

# Social Media for Government Services: A Case Study of Human Services

Gina Ciano and Amanda Dennett

**Abstract** The Australian Government Department of Human Services has been using social media since 2009 to support its customers and improve service delivery. It has done so in a number of ways: by monitoring social media to listen to citizens, establishing Facebook and Twitter accounts to engage with the public, and creating online communities. In this chapter, we present how we have been using social media, some success stories together with the challenges we had to face. We also briefly describe our governance framework and how we might measure success.

**Keywords** Social media · Facebook · Twitter · Online community · Citizen engagement · Emergency management · Risk management · Health · Social services

## 1 Introduction

The Australian Government Department of Human Services<sup>1</sup> uses social media technologies to support its customers and improve service delivery. Since 2009, the department has been using social media to engage with customers, staff and stakeholders [1]. It is responsible for delivering Medicare,<sup>2</sup> Centrelink<sup>3</sup> and Child Support<sup>4</sup> services to 23.8 million Australians.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.humanservices.gov.au/>.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/dhs/medicare>.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/dhs/centrelink>.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/dhs/child-support>.

<sup>5</sup>Australian Government Department of Human Services Annual Report 2013–14.

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The work has been led by the department's Communication Division, by staff with a background in communication strategy, journalism and media, public relations, and customer service. This provides the essential mix of skills needed for government to effectively engage with citizens online.

The department's social media presence has grown from one Facebook and one Twitter account, to over a dozen official social media accounts across Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube and LinkedIn. A small team of specialist Social Media Advisers manage these accounts, and also participate in a range of third party online communities, such as Whirlpool and Yahoo Answers, where our customers congregate to respond to enquiries or provide information.

In addition, the team has worked on social media research projects, such as the Next Step online community [6] (see Chap. 9), with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) under the Human Services Delivery Research Alliance [3].

All of this social media engagement is governed by robust processes and policies, including a social media risk management plan [2].

In this chapter, we will cover topics such as social media monitoring and listening to citizen needs online to find issues and help resolve them, engaging in meaningful conversations with citizens online and correcting misinformation about government payments and services. We discuss managing risk and privacy, along with ideas and methods for measuring success in social media engagement projects. We present clear examples of our various experiences in adopting social media to engage with the public to achieve business objectives, and discuss the Australian Government Department of Human Services' experiences in establishing mutually beneficial relationships with citizens through social media.

## 2 Listening to Citizens

For the Department of Human Services, entering into the world of social media began with monitoring mentions of keywords like 'Centrelink' and 'Youth Allowance' (a specific payment type) to find what citizens were saying about the department online. As was the experience for many other government and non-government organisations, this low-risk beginning allowed the department to gather information and understand customer needs before implementing a proactive social media strategy.

### 2.1 *Listening and Learning*

We started out using freely available tools such as Google Alerts<sup>6</sup> and social search websites such as socialmention<sup>7</sup> to gain an insight into customer sentiment

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.google.com.au/alerts>.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.socialmention.com/>.

about the department and the services it provides. This information provided some surprises—for example, that social media wasn't simply another avenue for complaint. Rather, posts showed that people wanted the opportunity to seek out information about health and social services and ask questions about their eligibility for payments and support. Figure 1 shows an example post from Google Alert.

In addition, we discovered that social media was not used exclusively by young people, and the places our customers were choosing to congregate online were not always where we expected it to be. While Facebook and Twitter continue to be the leading social media platforms used by Australians,<sup>8</sup> our customers were often choosing other platforms to share their questions and comments about Centrelink, Medicare and child support issues. Some niche online communities of interest provided an avenue for our customers to share their concerns with other people who already had their trust.

**Example:** A discussion thread from the 'grey nomads'<sup>9</sup> online community, a caravan enthusiast forum for older Australians, appeared in the department's social media search results. Community members were sharing their experiences of travelling around Australia in their retirement. Some were receiving Age Pension and doing occasional casual work. There were discussions about whether customers had to visit the Centrelink Service Centre nearest their permanent home, or if they could visit any location around Australia to report their income and other changes in their circumstances. Having found these questions, the department was able to clarify that customers can visit any office, and that online and phone self service options are also available, meaning that grey nomads can update their changes in circumstances while they are on the road – news that was gratefully received!

## 2.2 *Dealing with Volume*

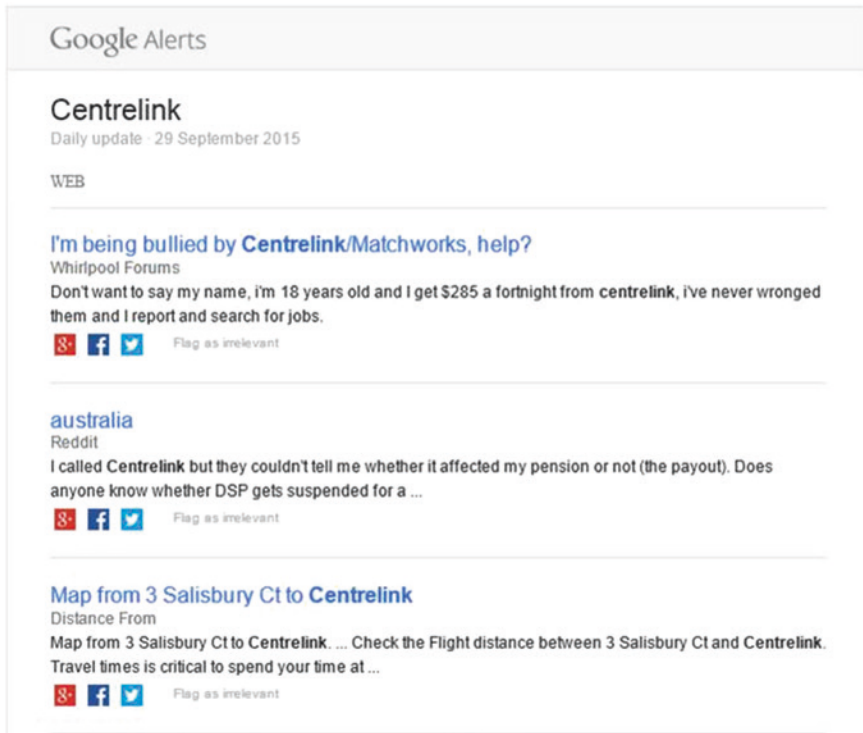
The results from our early social media searches were overwhelming. There were thousands of mentions daily, making it impossible for staff to manually sort through and prioritise. The problem to be resolved was how to find important mentions amongst the noise created by millions of social media posts every day—complaints that could help the department improve its services, or questions from individuals that the department could help answer online.

