

Social Media Strategies That Silence Skeptics

Interview with Alan Rudnick

TT: Okay, Alan, let's get started. The reason I've invited you on the call today is because you're someone who is excelling in using social media with a service that is not traditionally associated with it. I believe this is a great opportunity to gather some insight about the benefits of social media from somebody who isn't a "guru," but is using it every day with great success. Please give us a little background about yourself.

AR: Thank you, Tom. I am both a blogger and an author of a book coming out next year. I'm also a pastor. Working in ministry, I have found social media to be an excellent way to both assist people and relay a religious message at the same time. I have an online presence as a commentator and blogger focusing on issues of faith, and have been able to merge that with being a pastor full-time.

Most of my upbringing and education was pretty traditional. I attended undergraduate and graduate school. Being a Generation Xer, technology has always been a part of my life. Facebook and Twitter were becoming more popular as I was growing up. I started a blog when I was younger. It was a natural progression to blend those with my ministry. Of course, I am a pastor, but social media allows me to "market" my message using content in a way that is both instant and meaningful.

TT: In recent years there has been a lot of discussion about young people leaving the church. Do you see social media as a way to bring them back into the church?

AR: Yes, and that trend is shifting. Young people are beginning to return to the church. Alternatively, older people are now embracing technology, so the church can use social media to communicate with them, as well. We used to just see young adults on Facebook. Now their parents and grandparents are sharing. I can use social media to instantly convey messages about upcoming events. I can post pictures and videos. People can post messages on my blogs. Social media is just another way to connect.

Churches are beginning to understand the power of social media. They realize that it's not just a novelty anymore. They don't have to spend a lot of money or put a lot of resources behind it, and they can see the immediate benefit of having a social media presence.

TT: Now, you saw this natural fit between social media and the church, but I imagine there are still a lot of people out there where that isn't so clear. Many are still hesitant to get started in social media or are even intimidated by it. What is your advice for these people?

AR: I recently gave a social media presentation in San Juan, Puerto Rico to a middle-aged audience who were doubtful that social media could work for them. The first thing I told them

was not to compare what they want to do to somebody else. Anyone establishing a social media presence in order to become a celebrity or a star is probably getting into it for the wrong reason.

The first thing you should do is identify your goal for having an online presence on Facebook or Twitter. Do you just want a lot of followers? Are you looking to connect with clients and businesses? Once you identify your goal, then you can move to the next step, which is starting to build a base of followers. This is something which has to be organic.

That means you can't force it. You can't force a thousand people to follow you on Twitter. Start small. Create a very simple Facebook page or website. Don't feel like you have to hit a home run when you're first at bat. Some of it is trial and error. The more natural you make it and the more you move at your own pace, the more people will appreciate what you're doing.

Using social media doesn't require you to be something you're not. If you're a very outgoing person, people will see that in what you're doing and what you promote. If you're more of an introvert, then maybe communicating with people one-on-one online is a better way to help you establish a relationship or promote your business.

TT: Do you find that people get too hung up with the number of followers or friends they have? That this holds people back thinking *If I don't have an audience, what's the point of doing this?*

AR: Yes, and that's a big misconception about social media. My philosophy has always been that it's not about how many people are following you, but how you are engaging the audience that you do have. You may only have 150 or 200 people following you, but if you engage these 200 people in a quality way, it will have much more of a benefit.

When it comes to my ministry, I need to make sure I connect with my friends and followers. If you're not putting out quality messages once a day or even once a week, people are going to lose interest. Social media is just a tool, and people need to see it as just another way to connect, and not be intimidated by it. That's the goal.

I advise people to finish the following statement: "I want to have a presence on Facebook so that..." and finish the statement. That will help you realize your passion and your goal. Instead of just opening up a Facebook or Twitter account blindly, you should know that you want to have a Facebook account so that you can share updates about your product or updates about your blog. That kind of purpose statement will give you the focus you need for your social media presence.

TT: Now you blog quite a bit, including for your local newspaper, and I know that's an opportunity many people would love to have. Can you give a little insight into how that opportunity came about? How you were able to expand your personal blog to having an audience with a local newspaper?

AR: It started because I saw an opportunity. I saw different news stories I wanted to comment on, and I also wanted to provide a ministry resource for people. That's when I decided to start my own blog, and I used WordPress which was really easy.

As I started to blog, my audience kept growing. Then I noticed that the *Albany Times Union* newspaper had no blogs on Christianity. I emailed my blog to a content editor, followed up with a phone call and asked him to take a look at the blog. He loved it and told me the paper would love to have me as a blogger on Christianity.

It was an opportunity I was seeking that would allow me to advertise my blog and get the word out. During that search, I stumbled upon the fact that there was this huge missing niche at the *Albany Times Union*. They saw the content and they knew what they were getting. It was an easy decision for them.

