

The Use of Social Media by Electronics Design Engineers

**A Study by the University of Chichester and
Napier Partnership Limited**

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ABSTRACT

This joint project between Napier and the University of Chichester aims to understand whether engineers make use of social media, and if so whether social media provides an effective marketing channel to electronics design engineers in Europe. The research reveals that whilst engineers are making use of online tools to communicate and collaborate – particularly forums and LinkedIn – there appears to be a significant resistance to social media and viral marketing amongst a large section of the engineering audience.

METHODOLOGY

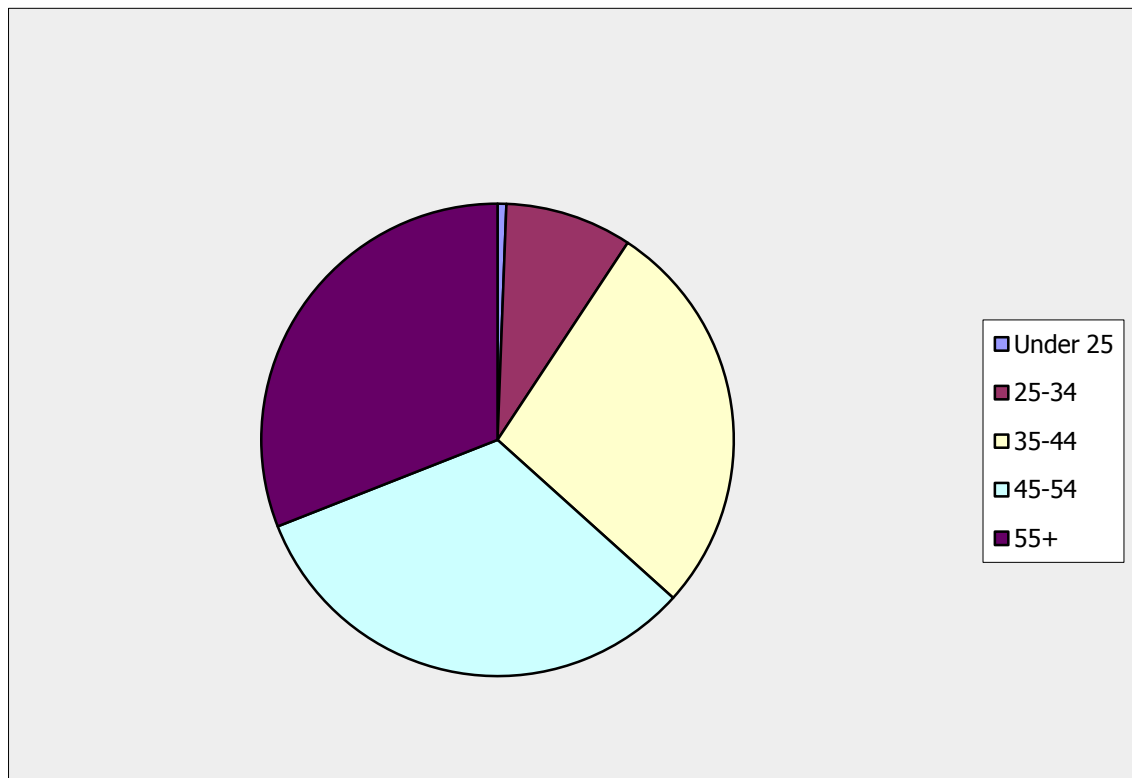
The survey was developed and hosted online. An email was then sent to 15,934 engineers working within Europe, with an incentive of a prize draw that would allow one respondent to win an iPod Touch. A total of 359 responses (2.3%) were received.

RESULTS

The full results of the survey are available from Napier, and can be requested by emailing Mike Maynard (Mike@Napier.co.uk). The following summary highlights the key findings of the research.

