

SNCR 2020 Series

Exploring New Communications Tools and Technologies

Employees as Brand Ambassadors

The State of Employee Advocacy

By Jen McClure and Alex Parkinson

Many brands are empowering their employees to use social media to enhance the company's thought leadership position, amplify branded content, reach new audiences, engage in "social selling," and improve employee engagement. In fact, employee advocacy programs are one of the fastest-growing trends in social media marketing. This *SNCR 2020* article presents findings from the JEM 2016 State of Employee Advocacy Survey, assessing the trend towards employee advocacy and benchmarking how companies structure and manage programs.

Employee advocacy programs are increasingly attractive to companies, because of the power of the employee voice in disseminating corporate messages. The potential for employee advocacy to contribute to company growth is huge. A number of statistics demonstrate this, including:¹

- Employee advocacy programs involving 1,000 active participants can generate \$1,900,000 in advertising value.
- Brand messages are eight times more likely to be shared on social media when first distributed by employees than when distributed by the brand.
- There is only an 8 percent overlap between the company's followers and those of its employees.
- 41 percent of people believe conversations with company employees to be the most credible specialist sources of information.²

Employee advocacy programs are complex, often spanning multiple departments, functions and business goals and companies are facing numerous challenges as they adopt, manage, and grow these new programs.

What is employee advocacy?

Employee advocacy programs can be generally described as efforts made by companies to empower their employees to use their own social media channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn, to share company news, insights, and expertise, and to communicate on behalf of their employer.

Chris Boudreaux, author of *The Most Powerful Brand on Earth* and a social media governance advisor, suggests that employee advocacy is: "Brands empowering employees to support the goals of the brand, through employee-owned social media."

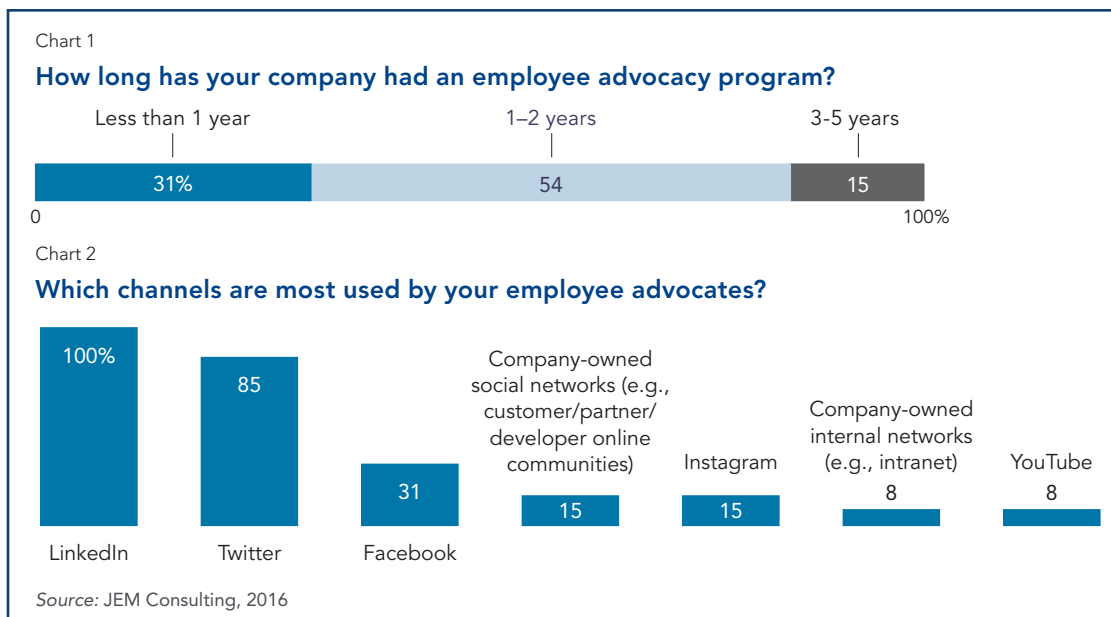
Source: Chris Boudreaux, "Buyer Guide: Social Employee Advocacy Software," *Social Media Governance* (<http://socialmediagovernance.com/social-employee-advocacy-software-buying-guide/>).