TT: I understand you've also been interviewed on the news as well as had other media opportunities. Have those come about as a result of your blogging?

AR: Oh, absolutely. I received a call from a radio station in Pittsburgh after I blogged on the Joe Paterno incident and the Sandusky incident at Penn State. They found it on my blog in the *Albany Times Union*. They liked what I had to say, and they wanted to interview me for the radio program. I was interviewed right after a major author and seminary professor. Being interviewed right after him was really cool, because I was being viewed as someone who is an authority on the Penn State scandal from a faith perspective.

Then I started getting people interested in reviewing books on my blog. People doing book tours, blog tours. Then I started to see different news outlets or religious newsletters starting to take quotes from my blog. People were reading the content after just doing Google searches for a particular phrase.

At that point I started researching search engine optimization. As the interest in the blog grew, so did my interest in understanding the finer details of social media so that I could be more effective. When people are researching current religious news, I want to be one of the top searches that comes up.

So, each opportunity has really encouraged me to go further and to learn more so that I could continue my presence and continue being more of an outlet for religious commentary and ministry on my blog.

TT: You mentioned an incredible tip just now. You're blogging about topics that are in the news. If it's currently in the news, people will already be searching for it. That gives you a jump-start on people finding your blog, because you're writing about topics that people are searching for. How do you select the specific topics to blog about? Are you just following the news? Do you just fall upon something you believe would make a great blog post? What's the criteria for you taking the time to write a blog post?

AR: Probably my first priority is that it's timely. It's something current. I don't want to write about anything that happened six months ago that nobody has any interest in. I keep an eye on several news services, including CNN, the *Washington Post* and the *LA Times*. I keep an eye on some news items that may or may not have anything to do with my blog.

A couple of years ago, there were a lot of stories in the news about negative reactions to politicians. I wrote a blog post called, "Three Reasons Why We Love Angry Outbursts." That really got people's interest because at the time, the real hot news story was a congressman interrupting President Barack Obama in the middle of his State of the Union speech to Congress. Everyone was talking about that.

I tried to find an angle on that story that was different. Everyone was talking about this particular story. I tried to come up with an angle that nobody was talking about, was something that caught the reader's interest, and something compelling and different. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. That's part of the trial and error of blogging and social media.

In addition, I always try to find stories that may not necessarily be hot news stories on a national level, but are interesting to people in the Albany area. I try to keep a pulse on the news that's going on locally, particularly the religious news. I also watch what's going on with technology. For example, I blogged about the pitfalls of Facebook changing over to the News Feed feature.

That was timely enough that WordPress.com picked it up and featured it on their site. All of a sudden, I had thousands of people reading my post just because I blogged on a hot topic.

TT: Incredible. It's just instant traffic.

AR: Oh, yes, instant traffic. I went from a couple of hundred people a day to a couple of thousand in a matter of minutes, and it was just because I found a timely news topic and I used a service that already had a broad base of users.

TT: In addition to writing about timely topics, are there other things you're doing to direct attention to your blog? For example, when you blog about a newsworthy event, do you send out press releases? What are some other ways that you attract attention to your blog?

AR: Press releases don't work for me, personally. My main method of getting the word out is Facebook, because I've already built a large network of friends on Facebook (and when I was doing this, I didn't even know I would be writing a blog). Friends. Colleagues. People I've met. I have a little over a thousand friends on Facebook, so when I write a blog post, I just post it on my wall and immediately people start looking at it.

I will also go on Twitter, because I've already built a base of people who have similar interests. I'll write a post, and if I know it will be interesting to some people, I'll tag those people on Twitter so they can read it. People then tell their followers to check it out by retweeting it. I use Facebook and Twitter as the main ways to notify people I've written a new blog post or am working on a new project.

TT: You mentioned the two different social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter. Can you go into some detail as to what you see the differences are between the major social networking sites of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+? How do you determine where to focus your attention?

AR: I use this analogy. If you think of information as a body of water, then Facebook is like a lake with a dam. There's all this information in this lake which is slowly being let out. Somebody can post something on Facebook, and it will float around that lake for a couple of hours, sometimes even for a couple of days. And you can go back to that information, because the information is dammed up and released slowly. Facebook is more of a connecting website. You don't have to worry about the speed at which you need to keep up with everything.

Twitter is more like a river. If you put a little paper boat in a river, it's going to float away very quickly and it's unlikely you're going to catch it. Twitter has this constant flow or stream of information. As that stream is running, you can only keep up with it as quickly as you can scoop up the information. Twitter has a much more instant nature to it. You have to be a little bit more regimented about checking Twitter. Having it on your BlackBerry or on your iPhone or on your Android device so that as the day goes by, you're able to check it. With Facebook, several hours or even a day can go by and you can still keep up with post and make replies.

