

WHAT FORUMS DO ENGINEERS USE?

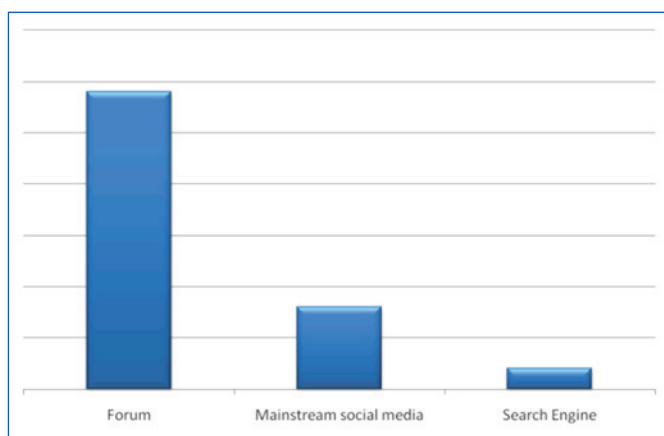
Research shows that the most popular social media for electronics engineers are forums, which covers a wide range of different platforms. This tip sheet explains the sorts of forums engineers like to use.

At Napier we've conducted several research studies that show forums are the most popular form of social media for engineers. However there is a huge variety of forums available. This tip sheet provides a guide to the most popular forums based upon some informal research carried out by Napier in July 2011.

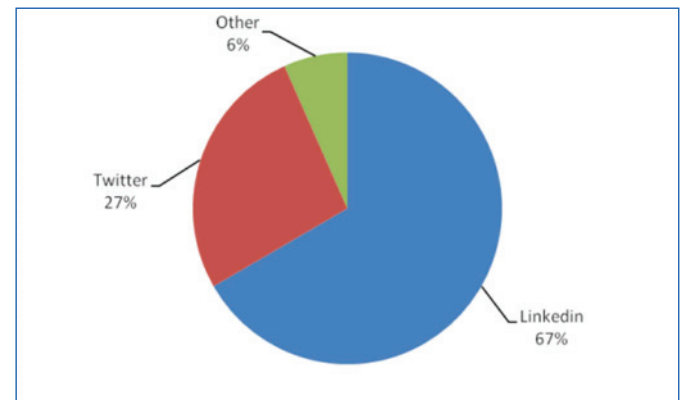
The research was an email-based survey that asked engineers living and working in Europe to name the forums that they use on a regular basis. Responses were only taken from engineers who actively used forums, and the answers were unprompted, revealing the sites that are at the top of the respondents' minds.

WHAT DO ENGINEERS MEAN BY "FORUM"?

We asked engineers which forums they used and got some interesting, albeit confused, results. For example a number of respondents named mainstream social media sites (an analysis of these sites is given later in this document) as examples of forums. Several engineers also stated that they didn't look on particular forums, but rather preferred to search for forum posts. In this case all of the respondents said Google was their preferred search engine.

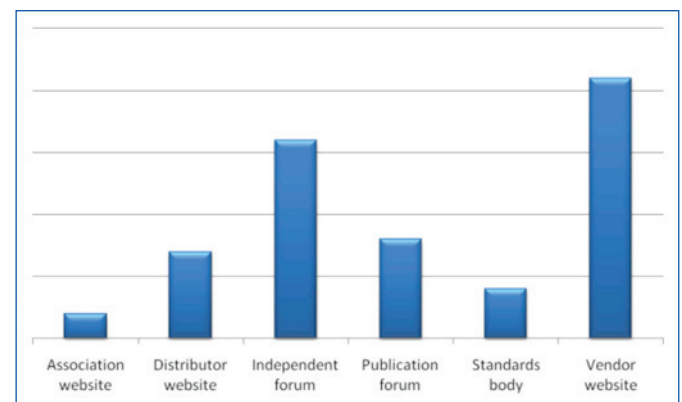


LinkedIn was by far the most popular. Twitter achieved a surprisingly high number of mentions, considering the relatively low numbers of followers achieved by most electronics companies' feeds.



THE MOST POPULAR FORUMS

The research showed that the most popular forums for interaction were hosted on vendor websites. Of these, 62% were hardware vendor websites. Microcontroller vendors were particularly prominent, although the respondents also mentioned FPGA companies and suppliers of industrial boards and systems.



28% of the vendor websites were software vendors, and these were almost exclusively operating system suppliers. The remaining 9% of responses cited test equipment vendors' sites, particularly the National Instruments forums.

Independent forums were the second most popular, with a very broad range of websites identified. Local language forums were well represented, but many engineers also used English language sites, even if it wasn't their first language. Interestingly engineers seemed to balance their activity equally between hardware-orientated forums and those forums that are purely focused on software development.

Publications are lagging behind the independent forums: adding this capability to their existing websites would appear to be a great opportunity to generate more traffic. Again the responses in this category were diverse with no publication showing a clear lead over others.

Recently some distributors have invested in the development of their own social networks and in the case of Farnell this appears to have been very successful. Their network, element14, accounted for significantly more than half of the responses in this category.

It's interesting to note that trade associations appear to have little impact. You might expect that they would provide a great platform to develop active forums, but this research shows that this is not the case.

THE FUTURE: WILL NEW ENTRANTS CHANGE THINGS?

As this research was being conducted, Google launched their new social network, Google+. The use of "circles" would potentially provide the closed discussions with subject matter experts that engineers appear to value, and so we could see this platform gaining traction within the engineering community. However it is far too early to tell if Google+ will be successful. We also expect other social network platforms to launch, causing the landscape to be even more dynamic over the next few years.

CONCLUSION: THE MORE FORUMS, THE BETTER

The biggest "winners" in this research were LinkedIn and element14. LinkedIn has clearly established itself as a social media platform where engineers can discuss technical issues, whilst element14 has received a large investment from Farnell: a gamble that appears to have paid off for the distributor.

However the main conclusion of the survey is that the reason that forums are so popular amongst engineers is probably due to the large number of different sites available. It appears that engineers are only interested in discussing technical issues on forums that are frequented by specialists in their particular area. This hypothesis would account for the very diverse range of different forums cited by the respondents. If this is true then perhaps the landscape of forums for electronics engineers will remain fragmented for the foreseeable future.

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