

Case study
July 2014

Putting social media to work

Marks & Spencer

Championing better work and working lives

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Putting social media to work

Marks & Spencer case study

This case study forms part of a research project conducted in 2014. The main research report and other case studies can be found [here](#).

The context

Marks & Spencer (M&S) employs over 81,000 people worldwide, about 70,000 of whom are in the UK, where it has over 700 shops. Over the last three or four years, there has been a concerted attempt to make the working culture more open and collaborative and to develop more devolved leadership.

When I joined M&S four and a half years ago, M&S [ran] an annual survey, the 'Your Say' survey. But beyond that, we didn't have a way of doing a quick temperature check. ... Now there is more of an interest in not following a single leader, but everyone playing more of a leading role ... we were always collaborative, and we've always had an interest in how employees are feeling ... [but now] there is more of an order and a method to it. So we are more proactive in consulting employees about how they are feeling, what their response is to particular projects and programmes. ... facilitating more of a discussion, rather than pushing information out and not really knowing how it lands. (Roland Burton)

The HR and communications functions and developments in social technology have played a central role in this.

Our role is to engage our employees with the business strategy and help them play their

part in delivering it. Over the last couple of years, technology has moved on and enabled us to do that, in ways that wasn't previously possible. So we have been looking at ways of not only increasing our way of talking to employees ... but how we can get news, stories and information back from employees as well, and create more of a dialogue, rather than it being a one-way push. (Roland Burton)

The innovation

Marks & Spencer has redeveloped its intranet, adding interactive features, and has been actively using Yammer to foster greater employee engagement. This complements, rather than replaces, the mix of channels previously used in internal communications, such as email, an employee magazine and noticeboards. It is, however, reducing the number of large documents it circulates and moving to shorter written communications.

We are moving away from giving teams big documents that mark a point in time – which then become out of date quite quickly – to electronic information, which is much easier and quicker for them to get to and to get out to people; but also, easier and quicker for them to digest. (Roland Burton)

Employees can access Yammer through corporate or personally owned devices. The greater use of mobile technology supports

this and can also be used in other ways. For example, employees in stores increasingly use tablets to help customers find particular items online that are not currently available in that store.

It's a fantastic opportunity for people who work in, particularly smaller stores, because although they might not physically [have] the product, they can sell the product. ... It means you are never out of stock either. You can always order something straight away and it will be delivered there, to collect the next day. (Roland Burton)

Over the last two years, Marks & Spencer has also been using videos more widely, uploading them weekly to the intranet. These are recorded like a very short chat show, with a presenter and interviewees.

So they get a really condensed, two-minute interview about whatever product or whatever topic, or whatever campaign is going on in the stores at the time. ... [As well as being a more engaging channel, this is a way of] giving everyone in the business more of a voice and saying, 'You're the product developer, tell us about your product.' (Roland Burton)

The social functionality of the intranet remains fairly limited, but it allows employees to 'like' and comment on stories.

The journey

There has been a recognition that social media is a natural channel for employees. Indeed, before Yammer was embraced, some employees were already posting comments and interacting with customers on Marks & Spencer's Facebook page.

Externally, active engagement with customers is generally encouraged, but the Facebook page is nonetheless carefully managed by a dedicated team. There was seen to be risk in encouraging employees to engage with customers through Facebook and Marks & Spencer has a very clear social media policy to protect both its brand and employees. An enterprise social network, such as Yammer, was an obvious way of capitalising on employees' desire to engage through social media in a safer environment.

Part of the drive for Yammer was to say, 'Look, when we are discussing things about the business, let's keep that in a private network that we can see and where the consequences are much less far reaching. Feel free to have a voice within M&S, but let's make sure that we don't risk compromising ourselves.' (Roland Burton)

At the time of the research, Marks & Spencer had been actively encouraging all employees to use Yammer for about 18 months. Before this, the capability was there and Yammer was used in pockets by office-based teams, such as IT, HR and learning and development. Its more widespread use in retail started with the launch of a particular initiative, *Customer Ready GM [General Merchandise]*, during which employees in the 80 stores involved were expected to sign up to Yammer to give feedback. Over the next year and a

half, retail usage grew rapidly, but office use was much slower, only recently catching up.

The general sense was we had a big job to do to get office teams engaged in seeing it as valuable. ... Potentially, worst-case scenario, it feels like another Outlook account ... 'another thing I need to check'. ... Now it does feel like business as usual.' (Jo Hutchinson)

Take-up and use

Out of about 70,000 employees, about 10,000 are registered on Yammer and nearly half are seen to be active users. Some departments – for example, women's footwear and menswear – are much more active on Yammer than others.

Currently access to Yammer is split evenly between mobile devices (mainly company-owned but also personally owned) and desktop computers. Interestingly, desktop usage has had a recent surge, rising to 52%. This is thought to be a result of the increase in office users. Employees working in stores are more limited in their access to Yammer, as they will not all have IT access or the time to access it in the working day, but some access it through personal devices in their own time, at home or while commuting.

The two main ways that employees use Yammer are to celebrate the work they and their colleagues are doing, and to find out answers to problems and get practical support from colleagues.