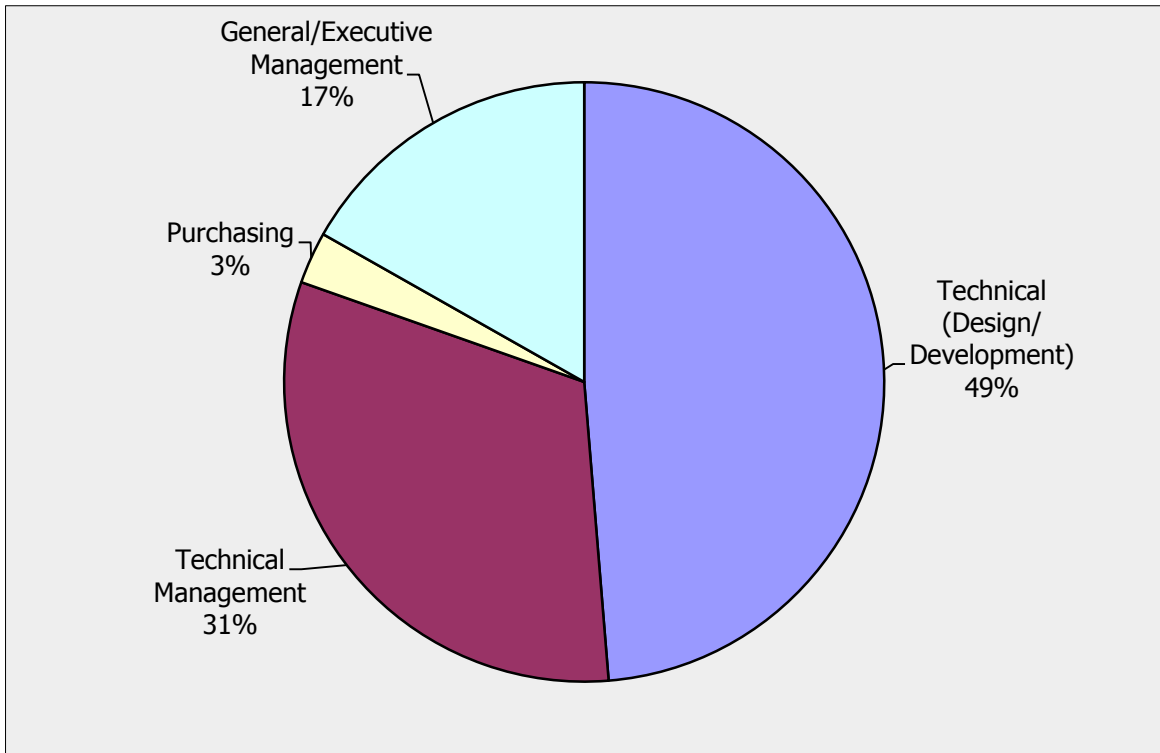
DEMOGRAPHICS

The respondents show an even age distribution above 35, although the 25-34 year old demographic is a little lower than might be expected. Unsurprisingly there are few respondents aged under 25, reflecting the time taken to train as an engineer. The under-35 demographic, however, was expected to be lower than other age bands, reflecting the relatively low recruitment rates over recent years. We would therefore conclude that the sample is reasonably representative of the overall population of engineers.

