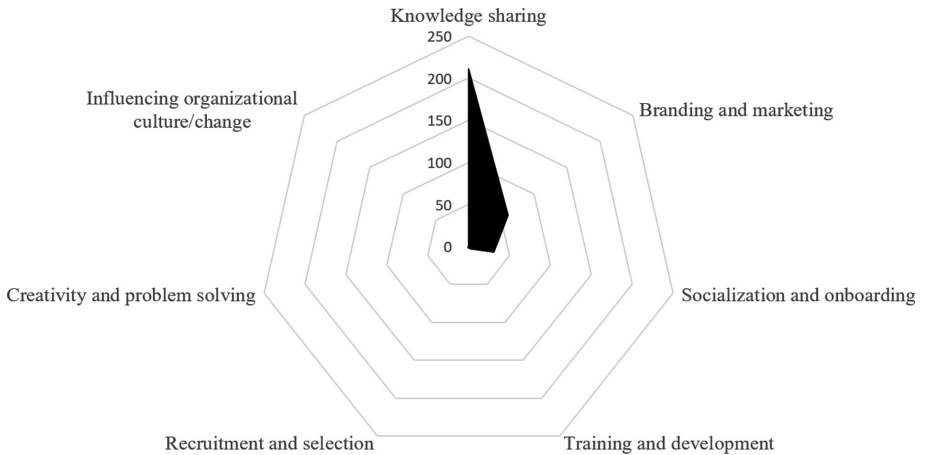


Fig. 1. Firm-wide main page messages coded by business objectives

objective took up the largest proportion (45.6%) of the messages, followed by *Knowledge Sharing* (28%), *Branding and Marketing* (23.3%), and *Recruitment and Selection* (3.1%). Figure 2 shows the distribution of business objectives on a radar chart. None of the messages were coded into *Training and Development*, *Creativity and Problem Solving*, and *Influencing Organizational Culture/Change* business objectives.

5.3 Social Media Usage: Main Page Versus Career Page

We performed the Chi-square test to assess if there is any difference between the main page usage and the career page usage on Facebook. An assumption of the Chi-square test is that expected frequencies should be at least 5, so we removed four business objectives from the analysis: *Recruitment and Selection*, *Training and Development*, *Creativity and Problem Solving*, and *Influencing Organizational Culture/Change*.

Table 3. Facebook career page usage frequencies and normalized frequencies/percentages

Firm/objective	R&S	S&O	T&D	KS	B&M	C&PS	IOC/C
EY	6 (5.0%)	22 (18.3%)	0 (0.0%)	49 (40.8%)	43 (35.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
PwC	8 (3.5%)	95 (42.0%)	0 (0.0%)	77 (34.1%)	46 (20.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
KPMG	1 (0.7%)	106 (74.1%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (7.7%)	25 (17.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	15 (3.1%)	223 (45.6%)	0 (0.0%)	137 (28.0%)	114 (23.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

* R&S = Recruitment and Selection; S&O = Socialization and Onboarding; T&D = Training and Development; KS = Knowledge Sharing; B&M = Branding and Marketing; C & PS = Creativity and Problem Solving; IOC/C = Influencing Organizational Culture/Change

