

How to Find Your Community,
Build Relationships and Gauge
Your Influence Online



A Cision Executive White Paper
Engaging Social Networks



ENGAGING SOCIAL NETWORKS: HOW TO FIND YOUR COMMUNITY, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND GAUGE YOUR INFLUENCE ONLINE

INTRODUCTION

The new social networks proliferating across the Web have fundamentally changed the equation for professional communicators once again. The first wave of social media consisting of blogs, bulletin boards, viral marketing, and user-generated content created challenges and opportunities for public relations and marketing professionals. Marketing began its transition to interactive conversations rather than competing to push more messages through one-to-many channels. Customers were empowered, and companies had to share the podium with their audiences, loosening up their traditional tight control over messages and brands.

The stakes are even higher with the new wave of social media consisting of vast numbers of small and large social networks facilitated by services such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Flickr and YouTube, as well as micro-blogging networks such as Twitter. Communities of like-minded individuals, often thousands or millions strong, are communicating, interacting and creating their own content. These networks host their own conversations, where passionate advocates often air out powerful preferences and opinions for and against brands. These advocates have maximum credibility among others in the group, who are less susceptible than ever to influence or persuasion by marketers that are not part of their social networks.

How should public relations professionals respond to these new, powerful forces that are shaping their markets? How can they engage social networks in the most productive ways? And how can they avoid the pitfalls awaiting any company venturing

into a new medium? Following are three steps that will lead to constructive engagement with social networks.

Step One: Find Out Where on the Web Your Customers Live

Comscore, the Internet metrics company, reported that in June 2008 alone, there were 580 million unique visitors to social networking sites. Facebook alone had 132 million visitors. Determining where your customers congregate in those networks might seem like a daunting task. The good news is that the web makes it easier than ever to locate your customers, monitor their conversations, and listen to what they are saying about you. It is now possible to search for social networks—and interest groups within those networks—that match the demographics of the audiences you need to reach. It is also possible to gauge influence of the social networks you find by assessing readily available metrics, not only on their overall size and number of visitors, but also on the participation levels of existing users, the frequency of activity on the network, and the prominence of the network within the larger community.

Search engines are getting better all the time at finding and tracking conversations by their context rather than merely by keywords. Mashable and other sites provide news and information about social networks, along with updated lists of social networks. Twitter automatically guides users to other like-minded users and provides a search engine to find specific interest groups. And research services such as Cision are responding with broader and deeper content, providing fast identification of all the networks that are important to you, along with detailed databases featuring broad and deep information about those networks. CisionPoint currently features detailed profiles of more than 200 influential social networks.



Once you have identified the most influential social networks, constant monitoring of conversations helps you understand the most effective ways of interacting with them. There are a growing number of excellent monitoring services that provide a real-time snapshot of issues and conversations raised in social networks. The new Cision Social Media Dashboard, powered by Radian6, monitors micro-blogs, rich-content sites, online forums, social networks, and millions of blogs, providing an excellent means of identifying new key influencers.

Step Two: Engage

Once you are on top of the conversations in your marketplace, it is possible to join the dialogue. There are many ways to engage social networks as a PR person, but the first and most important

rule is the same as when pitching more traditional media: “use common sense.” Don’t waste people’s time with hype or a hard sell; create a relationship that will be mutually beneficial over time; learn everything you can about the group you want to engage before entering the conversation; treat every interaction not as a sale but as a two-way street and an opportunity to be helpful. That’s why good information about the social networks that are most influential in your marketplace (especially when you do your homework with research from services such as CisionPoint) can increase your effectiveness dramatically.

Following are steps you need to take to engage productively with social networks:

Large Corporations Bet on Social Networks

“Write something about Dell online, and chances are the company will know about it in an hour or so. Dis the company in a blog or a Facebook group, and someone from a crack response team may even chime in, if only to let everyone know that Dell cares...” (*Fortune Magazine, Sept. 3, 2008*).

When Dell, Inc., was embarrassed by a series of customer service snafus, the high-profile technology company got social-media religion. By tracking, then engaging the most influential social networks, blogs and other social media venues in appropriate ways, the company turned its image around rapidly. Dell became a model for dozens of other corporations that are having equal success engaging social media in a variety of ways:

- Southwest Airlines started a “Nuts about Southwest” blog that lets its employees talk about their experiences; the everyday comments of people at the front lines of customer service turned the social network of employees into brand ambassadors that enhanced the airline’s image and customer loyalty.
- Absolut Vodka leveraged the attractive demographics of the Facebook community with a “Top Bartender” page.
- Canon understood early on how group discussion and opinion building on the Flickr photo-sharing service might strengthen customer loyalty and improve sales of its digital cameras. Today the Canon DSLR user group on Flickr has more than 30,000 members and there are dozens of other Canon-focused groups with thousands of additional members.
- Kleenex created a “Let it Out” social network to build customer loyalty by encouraging members to get worries or concerns off their chests by sharing them with other customers, or to simply share interesting or funny stories and photos.