So, I would say those are the main differences between those two websites. One is more of a slow release of information and the other one is just a constant stream that either you keep up with or you don't.

TT: Have you messed around with Google+ any?

AR: Yeah. At first I was really skeptical because Google has created a number of social media websites and tools that have flopped. When Google+ came out, I immediately grabbed an account just in case it began to grow. I just saw a news article stating that a year from now, Google+ could quadruple its number of users. I think they already have 55 to 60 million users, and they could quadruple that number in a year.

So, I've begun to build a base of people on Google+, but I haven't really committed to it, yet, because not enough people are on it. The day will come, probably, when Facebook, just like MySpace, becomes less interesting. It's possible that Google+ could be, but I'm not putting all my eggs in that basket yet. I just want to test the waters a bit while I continue to use Facebook and Twitter until those no longer become effective avenues for sharing information.

TT: I agree with you. I also have a Google+ account. People seem very slow to embrace it who are outside of the business or social media community. I think it's going to be difficult to get people who use Facebook to transition to another medium. So, you're right. I think it will take some time and we're just going to have to wait it out and see what's going to happen.

AR: Now, I have to confess that from time to time I get social media fatigue. I get fatigued by keeping up with Facebook and Twitter, and I don't really want yet another site to maintain. I believe that people should use social media on a limited number of sites. I've also started using a number of tools that will place a post both on Facebook and Twitter simultaneously.

I think the reason why Google has not been successful is because MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook were all organic start-ups. They were started by a small group of people whose ideas grew. Google is trying to create something big by starting it big. I don't believe a large company advertising a new product can compete with something that starts organically; that as people begin to use it and give feedback, it organically evolves.

Google keeps saying, "This is the next great thing," and people are responding, "No, it isn't, because it needs these ten things." It then takes months for Google to change it. So for me anyway, Facebook and Twitter are mostly what I use at this time.

TT: The one feature I do like with Google+ that's not available on Facebook and Twitter is the Hangout feature. It allows you to have these video chats with people who are in your circles. I believe you can have eight people chatting together at one time. A lot of people are embracing that feature.

There's an author that I follow, Martin Lindstrom. He's a great writer. About a month ago, he posted a note saying he was going to do a Hangout and select random users to join him in the Hangout. Fortunately, I was selected, so I was one of eight people who were able to go back and forth with him, via video, asking him questions.

The reason I think it's a great feature is because you get that personal touch. It's as if the person is sitting right in front of you. It's a very cool feature. I'm waiting to see if more people latch onto it. But that's the primary feature I think Google+ has that's different than some of the other social media sites.

You talked earlier about tools that you use for posting to multiple sites at once. Can you go into some detail on what tools you use to help with your social media efforts?

AR: I try not to use too many automated social media tools, because if you use too many automated tools, you really lose that personal touch with your followers or constituents. If people feel that you're just putting out robo content, they're not going to feel like you're a quality contact.

I definitely like to use things like TweetDeck, which is now owned by Twitter. That allows me to keep track of new followers. It allows me to keep track of hot trends on Twitter. It allows me to keep track of all the direct messages I get. So, that's been helpful.

HootSuite is a good one because they have a little icon button where at the beginning of the day, I'll identify about ten news stories that are religion-based, and I'll time them throughout the day

so I don't have to be sitting there at my desk waiting to send these out to my followers. I'll use HootSuite to space all those stories out.

There are a number of Twitter tools out there that can help you. One is called Unfollow. That allows you to see who has actually unfollowed you. That's helpful because if you see that people in a particular profession or a particular niche are starting to unfollow you, that lets you know that the content you've been providing, for one reason or another, has not hit a sweet spot with those people. That's something that people rarely use. I think it's really important to know why people unfollow you, because that can help you focus your content.

I have found a couple of other automated tools to be helpful. One popular feature on Twitter is Follow Friday. If you've been interacting with certain people during any given week, you can use the Auto Follow Friday tool to search your timeline in Twitter, and it will automatically post a follow to the people you've been talking with the most.

There's also a variety of sites that can be linked together for cross-use. LinkedIn and Foursquare can be linked to your Twitter account. Maybe you want to post that you've been to Google's headquarters. You can go on FourSquare, post that you were there and it will automatically post it on Facebook or Twitter. I really try to find tools that bridge all the different social media sites in a way that doesn't make it look impersonal.

Fortunately, all the major sites have accepted that we are integrating them, so sites like Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare and LinkedIn are starting to allow the sites to access each other. That allows you to avoid the daunting task of updating all these sites one by one.

TT: Good point. A word that jumped out at me that you mentioned was "interact," and it's something we haven't covered too much in our talk here. How do you determine who are the best people to interact with on social media? You're not just putting out content, but interacting with people. How do you find those people and how do you determine who should get your attention?