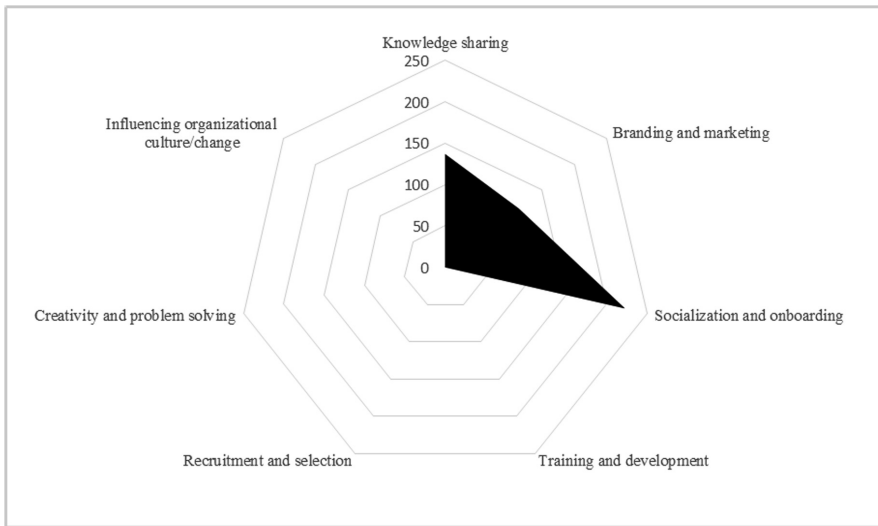


Fig. 2. Career page messages coded by business objectives

Table 4 shows the total frequencies of social media usage by main and career pages across *Socialization and Onboarding*, *Knowledge Sharing*, and *Branding and Marketing* business objectives.

The value of the Chi-square test statistic is 146.7 with a corresponding p-value of less than 0.001. Since the p-value is less than the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, the test result indicates a significant association between business objectives and social media page type, which suggests that firm-wide main and career pages serve different business objectives of public accounting firms, thus supporting the hypothesis for this research.

As shown in Fig. 3, public accounting firms used their career page for *Socialization and Onboarding* and *Branding and Marketing* objectives more frequently than on their firm-wide main page. On the contrary, more *Knowledge Sharing* messages were posted on the firm-wide main page than the career page.

Based on our analysis, Big 4 public accounting firms utilize Facebook to achieve the *Branding and Marketing*, *Knowledge Sharing*, and *Socialization and Onboarding* business objectives. The other four business objectives, *Creativity and Problem*

Table 4. Total frequencies of social media usage: main page vs career page

Page type	S&O	KS	B&M
Main page	31	211	60
Career page	223	137	114

* S&O = Socialization and Onboarding; KS = Knowledge Sharing; B&M = Branding and Marketing

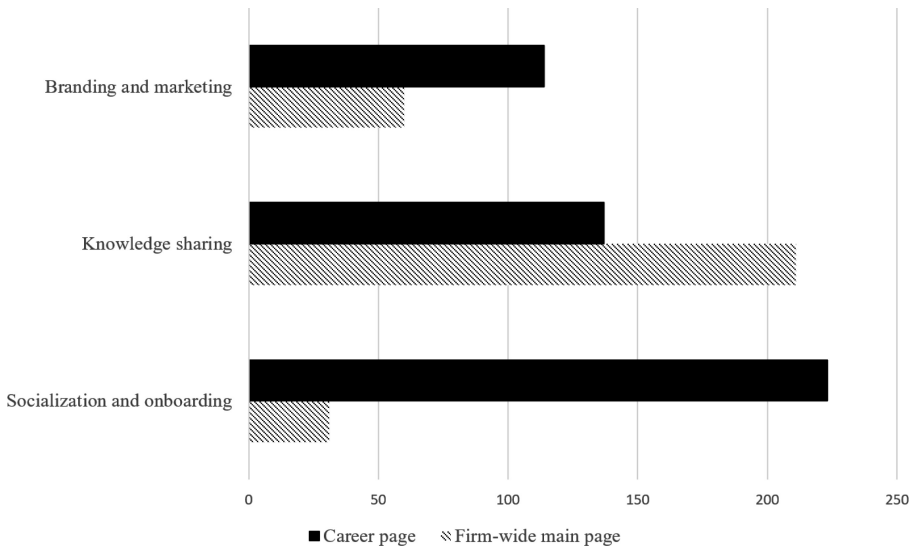


Fig. 3. Social media usage of firm-wide main page versus career page

Solving, Influencing Organizational Culture/Change, Recruitment and Selection, and Training and Development, were rarely addressed or not fulfilled. The business objective of *Recruitment and Selection* was pursued minimally, which may be due to Big 4 firms’ use of other social media, such as LinkedIn, to achieve the business objective of recruitment. With regard to recruiting, employment-oriented social media like LinkedIn have a more professional appearance and targeted purpose than multi-purpose social media such as Facebook. However, Facebook career pages have more messages on *Recruitment and Selection* as compared to Facebook main pages. This difference could be explained by the nature of career pages. Career pages provide a platform for sharing career information and attracting potential candidates.