The department partnered with CSIRO to develop Vizie, a social media monitoring tool to address this need [4; see also Chap. 11 in this book]. Vizie automates the social media monitoring work previously undertaken by the department's social media staff and keeps records of online interactions to ensure the department meets its record keeping requirements. At a glance, social media staff can see what issues are trending, which customer posts require more immediate attention, and the words people are using to describe their interactions with the department.

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.sensis.com.au/about/our-reports/sensis-social-media-report>.

<sup>9</sup><http://thegreynomads.com.au/>.

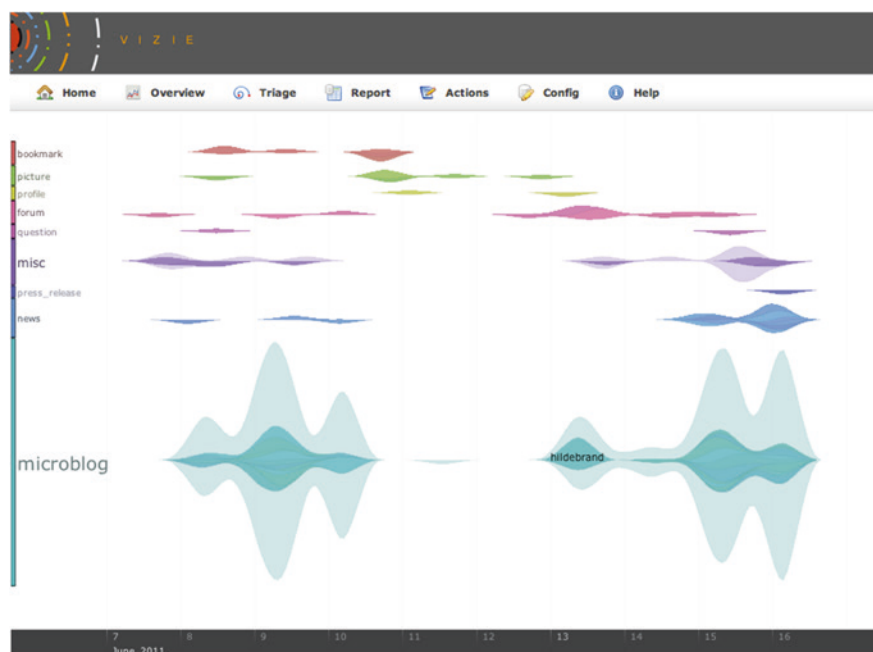


**Fig. 1** An example post relevant to human services from Google alert

One of the key differences between Vizie and other social media monitoring tools is that customer issues are prioritised above popular posts or those made by online influencers, to ensure people in need get help quickly. This work changed the traditional view of what is considered an important social media post to suit the government service delivery context that we work in.

**Example:** Using Vizie, social media staff identified a discussion thread in a niche online forum for overclocking enthusiasts<sup>10</sup> where a member has asked his online network for advice about how to support his father who lived with mental health issues. He was working but that meant he couldn't provide the care he believed his father needed, and was considering whether Centrelink payments may be an option. Many of the responses he received were negative about the idea of leaving a job to receive Centrelink payments, even if the reason was to support a father with disability, and an adversarial discussion thread resulted. To avoid inflaming the conversation further, the department posted a private message in response to the individual with information about payments for people with disability and their carers, along with information about how much a person can work and earn before payments are affected.

<sup>10</sup>Overclocking is the process of forcing a computer or hardware component to operate faster than the manufacturer-specified clock frequency. Source Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overclocking>.



**Fig. 2** A Vizie visualisation and interface

The department would not have found this individual's question by tracking only popular social media sites. By offering information to help his family's situation, we ensured an individual received the help they needed, through the medium in which they had gone searching for it.

Figure 2 shows one of the dashboards Vizie offers to view and explore social media. Vizie offers an integrated interface to numerous social media platforms. As shown in the figure, the visualisation presents the posts separated by platform, and grouped per topic. The analyst can interact with this visualisation to access the specific posts.

## 2.3 Crafting Keywords

To obtain the relevant social media posts, there is a need to define keywords. Establishing and refining appropriate keywords is critical for successful social media monitoring. We started out with a simple list of payments and services to monitor, then refined these over time to improve the relevancy of search results.

The department is fortunate that the names of many of its payments and programmes are unique—such as 'Austudy', 'Newstart Allowance' and 'Centrelink'—making social search easier for some topics. However there are still

difficulties capturing all relevant information for keywords such as ‘Medicare’ and ‘child support’ as these are terms also used in the United Kingdom and United States of America.