- Seek out media and influential bloggers who have taken up residence in social networks, but be VERY careful to follow their requests for how they do and don't want to be contacted. (CisionPoint and other research services detailing ways members of influential social networks do and don't want to be contacted can be helpful).
- On social networks, message boards, Twitter, and other sites, follow the social conventions. Being seen as a knowledgeable contributor who is not always out to promote a client is, paradoxically, the best way to get attention for your client. On the other hand, getting into arguments where you are just a shill for your brand may be the worst. Be transparent and never lurk under an assumed name.
- Informative, constructive and high-quality content and images will always trump promotional content. For example, many companies want to post promotional or viral videos and ads on YouTube and other video- and photo-sharing sites. It's important to offer

Social Media Goes Mainstream

From 2007 to 2008, social networks matured from their youth-oriented, consumer-community roots into mainstream tools used by major corporations seeking to engage customers and employees more actively and productively.

Cision and Radian6 Technologies recently confirmed this mainstream trend with an agreement to provide Cision's global customer base with new social-media monitoring services based on the Radian6 technology platform. Cision, the leading supplier of social media monitoring services for marketing, communications and customer support professionals, launched two new services:

- The Cision Social Media Dashboard, a self-service, online portal that delivers real-time access to social media coverage, plus analysis and reporting tools that allow communications professionals to understand the impact of social media activity and to take action based on those insights.
- Cision Social Media Daily Reports, detailed, twice-daily email reports that monitor all relevant social media coverage, with direct links to the online posts.

The new services empower Cision clients to monitor in real-time and understand the impact of the conversations taking place across the full spectrum of social media vehicles. "Here's a player who's really well known in more traditional media who has now launched a new social media product," he said Marcel LeBrun, CEO of Radian6. "It really creates a lot of awareness to a lot of their customers who may not have social media on their radar."

The services will monitor over 100 million blogs, tens of thousands of online forums, over 20,000 online media sources, over 450 leading rich media sites, top micro blogging sites such as Twitter and Friendfeed, and LinkedIn. Both services monitor public content on the full breadth of social media outlets, including social networking sites (including MySpace), micro blogs (e.g. Twitter), video- and image-sharing sites (including YouTube and Flickr), online forums and opinion sites, and LinkedIn Answers. In addition to English-language sites, the services monitor social media across multiple languages, including Spanish, French, Italian, German, simple Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Russian.

Clients utilizing the new social media monitoring services along with Cision's research, distribution, monitoring and analysis services will have the industry's most comprehensive real-time monitoring capability.



guidance on appropriate content with high-quality information or a creative or humorous concept, not just a promotional pitch. Just as an objective article by an independent journalist on your product or company is far more credible than an ad or a press release, an informative video with high-quality content that you post on your site or on YouTube is more likely to be passed along by the media and individuals.

As always in PR, courtesy, common sense and following the golden rule “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” will go a very long way. And no matter what means of engaging social media you choose, it is important to join the conversation with an authentic voice. Paul Gillin, social media marketing expert and author of *The New Influencers* and *Secrets of Social Media Marketing*, advises: “When marketing to vertical communities, you need to dig deeply into the expertise in your organization....If you have articulate, interesting domain experts in your organization, now’s the time to pull them out of the shadows and engage them with knowledgeable communities.”

Step Three: Track and Measure Success

With every wave of new media, marketers must answer the question: “What does success look like?” Measurement of social media is a new field. But the new, online, real-time social media monitoring services provide data you can use to start measuring quantitative and qualitative success.

Users of the Cision social media dashboard are provided with a constant stream of helpful data that can be the starting point for a measurement program. It is possible to develop the same kinds of qualitative measures currently used in measurement of mainstream media to assess the overall pickup of marketing messages, but with a larger volume of web-generated data that makes immediate assessment and analysis possible. Remember, if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it. The sooner you start, the better the set of benchmarks you will have going forward. The better and more complete the overall measurement, the easier it will be to allocate the proper resources in the overall marketing mix to proactive engagement with social networks as part of your social media program. You can start collecting counts of inbound links and social bookmarking citations on on-topic posts, comment count and number of unique commenters. Or services such as the Cision Social Media Dashboard allow you to score the influence (relevant to your topic of interest) of any blogger or social network based on the vote count (the total number of citations on Digg and Delicious).

The measurement metrics you develop will be natural outgrowths of the most important measure, which is your success in becoming part of the communities you serve. Has the social network you created gotten traction, return users, and links to others? Has your participation in other social networks increased your community of customers and followers? If the answers to those questions are “yes,” the other measures of success will follow.

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