

Social Media Guide For Free Software Projects

or: how to stay in touch with your users

Abstract

Social media is becoming more and more popular. Sites like Twitter and YouTube are visited by millions of people each day. Free Software projects should use this as an opportunity to get a broader overview of their user base as well as to broaden their communication efforts to reach more people who might otherwise not get in contact with Free Software. Social media offer a unique opportunity to show the human side of Free Software; that it is made by enthusiastic people from all around the world who are passionate about what they are doing. Last but not least social media are a good medium to turn users into contributors.

This guide gives an overview of the most popular websites that Free Software projects should concentrate on and gives tips about how to deal with them. Most of it applies to companies wanting to engage online with their customers as well but the guide concentrates on some problems specific to Free Software projects.



Photo by [Claudio Gennari](#)

Overview

So you decided social media are a good thing? You want to be a part of it? Here are a few things you should know to get started:

Be positive and human! Share funny stories. Share personal success (and failure) stories. Congratulate your competitors on releases.

Be prepared to find people who do not like what you are doing. Find out why they don't like it if they seem to be reasonable. You will be surprised. Ignore the trolls and do not engage in endless, meaningless discussions. It is not worth your time. Your answer to FUD should be calm, clear and short.

You will find people having problems with your program. If you can solve it quickly help them immediately, otherwise politely show them the way to a more appropriate place to find help. If you don't know the answer to a question, find someone in your team who does. Some people will not actively ask you for help but just say that program X is not working for them. Asking them for more details so you can help them fix it will get you a long way. Be active!

People will let you know how much they appreciate your work. Let them know you got their message. This might be the first step to getting someone involved in your project. Use it wisely!

Your community consists of about 1% core people that drive the project, 9% who engage with you but are not really part of the core team and 90% passive consumers. Social Media are an excellent tool to convert some of the 90% into more active contributors by showing them your great team and what tasks are available for them to get started.

It's all about the conversation. Make sure you are in it for the long haul. You need to engage with your community. When someone wants to communicate with you or your project on those sites, they expect someone to read and react to it. You will improve your image a lot if they see people caring about what they write and engaging in discussions with them. If you think you can't do that it might be better to not create an account. Don't be annoying by posting too much either. Listen to your community and find a good balance.

Get the right tools. A good web browser is essential. Do you feel at home in your browser? You need a RSS feed reader. Get one that fetches feeds while you are offline as well (Google Reader for example). You will need a microblogging client that supports multiple microblogging services and accounts (Choqok and Gwibber for example). Email, IRC and instant messaging will help you spread the word.

Share account data for project accounts with several trusted team members and keep an overview of who has access to which account. Don't let one of those accounts die because the team member decides to leave your project. Having more than one person care for such an account also makes it easier to respond in a timely manner.

Social networks rely on connections between people. So jump right in and get an account. Chances are a few of your friends have an account already. Connect to them. Some sites call this "to friend someone", some call it "to follow someone" and others call it "to connect to someone". Depending on the network those things also have a slightly different meaning.

Let your network know where to find you. Add links to your profiles in your newsletters, release announcements or websites. Encourage them to share your content and share their content in return.

Tags are an essential part of sites like Twitter and Flickr. They help categorize your content and make it easier to find content for a given event, program or person. If you have an annual developer meeting called FooCon, tell everyone to tag their photos, videos and messages with FooCon. This way outsiders can easily follow what is happening at your event. Make sure you are all using the same tag.

Nearly all of the following pages offer RSS feeds for searches for your programs name and competition. Use them to keep up to date. Share good content you find.

What is out there?

There are many social media websites. For now it should be enough to concentrate on the biggest in each of those categories:

- * news sites (digg, reddit)
- * social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Xing, OpenDesktop.org)
- * microblogging (identi.ca, Twitter)
- * media sites (YouTube, Flickr)
- * bookmarking sites (del.icio.us, StumbleUpon)
- * others (Google Alerts)

There are more but unless you have a huge team you will not be able to cover them all. Concentrate on the most important ones and let your wider community take care of the rest.

News Sites



[Digg.com](#) is a website that lets you share news stories in a lot of different categories. Other people can give your story a +1. This is called digging a story. If a story gets a lot of diggs in a short time it shows up as a top story in its category. The most popular stories show up on digg's frontpage. Getting a story on digg's frontpage means a lot of traffic to your website. A lot of people will read your news. If a story is wrong or spreading FUD you can bury it. This gives it a negative vote and makes it less likely to become popular and show up on the frontpage. If you like a story very much you can mark it as a favorite, which makes it show up more prominently on your profile.