We have undertaken significant work testing and refining the keywords used in Vizie, drawing on the expertise of social media staff and researchers at CSIRO. A lot of effort has gone into excluding words from results in order to limit the number of irrelevant results returned. For example, during discussions in the United States about the future of their Medicare programme in 2012, the department changed its search to exclude the words ‘Congress’, ‘Barack’, ‘Obama’ and ‘Obamacare’ to try to keep the focus of search results on Australian Medicare references.

While the quality of search results has improved over time, some manual sorting of search results for these terms is still required. The benefit of this work for our customers is clear, as outlined in the following example.

**Example:** A customer group not easily reached through traditional or direct communication channels was identified during searches for Medicare discussions in social media. We found several anonymous questions were posted in online forums, such as Yahoo Answers!, by 14 and 15 year old young people asking about seeing a doctor without a Medicare card, or using their family Medicare card, and seeking reassurance that their parents wouldn’t know. Responses shared in those forums can sometimes be unsympathetic, or contain inaccurate information for a customer’s individual circumstances.

To counter this and help increase the chances that the young people would see the doctor, the department responded publicly to let the young person know that doctor visits are private and also provided information for young people wishing to get their own Medicare card.

### 3 Changing Perceptions Through Engaging with Citizens

Social media provides a key opportunity for governments to build relationship with citizens online, develop trust and collaborate to co-design the future of public services. In the years since the Department of Human Services established its social media monitoring processes, work has expanded to include online customer and community engagement. This work has allowed customers to participate in customer service and co-design discussions anonymously, creating an environment where they feel comfortable sharing honest feedback.

#### 3.1 *Joining Online Communities*

Where the department has differed from most other government agencies in Australia and overseas is its work in online communities. As referenced in some of the examples above, we have sought out, joined and actively contributed to

numerous online communities. The aim is to reach our customers in the online spaces they prefer to use.

Not only has this work expanded the reach of our information online, but it has helped change community perceptions and build improve the department's reputation as a progressive and transparent government agency.

**Example:** The department's social media monitoring work uncovered a lively discussion thread about government payments for student in the Whirlpool online discussion forum.<sup>11</sup> While it was exciting to see young people sharing links to the Human Services website, policy documents and asking clarifying questions about their eligibility for student payments, some of the responses shared by fellow Whirlpool members offered information that may have mislead people about what the support they could receive. As you would expect, member responses related to each individuals' own experience in applying for payments.

The department decided to join Whirlpool to participate in the discussion, to let students know that eligibility for payments depends on a person's own circumstances – just because another student in their class does or does not receive payments, doesn't mean they will be in the same situation. At first, posts by the department were not well received. Students wanted to know why we had entered the conversation and whether we were watching their conversations 'big brother' style. We answered their questions honestly, explaining our aims of making ourselves available to answer their questions online, saving them a phone call, and correcting misinformation where needed. This eventually won them over. In the past 5 years the relationship has changed to one where members now defer to our staff to answer questions when they don't know the answer themselves, often saying 'Flick from Human Services should be on here soon, she'll know'. For the department, this type of acceptance and change in sentiment has been a key measure in the success of our social media outreach work.

### ***3.2 Human Services on Facebook and Twitter***

Alongside our social media monitoring and work in online communities, the department created official accounts on Facebook and Twitter to allow customers to find credible Australian Government information on the social media platforms they preferred most.

The first accounts were created for the General Manager and media spokesperson, Hank Jongen, and launched in 2010. This was chosen as a natural evolution to the work Mr. Jongen already did in engaging with customers through talkback radio interviews by taking those conversations online. Mr. Jongen answers customer questions posted on his Facebook and Twitter accounts (see Figs. 3 and 4) and has participated in Facebook live Q&A events for Older Australians to answer their questions about retirement, Age Pension and Concession Cards.

To help present the human side of our department, the Hank Jongen Facebook page (shown in Fig. 3) regularly shares good news stories to highlight the work

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<sup>11</sup><http://whirlpool.net.au/>.



Fig. 3 A snapshot of Hank Jongen Facebook page

our staff do in their local communities. The popular #giftogiving series on his accounts demonstrate the contributions our staff make to charities.

Over time, the department expanded its approach by creating social media accounts to support various customer audiences, in line with the department's strategic priorities.

Our Student Update Facebook and Twitter accounts launched in 2011 (see Figs. 5 and 6), targeting a young audience we knew were already active on social media. The accounts share information for high school, university and TAFE<sup>12</sup> students with an audience of 18,000.

The department built on this experience, launching the Family Update Facebook and Twitter accounts in 2013 (see Fig. 7) to engage with one of its

<sup>12</sup>TAFE is a vocational education and training provider in Australia.





Fig. 4 A snapshot of Hank Jongen Twitter account

largest customer groups. The aim is to educate and inform customers about the online services and mobile apps available to help them claim and manage family payments while they are already in the digital channel. Our Family Update accounts are still our fastest-growing online community, gathering more than 30,000 likes and followers in the first 18 months.

The accounts have helped influence customer behaviours from always calling the department or visiting an office to ask us a question or update changes to their circumstances. Now, customers ask us approximately 1500 questions per month on social media and use digital services to most transactions, saving phone calls and visits for more sensitive or urgent issues.

Over time the department has expanded its official social media accounts further, to include YouTube, Google+ and Instagram.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>[www.humanservices.gov.au/socialmedia](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/socialmedia).