Overview of Employee Advocacy Programs

Employee advocacy programs are not yet ubiquitous, but adoption is growing. Whereas 56 percent of survey respondents said they have an employee advocacy program in place, of the nearly 50 percent of companies that said they do not, 24 percent said they were planning to launch one this year. Other research has found an even greater proportion of companies either utilizing or on the brink of developing an employee advocacy program. For example, *Social Media Employee Advocacy: Tapping into the Power of an Engaged Social Workforce* found that 90 percent of the brands surveyed are already pursuing or have plans to pursue some form of employee advocacy.³

Respondents to this survey noted that the programs that are in existence are still very new, with 85 percent being less than two years old and the remaining 15 percent having started between three and five years ago.

LinkedIn was the social media channel of choice for companies, with every company reporting it being used by employees. A large majority of companies (85 percent) also reported their employees' use of Twitter, while Facebook was used by a significant minority (31 percent). Few companies reported using online video and platforms focused on visual media.

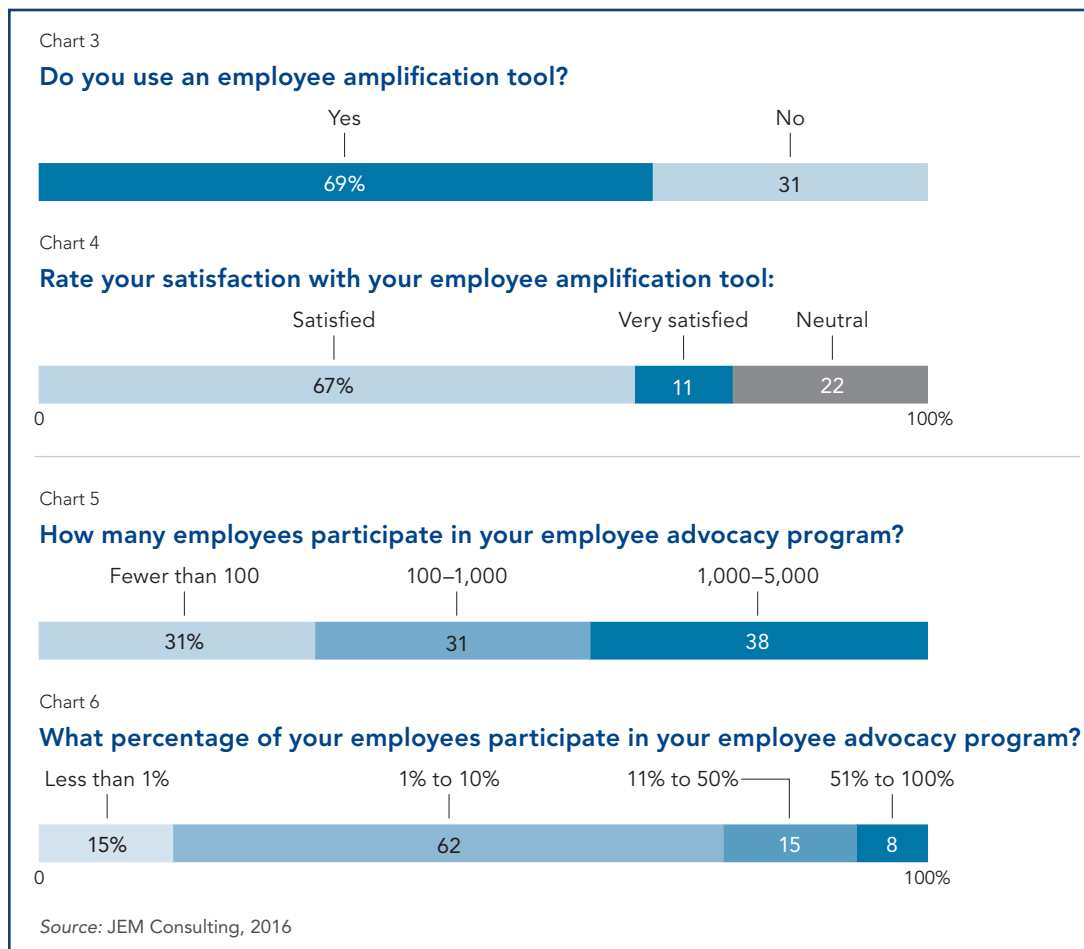


Employee amplification tools—software that helps companies provide employees with pre-approved content to share on their own networks—are used by nearly 70 percent of companies with employee advocacy programs. No company reported being dissatisfied with its use of these tools and in fact nearly 80 percent of companies were at least satisfied, suggesting that employee amplification tools are an effective way of getting content into the hands of employee advocates.

Participation

Participation in employee advocacy programs is fairly evenly split, with approximately one-third of companies responding to each category of participation. These numbers equate to a majority of companies (62 percent) claiming participation rates of between 1 percent and 10 percent of the employee population, although a solid minority (23 percent) report participation rates of higher than 10 percent of employees.

