

Companies are like-minded on social media jobs

October 5 2011, By Shan Li

Like many people, Evan Cunningham spends time on Facebook and Twitter while at the office. He sends out party invitations or chats about beer. But unlike most people, he gets paid for it. And he gets a title.

Cunningham's job is one of the newest in corporate America: [social media](#) manager. It's also known, depending on the company, as social media wizard, social media ninja, social media diva or just plain [online communities](#) manager.

No matter what they're called, experts in marketing a company's name and wares on social network sites - such as Facebook, Twitter and special interest forums - are in demand.

"This was the year when companies large and small began to realize the importance of social media, and there has been lots of investment in social media," said Augie Ray, a former [Forrester Research](#) analyst who now handles social media for insurance group USAA.

No one knows exactly how many social media jobs exist, but a quick scan of online recruitment sites shows a bounty of businesses looking to hire.

"On any given week, we may see hundreds of new social media jobs posted," said Kathy O'Reilly, director of social media relations for job recruitment site Monster.

The number of social media-related jobs on Monster has surged 75 percent over the last year, O'Reilly said. About 155 positions are available a month, up from an average of 88 a month a year ago.

But what are the qualifications for the job? Cunningham admitted it's a vague area.

"I just sort of stumbled into social media," said Cunningham, 24, of Los Angeles. "It made it easier because I'm young, and people assume you know what you're doing."

After graduating from the University of Virginia with a double major in political theory and media studies, he worked in social media for several marketing agencies, where his duties included chatting with women on forums about their [dry skin](#) for Vaseline and finding celebrities willing to tweet (for a fee) about the Kia Optima.

Pabst Brewing Co. hired him in July to spark conversations about its beer and other drinks and to check social network sites for customer complaints that could escalate into a crisis.

On a typical day, Cunningham scans Facebook, Twitter and Google alerts for any mention of Pabst products. He'll most likely find them among people who have signed on to affinity groups - for example, Facebook users who "like" Pabst, and therefore get updates, special offers and other messages that he sends out about events and promotions.

If he finds a favorable message on Twitter about a product, he might re-tweet it to all his followers on that social network, which favors brief, often non-grammatical posts. A recent example: "It's the freaking weekend, baby. I'mma have me some Pabst."

Cunningham also looks for comments that might indicate dissension among consumers, and if it looks like the situation could turn damaging, he'll try to intervene before the complaint spreads.

Offline, he meets with the marketing team to integrate social media into traditional ad campaigns. When the company made a music video by celebrity spokesman Snoop Dogg to promote a new product, Blast by Colt 45, he suggested putting behind-the-scenes videos and other materials on Facebook, where they could be viewed by people who "like" the brand.

Some companies use social media staffers to boost traffic to their sites. Edmunds.com, a Santa Monica, Calif., car information site that is mostly ad-supported, has five staffers to handle its social media presence. Car buyers haggling at dealerships or confused about anything auto-related are encouraged to use Twitter to send them queries, said Avi Steinlauf, president of Edmunds.

"If there's chatter going on in the Twittersphere about buying cars or selling cars or car enthusiasts having a conversation, we'd like an opportunity to engage them," Steinlauf said.

With 800 million users on Facebook and 200 million on Twitter, it's no wonder that companies are desperate to reach social media users. But it's not as cut-and-dried as buying an ad.

It's "more like being at a cocktail party" than a direct marketing campaign, said Tom Poole, managing vice president of digital mobile and emerging channels at Capital One Financial Corp. He said the firm is still experimenting with the medium.

"It's less of a direct sale and more about creating a face for the brand that is human."

There have been blunders along the way.

When Amy Winehouse died in July, Microsoft sent out a tweet encouraging fans to remember the singer by buying her last album from Zune, the company's digital marketplace. Thousands of Twitter users responded with tweets of their own that included, "utterly tasteless," "vile-leaches - seriously?" and "Microsoft - failing at social media."

O'Reilly of Monster said the specialty has gone through growing pains but is getting more professional. A sure sign: Some of the gimmicky job titles are on the wane, including at Monster.

"We added a social media ninja at the very beginning," O'Reilly said. "It was very trendy at the time, but then you grow out of it."

Ray said it's about time. "As a social media professional, I am personally embarrassed by all the wizards and gurus and ninjas," he said. "It's a serious profession."

He also said that businesses are more often turning to marketing professionals for their social network needs rather than handing the job to tech-savvy youths. It's a sweet turn of events for Raleigh Gerber, a social media consultant in her 40s who didn't want to disclose her exact age.

"So many companies will just toss it over to an intern, thinking that these young people are always on social networks, so they must be good at social media," Gerber said. "It rarely works."

Average starting wage for social media jobs, according to the jobs search site Simply Hired, is about \$55,000.

Academia is starting to take the field seriously too. Birmingham City

University in England now offers a master's degree in social media. Beginning this fall, Northeastern University in Boston will offer a specialty in social media for master's students studying corporate communications.

"We tried to cover social media in other classes, but we realized that it's become important enough that we need something much more in-depth," said Carl Zangerl, a faculty teacher and coordinator of the Northeastern program.

But no matter how much the title is dressed up, the job still largely involves sending out messages on [Facebook](#) and Twitter.

"I have trouble explaining my job to my mother," said Scott Skurnick, whose title at Edmunds is executive director of search engine optimization and social media programming.

Worse, he said, "I have a hard time keeping a straight face when I tell people what I do for a living."

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