Large numbers of employees congratulate colleagues and 'like' posts (for example employee of the month awards) and this use of an enterprise social network is seen to be an important way in which employees get recognition for their work. At more local levels, Yammer

tends to be used more for social than business reasons, for example to arrange team nights out.

In a similar vein, employees use Yammer to share their experiences of the corporate and social responsibility initiatives. Examples include *Plan A*, when all employees are encouraged to go out and clean up a local beach, and *Make Your Mark*, a youth employment scheme. They post stories and photos and comment on others' posts. This sends a powerful message and strengthens both the pride in the organisation and the sense of community among colleagues. Similar online activity can be seen in other initiatives, such as *Shwopping*, Marks & Spencer's twice-annual clothes recycling campaign.

It's quite a big celebratory event in stores. We provide the platform, by saying, 'Guys, it's the one-day wardrobe clear-out next week. Send your photos, show us how you're being creative about it. We will give you an award for the most creative photo.' We don't put too many guidelines around it, because people come up with some really creative stuff. But that in turn generates its own traffic, because people start commenting on other people's photographs, rather than us being the arbiters of what's the best photograph. You can actually say to everyone, 'Well okay, you have seen all these photographs, well done everyone, what's your favourite?' (Roland Burton)

Celebration of such activities is also a positive way in which Marks & Spencer can engage with customers through external social media such as Facebook.

It's about giving our employees a personality and making them the heroes and the brand

ambassadors for M&S. So where they are doing really good things, we can pick that out and share it with a much wider audience. It's very authentic as well, it's genuine stuff. / (Roland Burton)

Another use of Yammer is to support learning and development, in particular the shorter bite-sized interventions that are becoming more common. For example, live 'YamJam' forums are run whereby a team is on standby to answer questions relating to a particular piece of training being rolled out. As well as directly answering employees' questions in real time, the discussion thread then acts as a reference for frequently asked questions. Yammer is also used to drum up interest before events and maintain momentum and interest afterwards.

It was almost like a live Q&A training session, which was phenomenally successful. Within an hour, I think there were 220-odd interactions between different stores and the [learning and development] team, [so] they then repeated it two weeks later. It definitely gave that sense of people having a real clarity of the training, what they're meant to be doing. Historically, we'd have written the training materials in an office, we'd have put them in the post to stores. Just said, 'You get on with it, train your people' and there would never have been a facility to actually talk to the experts. / (Jo Hutchinson)

YamJams help flag up the extent of common challenges across the organisation – for example, certain modules that employees often find difficult. Previously, with far fewer comments being received, such issues may have been considered isolated cases and not taken very seriously.

Business impacts

An enterprise social network is seen to help drive business value in various ways, including promoting employee voice, being more in touch with colleagues, sharing good practice and quickly resolving issues, developing pride in the organisation and strengthening the sense of workplace community.

Regarding employee voice, the use of Yammer and a social intranet has given Marks & Spencer 'a really good temperature check' and drawn attention to issues that employees care about that were not picked up on before, or about which it was not realised that employees felt so strongly.

For example, the dedication of store-based employees to their customers has shone through their use of Yammer and the full potential is now seen of harnessing their tacit understanding of customers and desire to help make improvements.

If all of our customer assistants access Yammer, they can be our customer insight. They can say, 'Do you know what, I've had ten customers in this week, all [saying] X.' If we end up with that, you've actually got some quite meaningful customer insight, which is real, live and free. Currently, we pay for lots of agencies to collate that customer insight for us. / (Jo Hutchinson)

Yammer conversations can also greatly help in quickly picking up on and responding to live operational problems, such as identifying widespread faults with products, or dealing with customer queries or requests.

We had a customer who came into a store who, over Christmas, had bought her son a pair of

dinosaur slippers. Her son loved them, his favourite gift. He started complaining that one of them was hurting his feet. ... When she looked at them, one was a size 11 and one was a size 6. The pair had obviously got mixed up. She went into the store to say, 'Is there any way you can find a size 11?' The slippers had gone into the sale, so it was becoming more and more unlikely. The store decided to put it on Yammer. ... Within 36 hours we'd managed to find some slippers and they were on their way to the customer. It's a really small example, and it's commercially a very small return these slippers – I think they're in the sale now for £3.00 – but it's just that warmth and that's what M&S should be good at. We made that customer's day. ... People weren't spending hours trawling through trying to find it ... and everybody could see [once it had been found]. / (Jo Hutchinson)

With more widespread customer service issues, Yammer helps swiftly communicate to employees how to approach it or inform customers how the organisation is responding.

It absolutely adds real value to problems with products or problems with customer service that have been identified. Especially if there are a number of people who are identifying problems. ... [We're] able to say, 'Great, thank you for all of that. We are working on the problem.' Then coming back and saying, 'Here is what the answer is. Here is how we are fixing it. Here is what to tell a customer.' Everyone knows at once, rather than having to phone around 50 different people. / (Roland Burton)

Yammer also helps with internal problems (for example with IT systems), especially at the weekend when the stores are very busy but central offices run on a skeleton resource. Previously, this would have taken a while for support functions to realise there was a widespread problem; through Yammer it becomes apparent within minutes, as people respond to colleagues asking if anyone else has the same problem.