The business objective *Knowledge Sharing* was achieved on both firm-wide main pages and career pages. However, *Knowledge Sharing* was realized to a greater extent on firm-wide main pages than career pages. Public accounting firms posted information and knowledge created or acquired (e.g., industry information). In comparison to the

other objectives, a majority of the messages posted by public accounting firms on their main pages are related to *Knowledge Sharing*.

Career pages were utilized more extensively for *Socialization and Onboarding* and *Branding and Marketing*. *Socialization and Onboarding* is intended to improve employees' sense of belonging, loyalty, and commitment to the organization. *Branding and Marketing* is utilized to promote the brand to job applicants and outside parties.

6 Discussion

Public accounting firms are dependent on the capabilities of their employees. Hence, recruiting, hiring, developing, and retaining the highest quality employees are of paramount importance. Our research shows that public accounting firms pursue *Socialization and Onboarding*, *Knowledge Sharing*, and *Branding and Marketing* objectives with their Facebook career pages. However, they use their firm-wide main pages to achieve *Knowledge Sharing* to a greater extent.

Messages regarding *Socialization and Onboarding* contribute to retaining existing employees and onboarding newly hired employees. Public accounting firms use social media to build relationships with employees and enhance their commitment to the firm. Platforms can also be used to disseminate information and share knowledge to demonstrate the firm's commitment to keeping employees current on industry or firm-specific topics. Social media also provides a platform to build the firm's reputation and promote the firm's image.

Interestingly, only a few messages were posted for *Recruitment and Selection* on career pages. Considering the pivotal role that hiring quality employees has in public accounting, these firms have an opportunity to more fully utilize the recruitment potential of social media. For example, firms can connect with potential candidates by elaborating on the leadership program, internship, and full-time career opportunities they offer through social media. Recruiting is a very competitive process among the Big 4 firms, so they can also use social media to connect with potential candidates early in their careers by providing career advice such as information regarding changes in the CPA exam.

Although the Big 4 firms have utilized social media to achieve certain business objectives, they have an opportunity to further expand its use to achieve other objectives. For example, social media can provide training and development information to employees. In addition, firms can engage employees with interactive training tools that are made available on social media to allow them to acquire information and test their existing knowledge or understanding of a topic. These endeavors can assist employees in staying abreast of current changes as well as serve as a means of semi-formal training. They can also provide information regarding professional development, such as enhancing leadership or communication skills.

Based on our research, *Creativity and Problem Solving* and *Influencing Organizational Culture/Change* objectives were not evident on either firm-wide main or career pages. One possibility for *Creativity and Problem Solving* is that this objective is being pursued on different platforms, and possibly on private platforms. Considering the competitive nature of the industry and issues of confidentiality with client information,

firms may best be served using an enterprise social network that restricts certain content to employees or clients only.

The Big 4 firms may consider utilizing social media to a greater extent to continuously reinforce their desired organizational culture or to institute changes. They may consider engaging a more diverse group of employees in their social media posts and communication exchanges in order to have the desired culture permeate all areas and levels of the organization. To do so, they may need to provide incentives to employees to participate, such as reward systems. Also, acknowledgements of employees' participation in social media can assist with making employees feel that their efforts and opinions are valued by the company. This may help strengthen the culture and also contribute to the objective of retaining employees.

7 Conclusion

Social media plays an important role in achieving business objectives by public accounting firms. The three key business objectives of social media usage are *Socialization and Onboarding*, *Knowledge Sharing*, and *Branding and Marketing*. We also found that firm-wide main pages and career pages are used to achieve different business objectives. The firm-wide main pages were used more extensively for *Knowledge Sharing*, while the career pages were used more extensively for *Branding and Marketing* and *Socialization and Onboarding*. Social media can present benefits and advantages to public accounting firms, and they are only at the cusp of tapping into its potential. For instance, public accounting firms can use it to connect with potential job applicants and disseminate information to existing employees as an informal training mechanism.

There are several limitations to our research. First, we analyzed the Facebook data for the year 2012. Social media has developed rapidly since 2012. Therefore, further research is warranted to collect messages of more recent years and extend the study to include other social media platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn. Another limitation is that only three Big 4 public accounting firms were included in this research. Future research can extend the study to include other public accounting firms and assess how they differ from the Big 4. Future studies can also include more industries and compare social media use across different industries.

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