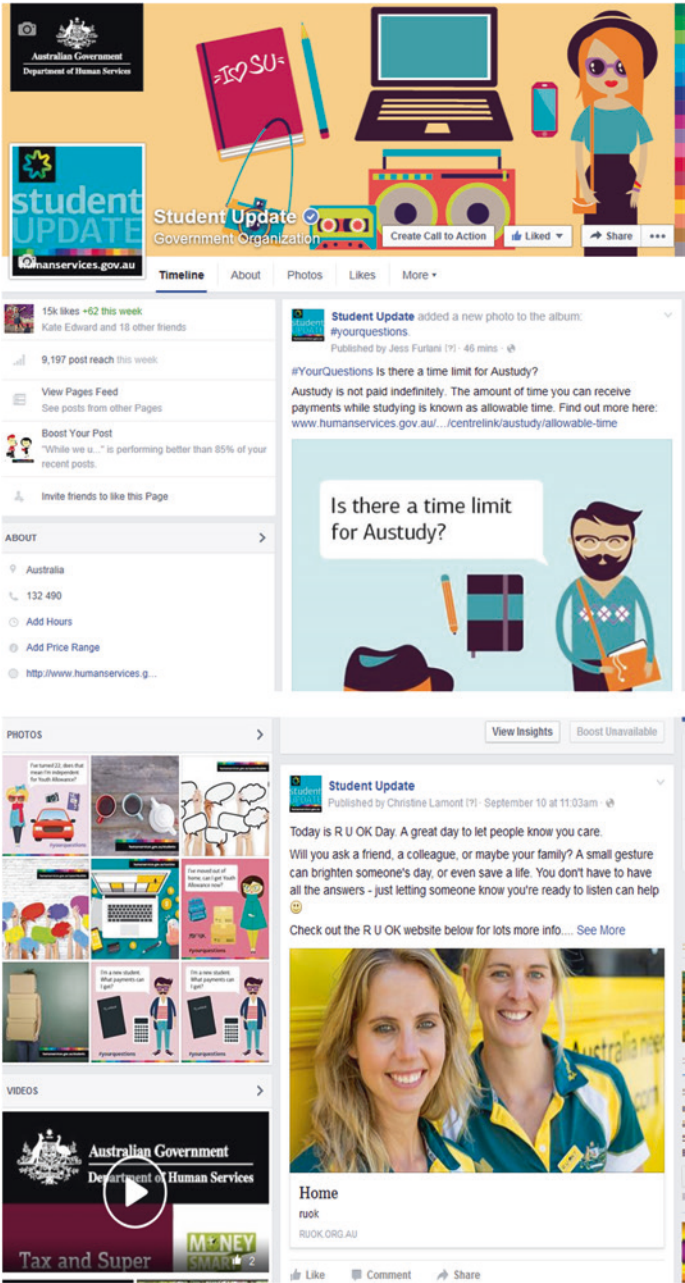


Fig. 5 Snapshots of the student update Facebook page



Fig. 6 Snapshot of the student update Twitter account



Fig. 7 Snapshot of the family update Twitter account

### **3.2.1 Creating Content**

A solid schedule of relevant and helpful content has been critical to the success of these accounts. An average of 2–4 proactive messages are shared each week, with a focus on helping customers to access services for which they are eligible, keep payments by accurately reporting changes in their income and circumstances, and supporting them in the move to self-sufficiency with tips on training and looking for work.

The department's social media staff use an online calendar to plan content several months in advance and clearly show what content is planned for publication across accounts on any given day. There are robust clearance processes in place to ensure that published content is accurate and supports the department's current service focus.

Proactive messages also aim to generate engagement with our customers, encouraging them to post questions or share their experiences in dealing with the department. This approach helps build the department's reputation by ensuring we are open to receiving feedback and are transparent in our responses, while also helping keep our content in the Facebook news feeds of customers who follow our accounts and their friends.

## ***3.3 Social Media Engagement During Emergencies***

In a disaster event, such as flood or fire, social media is increasingly vital in delivering information to communities and strengthening relationships between emergency services and Australian communities.

During these emergencies, the Department of Human Services plays a critical role to support affected Australians—in the physical world and the virtual world. Our Service Officers, along with our specialist staff such as social workers, are some of the first to arrive in disaster-affected communities during the recovery effort. Teams set up temporary offices in Community Recovery Centres to help affected families access Disaster Recovery Payment and other support.

The first time the department tweeted during an emergency was for the floods in Victoria in September 2010 [5]. Since then, we have harnessed our strong social media presence to effectively support customers during and after a disaster—providing timely information about office closures, emergency service centres, and government disaster support.

### **3.3.1 Our Approach**

In establishing our Emergencies Social Media Strategy, we considered the need to share critical payment and service information with citizens after an emergency with the need to ensure we are not contributing unnecessarily to the large volume of social media noise that occurs during and after an emergency.

Our approach recognises the differences between the work the police and State Emergency Services do during an emergency, and the financial aid and social work support that we are responsible for. While police and emergency services are needed immediately during a disaster, people often come to us days and weeks later for information and financial support, once they've dealt with the initial impact.

The department posts proactive messages on its official social media accounts to reach existing customers. The types of content shared include: information about Centrelink and Medicare Service Centre closures in affected areas, links to claim information for Disaster Recovery Payment on the [humanservices.gov.au](http://humanservices.gov.au) website, videos on how to claim and answering common claim questions, and photos and stories from staff who are working on the ground to support people in need.

Wherever possible the department also leverages trending hashtags on Twitter and share posts on community Facebook pages to ensure our emergency information is seen by people in affected communities.

