Employee Advocacy Program Guide

How to plan, launch, and grow a successful employee advocacy program for your organization

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Contents

IN SOCIAL MEDIA, SOMEONE ADVOCATING FOR YOUR BRAND is very powerful. Advocates give their friends, families, and colleagues trusted advice that is more credible than traditional advertising. They defend a business against negative messaging, volunteer ideas for product and service improvements, and they do it all for free. While enterprises tend to reach out externally, the best advocates hide in plain sight—their own employees.

Consider the main points of an employee advocacy program, which may differ depending on which model or approach is best for your organization.

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Design your advocacy program

1. Plan, pitch, and get buy-in

A desire to see the company succeed is crucial for advocates, and this cannot be created by corporate mandate. Compulsory advocacy negates the entire point of bringing employees on to social media—creating a transparent and sincere business environment that resonates with customers. For these reasons, buy-in across multiple stakeholders within your organization is key.

So, what motivates an employee to become a company advocate? The simple answer is engagement. If an employee feels personally rewarded by the work environment, it's natural to transfer that engagement to customers. Build a plan for buy-in by:

- Gathering key information and figures
- Considering the stakeholders and stages
- Creating a formal case around the benefits of advocacy
- Communicating the concept and gathering feedback
- Leadership buy-in

While buy-in at the executive level can be achieved through a business case, organizational buy-in at the departmental or employee level is often handled through change management processes. There are different approaches to this process, but it is important in helping to ensure smooth adoption of a new approach. Employee advocacy might seem natural on paper, but each individual has unique views on social media, and the division of work and personal lives. Thus, you need to consider a broad spectrum of comfort levels. Here is a high-level list of considerations for change management:

- Consider the individual and human sides
- Start from the top down but include every level
- Create sense of ownership
- Plan to assess and create touch points throughout
- Prepare for the unexpected and adapt to real-time circumstances that inevitably arise

The steps you take to gain buy-in will help you throughout the rest of the roll-out process for a successful employee advocacy program.

2. Set program goals and objectives

We've established why employee advocacy can be highly effective and gained buy-in from the organization. Defining what you want to accomplish is the next step. Now you need to set objectives for your organization. These will largely depend on your overall social media, marketing, or communications strategies and will help to create a specific and measurable framework for this aspect of your marketing mix. Consider different objectives for different departmental needs. Each department has different goals and could potentially leverage an employee advocacy program in a number of powerful ways. Taking these differences into account is important when setting objectives for your program. Some items you could consider measuring are:

- Employee adoption rate

- Usage and publishing frequency

- Reach of employee advocacy messages

- Business impact: leads generated from employee advocacy (sales, recruitment etc.)

Below is a worksheet that will help you organize objectives across your departments:

Department	Departmental Goals	Objectives for Employee Advocacy	Measurement of Success
Marketing/ Communications	• Social ROI • Customer engagement • Brand management	Increase reach of marketing and corporate content Make social accountable for business results	• Engagement • Increase in organic reach • Inbound traffic driven to website • Conversion from employee advocacy • Cost per click - Earned media value of clicks vs paid media
Human Resources	• Employer branding • Empower employees • Mitigate risk	Empower, retain and attract new talent	• Employee adoption • Recruitment cost • Employee efficiency • Employee satisfaction • Attrition vs retention rate
Customer Service	• Customer satisfaction and retention	Improve customer experience	Brand sentiment—has your NPS score increased since program launch?

3. Plan for deployment across your organization

We've outlined the different models an organization can follow to help develop your policies and governance.

Empowerment

Collaboration. Create a social business Center of Excellence (COE). This is an advisory council or governance committee of social leaders in an organization that sets social media policies and processes, and provides best practices and training for colleagues.

Content. Employee advocates need support from the marketing department and other official content sources within the organization. It's vital that advocates get support from marketing to access content for social sharing.

Localization. Employees advocate the ability to listen and speak at a local level and still act in harmony with company-wide social initiatives.

Culture. Culture is built on trust, transparency and freedom of choice. Senior management is serious about developing the company's human capital. Collaborative social tools help spark cultural change and ultimately drive employee advocacy outside the enterprise.