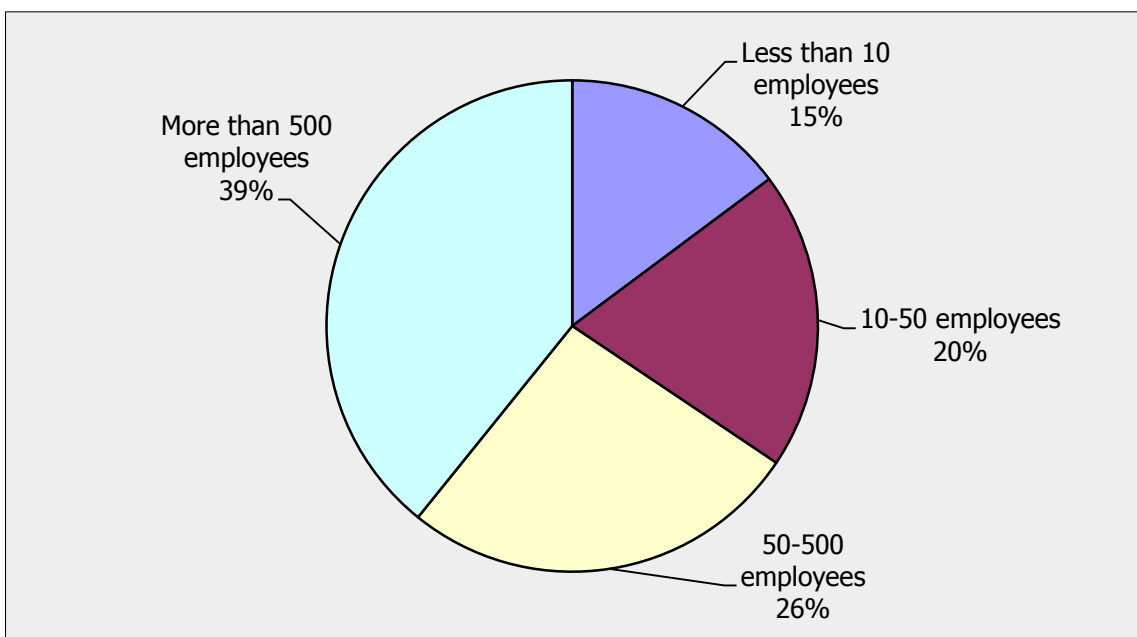


Only 2.3% of the respondents were female, reflecting the male domination of the engineering industry.

All the respondents work within the electronics industry, with 80% actively involved in electronics design. 17% of the respondents were executive or general managers and 3% had purchasing roles. The survey therefore is very representative of the views and behaviours of engineers.



The respondents reflect the broad range of company sizes in Europe, with medium and large companies well represented.



SOCIAL MEDIA CAN BE USEFUL BUT MAY BE BLOCKED

When asked “Do you think social media is a useful tool within a business environment?”, 61% of engineers responded positively. Despite the majority view that social media can be useful in their work, 29% of the respondents revealed that social media was blocked at their workplace. The issue of internet filtering is clearly a concern for marketers because at present it would seem that any social media campaign will only address 2/3 of the possible audience.

Unsurprisingly, large companies were more likely to block social media than small companies, with 94% of employees at companies of less than 10 employees able to access social media, whereas only 71% of the respondents at companies between 10 and 50 people, whilst just under 2/3 of the respondents at companies of more than 50 people did not have social media filtered.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IS STILL LIMITED AMONGST ENGINEERS

Interestingly 45% of the respondents do not use social media at all. Of the remaining 55%, 24% use social media exclusively for personal use, leaving only 31% of respondents currently using social media for business purposes.

Presumably half of those that don't use social media for business purposes are those where the tools are blocked by internet filters. This still means that only half of the engineers that could make use of social media for business purposes actually choose to do so.

FACEBOOK AND LINKEDIN ARE ENGINEERS' FAVOURITE SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

The study analysed the preferred tools amongst the respondents that said they made use of social media. Perhaps unsurprisingly Facebook is the most popular social media website¹, but LinkedIn is only just behind Facebook – a very strong vote of confidence for a clearly business-orientated tool.

Other social media sites, including Twitter fell well behind these two leading sites, and less than 1 in five engineers are Twitter users.

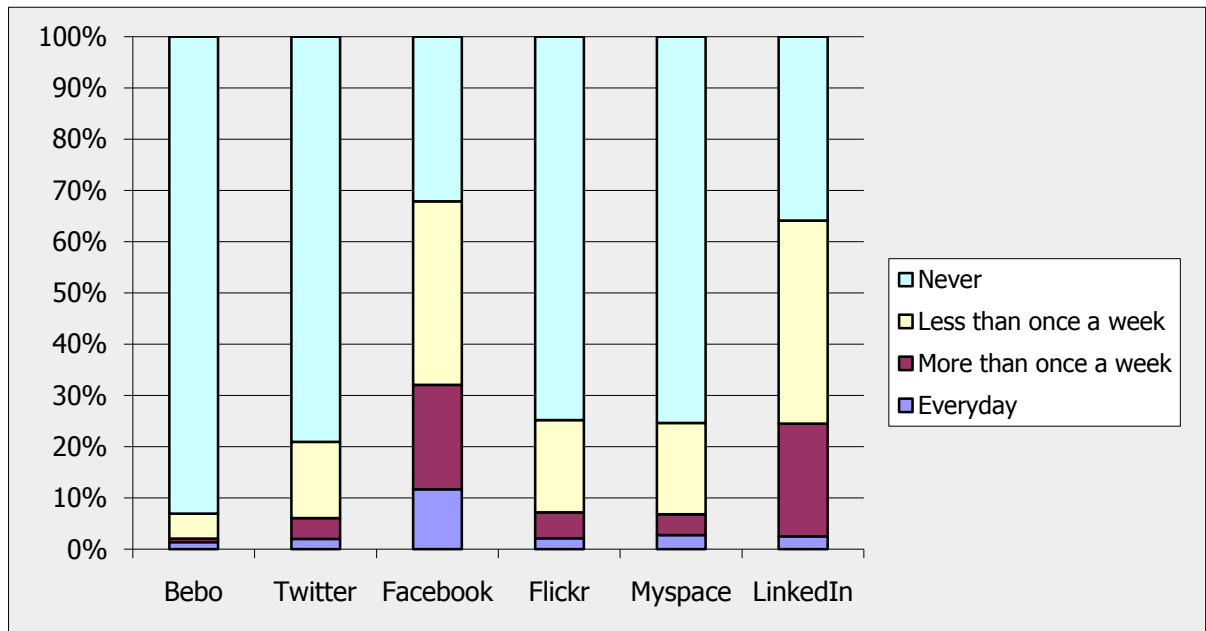
The clear conclusion from these results is that the most important part of any social media strategy to market to engineers is a strong presence on LinkedIn.