Our proactive social media messages are generally timed in the following way:

1. **During event:** Only critical messages shared, for example if a Service Centre is closed due to an emergency we post messages to offer alternative access to services.
2. **Days after event:** Proactive messages about Disaster Recovery Payment amounts and eligibility, our free Social Work Service, as well as messages identifying which Community Recovery Centres our staff are located at to help access payments and other support.
3. **2–3 weeks after event:** Reminders about financial assistance and social work support, as well as stories and photos provided by our staff about their experiences helping in disaster-affected communities.
4. **6 months after event:** Proactive messages shared with information about the upcoming deadline for claiming Disaster Recovery Payment for the event.

## 4 Facilitating Online Communities

The department has established a range of online communities including *Next Step*, a research partnership with CSIRO [6] (see also Chap. 9 in this book).

*Next Step* was a closed community for parents transitioning between welfare payments and returning to work. Its objectives were to:

- provide informational and emotional support to parents;
- explore if novel technologies could help parents achieve better outcomes for themselves and their families; and
- measure social trust in the community.

Members could access tailored information—videos, resources and podcasts—and discussion forums and live Q&A events where they could ask questions and receive meaningful answers, as well as engage with other community members [7].

This case study will explore how moderators, staff in the Department of Human Services Social Media Team, managed the community and what tactics they used to bootstrap engagement. Firstly, we will provide more detailed information about the community.

## ***4.1 Overview of the Community***

### **4.1.1 Aim**

The aim of *Next Step* was to explore if using social networking technologies could help customers achieve better outcomes for themselves by having access to informational and emotional support. Informational support was provided by having access to tailored resources and Human Services policy experts who could answer their specific questions. Emotional support was provided by having a shared space where members in similar situations could connect and share experiences and knowledge.

A unique aspect of the project was also examining social trust—exploring if trust between members and moderators developed over the life of the community and what could have attributed to these findings [8].

The main activities members could do in the community included:

- **completing member profiles** and finding buddies to work with on activities;
- **completing weekly activities** to help build their skills and confidence to return to work, including how to prepare for a job interview, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and searching for employment opportunities;
- **participating in live Q&A events** with experts to understand the transition process and have their questions answered;
- **participating in discussion forums** about their hopes, fears, concerns and aspirations during this life stage, as well as seeking information about the transition and maintaining welfare payments; and
- **reading, listening and watching content** in the resource section about the transition process, and become prepared to return to work.

### **4.1.2 Audience**

Parents with young children who received a parenting payment (Parenting Payment) and would need to transition onto a parenting allowance (Newstart Allowance) when their youngest child turned 6 or 8 years, or transitioned in the past three months, were invited to join the community.

This niche audience was selected because of the complex transition process, and the impact it has on other aspects of a parent's life including the need to become job ready.

We conducted preliminary research, including focus groups and an online survey, with this audience group before the community began to gain an understanding



of the issues they face, and to identify if there would be value in establishing the community [12, 13]. Key findings included:

- for many there was no clear understanding of the transition process or what was expected of them *“I am unclear about the process.... The lack of communication is the biggest issue... how does the whole process work? ... I am in the dark”*;
- lack of understanding led to feelings of stress and anxiousness *“Definitely stressful and overwhelming”* and *“I felt daunted”*;
- frustration with policy requiring them to transition or perceiving it as a punitive measure *“Why do we cease to be parents when our children turn 8?”*;
- feelings of anxiousness about returning to work; and
- most parents would be open to trying an online community once the concept was explained to them.

The research findings were used to design the community, develop tailored content, and manage the community once live.

As *Next Step* was a research project, only parents in the niche audience group could be invited to join. This limited the ability to recruit new community members and prevented organic growth from members through word of mouth.

Members were invited by letter of invitation via Secure Online Mail with a unique registration token. The double blind recruitment process meant community members could remain anonymous and participate freely in the community [9].

Over the twelve months the community was open, we conducted four recruitment rounds and welcomed hundreds of members to the community.

Figure 8 shows the activity page of the *Next Step* where members perform different activities to enhance their skills.

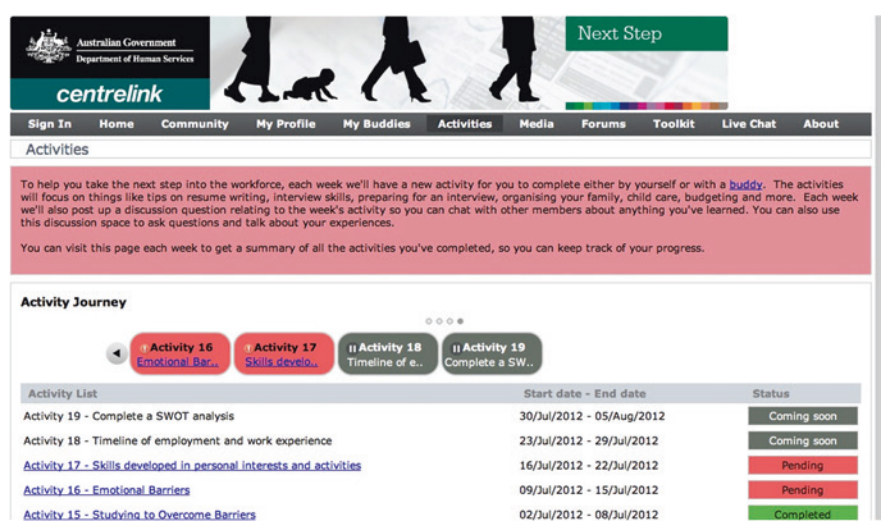


Fig. 8 Activities in NextStep

## 4.2 *Lessons in Building Engagement*

Being a new online community, the biggest challenge moderators faced when the community launched was engagement—overcoming what is often referred to as the ‘cold start’.