Increasing participation rates is one of the most frequently cited challenges by companies and some companies have set aggressive goals to grow their programs. For example, in a case study in *Unlocking Value from Integrated Corporate Communications and Marketing*, Cisco’s director of global social media marketing, Laura Powers, noted that the company has a goal to increase the number of employees in its Social Ambassador program from 6,000 to 20,000 this year.⁴



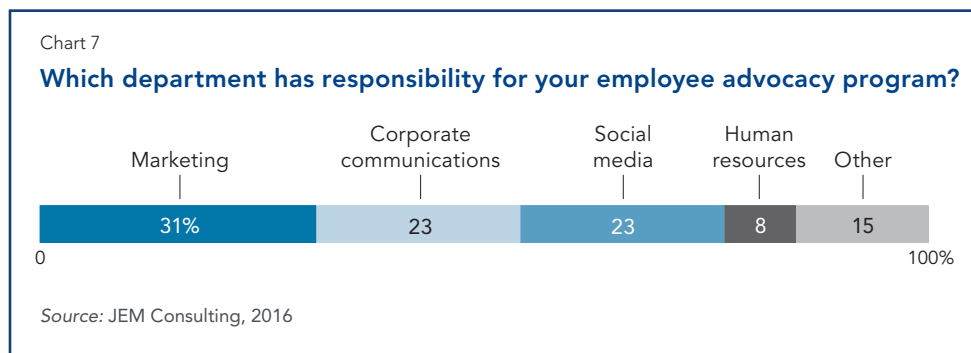
Management

A variety of functions across the organization manage employee advocacy programs, reflecting the struggle that social media has had generally to find a consistent home within corporations. As social media use has grown and the benefits of it have become apparent across the enterprise, a number of departments have shown interest in having responsibility for the technology or using it in their operations.

The top three functions claiming responsibility for employee advocacy programs are Marketing (31 percent), Corporate Communications (23 percent) and Social Media (23 percent). With Marketing assuming the top spot in this list, there is some indication as to the commercial nature of many employee advocacy programs, as companies seek to use their employee reach to shore up their brands and take their message to a wider group of potential customers.

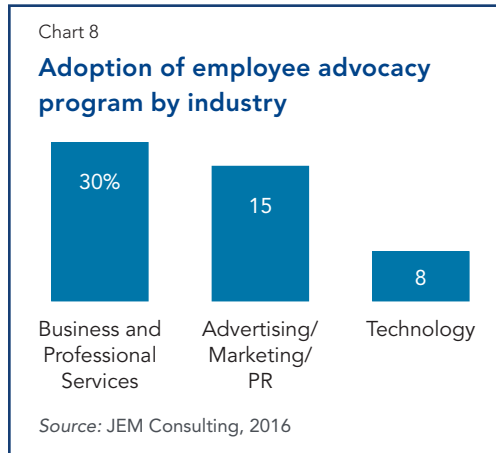
Perhaps the most surprising function not featured among the top three for responsibility is Human Resources (8 percent). Successful employee advocacy programs often require companies to loosen their grip on messages and to trust employees to speak openly without micromanaging, so it could be argued that although HR might be a good partner to have in the training process, on an ongoing basis there is less of a need for employee oversight and hence less of a role for HR in employee advocacy programs.

Companies reported facing many challenges in the successful management of these programs. Among the most pressing were strategic issues, such as increasing employee participation and measuring effectiveness. These were followed by tactical issues including developing content, managing budget, training and enabling employees, and developing tools and technology to support the programs. In response to the challenge of training employees, just over half the respondents (54 percent) have instituted a mandatory training program for employees participating in advocacy programs.



Industries using employee advocacy programs

Companies in the Business and Professional Services industry were the most likely to have an employee advocacy program (30 percent), followed by those in Advertising/



Marketing/Public Relations (15 percent), and technology (8 percent). The lowest adoption of programs was registered by companies in the Financial Services, Legal, and Healthcare industries. The common feature of industries in the low-adoption bracket is that they're all highly regulated, which generally means corporate messaging is much more tightly controlled. This presents a challenge to those companies that wish to capitalize on the business benefits of employee advocacy, but need to be cognizant of the regulatory risks on completely unfettered employee advocacy.

The nonprofit sector is another industry group that reported low adoption of employee advocacy programs. There is a robust opportunity for these groups to make better use of these programs, particularly due to the fact that the most impactful content (i.e., most widely shared or engaged-with content) is often purpose-based content and stories.⁵ A counterargument could be that nonprofit messaging is viewed less suspiciously than for-profit corporate messaging, and as such there is less of a need for nonprofit organizations to engage their employees as organizational spokespeople in place of official corporate spokespeople.