The fact that LinkedIn is the preferred network for engineers may be linked to finding jobs: the most popular reason for accessing social networks (82%). Interestingly a large number of respondents that use social media for business used the tools to work with customers, either promoting products on social media (82%) or communicating with customers (73%).

Finding information about companies was another popular use for social networks, with 49% citing this reason for using the tools. Collaborative working also drove engineers to social media, with 41%

¹ Note this analysis includes both business and personal social media usage

of the respondents that use social media also using the tools for communicating with co-workers, a surprisingly high number as only 21% used social media to communicate with family.



ENGINEERS YET TO JUMP ON THE VIRAL MARKETING BANDWAGON

Only 52% of the respondents professed to understand what was meant by viral marketing – perhaps a surprisingly low figure given the fact that engineers would be expected to be proficient and active users of PCs. Despite this low level of awareness, 7% said that a viral campaign had encouraged them to purchase a product for business use, and 14% said it had encouraged a personal purchase. There are two possible conclusions from this: either that viral marketing is in its infancy in the electronics sector and will prove to be a valuable tool, or simply that some engineers are completely disengaged with this marketing technique.

Only 35% of the respondents felt that viral marketing was an effective way of selling products to engineers, and the comments such as “There are probably sufficient stupid people who don’t delete it”, “Too aggressive for me” and “it bugs!” suggest that a viral campaign may risk turning off some engineers.

ENGINEERS LOVE FORUMS

When asked about new media such as blogs, forums, podcasts, videocasts/videoblogs, and other online video, engineers showed considerable enthusiasm to make use of these sources of information. By far the most popular were forums, with 63% of respondents making use of forums for business purposes, and a further 24% using forums in their personal life. Clearly it is essential that companies trying to reach out to engineers develop a strong strategy for providing interaction and support through online forums.

Online video was popular, with 38% making use of some kind of online video for business purposes. Interestingly podcasts (17%) and blogs (23%) were relatively unpopular tools for business, although

this may be due to the limited availability of these media covering engineering topics. Engineers did make personal use of blogs – 38% used blogs, making them as popular for as online video for recreational use, whilst 38% listened to podcasts.

SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH MAY NOT MEET PREDICTIONS

39% of respondents expected to make more use of social media for business purposes in the next year: a relatively high number, but some way from the often heard prediction that “everyone will make more and more use of social media”. Slightly more respondents (43%) expected to make more use of social media in their personal lives. The 46% that do not expect to make any greater use of social media in the next year represent a very large proportion of the engineering audience and suggest that whilst social media can clearly reach a proportion of engineers, its value should not be overestimated.

CONCLUSION

The research undertaken by Napier and the University of Chichester has shown that a significant engineering audience is making use of online tools to communicate and collaborate. There is, however, a large number of engineers for whom social media marketing is unlikely to be effective: almost a third of the respondents were unable to access social media at work, and many had negative perceptions of some new media marketing techniques.

At the risk of stereotyping engineers, the most effective and popular tools are those that enable access to information, particularly LinkedIn and the use of Forums. Although Facebook was used by engineers, it tended to be used for personal reasons and not for work..

Perhaps the best conclusion is that companies marketing to electronics engineers should instigate a social marketing strategy, but they need to implement such a strategy carefully. The use of social media ranges from hugely popular forums – which are clearly the most important way to interact online with engineers – to viral marketing, an approach that does work with some engineers, but also will cause other engineers to view the brand more negatively. As with all social media, it’s essential to initiate a conversation with the audience, rather than simply push marketing materials onto social media websites, if campaigns are to be effective.