As there were restrictions on inviting new community members, moderators focussed their attention on converting as many newcomers to regular members as possible to achieve ‘critical mass’, i.e., the state where the community can sustain itself through member activity.

### 4.2.1 Understanding Community Purpose and Value

To create a community that members would want to return to, and engage with, we needed to understand what type of community we were building and where we could offer members value.

Online communities often fall into one of five types:

1. Place—where members share a geographic region.
2. Practice—where members undertake the same activity.
3. Interest—where members share a specific interest.
4. Action—where members are dedicated to making change in the world.
5. Circumstance—where members have a situation thrust upon them.

We identified *Next Step* was a hybrid community of circumstance and interest. Parents told us during the research focus groups that they felt thrust into this situation of needing to claim Centrelink payments and felt the situation was out of their control. And all community members shared the specific common interest of being parents.

Understanding the type of community we were creating, we designed content and discussion topics to match their needs. We focussed on content that would:

- bond parents;
- push towards more focussed discussions; and
- provide support for dealing with the situation.

Moderators also strongly encouraged members to start their own discussions, and six months into the community launching, member-generated comments and discussions outstripped moderator activity.

### 4.2.2 Bootstrapping Engagement

Populating the community with tailored content and establishing relevant discussion topics was important to create a community members would find valuable, but it was not enough to create engagement—this required members to feel a sense of connection and belonging in the community.



## Establishing Member Connections

The first step to create a sense of belonging was to establish member connections. Each member was asked to complete a ‘profile’ including public and private information. Public information, such as number of children, could be seen by all members and was a way for members to get to know each other without having to actively engage. Private information was used to ‘match’ buddies (people who members would work with to complete group activities) [10].

On the ‘Community’ section of *Next Step*, several member profiles were displayed to encourage all community members to get to know them. At first, this section displayed moderator profiles (see Fig. 9), but once members completed their own profiles, they were invited to feature in this section.

## Providing Different Ways to Engage

The second step in the engagement process was offering different ways for members to engage. According to Jakob Nielson’s rule for participation inequality in online communities [14], 90 % of people are ‘lurkers’, 9 % are ‘intermittent contributors’ and 1 % are ‘heavy contributors’.

Knowing that not all members would be open to commenting and joining discussions about their personal situation, we offered a range of ways for people to passively engage—rating other people’s comments, watching videos, listening to podcasts, reading resources, and completing activities. Having a broad range of ways for people to engage meant that each time ‘lurkers’ visited the community, they could still participate in the community and be rewarded with fresh content [11].

## Giving Social Proof<sup>14</sup>

We used social proof—evidence from other community members—to persuade more members to model their behaviours or take certain actions. This included mentioning the number of people who completed their weekly activities to encourage more members to do their activities, and talking about comments members had posted to drive more members to read and contribute to those discussions.

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<sup>14</sup>Social proof, also known as informational social influence, is a psychological phenomenon where people assume the actions of others in an attempt to reflect correct behaviour for a given situation. This effect is prominent in ambiguous social situations where people are unable to determine the appropriate mode of behaviour, and is driven by the assumption that surrounding people possess more knowledge about the situation. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_proof](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_proof).

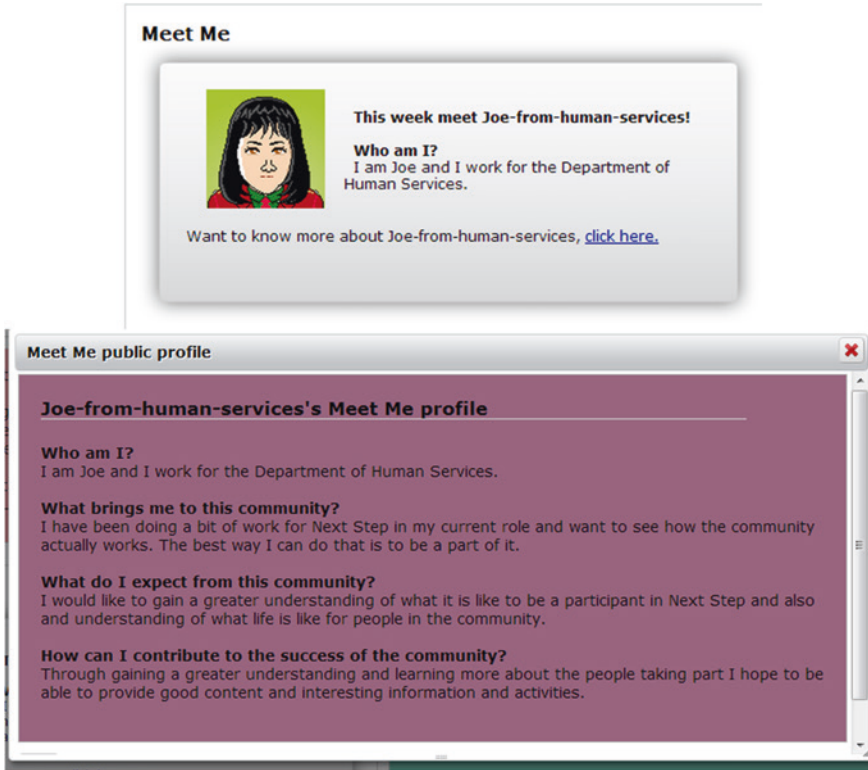


Fig. 9 Displaying a profile to encourage people to know each other

When the community first launched and we lacked the above social proof because members were not yet confident to contribute to the community, we used evidence from the preliminary research to build our credibility and foster trust. In preparing to establish an online community we held focus groups with parents who were going to make the transition back into work to ask them about the worries and opportunities they identified, and to determine how an online community would best support them. We posted messages about the focus group process and findings to explain to community members that other parents in a similar situation to them had said that they wanted this community and that their feedback was used to shape the content and the way it was delivered. For example, parents in focus groups identified that going back to work after years out of the workforce while trying to arrange childcare is stressful, so we created discussion threads to allow people to share tips and experiences on this topic, as well as several activities aimed at minimising stress.

