

Social Interaction Design Site Audit



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Site Audit

The site audit is a review of your web site or other social media service for social interaction and member participation. I look at how members are using your site, with an eye to opportunities and areas of improvement, and make recommendations and suggestions. Details, screen shots, and specs can be obtained from further engagement.

Here, in brief, is my approach to the site audit. For more, please contact Adrian Chan.

Site objectives and goals

Social media are unique in that the value of their content is subject by user participation that is beyond the site's direct control. Individual user and audience engagement has to be fostered — and in a fashion that solicits the kinds of contributions from users that create value.

- What are your site's objectives, and how well are they being met
 - From your perspective (company's)
 - From the user's perspective
 - Have social practices emerged on your site that produce the content and useage for which the site was designed?
- What kind of activity do you wish to facilitate? Is it occurring?
- What kind of value does your site provide?
 - To you (company)
 - To users
 - To third parties (businesses, advertisers, etc.)
- To whom are you providing value, and how?
- What are the social barriers to participation on your site?
- How well does in individual user experience match your stated goals for user and community participation?

Theme

Social media sites are thematic. They have a social purpose and thematic activity, such as: product reviews, job networking, dating, movie recommendations, restaurant reviews, video sharing, or what have you. That social purpose has to make sense to users on an individual basis while having a social application also.

Communicating your theme

- What is your site about, and does it leverage something that members already talk about?
- Is it easy for members to see the benefits of participating in your site?
- Can members see this from what others are doing?
- Do members naturally talk about the theme or topic your site is built around?
- What motivates them to participate?

Theme and motivation

- What is your site's theme, and does it drive the kind of social participation you anticipated? How does it shape user participation?
- What kinds of talking and posting support that theme? How familiar are your users with it?
- Does your site's theme speak directly to users' daily routines or practices? Or does your service ask them to invest, to make a creative stretch, in order to see the value of your site?
- If so, what individual and social techniques do you use to drive motivation: for individual involvement as well as for social engagement? In other words, do your users see the purpose in doing this socially?

Intended and actual social practices

Users will use your site according for their interests, regardless of whether or not they support and further the site's business. In extreme cases, an audience can hijack a social media service — changing or re-orienting audiences can result in a mutiny that may cost you your brand and user-base.

Seen from the user's perspective, your site's uses depend on what the site does, who's on it, and what they're doing. And all of that is shaped by your site's particular mix of profile pages, public communication, private messaging, balance of private and public, media formats, visibility of traffic, activity, use, member details, and much more. Users like to succeed, and are sensitive to where they succeed and how. And they will quickly read what's happening in any social medium on the basis of what others are doing — and not on the basis of what's in the fine print or home page copy.

- What are your site's primary social practices? *Do they serve your purposes?*
 - Socializing?
 - Auto-biographical disclosure?
 - Establishing personal expertise and talent?
 - Establishing professional expertise and skill?

- Helping others? Abusing others?
- Attracting attention through desirability? Looks and poses? Wit and writing? Connectedness and popularity? Activity and participation?

Content organization

The content on your social media site depend on user participation, while serving a large audience of consumers. Content on social media should be easy to use by both user groups: participating and active contributors and passive readers/viewers alike.

Navigation schemes and shortcuts like lists, tagging, bookmarking and favoriting all help users find what they are looking for, while also facilitating discovery and surfacing serendipitous relations and connections. Content can also be structured to bring attention to members or to topics.

- Does your site help users find what they need?
- What kind of content organization schemes are you using?
- Are users encouraged to contribute?
- Does your success depend on their motivation to contribute?
- If so, what would motivate them?
 - Popularity?
 - Perceptions, recognition, acknowledgement? (popularity, celebrity, expertise, trust, etc)
 - Page views, friending, topical leadership, etc
- Would a user's contributions be a natural extension of his or her interests? In other words, would using your site, and contributing to it, make sense?
- Where else do you obtain content from?
- Is your mix of user-generated content and third party feeds, articles, and so on easy to differentiate and navigate?
- How and with what effectiveness are you using rich media?