Brand. For empowered employees to properly advocate a brand, they must be able to express what differentiates it from the competition. In an empowered social business, employees may collaborate to refine the brand, and even facilitate customer influence over the brand, but they should always know the brand. Even though they can be very credible advocates when describing the enterprise in their own words, their messaging should convey commonalities.

Containment

Collaboration. Financial services and other regulated industries must ensure that employee messaging is compliant with the law. In this model, technological platforms and business procedures value security and control over participation. However, employee participation can be scaled up over time if the right strategy is put in place.

Security. Security is the foundation of containment. This comes from a social relationship platform that includes centralized control of corporate profiles, multi-layered permissions, secure single sign-in procedures, and an encryption protocol, such as https. Compliance might also necessitate automatic archiving of both internal and public social messaging.

Governance. A clear policy that lays out the rules of engagement for all employees. This document is aligned with the company's guidelines for email, text messaging, and all other communications with clients and the public. Since social media management is part of the company's overall security and compliance policies, the chief information officer and chief risk officer may be involved.

Roll out your advocacy program

WITH YOUR PLAN IN PLACE, approvals in hand, stakeholders bought in and eyes on your objectives, it's time to get started! Below, we'll explore how to identify advocates and motivate them to participate, how to execute the roll-out, communicate the plan, and set up training.

1. Identify your advocates

You may have existing thought leaders or social media aficionados within your organization. These people can be great to launch and help grow your program, starting with reaching out. They can also act as a sounding board for the concept and can offer valuable insight into your community and employee sentiment within the organization. Align yourself with these folks early and make them feel like a part of the team. These early adopters have an influence within your organization already and can help get others curious and involved.

Follower and friend counts are only part of the story. When the impact of their social messaging is considered, employee advocates look like marketing powerhouses. According to Edelman's 2019 Trust Barometer, 53% of all global consumers see employees as the most credible sources for learning about companies.

Enterprises strengthen their brands enormously by activating these internal thought leaders on social media. Employee blogs and social media profiles allow workers to build personal brands online and to create employee generated content that also reflect well on their employer. Meliã Hotels International, for example, launched an innovative initiative centered on the people behind the brand: clients, employees, influencers, and even the company's CEO.

This initiative allowed the company to capture images of its products and services taken by clients and use them in email marketing, in digital advertising, or as widgets on its website, allowing users to make reservations with a single click from user-created content.

Today's workers see social media as a basic way to communicate, so they don't miss a beat when companies introduce internal social tools like Hootsuite to help them collaborate and amplify external messaging on behalf of their brands. Corporate education programs can accelerate the workforce transition and turn typical employees into social media power users.

How you roll out the program will likely have a number of dependencies including the model you've adopted, the size of your organization, social media competencies of your workforce and your goals and objectives for the program.

In smaller organizations with a high level of social media sophistication, you may want to simply launch the program, communicate, and open up access immediately. This approach requires a higher tolerance from the employees for learning on the fly and a culture that supports moving fast.

For all other situations, it's likely that you'll choose to pilot your program with a number of different groups or individuals, collect feedback, and iterate in a beta prior to launching broadly. The existing group of thought leaders or early adopters are usually ideal candidates, but you may want to consider diversifying to gain other perspectives that may better match those of the rest of the organization. The benefits of taking the pilot approach are:

- Gathers learnings and shortcomings
- Clarity into what's working
- Builds curiosity within the organization
- Creates ownership or VIP feel for those within the program
- Allows you to predict future success based on early metrics

2. Motivate for success

This section will help you to answer the "what's in it for me?" question when rolling out your employee advocacy program to employees. It is critical that they do not feel like the program is imposed upon them or forced in any way. It has to be mutually beneficial for both the employee and the organization. Just as in your approach with content, be authentic in the description of benefits for both parties. There are also tactics you can apply to sweeten the deal for employees:

- Rewards and contests
- Leader boards
- VIP programs
- Development opportunities
- Early access

In some organizations you may face friction when asking employees to do something publicly on behalf of the organization. It's important to communicate that they can choose to have an impact on the reach and effectiveness of your marketing programs. This will, in turn, benefit them with better sales, or company performance.

From a human resources point of view, this type of program presents a number of development and recognition opportunities that can keep employees engaged and progressing. With training programs, you can provide unique tips for them that can help with their social media savvy in their personal lives as well. That may be seen as a benefit to those who are a little uncomfortable with social media and would like to become more familiar with it.