Goals and satisfaction

With regard to goals for employee advocacy, nearly all respondents (92 percent) with such a program sought to use it to enhance the company's thought leadership position, pointing to the importance of content and storytelling in modern business strategies.

Majorities of companies also cited the following as goals:

- Amplify the reach of branded content/reach new audiences
- Improve employee engagement
- Elevate and humanize the brand
- Drive leads/sales
- Strengthen relationships with stakeholders

Chart 9

What are the goals of your employee advocacy program?



Source: JEM Consulting, 2016

The way in which companies measure the performance of their employee advocacy programs is not aligned to the goals they target. Most companies measure the success of their employee advocacy programs by looking at metrics related to traffic on websites and social media, even though the same pool of companies does not acknowledge that either of these are goals of the program.

Organizations make no effort to measure the effectiveness of reaching the most important goal of enhancing the company’s thought leadership position. Granted, this goal is difficult to measure (indeed, respondents cite measurement of the effectiveness of employee advocacy programs as their number-two challenge), but the fact that there is no sign that companies are trying to measure progress against this goal suggests an opportunity for improvement.

Although nearly two-thirds of companies (62 percent) reported being at least satisfied with their employee advocacy program, there is room for improvement, highlighted by the fact that a large minority of companies (38 percent) are neutral or dissatisfied with the success of their program. The disconnection between goals and measurement could explain why more companies did not report satisfaction.



Creating Successful Employee Advocacy Programs

Choosing the right tools and technology, such as employee amplification platforms, is crucial to the success of an employee advocacy program. This is a growing and crowded space, with many players, and new companies continuing to emerge.

These companies include:

- Bambu
- DrumUp
- Dynamic Signal
- Everyone Social
- GaggleAMP
- Hootsuite Amplify
- LinkedIn Elevate
- NextBee
- Oktopost
- PeopleLinx
- rFactor
- Sociabble

Growing participation

Developing social media policies and guidelines and ensuring employees are aware of them can help to improve employee participation. Social media guidelines should cover three areas:

- 1 Basic principles for all types of social media
- 2 Branded social media
- 3 Personal use of social media

Companies could also consider creating a Digital Center of Excellence (DCOE), which provides a centralized resource and structure for employees to access the digital and social media strategy and initiatives, policies, guidelines, monitoring, and reporting. Many companies' DCOEs host regular meetings, webinars, training sessions and educational events. The DCOE provides a valuable opportunity for best practices sharing and a chance for advocates to engage in peer-to-peer learning.

Sample points for social media guidelines

A sample social media guideline could include the following:

- You are accountable for your actions and what you write and post
- Use common sense and good judgment
- Be accurate and honest, respectful, and sensible
- Disclose your relationship to the company and remember that you're representing the company in your posts and content. If needed, clarify that you're expressing your own views and opinions and not those of the company
- Maintain the confidentiality of the company's IP and trade secrets and any private or confidential information as well as that of our customers, partners, vendors, contractors, suppliers, or others
- Don't disclose financial information
- Refer media and press inquiries to authorized company spokespersons
- Don't delete comments just because you disagree with the commenter's point of view
- Minimize security risks
- Obtain permission for official company use of social media
- Excessive personal social media activity on company time and infrastructure is a problem
- Don't host personal blogs, websites or other types of online content on property owned or leased by the company
- If you violate these guidelines, we may require you to correct, edit or remove a post or statement. In addition, violations of these guidelines by employees can result in disciplinary action
- These Social Media Guidelines will be administered in compliance with applicable laws and regulations (including Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act)

Risks Associated with Employee Advocacy Programs

There are three categories of risks associated with employee advocacy programs and organizations should weigh their ability to manage these risks prior to launching an employee advocacy program:

Brand risks For example, inappropriate links, or unprofessional conduct and content (e.g., profanity, hate, bullying, etc) by employees

Compliance risks For example, ensuring that employee advocates comply with Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations, such as proper disclosures of the employee's relationship to the company

Security risks For example, inbound security risks that can arise from hundreds or thousands of employees self-identifying as a company's employee in their public social media profiles. This increases the corporate attack surface, and may result in hackers developing fake profiles to establish relationships with employee advocates for the purpose of distributing malware, phishing for credentials, stealing confidential data, or opening a gateway to corporate data.

Technology solutions to help manage these risks include Brandle and Proofpoint's Nexgate.

