



By Scotty Autin

Commanders-

I feel like most of us are missing an opportunity. We're missing a chance to get the command messages out to audiences and shape the narrative of our units. More so, we're

missing a chance to talk directly to our Soldiers, their families, the larger Army, and even the American public.

In a post late last year, Gen. Robert Abrams penned an article published on this site titled, "[Social Media: Senior Leaders Need to Get on the Bus.](#)" If you haven't had a chance to read his article, take some time to read it before you proceed here. It gives you a great understanding of why leaders need to be on social media. Likewise, the US Army laid out a comprehensive overview of [how to use social media](#) with most of it focused on the official accounts for brigade and above. From here forward, for those nondigital natives like me, I hope to lay out a way that battalion commanders can leverage social media.

First and foremost, you have to think of social media as a virtual hangout as it relates to interacting and engaging with Soldiers and families. It exists and your Soldiers are there and active in it. Whether or not you choose to be present, the thoughts, ideas, and narratives are progressing with or without you. For me, I had the benefit of witnessing some really good leaders and public affairs experts that understand how to use social media as a force projection and multiplication platform. With that, I'll lay out a strategy that can help you wrap your head around how to be a leader on social media. This is based on three key points.

1. Know the platforms
2. Promote engagement through a strategy
3. Know your role, and (sometimes) shut your mouth

Know the Platforms

About a year prior to assuming command, I was not very active on social media. I mostly used Facebook to connect with family and friends. I have a LinkedIn account that I kept

current but rarely used, and I did not have Twitter or Instagram. Hearing about the ability for leaders to connect with Soldiers on social media, I set out to learn more about the platforms. I won't spend a lot of time explaining the platforms to you but you can learn about them here: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#). As a battalion commander, I primarily use these four to get my messages out.

For Facebook, I set up a Commander's Facebook page and invited my current friend's list. I also posted it on our battalion Facebook page. This page had the fastest initial growth with up to about 450 likes/followers. Due to the numbers this account allows the most people to see content and often generates the most impressions. This also has, by far, the most people from my unit, families, and battalion alumni.

I then set up Instagram and Twitter accounts from scratch. My handles on Twitter and IG are the same and structured as I discussed earlier. On Instagram, I had quick initial growth but it also slowed very quickly. This is my least engaging platform but has the most regulars. I also see a lot of my LTs on here. Twitter, however, started very slow but has picked up as I start to see engagement for more people. This is my second largest following at about 260 followers. The content is inconsistent with impressions but has the biggest opportunity for engagement with the larger military community. It's difficult to tell how many, if any, followers are from my unit.

For LinkedIn, I simply use my current LinkedIn profile to post the same content. This is on my personal LinkedIn page where I am identified as the Battalion Commander of the organization. Since I am portrayed on there in my current role, I consider it broadcasting the great works of the organization to a professional network. This sees low but consistent impressions on everything I post.

With those four platforms as my basis, I started to see that there is a strong military presence on Twitter but it consisted mostly of junior Soldiers and non-commissioned officers

(NCOs) or senior military officers—mostly general officers (GOs). The GOs are all known, but most of the junior Soldiers and NCOs are anonymous. Overall, I noticed a lack of known lieutenant colonels and unit commander presence. So I decided to capitalize on a chance to engage with my Soldiers, alumni, families, and the greater Army in this digital environment.

Promote Engagement with a Strategy

My strategy has five main pillars. I use my battalion commander social media presence to celebrate Soldiers, showcase the battalion's great history, talk about leadership and command messages, highlight community engagement, and understand the current concerns of my Soldiers and their families.

Celebrate Soldiers

Highlighting the daily successes of the Soldiers in the battalion was always my #1 goal with social media. Every week I highlight an "Eagle (Paratrooper) of the Week" in the formation and then post pictures on social media. I also post pictures and highlights of promotions, great achievements by NCOs, awardees, DFAC workers, maintainers, etc. Ultimately, it is about celebrating our great Soldiers in a public fashion. This resonates well across each of the four platforms.

