Manage Complexity

4 ways to simplify social media in large companies
Introduction

In multinational companies, it’s impossible to eliminate corporate complexity. As companies grow and acquire new brands, they need to serve diverse customer segments and coordinate global and local marketing campaigns. While you can’t eliminate complexity, social media does offer four key ways to better manage it.

In Bain & Company’s study of 1,208 global executives, 63 percent of executives reported that excessive complexity is raising costs and hindering growth.¹

While leaders understand the costs of complexity, they often forget the individual complexity that employees face such as inefficient workflows and unclear accountabilities.

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“Complexity is in the eye of the beholder,” says Julian Birkinshaw, a Professor and Chair of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at the London Business School and world-recognized expert on innovation and renewal in large corporations.

“The senior executive’s view is much different than the employee. For someone in the middle of the organization, complexity takes on a different meaning. Are there hindrances in my way? Is the responsibility clear for me to get my job done?”

In this white paper, you’ll learn how to simplify social media in large organizations.

When executed correctly, social media can bring together teams in new ways, feed local insights back into global marketing strategies, and consolidate social data across product lines, languages, and multiple business divisions.

These insights are based on interviews with experts as well as our experience working with over 1,700 enterprise customers including Adidas AG, ANZ Bank, Australia Post, Levi Strauss & Co, Oakley, RWE AG, Sony Music Entertainment, and WWF International.

4 key ways to simplify social media in large organizations

- Eliminate unintended complexity in social media with clear accountability and defined roles.
- Shield employees from complexity by defining local and global boundaries and empowering teams to focus on succeeding in individual roles.
- Structure social teams around customers, not products. This helps large organizations resist fracturing social media audiences and stay focused on the needs of customers.
- Find your next big win with small improvements—helping your employees experiment without the fear of mistakes.
1. Eliminate unintended complexity

Research shows that some forms of complexity can be advantageous to organizations. For example, industry regulations can create a high barrier to entry for smaller competitors.

In an article published in McKinsey & Company, Professor Birkinshaw and Suzanne Heywood (a director at McKinsey who helps large organizations strengthen their processes and governance) outlined four types of complexity including imposed, inherent, designed, and unintended complexity.²

Julian Birkinshaw and Suzanne Heywood’s four types of complexity

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPOSED COMPLEXITY</th>
<th>INHERENT COMPLEXITY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Includes laws, industry regulations, and interventions by nongovernmental organizations. It is not typically manageable by companies.</td>
<td>Is intrinsic to the business, and can only be jettisoned by exiting a portion of the business.</td>
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<tr>
<th>DESIGNED COMPLEXITY</th>
<th>UNINTENDED COMPLEXITY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Results from choices about where the business operates, what it sells, to whom, and how. Companies can remove it, but this could mean simplifying valuable wrinkles in their business model.</td>
<td>Arises from growing misalignment between the needs of the organization and the processes supporting it. It is easily managed once identified.</td>
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Source: McKinsey³

From a social media lens, it's the last type of complexity that large organizations can better manage.

According to Professor Birkinshaw, unintended complexity can be difficult to spot. "It manifests itself in a hundred little things that don't quite work. Over time, employees become unsure of their role and responsibilities. It's the role of managers to identify these small things causing confusion and reduce them."

When structuring and managing social media teams, be aware of the possible unintended complexity you may be creating. Whether it's having too many stakeholders on planning committees or having unclear roles and ambiguous metrics, all of these decisions can impact the efficiency and effectiveness of teams.

Tactics for managing unintended complexity:

- **Survey your employees.** Ask them about the obstacles they face in their daily social media tasks. Use open-ended questions instead of quantitative surveys (in other words, don't ask them to rate their complexity level 1-10) as ambiguity and confusion is likely coming from a variety of sources.

- **Eliminate unclear roles.** Employees need clear assignments and clear direction about how to respond to customers on social channels. A recent McKinsey survey of over 300 senior executives found that only 44 percent agreed that their organizational structure created clear accountabilities.⁴ Use divisions of labor—for example, assign one team to manage incoming @replies, another to proactively respond to customer conversations, and another team for drafting responses.

- **Connect metrics to company purpose.** Companies like Zappos have excelled on social media because they have clear metrics that are hard-wired into company culture. For example, Zappos' holistic emphasis on customer happiness runs all the way down the line from social campaigns to customer interactions to return policies. Too often large organizations and managers will shift the emphasis on social media from quarter to quarter. Raising engagement rates is a lifeless metric. A metric such as "delighting customers with unexpectedly helpful social interactions" shows employees how their individual interactions connect to the larger goals of their division.
2. Leaders must shield employees from complexity

“Leaders and managers need to know where to hold the complexity in the organization,” Professor Birkinshaw told Hootsuite.

“For example, do we allow people to see the complexity matrix? Or do we hold the complexity at a higher level, so someone in a middle position is the buffer or shield of complexity?”