A typical story including the most important information and actions on digg looks like this (well, it it not always about bunnies ;-)):



The screenshot shows a Digg story interface. On the left, a yellow box displays '287 diggs' and a 'digg' button. Next to it is a small image of a white rabbit. The title is 'Wascally Wabbits! The best bunny pics on Flickr' in blue. Below the title, the source is 'blog.flickr.net — Silly wabbit, Trix are for kids!'. There are social media icons for email, Facebook, and Twitter. To the right are 'Bury' and 'Who dugg this?' buttons. At the bottom right, it says 'Made popular 1 hr 13 min ago'.

Try not to have competing stories for the same news. That makes it a lot less likely to get on the frontpage with any of them.

Every story on digg has a discussion page. You can answer questions people have and digg or bury comments there. Comments below a certain threshold will not show up for most digg users as they filter them. Make use of it. It is a very easy way to promote good comments and discourage trolling. +5 diggs  

Digg lets you add friends. This gives you the opportunity to follow what they are digging and commenting on. Friends are seen as "people, whose stories you like", not necessarily people you know very well.



The screenshot shows a light-colored button with a plus icon and the text 'Add Friend'. To the right of the button is a small square profile picture of a man with a beard and a black turtleneck.

Digg offers an excessive amount of RSS feeds for searches and your friend's activities. Searches can be fine-tuned to suit your needs. Make use of it.

[Reddit.com](#) is very similar to digg but less popular. Comments are usually more knowledgeable than on digg. Stories look like this:



The screenshot shows a Reddit post. At the top is an upvote arrow, the title 'One thing is not like the other...' in blue, and '(en.wikipedia.org)'. Below the title is '58 submitted 6 hours ago by btipling'. At the bottom is a downvote arrow, '85 comments', and a row of buttons: 'share', 'save', 'hide', and 'report'.

Social Networks

[Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) is probably the most popular social network. It allows you to create a profile and connect to friends. Being friends with someone here is seen more strict than on digg by most people. You are expected to actually know the people you connect to. Facebook allows you to share photos and tag people on them, chat and a lot more.

Most interesting for Free Software projects are the fan pages. It is basically a page on Facebook with a discussion board. People can then become a fan of your project and get updates whenever you send a message to all fans.

Events on Facebook are useful for inviting people to your next developer conference or local get-together.

FSFE and KDE meeting in Stuttgart

celebration of our 4.3 release and fellowship meeting

Hosted by: **me**

Type: **Meetings - Club/Group Meeting**

Where: **<http://blogs.fsfe.org/gladhorn/2009/07/19/meeting-in-stuttgart/>**

When: **Saturday, August 1 from 7:00 pm to 12:00 am**

Your RSVP: **Attending (edit)**

[LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com) and [Xing.com](https://www.xing.com) are the more business oriented social networks. Create groups for your project and join Free Software related groups to find possible business opportunities for you and your project. Both networks support events and let you invite your contacts to them just like Facebook does. This is a great way to connect to people after having met them at a conference.

[OpenDesktop.org](https://www.opendesktop.org) is a network of sites catering to Free Software users and developers. You can enter your program, artwork, job offer, event and a lot more. Users can become a fan of your program, receive updates whenever you release a new version and create a knowledge base for your project. If you want you can add a donation button to your project page.

They all support status messages. Some of them can even be updated via Twitter and identi.ca.

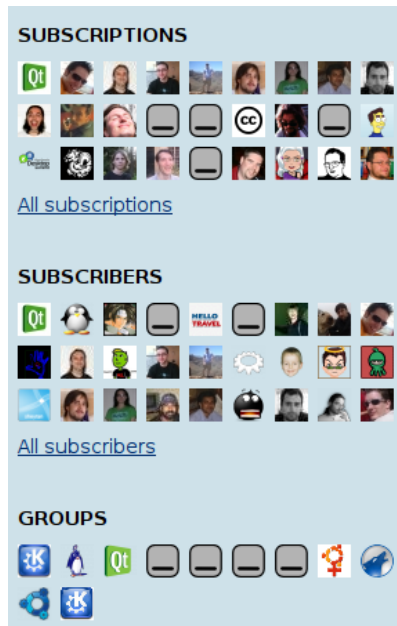
Microblogging

Microblogging is probably what gets you in closest contact and conversation with your wider community. Microblogging services allow you to post messages (140 characters most of the time) for people who follow you (are subscribed to you) to read. Use it to share new features or important service announcements for example and to help users who are having problems with your program. Post links to content of interest to your wider community. Engage them. Often people use microblogging to vent or find help among their friends.

Make sure you follow some other people or projects and see what they are doing. Nothing is worse than a microblogging account that does not follow a single person.

You usually address other users with @theirnickname when sending them messages. One example message could be: "@foo thanks for your support".