Showcase the battalion's great history

Most of our Army units have a remarkable history. This history can be the stories of prominent former Soldiers, vital operations, or even just unique artifacts from the

past. Quite often, these stories were lost over the years. I've been able to find some outstanding videos, pictures, and even a couple of different diaries to take photos of and excerpts from to help tell the history of the battalion. It's a great way to show the lineage of the unit and keep history alive. This resonates best on Twitter and Facebook with some mild impressions on Instagram and LinkedIn.

Talk about leadership and share messaging

Social media presents a great opportunity to highlight your battalion vision, priorities, leadership philosophy, or even just a chance to engage on different topics. Within this category, I will share an article or video on leadership as well as some different ways to translate my different messages to the formation. Most notable was when the Command Sgt. Maj. and I made a [holiday video](#) for the formation that garnered about 15K views across each of the social media platforms.

Highlight community engagement

Many of our civic-minded Soldiers participate in outstanding volunteer opportunities near the base or in their hometowns. Using your social media platform can help lessen the civil-military divide. While the work itself creates meaningful connections with our community, highlighting it not only pays tribute to those Soldiers but also showcases them as unique and interesting. People are drawn to these types of human interest stories, and it's a great way to show how your formation is having a positive impact on the surrounding community. Lastly, these good works continue to improve public perception of the Army and promote trust and confidence within the American people.

Keep a pulse on the concerns of Soldiers and families

Commanders can also use social media as a means to monitor concerns of Soldiers and families. It's most effective on your unit FRG pages and throughout the #milTwitter community. I recommend that you use it to monitor, and limit how much you directly engage. There are some officers that get sucked into this area and step on themselves by saying inappropriate things. Which leads directly to my third major point.

Know your Role....

While I look forward to leveraging these social media sites throughout my command, I also understand that when I leave, they are not mine to take. These belong to the unit and the commander after me. I will hand over these platforms to my replacement and hope he is able to leverage them to the same effectiveness. Therefore, if you are going to augment your command with a social media presence, then you should do so in your official capacity. This means utilizing your rank, name, and title. The handles on your pages should be as your official title (i.e. "37BEB_CDR" or "37th Brigade Engineer Battalion Commander" and it should have your rank and name listed with it in the bio. This last point is mostly for Twitter. By listing it as such, it becomes an extension of yourself and the unit. There are standards of discipline that should be met when and how you interact online. I see an increasing number of Army leaders hide behind a veil of anonymity and say things they wouldn't normally say if their identity was known.

...and (sometimes) shut your mouth.

There is a very simple rule that I follow online when I want to post, comment, or share a post. I must be the ultimate cheerleader. Does this comment or post build up, encourage, or pay tribute to another person or the unit? If it doesn't do that, then I don't post it. If you can't say something encouraging or uplifting, then don't say anything at all. I know that sounds simple, but I've seen numerous officers completely screw that up. That's actually the main pitfall in my eyes. The leaders that seem to do best online are the ones that are

genuine, uplifting, they have a strategy, and they stick to it. Additionally, you as a leader must have thick skin online and know that not everyone will like, support, or endorse what you perceive as great. Therefore, if the post grossly misses the mark, evaluate why, recognize it publically, and move on.

Ultimately, there are many ways for Army leaders to get on and engage with social media. It took some time to get used to the different tricks of effectively building posts, taking impactful pictures, and ensuring that the verbiage was properly celebratory. However, I have seen some great responses to it. It's rewarding to see a Soldier's family members and friends like, comment, and share the photos of them receiving accolades or conducting great training. I've also received very positive feedback directly from Soldiers, Family members, and even fellow battalion commanders. Ultimately, a strong social media with a positive and engaging strategy is important as people, not just inside your formation, desires to read and see the amazing things their loved ones do on a daily basis and know that their Soldiers are part of one of the most storied units in our nation's Army. Now, go tell that story!

Thank you,

LTC Scotty Autin

LTC Scotty M. Autin is the commander of 37th Brigade Engineer Battalion (Airborne), 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. He can be found on Twitter/IG/Facebook [@37thBEB_CDR](#). The opinions expressed in this article are his and do not necessarily represent the official

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