This technique of using social proof was highly valuable in making a low level of engagement seem more meaningful and to quickly build upon it—it helped to cultivate a community of regular contributors.

Being Responsive and Setting the Tone

Underpinning these three key tactics to bootstrap engagement was the warm and inclusive welcome of moderators, and our ongoing responsiveness during the community. Our role was to set the tone of the community as a safe and helpful space where parents would be supported.

From the preliminary research, we understood members felt anxious, stressed and overwhelmed. We encouraged them to speak openly about their experiences even if they were not necessarily related to transitioning between payments or finding work. In the beginning, members would ask if they could talk about certain topics and we reassured them they could discuss anything so long as it was within the community’s Terms of Use, which mainly covered being respectful to all members. This opened up discussions that bonded members and allowed them to emotionally support each other.

Moderators also actively responded to all comments and questions as quickly as possible (generally within half an hour and always same day) to demonstrate we were listening and there to support members. We proved ourselves to be helpful and caring. When members saw we could offer accurate and clear advice to support them, they were encouraged to return for ongoing assistance. Analysis by the CSIRO indicated our moderation approach was the biggest influence in establishing social trust with members.

Figure 10 shows a snapshot of discussion forum in Next Step, where members discussed various issues relevant to them.

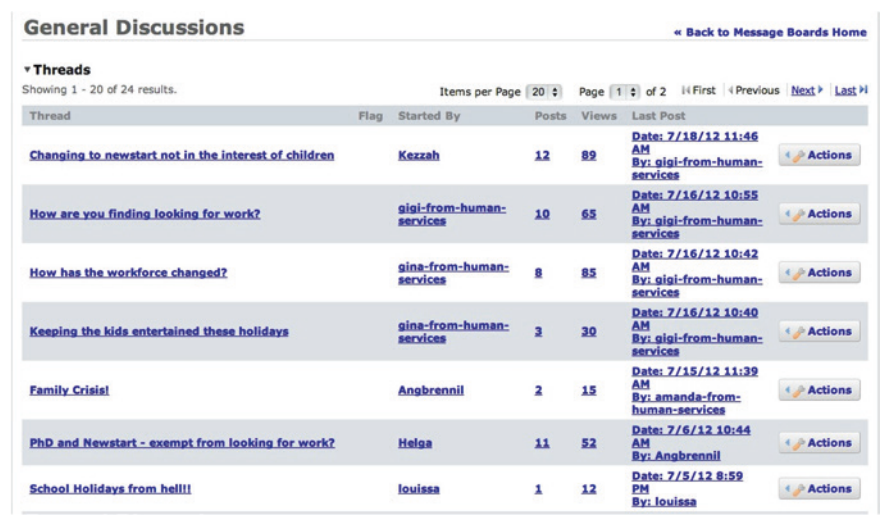


Fig. 10 Discussion forum in Next Step

## 5 Strong Governance

Engaging in social media presents risks, particularly for a government department that operates in a challenging and risk averse environment. While many of these risks are not new, the risk level, consequences or proposed treatments may differ on social media that in other situations.

Undertaking risk assessments with key stakeholders, planning for issues and having escalation processes in place has won us the support of our Executive and given permission for us to grow our social media work. Importantly, it has ensured we deliver this work in a controlled, transparent and accountable manner—serving our customers efficiently and effectively in social media.

This section provides an overview of how we govern our social media activities.

### 5.1 *Governance Framework*

Our Governance Framework tells the story of how we manage social media and includes information such as roles and responsibilities, clearance processes, constraints, risk assessment and management, corporate identity, legal and other mandates.

We also include all of the documents our team uses, such as the moderator guidelines and Acceptable Use Policies, in the attachments.

This framework has also helped build confidence amongst stakeholders and senior executives by demonstrating we take a proactive approach to managing the department's social media presence.

### 5.2 *Managing Risks*

The first step for managing risks is to plan for them and any other potential issues that could arise. We consult with our IT Security, Legal, Privacy and HR colleagues to identify, measure and propose treatments to managing all of the operational and contractual risks associated with any social media project or campaign we undertake. Generally, this is in the form of a risk assessment meeting where a representative from every area is there to discuss the project. They are experts in their fields and help us ensure our project is being done properly.

We use the information from these risk assessment meetings to draw up a risk management plan that outlines the risks, how we propose to treat them, measure their consequences and appoint an Executive who is responsible for accepting each risk. This plan is circulated to all relevant stakeholders for approval.

While these risk plans can take time to negotiate, they enable our team to understand potential risks and plan ways to manage them before they arise.

For many years we wrote individual risk plans for every project but found this presented the potential for us to not manage risks consistently. We now have an overarching risk plan and whenever we create a new project, an individual risk schedule that only outlines the specific operational or contractual risks for that project is created.

Some of the main ways we treat risks include:

- ongoing training on security measures and escalation processes
- ongoing training for social media moderators in communicating with vulnerable customers
- having Acceptable Use Policies for all of our social media accounts to be transparent and consistent about we moderate
- moderator guidelines for our team—describing a range of issues that could arise and how to manage them—like what teams to escalate issues to and other steps to take
- seven day moderation from 9 am to 5 pm
- regularly changing passwords for our accounts and having banned words lists
- regularly reminding our audience not to share their personal information
- annual reviews of our social media risk management plan
- annual crises management simulation with our media team that crosses over media and social media risk management
- an overarching social media governance framework.