In a very different way, the use of Yammer has highlighted how strongly employees identify with the M&S brand. For example:

‘Last year, when there was the horse meat crisis ... M&S was one of the few food retailers that wasn’t affected. But we still did our due diligence and tested. ... So there was a period of some quiet, where we didn’t comment on what was taking place. But when we had gone through all of our checks again ... we announced that internally first and said to everyone, ‘Look guys, we are going to be writing to all our customers, to assure them ... but just to let all of our people know first of all, we are absolutely in the clear. We have always been confident that we were, and it is because we place such value on our partnerships with farmers, have such a high commitment to quality, etcetera.’ The response to that was really, really powerful. ... Employees were saying, ‘This is why I am so proud to work for M&S. This is the company that I am really glad to be a part of. Thanks for sharing this before you shared it with customers.’ (Roland Burton)

It has also strengthened the sense of community between Marks & Spencer employees, both across different locations and throughout different levels of seniority.

‘Yammer has definitely given that sense of open collaboration. That, wherever you are ... you can make contact with people. ... It’s certainly broken down hierarchy on the basis that, on our Yammer network we’ve got every level of the business. ... Anybody can post anything and you actually don’t know who is going to reply. In some cases, your colleague down the road might reply, and in other cases the director of kids’ wear might reply.’ (Jo Hutchinson)

Next steps

As with many organisations, Marks & Spencer is at a much earlier stage with its internal enterprise social network than with its use of social media with customers. This reflects the emergence of the business needs. The case for investment in engaging with customers was clearer earlier on, but the benefits of enabling internal use across the organisation have nonetheless now become very apparent.

‘We really are on a journey and one of the exciting things is that we are learning all the time. We are trying things all the time, some of which work, and we are really pleased. Some of which don’t work, and we think, ‘Huh, we thought that was going to be good. Why didn’t that work?’ ... We are still at that point where we have got a lot of people doing it in their spare time. But I think for it to really take off, it needs more dedicated resource, one or two people who are completely immersed in the network.’ (Roland Burton)

Marks & Spencer is supporting the growth of Yammer so that it is used more consistently across the workforce. A particular group being focused on is customer assistants. Not only do they have less chance to use it in the working day, but many of them do not have Marks &

Spencer email accounts and so are technically unable to join Yammer at present. This is in the process of being resolved with an IT fix so that all customer assistants can join.

It is also using Yammer to help break down the barriers between offices and stores, encouraging employees to think ‘that we are just Marks & Spencer and you happen to work in an office and I work in a store, and that we can collaborate well together’ (Jo Hutchinson).

There are also plans to migrate other communications activities to Yammer. In particular, Marks & Spencer runs an ideas scheme, *The Big Idea*, which generates 2,000 to 2,500 employee ideas each quarter. Currently this is done by completing a template and submitting this on paper to the HR and communications team. This year, the process is being run on Yammer as well to make the process more dynamic and open, allowing employees to see, respond to and build on suggestions put forward by colleagues. In the future, as more employees are signed up, the aim is to run the scheme entirely on Yammer. Ultimately, the potential is seen to use a socially networked crowdsourcing model by which employees collectively choose the successful ideas.

There are also plans to more actively encourage the social use of Yammer to help cement the sense of community across the organisation. One example, on the back of a recent successful cycling event for employees, is to set up a cycling club.

Lessons

The development of an enterprise social network has highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer recognition, relationships across

the organisation and employees' enthusiasm for their work. But Marks & Spencer's experience is that internal social networking does not self-perpetuate. Firstly, it needs to have a clear business focus.

✓ Social technology works very well when it is focused on particular needs. It's not a catch-all and just putting it in place doesn't transform an organisation. But if you use it on particular targeted areas, it can be very effective. So that's on a particular project, where people need to work closely together on something. On a particular event, where you are asking people to share their success. Or, on a particular question, that you want people to give feedback on. It can be very, very effective in those ways. ✓
(Roland Burton)

At a practical level, Marks & Spencer's enterprise social network has needed to be actively driven and promoted.

✓ I personally think in the first year you ideally need a person whose job it is to drive and embed it and direct people and report on it. ... [We now have a group of] champions who are helping curate it [and shape it] into what we want it to be. Otherwise it could take quite a long time. ... We're probably like every other business, impatient and we want everything yesterday. ... Those champions help us drive it there more quickly. ✓ (Jo Hutchinson)

This drive does not need to come from a centralised function. On the contrary, local ownership is seen to be extremely important, and some of the best examples have come from store-based employees who have taken the initiative to use Yammer to address a specific need. An enterprise social network needs constant attention so that these examples can be noted and replicated.

✓ Having a social network is just the very, very beginning of the journey, it's not the end of the journey. Growing it and then maintaining it, and then demonstrating how it is delivering value, is more of a challenge. It doesn't feel like it's a linear journey ... we see it growing in fits and starts and all of a sudden we see how it is being used in a particular way or at a particular event and go, 'Wow, we never thought it could be used in that way. What a great idea, we will build on that for the future. ✓
(Roland Burton)

Acknowledgements

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