AR: I look for people who share the same interests. I try not to connect with the people who say they are a social media guru or a marketing pro and brag about the number of followers they have. I want to follow somebody who is more down-to-earth and who I know I can connect with. I want to connect with people that have the same interests as I do (religion, faith and social media) but aren't people who are so above the clouds that they don't have time to interact.

I know that I can interact and get a quick response from almost anybody I've followed. Of course, there are several celebrities on Twitter. I happen to really like *Time* magazine's Joel Stein. I think he's a really funny and witty writer. One day, I was reading one of his articles in *Time* magazine, and he talked about how he was on Twitter, so I started following him.

One day, I came up with a witty tweet that I could write about him. I said something like, "My goal in life is to get Joel Stein to follow me so I can brag to all my followers, and then they will all unfollow me because they're tired of me bragging about my friendship with Joel Stein." He

apparently saw that, thought it was really funny and started following me. Joe Stein has over a million followers, and he only follows about 200 people.

And from there, we started e-mailing back and forth. I told him that I used a couple of his articles in sermons, and he wanted to know all about it. So I formed a social media relationship with Joel Stein. He's down-to-earth, and he's a guy who will interact with people. I wouldn't expect a response from Shaq if you follow him on Twitter. But there are some people on Twitter who have a ton of followers and who are down-to-earth enough that you can interact with them and engage with them in a meaningful way.

TT: Well, one final question. What do you believe is the future of social media? Are there any changes or advancements that you predict we might see?

AR: It's always hard to predict social media. It's not changing on a monthly or yearly basis. It's really changing on a daily basis. As technology with smartphones becomes more advanced and integrated, you'll start to see devices begin to integrate with social media a lot more. For instance, we've already seen Blu-ray players (DVD players that have WiFi on them) enable us to access additional content online. Now some of those players can interact with your Facebook account to tell your friends what you're watching.

One of my big concerns about where we're going in social media is the amount of information that is being shared. I don't think people realize the massive amount of personal information about them that's being shared. Most people don't give a second thought about it, but there are so many things that others really don't need to know anything about. There are some real privacy issues.

My big concern is that as we become more and more connected, we really have to be careful about what we share, particularly on devices. It's no secret that companies advertising on the web are doing everything they can to learn about our personal preferences. I think it's very important to be vigilant about what information we share and how we share it.

And it will continue. As we get further into social media, it will become easier and easier to share information. The key is that companies are going to be watching that information to try to gain marketing perspective on the buying habits of people. We really have to be mindful and establish an ethical philosophy about what companies should be sharing, what *we* should be sharing and how we should be sharing it.

TT: I think you're right. I think that is going to become an issue. It seems as people get more involved with social media, they're sharing more and more. Conversely, I think there's already too much stuff being posted that people just don't care about. I wonder when it's all going to get to be too much. The bottom line is that social media isn't going away and it's not just a fad. Do you agree?

AR: Well, I definitely don't think it's a fad because of the amount of resources that major Fortune 500 companies are putting into sites like Twitter, Facebook and other social media.

Businesses have finally realized that social media is not like the dot com problem in the 1990s. Some of these sites are really connecting people.

And so, companies are using social media to do giveaways and promotions. It's all free content. It's a free way for businesses to advertise. And I think organizations and businesses are seeing just how big it's becoming. I mean, there's a half billion people on Facebook, and something like that isn't going to go away tomorrow.

Facebook may not always be around, but Google has lasted a long time. Google came on the scene in 1998, and it's still going strong. I think the social media companies that survive will be the ones that evolve as needed. They'll be the ones able to meet demands and recognize new opportunities. So, no, I don't think they'll be going away, but it will look different five to ten years from now. We'll continue to use the social media concept for the foreseeable future.

TT: That's excellent insight. Before we end here, I'd like to give you the opportunity to tell people how to find you in case they have questions or want to see some of your work. I know you mentioned you've got a book coming out. Could you give us a way to reach you?

AR: Absolutely. My Twitter handle is @AlanRud. You can certainly look me up on Facebook. Please check out my *Albany Times Union* blog by going to TimesUnion.com, clicking on the blog section and then scrolling down and looking for my name.

Also you can go to my personal blog which is OnTheBema.com. I often post about social media, as well as give commentary on Facebook and Twitter. And I do have a book coming out. It's called *The Work of the Associate Pastor* with Judson Press and it's coming out next fall.

TT: Well, Alan, I really appreciate you taking the time to share some insight into social media. As I said at the beginning, you're really excelling at social media, and I really admire you because you're doing so with an industry that many people wouldn't view as one that embraces social media. So, I commend you for that. I'm a fan. I enjoy watching what you're doing on social media. Again, thanks for the time.

AR: Sure, Tom. Thank you.

[End of interview]