These treatment measures have helped build the skills of our staff and provide confidence in managing the worst-case scenario. The annual training in particular ensures our work is always being led by current policies and best practice.

## 6 Measuring Success

It is much more difficult to measure return on investment when you're not selling anything. Public sector agencies across Australia and the world are seeing benefit results in their social media work but are still looking for the best ways to measure and report on its value in dollar terms.

To help measure the value of the department's social media work, we are working on a model that tracks the cost of the social media engagement and customer service, alongside the return on reputation that results.

This section provides an overview of our current work on measuring return on reputation.

### ***6.1 The Cost of Social Media Engagement and Customer Service***

Over time, customer demand for information about social and health services on social media has been increasing. From sharing proactive messages in 2010 that

received less than a dozen likes or comments, the department has an active social media following of 100,000 and now responds to approximately 1500 customer questions on social media every month. That growth requires additional staff and technology resources to monitor and respond to questions.

The department is setting new Key Performance Indicators for answering customer questions, modelled on measurements used by our call and face-to-face service channels. These include speed of answer, response accuracy and ability to answer on first query. This will allow for a cost comparison with other service channels.

The following is a list of considerations the department is tackling in this work, however measuring some of these impacts using anonymous social media data is very difficult.

*Costs:*

- Many social networking sites are free to establish, but over time the department has had to invest in technologies for social media monitoring and queuing social media customer questions, to make this work more efficient.
- Staff resources may need to grow over time to support increased social media demand, but this can be expensive.
- How long does the average social media response take? And is it more efficient to answer questions on Facebook and Twitter than over the phone? A social media response has the potential to benefit many customers who can see the post, however customers can't get personalised service through social media because the privacy of their personal information cannot be assured.

*Savings:*

- Providing information and support to customers when they are already online makes it easier for them to remain there and complete many of the transactions they can do themselves using their online accounts. This means our staff complete fewer basic transactions for customers and can spend time working on complex customer cases instead.
- The department gets an early heads-up on potential issues through social media, such as when content on the [humanservices.gov.au](http://humanservices.gov.au) website could be made easier to understand. This means issues can be addressed earlier also, before they have the capacity to result in numerous phone calls to the department because people don't understand the eligibility information on our website.
- If more timely, efficient and accurate social media work results in fewer calls, does that save money? It will likely result in customers being able to access more personalised phone service from our Service Officers, who have the time to complete multiple services for a customer in the one interaction, reducing the need for staff re-work or future customer contact.

## **6.2 Return on Reputation**

Reputation management is critical for government agencies so citizens have faith in the services and support they deliver. Using social media we aim to demonstrate

transparency in government communication, build trust, and create a more agile and responsive organisation.

We can readily see the impact of some of our proactive social media messages, for example our weekly Facebook and Twitter posts about our Mobile Service Centre<sup>15</sup> visits to regional communities have directly resulted in people visiting the buses in their town.

In addition, giving customers a heads-up about planned maintenance for online services, and responding to their complaints about service issues quickly, has greatly improved our social media following and reputation.

But when citizens can choose to interact with governments anonymously through social media, how can you track whether an individual's query was resolved? Did their dealings with government end on Facebook, or did the citizen make a phone call, email a complaint, then visit an office in person to seek a resolution?

The department is working on analysing a range of data sources to answer these questions, including sentiment analysis, and call demand and social media comparison data.

## **6.2.1 Comparing Call Centre and Social Media Data**

The department forecasts demand for its services to ensure adequate resources are allocated to areas where demand may peak.

We are currently exploring whether our proactive social media campaigns have an impact on call demand by measuring the reach of social media messages as well as whether actual demand for phone services was greater or less than the forecast. This is measured on particular dates that correspond with proactive social media messages being published and shared.

Where the department can demonstrate a reduction in call demand compared to what was forecast, it is difficult to attribute all credit to social media activity. This is because online anonymity means there is no way for us to track that all customers who interacted with the department on social media did not call us because they already got the information they needed. This is an issue we will continue to work on as we evolve in our return on investment work.

## **6.2.2 Sentiment Analysis**

Tracking customer sentiment about their social media interactions with us is one way, however automated sentiment provided by some social media monitoring platforms is inaccurate and has particularly difficulty dealing appropriately with sarcasm. Our social customer service staff required to manually attribute sentiment to social media posts made by our customers on the department's official social media accounts.

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<sup>15</sup><http://www.humanservices.gov.au/mobileoffice>.

Early data shows that often when customers write to us online their posts are negative or neutral in sentiment, but after we respond the sentiment of their replies often changes to neutral and positive respectively.

While not an accurate measure of effective social customer service on its own, when tracked against call and social media demand data, sentiment analysis provides a snapshot of how well the department is managing reputation and meeting the needs of citizens through social media.

## 7 Conclusion

We have been using social media since 2009 in our efforts to support the Australian Government Department of Human Services improve service delivery. This work was led by the department's Communication Division and has evolved from monitoring social media and engaging with citizens in discussion forums, to creating our own social media accounts and online communities. Along the way, we helped build new tools to monitor social media and developed a strong governance framework to better manage the risks involved. Our use of social media has enabled us to share health and social security information in an efficient and effective manner, respond to citizen questions quickly, and build trust with the Australian public. Our work continues to evolve as we explore new ways to engage and collaborate with citizens through social media. We are also now focussed on ways to measure success (or return on investment). In this chapter, we described our engagement with social media, including specific examples of projects we delivered. We also discussed some of the challenges for government in social media engagement and how we dealt with them.

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