Let’s say that your social media team is tasked with creating content that resonates in both North American and European markets. To educate teams, a manager runs a global culture training group, showing a matrix that outlines the nuanced needs of all 30 different countries that the company operates in. This can lead to generic messaging and stale content ideas as copywriters try to please all markets and stakeholders with broad (and meaningless) sales jargon.

A better approach is to retain the nuances of global markets in a small and highly trained team. By holding complexity at higher levels in the company, frontline employees will have more confidence to act and come up with new ideas for social channels.

That way, different roles can be exposed to different levels of complexity. For example, you can appoint a global social media editor to identify the content that resonates across borders while shielding local teams from these global demands.

Tactics for shielding employees from complexity:

- **Concentrate complexity in highly expert roles.** Sourcing content for global markets and comparing the performance of different local campaigns should be held at higher roles such as senior analysts or global social media editors. This reduces complexity at individual levels—for example, a local team can freely draft content for specific products that is later refined by an expert team to ensure brand and global standards.

- **Tailor social media education to employee roles.** When we launch social media roll-out plans for large organizations, we typically recommend different levels of education. For example, managers and senior leaders take our Advanced Social Media Strategy (ASMS) Certificate. This training shows leaders how to use social media to solve business challenges. In contrast, employees are shown social media through an entirely different lens, mastering the skills they need to represent the brand on the frontline.

- **Define local and global boundaries with a playbook.** Ensure that you have clear links between different levels or regions such as global and local offices. This is about employees being able to do their job and knowing where the boundaries lie. Create playbooks that document company social media policies, common use cases, employee roles and responsibilities, and offer decision trees for different levels of responsibility—such as elevating a negative mention by a local influencer to the global team.
3. Structure social teams around customers, not products

Do the divisions that make sense for your products and teams also make sense for your customers? With a large and complex social media presence, your organization needs to balance the needs of the customer with those of the brand.

The customer’s needs can unite large organizations. As Adam Walther of FutureGov, a company that helps governments solve complex challenges with technology, recently put it, “diverse teams collaborating around a challenge is worth a thousand papers about silos.”

Tactics for structuring social media around your customers:

- **Start with a clean sheet of paper.** When reorganizing social media teams or building a new brand architecture, remember the core processes that deliver value to customers. This can be lost in new acquisitions and expanding product lines. Remind yourself of the core value you deliver, refocusing social media around the needs of the customer.

- **Resist the urge to fracture your audience.** If you have multiple product lines and divisions, how many social media accounts should your organization create? James McIntyre, a Solution Delivery Manager at Hootsuite, helps some of the world’s largest organizations structure their social media teams. “Fracturing social media followings is often a mistake,” he says. “Many organizations will often break down their audiences into different products, creating many different accounts for each section of the business. A better approach is to begin where your audience is. For example, if you have a range of household products then on which social media networks do people talk about kitchenware? Where do they talk about cleaning products? Begin by building out different social media profiles around those customer communities.”
4. Find your next big win with small improvements

As organizations grow, employees focus on avoiding mistakes especially on social channels. This leads the organization to become insular rather than focusing on the needs of customers. Over time, good solutions can be ignored as a result of a fear of failure.

Look for small improvements in how you coordinate work. This can be done in new markets where there might not be as many best practices to follow. These small experiments can turn into larger initiatives, allowing flexibility and freedom without the risk of large mistakes.

Tactics for finding your next big win:

- **Appoint global editors to surface local wins.** With global companies and multiple product lines, there’s always a tension between creating specific content for each location and the need to standardize messaging. For example, a global company might have different Twitter and Facebook pages for each country and the local teams running the pages are all creating different content. Appoint social media teams for each region (EMEA, APAC, LATAM, North America, and so on) to source the best content and geo-target messages to different locations. This helps to both give local teams the freedom to create content based on the unique needs of their countries but also helps to unify some of those themes. These teams can also collaborate and meet regularly to share best practices and think of ways to empower local innovation.

- **Test ideas on an emerging social media network.** Instead of reinventing your entire social media engagement strategy focus on testing on an emergent social media network. The stakes and audience size will be smaller, giving your teams the freedom to test new strategies and discover new best practices that can be shared across the organization. For example, test an entirely different content marketing approach on Medium or assemble a team to try new methods of engagement with Reddit advertising.

Next steps

In large organizations, social campaigns and activities can be weighed down by complicated manual workflows and approval processes. This results in missing out on the opportunity to capitalize on real-time opportunities and differentiate offerings with complementary brand and customer service touch points.

Use the steps outlined in this white paper to unify teams and refocus marketing initiatives around the needs of customers.
Endnotes


About Hootsuite Enterprise

Partner with Hootsuite to accelerate your social transformation

Hootsuite Enterprise empowers organizations to execute business strategies for the social media era. As the world’s most widely used social relationship platform, Hootsuite Enterprise enables global businesses to scale social media activities across multiple teams, departments, and business units. Our versatile platform supports a thriving ecosystem of technology integrations, allowing businesses to extend social media into existing systems and programs.

We help organizations create deeper relationships with customers and draw meaningful insights from social media data. Innovating since day one, we continue to help businesses pioneer the social media landscape and accelerate their success through education and professional services.

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