When you're ready to roll out your program, remember that how you communicate your program to your advocates sets the tone. It is important to keep the tone of empowerment and excitement throughout. The theme of authenticity is key in your communication plan as well. It allows you to speak transparently and on a human level about the benefits of becoming involved. Taking this approach will help to entice enrollment.

You'll want to consider developing content that will motivate your advocates. This will not only pump them up about the program, but also about your brand and organization. Offering prizes or swag for top advocates can be another incentive that keeps them engaged with the program.

Raising awareness can be a hurdle. Ideally you want as many people as possible in the loop on your employee advocacy program, so that it has the greatest potential reach. You likely already have a number of methods for communicating new initiatives across your organization. Things like company-wide emails, internal social tools, newsletters or other announcements can all be effective tools. Since these programs are social in nature, be sure to think creatively and out of the box for how you can further get the message out in an exciting or fun way. Leveraging early

adopters and the pilot team is also a key tactic that you won't want to forget. Think of your launch as ongoing, not a one-day activity.

Communications should never feel authoritative or imposing. The tone of your communications plan affects the program as a whole. Since the advocacy program is really about social media, consider mirroring its conversational nature. You can use rich media images, videos, gifs, and memes to break the ice, get a laugh, and spread organically through your employee base.

3. Build your training strategy

This step is fundamental to getting started. Experience indicates that the "If you build it, they will come" model isn't necessarily effective. Illustrating to your advocates, through training, is key to making the most of any initiative.

Consider these questions when setting up training programs:

- Do you already have a learning management system that could deliver training?
- Is everyone in a central location that would suit an onsite or classroom training?
- What are the different learning styles?
- Which technologies are available to employees? (Without computer access, webinars won't work.)
- How will training on the program best practices differ from certification/policies?
- Will there be a need for different levels of sophistication? For example, will your marketers require more advanced techniques than general employees?
- Will my executives get the most out 1:1 training versus 1:Many?

It is highly important to consider your options and compare them with the program's goals to launch successfully. You can also apply incentive techniques as mentioned above (rewards, competitions, and leaderboards) to training completion. Once everything is in place, consider providing refreshers to keep interest up and keep the program running efficiently.

Refine your strategy and measure success

WITH YOUR PROGRAM OFF THE GROUND, you'll want to create the ideal environment for it to grow for many years. In the realm of social media, the ideal environment consists of conversation, authenticity, transparency and, of course, content.

1. Refine your content strategy

Your content strategy for your employee advocacy program should augment your existing content strategy. You can tailor unique content specifically for your employees or keep it simple by hand-picking from your existing content.

When developing your strategy, be deliberate in what you decide to share via this program versus your day-to-day social media operations. Think about what kinds of content they're already sharing and try to mirror that tone wherever possible: branded, employee generated content, industry insights and thought leadership, and so on.

You will also want to build in ways for your advocates to suggest content. This creates a full loop of feedback and involvement and also empowers the employee and adds to the "what's in it for me" equation. Seeing content they've created shared on a brand channel can be exciting and rewarding for employees.

Along with the overall strategy, developing an appropriate cadence is critical. It may take some time and testing to get it right. How much is too much is a threshold that some organizations will reach much faster than others. If you push too few posts, on the other hand, the program may never take off to its full potential.

It's also important to recognize that your employees may be adopting new social media platforms much faster than you're able to on the brand side. Keep in mind that you can tailor content for them to use on platforms like Twitter and Instagram and share that way.

2. Keep advocates engaged

Think of this program not as a sprint, but as a marathon. Your communication definitely doesn't start and end with your launch activity. Creating an ongoing calendar of communication for participants will be crucial in early adoption, but also in maintenance of the program. It will keep your advocates engaged and sharing and ultimately will help you to better achieve your goals.

Don't limit your ongoing communication to simply promote new content. You can be creative by offering:

- Offers and rewards
- Challenges (team or individual)
- VIP/MVP updates
- Badges
- Rolling leaderboards

If incentives aren't a good option, you can simply provide transparent insight on how the program is doing, which content performs the best, what times of day are most effective, or other useful metrics and information.

