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Entering into engagement: Golden rules of social media

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In my previous three columns, I shared the critical preparatory steps real estate professionals should take before engaging in social media:

- * Understand the social media universe and how online tools present new and exciting ways to listen in on the commercial real estate dialogue, identify trends and opportunities, and participate in conversations with key influencers and stakeholders.
- * Employ listening campaigns to understand stakeholders' questions and concerns, identify supporters and opponents, and learn about breaking news and trends that will inform your community outreach plan.
- * Formulate a social media protocol prior to engagement. The key components of an effective protocol document include creating a message guide, editorial calendar, assessment plan and measurement standard.

This column focuses on the broadest social media topic of all: engagement. During the next several months, I will provide in-depth guidance on the different ways to engage with key audiences and the places where you can join the social media conversation. Because the social media universe is so dynamic and expansive, I will begin with an overview of the topic and some golden rules before covering specific online applications like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Create a Community

As I've mentioned before, social media is a great way to identify supporters of your project, company or brand. By networking with proponents, you can create a community to serve as an excellent source of feedback or breaking information, or as a powerful group of brand ambassadors to champion your cause. Social media is all about participating in conversations and building relationships, but you need to establish a community of contacts first, before you can engage. Fortunately, social media communities tend to welcome new members. So be proactive and reach out to people in your industry and region, and those who simply strike you as interesting.

Participate in the Community Dialogue and Begin Building Relationships

Individuals in your network will be discussing the key topics of the day as it relates to your industry, so it is important to be an active participant in those conversations. Responding to questions and

asking for feedback are key ways to ensure a beneficial relationship with the community you've built. Social media engagement is a two-way street: relationships need to be built, maintained, and strengthened, which takes time and effort.

Engage Influencers and Supporters

Whether you have a pressing project on the table or are exploring social media as a relatively new participant, it is critical to connect with key influencers in your field, in government, in social communities and in the cities and towns where you do business. When the time comes to build a groundswell of support for that project, your existing network of contacts will prove to be an invaluable resource by helping you disseminate information, bring new members into the alliance and serve as third-party spokespeople. Activating your online network can be a very influential strategy for winning project support, especially for professionals in the development community.

At Schneider Associates, we have three "golden rules" for engaging in social media:

1. Be authentic: Be honest, open and straightforward in your online discourse. Social media is about people connecting with each other, and members of online communities are skilled at identifying the "corporate voice" and alienating those users from the conversation.
2. Converse: Focus on talking to members of your community on a regular basis. These social media users have welcomed your connection, they share your interests and will move on to a different conversation if you choose to avoid regular participation.
3. Remember what you say sticks: Think of social media as a 24/7, public meeting, where what you say is broadcast, recorded and stored indefinitely on a searchable public database. So before you say something you might regret later, step back, take a breath, check your spelling, and then hit "post."

Next month, I will introduce you to the blogosphere, and tell you about how the real estate community can benefit from blogging. In the meantime, I encourage you to join the conversation. Tell us below what you think about social media, or message us on Twitter @SchneiderPR. We look forward to hearing from you!

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