"Talk" analysis

Any social software site must engage users in talk: in talking about something, and to somebody or somebodies. This talk must reveal something interesting about the member doing the talking, while also contributing the content of that talk to the site for consumption by others. It does nobody any good if a site's theme is serious, but its users are not.

Talk is the "social engine" that drives participation on your site. Users must be motivated to talk, and must find that talk interesting. And in being interesting, it should help the users doing the talking to seem interesting to others, while being

interested in talking to or in front of others. There are different kinds of talk, too, including telling, sharing, opinionating, reporting, inviting, recommending, commenting, quoting, and so on.

- What kinds of talk does your site facilitate?
- How does it help users to differentiate themselves?
- What are members “asked” to say in front of others?
- Does this provide them with a clear means by which to appear interesting to other members?
- What kinds of talk earn members the attention of others?
- How long, or short, are the runs of talk on your site?
- How is the talk self-sustaining?
- How does it appeal to user’s ongoing attention?
- Does it appeal on the basis of its content (fact), its personal appeal (relationships), or something else?
- Does your site’s navigation support it?
- Does your site’s organization structure it?
- Do your site’s tags, directories, lists, and supplemental navigation surface and engage interesting talk?
- If your site uses rich media, how well are they embedded in different kinds of talk?

Communication

Social software sites permit two kinds of communication. Members can post contributions to the site, or to other members. It’s by communicating directly to other members, and by contributing indirectly to the site’s audience, that users get noticed, distinguish themselves, attract attention, and so on. You don’t get to control what members do on your site, but you can facilitate and structure user participation so that direct communication is possible while indirect communication is captured and made publicly available

- Who are your members talking to?
- Why are they (not) talking?
- What makes them interested in others?
- What makes them interesting to others?
- How are you using direct interaction tools (IM, winks, messaging)?
- How are you using indirect communication tools (posts, comments, compliments)?
- What are the barriers to communication on your site?
- What are the benefits, rewards, and incentives to and from communication on your site?

Member trust and system confidence

Social media sites structure the trust users place in each other and in your site or service. For your users to get involved in your site, you must secure their confidence in the site, and facilitate trust among members.

- How much trust does your site require?
- What kind of trust do you establish among members?
- Do you use social networking to create trust?
- How does your site surface trusted content?
- How does it distinguish trusted members?
- What commenting, rating, voting or other social participation schemes have you employed to make trust a visible and reliable feature of your service?

Transactions

Social software sites promote transactions among members. In many cases these transactions are structured around some kind of economy: sharing knowledge, sharing files, voting, inviting, collaborating, and much more. Social media differ from conventional software in that these transactions are ongoing. They belong to communication, and because of this they are open-ended. Social structures organize social interactions, and transactional systems can be designed around a number of common social practices. It is in your interest to design these for compelling and self-sustaining audience participation.

- What do your members exchange with one another?
- What kind of economy organizes these exchanges?
- How do members stand out?
- How do members give and take, and what do they give and take?
- What kinds of transactions occur directly between members?
- What kinds of transactions are conducted “in front” of all members? Groups? Friend networks?
- How do you use community policing or normative reinforcement to enable self-sustaining and self-organizing user behaviors?
- What token gestures (such as winks, favoriting, hotlisting, compliments) are available to you for the purpose of cementing transactions and their cultural economies and social practices?

Social networking

Most social media sites use some kind of social networking to organize relationships among members. Relationships are a means by which members can meet one another. They are also means by which members filter the site’s content. Social networks do not have to be built on the basis of friendship, but can

organize professional, affinal, and peer relations also. Networks may even be built around family networks (which are not social networks).

- What kinds of social or other networks does your site provide?
- Are these relationships used to create trust?
- Are they used in navigation or content organization?
- Do they filter access to site members or content?
- Do they increase or decrease site content contributions?

Distribution

Increasing numbers of social media companies are modularizing their services and making available through widgets and badges. These make it simpler and faster to engage in social practices with friends and audiences, and are a lighter mode of producing social media and user-generated content than the full-on walled-city approach.

- Do you export your content to badges?
- Do you use widgets to parcel out small and familiar kinds of social interactions?
- Could your content or users be of value to third party sites or services?
- If so, how might widgets be used to accomplish this?