You will also want to communicate how often training will be revisited and use your training plan as an opportunity to re-engage those who may have fallen off the program or experienced social media fatigue. Consider offering new courses, new certifications, and optional learning opportunities as well for your most eager advocates.

3. Measure success

An advocacy program should align with your company primary business goals and inform the metrics you should be tracking. The worksheet provided earlier set the framework for you to measure the success of this program. You don't want to forget about measuring its shortcomings as well. These will give you valuable insights that will improve it and keep it rolling in the future.

Perhaps you will use a scorecard that ties back to your objectives. Decide how often you'll measure. Will it be weekly, quarterly, yearly? Make sure you set your benchmarks and identify trends and variations from there.

You'll also want to consider measuring qualitative data by way of surveys or feedback inboxes. This will allow people to share their thoughts and anecdotes, which you may find even more valuable than quantitative data.

To measure performance and increase engagement, include performance markers and milestones from the beginning. Reward the team via badges, gamification, or other reward bonuses as those milestones are achieved.

Lastly, openly share the results, wins, and losses with the team. Involving everyone creates a trusting and collaborative environment, which paves the way to increased program adoption and continued participation.

Visit hootsuite.com/amplify to learn how Hootsuite Amplify can help your organization tap into the power of employee advocacy

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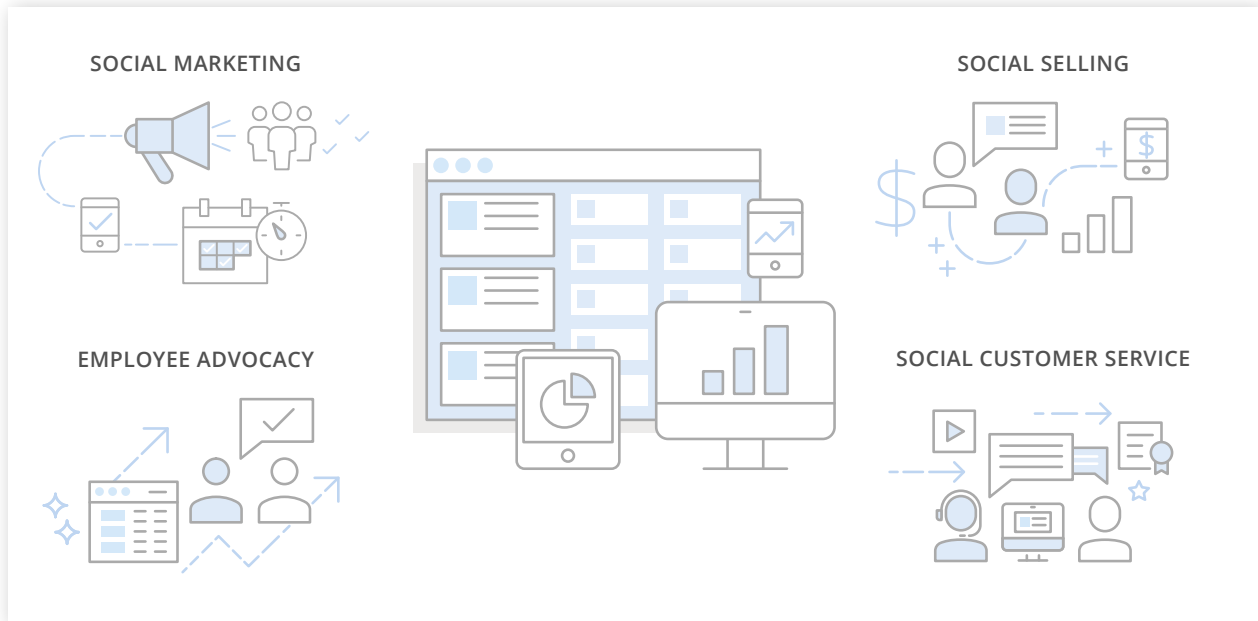
Hootsuite is the most widely used platform for managing social media, trusted by more than 18 million customers and employees at more than 80% of the Fortune 1000. Hootsuite Enterprise empowers organizations to execute business strategies for the social media era and scale social media activities across multiple teams, departments, and regions. Our versatile platform supports a thriving ecosystem of social networks complemented by 250+ business applications and integrations, allowing organizations to extend social media into existing systems and programs.

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