Conclusion

Companies are showing interest in employee advocacy programs, with most either already capitalizing on their workforce as spokespeople for the brand on social media, or planning to launch a program in the very near future. But employee advocacy is still young and therefore best practices are yet to fully emerge. Generally, companies engage between 1 percent and 10 percent of their workforce in an effort to elevate the company's thought leadership position, but with goals to increase participation those proportions could increase over time.

There are some missed opportunities with regard to use of employee advocacy programs. In particular, nonprofits appear to be lagging in their adoption, despite those organizations having some of the most impactful content and stories to tell. Employee advocacy programs also tend not to use online video and visual media, even though companies are increasingly focused on visual social media.⁶ In addition, visual media are typically some of the most shared types of social posts overall.⁷

Better strategy and governance of these programs will help lay the foundation for future success. In particular, the business goals of employee advocacy programs and measurement need to be better aligned, so that companies can gauge the performance of their programs more effectively. Meanwhile, companies should focus on increasing the participation level of their existing advocates, not just on increasing the overall number of advocates. Doing so will help them achieve their overriding goal of improving thought leadership.

As these programs mature and best practices and solutions to support them continue to develop, challenges and risks will be addressed and satisfaction and success of employee advocacy programs will likely increase, along with adoption. In these early days, there are a number of things companies should do to nurture fledgling programs:

- Align content strategy and measurements with business goals
- Choose advocates carefully
- Make social sharing relevant, easy, safe and fun
- Protect brands and employees
- Partner effectively across the organization
- Share successes

Methodology

To better understand the trend towards employee advocacy programs, JEM Consulting & Advisory Services conducted a research study to measure organizations' adoption of such programs. The purpose of the study is to track the adoption and growth of these programs, and to provide a useful resource to teams preparing to launch or who are currently managing an employee advocacy program. We led an online survey-based study from March to May, 2016, and received 134 responses. Of those respondents, 75 (56 percent) of companies had employee advocacy programs, and completed the full study. The geographical breakdown of survey respondents was as follows:

- United States: 80 percent
- European Union: 7 percent
- United Kingdom: 11 percent
- Canada: 2 percent

Endnotes

- 1 Brad Shepherd, "16 Employee Advocacy Statistics to Guide Your 2016 Marketing Strategy," *Kredible Blog*, November 17, 2015 (<http://blog.kredible.com/employee-advocacy-statistics-2016>).
- 2 Petra Neiger, "I [HEART] Our Employees: From Employees to Social Brand Ambassadors," *Cisco*, February 2013 (<http://blogs.cisco.com/socialmedia/i-heart-our-employees-from-employees-to-social-brand-ambassadors>).
- 3 Ed Terpening, Charlene Li, and Aubrey Littleton, *Social Media Employee Advocacy: Tapping into the Power of an Engaged Social Workforce*, Altimeter, 2016.
- 4 Alex Parkinson, *Unlocking Value from Integrated Corporate Communications and Marketing*, The Conference Board R-1611-16, September 2016.
- 5 *Unlocking Value from Integrated Corporate Communications and Marketing*, 2016.
- 6 Nora Ganim Barnes, "The 2015 Fortune 500 and Social Media: Instagram Gains, Blogs Lose," *University of Massachusetts Dartmouth*, 2015.
- 7 Kieran Dahl, "The State of Social Media Content, in 12 Charts," *The Content Strategist*, September 14, 2015 (<https://contently.com/strategist/2015/09/14/the-state-of-social-media-content-in-12-charts/>).

About the Authors



Jen McClure is a strategic and visionary leader with a deep understanding of how to transform businesses through digital and social media strategies. Currently CEO of JEM Consulting, LLC, a Silicon Valley-based consultancy dedicated to helping organizations gain competitive advantage through the use of digital technologies, McClure founded the Digital Center of Excellence and served as Vice President of Digital & Social Media at Thomson Reuters, the world's leading source of intelligent information for businesses and professionals, powered by the world's most trusted news organization. She joined Thomson Reuters in 2010. Prior to joining Thomson Reuters, McClure served as Managing Director of Re:Imagine Group, a consulting firm focused on helping clients to re-imagine their business models for the digital age. She was Chief Marketing Officer of Redwood Collaborative Media, a start-up focused on building professional online communities for technology professionals from 2008 to 2010; and Managing Director of Albrycht McClure & Partners, a strategic marketing and communications consulting firm, specializing in serving high-tech Silicon Valley start-ups from 2000 to 2005. She also held marketing, public relations and financial management roles at Ziff-Davis and Ketchum Public Relations.

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