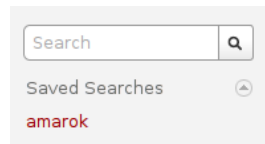
If you post links be aware that most services shorten them using a service like tinyurl before showing them to other users to save space. This way other users will not be able to see the real URL. Make sure to give them some context in your message and not just the link.



The screenshot shows a user profile with three sections: 'SUBSCRIPTIONS', 'SUBSCRIBERS', and 'GROUPS'. Each section displays a grid of small profile pictures. Below the 'SUBSCRIPTIONS' and 'SUBSCRIBERS' sections are links for 'All subscriptions' and 'All subscribers' respectively. The 'GROUPS' section shows several icons representing different groups.



The screenshot shows a user profile for Lydia Pintscher. It includes her name, location (Germany), a web link (http://blog.lydia...), and a bio (cat herder by nature, social media ninja). It also shows 129 following and 257 followers. Below this is a 'Tweets' section with a count of 840, and a 'Favorites' section with a 'View All...' link.



The screenshot shows a search bar with the text 'Search' and a magnifying glass icon. Below it, there is a section for 'Saved Searches' with a dropdown arrow and the text 'amarok' listed as a saved search.

Tags are used extensively. They are used like this for example: "this is a funny message #tag #tag2", which allows you to search for messages related to your project easily. Make sure to tag your messages as well.

If you like a message and think it is worth spreading resend the message. This is called redenting on Identi.ca and retweeting on Twitter. For a noteworthy message by user foo it works like this: "RT @foo noteworthy message" or "RD @foo noteworthy message". Try to keep your user name short to make retweeting and redenting easier. Remember you only have 140 characters per message.

You can mark a message as favorite to indicate you like it very much or if you just want to get back to it later.

Twitter.com is the most popular of these services. Subscribing to someone's messages is called following.

Identi.ca is the Open Source alternative to Twitter. It has a few more features encouraging more communication than Twitter, groups being the most important one of them. Groups are a way to communicate with a group of people by simply putting a ! in front of the group name in your message. For example you can have a group called foo for your project foo. A message to that group would look like this for example: "have you heard about the new !foo release?". Every member of the group will get this message. Remember that only members of a group can post to it this way. This is a very effective way to reach a lot of people interested in one topic without necessarily having to know them.

This is a typical profile on identi.ca including tags (amarok, freesoftware, kde, music, opensource) that make it easier to find similar people or projects:



amarok (Amarok)

<http://amarok.kde.org/>

[#amarok](#) [#freesoftware](#) [#kde](#) [#music](#)

[#opensource](#)

Media Sites

[YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com) allow you and your users to post images (only Flickr) and videos. You can comment (and rate on YouTube) on them and add them to groups and discuss about them there. If you like a screenshot or video very much you can mark it as a favorite. Let your users know who is working on your project by posting photos and videos from developer sprints and conferences. How about short interviews with your project members or happy users? Show new features. Or give a short how-to session that makes it easier for users to do a certain task with your program.

YouTube has channels that users can subscribe to. Whenever you upload a new video there they will get a notification. Flickr has a friend feature to stay up to date about someone's uploads.

Bookmarking

[Del.icio.us](https://del.icio.us) is a website that lets you save bookmarks, tag and share them. A lot of people do this already on del.icio.us so you can easily find the best/most interesting/most helpful websites for a given topic. You can use it to see which pages in your wiki people bookmark and improve your documentation accordingly. Which third-party extensions for your software are most popular? Add some of your websites with appropriate tags so they can be found when looking for pages related to your program. They offer browser toolbars and extensions for better integration with your browser bookmarks. You can keep up to date with RSS feeds and add friends to see what they are bookmarking.

[StumbleUpon.com](https://www.stumbleupon.com) offers a browser toolbar that lets users discover and rate new websites by offering random links from a pool provided by other users. Enter your project's website and let users stumble upon it. This offers a great opportunity to get visitors who don't know about your program and would not look for it actively. Does your website give a short introduction about your project for someone who has never heard of it?

Other

[Google Alerts](https://www.google.com/alerts) offers updates about new search results found by Google for a given search term. Monitor your project name to keep up with what blogs are saying about your program. You can get updates by email or RSS feed. This is an excellent way to stay on top of blogs where people write about their problems with your program. Go and help. You will be amazed how much you can change their view of your team and program if you do it right. Google Alerts will also let you know if someone did something incredibly cool, like painting your logo in huge size on the wall of their living room. (Yes, this has happened and we found out about it via Google Alerts ;-)) Spread the cool stuff you find!

About

This is version 1.0 of the Social Media Guide For Free Software Projects and was published on 16.08.2009. The most recent version of this document can be found at <http://lydiapintscher.de/whitepapers>.



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