

Staying Afloat in a Sea of Social Media

AN INTELLIGENT APPROACH TO
MANAGING AND MONITORING
SOCIAL MEDIA

THE CHALLENGE: TAKING ADVANTAGE OF A COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION

PR professionals today must successfully navigate a sea of social media. But the social media universe is broader, more complex, and quicker to change than mainstream media.

There are more than a hundred million blogs – and millions more users of social media networking sites, podcasts, video sharing sites, RSS feeds, traditional bulletin boards, Twitter groups, wikis, and countless other modes of interaction. In total, they represent an exciting, transformative grassroots revolution in communication. Anyone with knowledge to share or a lot of passion can become a blogger. “Citizen journalists” who provide indispensable information and credible opinion can become opinion-shapers whose impact can be felt in newsrooms in Manhattan, Washington and London, in boardrooms around the world, and by millions of individual consumers.

For public relations professionals and other communicators, social media present huge opportunities. To engage effectively, you need the right tools and skill set. Navigating the social media sea starts with a common sense understanding of how individuals and social groups communicate and relate to each other. When social-media mavens say marketing is now participating in and managing a “conversation,” they are talking about managing relationships at their most fundamental level.

The social media phenomenon is less a singular movement than a vast, loosely affiliated universe of discrete communities – some of them large, and many of them very small – with each devoted to a particular and sometimes narrow set of interests or topics. Engaging in the conversations with these groups in a meaningful way requires developing relationships with them. Communicating your story credibly and effectively over time requires managing these relationships with care.

THE GOAL: IDENTIFY, ENGAGE AND MONITOR THE RIGHT COMMUNITIES

Building and managing relationships with the individuals and groups most important to you requires an understanding of whom you need to engage with and why. By concentrating on the right communities, you can begin a fruitful conversation with both professionals and consumers. While there are millions of blogs (including personal and corporate blogs), social media communities and video sharing sites, in almost every category there is a relatively small subset of truly influential voices with the credibility or the cachet to set the tone and agenda for the rest. If you identify, monitor and engage with those top-tier influencers, you will start to get the control over your story and message you could otherwise lose.

Start by asking these questions:

- How can I discover the most influential blogs and social media vehicles that affect my products, services or corporate reputation?
- How can I monitor them? How much time should I, or my team, spend on social media monitoring and outreach?
- How do I communicate effectively with them?
- Most important, how can I evaluate and measure the impact that social media conversations are having on my business, or my client’s business?

Answering these questions is the key to successfully navigating the social media waters. Here are four steps public relations professionals can follow:

1. PRIORITIZE. How do social media rank in importance to your overall media relations strategy?

One of the first decisions to reach is basic: are social media fundamental to the success of your company and stakeholders’ decision to do business with your company? The answer is **yes**, if:

- Your brand can be affected (positively or negatively) by social media conversation. A full range of consumer product categories – from clothing to home/interior design items to cars – are now dependent on social media to create buzz that both supplements and takes the place of traditional advertising.

- Your brand depends on early adopters and passionate “evangelists” to build momentum for your products or services – something business-to-business communicators are accustomed to, especially in high technology and consumer tech.
- Key blogs or social media sites are authored by or influence market analysts, other “thought leaders” about your industry, or mainstream media that cover your company.
- Your corporate reputation or your shareholder relations may be vulnerable to attack-blogging by unhappy customers and investors – or your company runs the risk of being deposed by aggressive competitors who have infiltrated social media.

Understanding the relative importance of social media in your entire communications and marketing mix will guide you to the right strategies for engaging with social media.

For example, if you represent the latest low-priced, consumer-friendly product, you might focus much time and energy on sites reaching masses of consumers; e.g., music companies interact with MySpace music sites or with YouTube video communities to promote artists and songs. On the other hand, if your client is the chief executive of that consumer products company, you’d devote your energy to engaging with individual bloggers at analyst firms, trade journals and websites of top business publications to position the CEO as an expert for both customer and investor audiences.

Clearly, many companies must recognize social media as a critical communication channel. But, as important as social media may be, they seldom will be the *only* channels. For strategic and tactical planning, and to properly manage your time (or your staff’s), you also need an understanding of social media’s context within the mix of all other communications channels that you must engage and monitor.

2. TARGET. All blogs are not created equal. How do you separate wheat from chaff?

Once you have determined where social media fit into your overall communications mix, it is imperative to understand which social media are most important to your cause. Focusing most of your efforts on the relatively small number of the most influential social media will most likely provide the best results. This requires identification of top-tier social media outlets and a detailed analysis of their impact on customer behavior.

The complex social media environment makes it more important than ever to leverage best-in-class research, targeting and monitoring tools when identifying and engaging with influential bloggers, and participating in other social media venues. With superior research intelligence and ongoing monitoring of the conversation, you will add value when contacting and interacting with social media.

The goal should be establishment of a strong *relationship management platform*, combining best-in-class media research, monitoring and evaluation of issues being aired by bloggers and in other social-media venues. CisionPoint, with its integrated media database, monitoring and evaluation modules, is one such platform. It contains critical information, updated continuously, on thousands of blogs and social media outlets, and includes tools to identify the most important blogs and monitor ongoing conversations. This information includes who runs the blog or site and their interests, background and credibility with your target audiences.

A relationship management platform also lets you know the basis on which they prefer to engage with you. Will they accept press releases from you? Do they encourage comments on their site? Do they edit or delete comments before they are posted?

You also need to understand the demographics and reach of the site. A relationship management platform contains tools and services that allow you to discern how well informed and well connected a site may be, with measurable data on a number of fronts, including:

- Traffic and Links: You need to determine the number of page views and unique visitors to the site. How many other bloggers have linked to the blog in question? The more links, the more powerful an influence the blog may be.
- RSS Subscriptions: Does the blog's home page or About Us page list newsfeed subscriptions? The number of subscribers may influence whether you consider the blog to be critical to your campaigns.
- Post Frequency: How frequently is the blog updated?
- Bookmarks and Social Media Network Tools: Does the blog make it easy for users to bookmark, or to join communities?

3. ENGAGE. Once you know whom you need to deal with, how do you join the conversation?

The social media are the ultimate uncontrolled communications channel. The lack of the editorial filters seen in the mainstream media and the low barrier to entry are two of social media's most compelling attributes. But this immediacy and accessibility also present challenges. The tolerance of pseudonyms and anonymous comments can lead to misleading posts and flaming – harsh and negative counter-posts and reactions – that can get ugly and personal.

In addition, the social media demand a greater degree of transparency in communications than many mainstream channels. In the past few years, public relations professionals have undergone some painful learning experiences when they have treated social media as a “traditional publicity vehicle,” rather than as a forum for open, frank and honest conversation among interested parties. Dissembling or pretending to be a happy consumer versus a paid advocate for a product, company or cause can cause a serious backlash, whereas honest identification of your interest, knowledge, affiliation and honest point of view are most often welcomed.

At the same time, the common-sense rules of engagement with mainstream media apply equally to engagement with social media:

- As with traditional journalists, what are their positive and negative biases? What's their history – the longevity and “positioning” of their outlet? What's their bandwidth? When and how often do they post?
- Understand and capitalize on niche outlets. Some blogs that narrowly focus on specific topics or products claim to have only a 100 readers, but they may be “the right (i.e. most influential) 100 readers” for your company or product.
- Also know and monitor who in the blogosphere is negatively disposed toward your industry or company (even its strategic partners). They could be the point of origination for damaging coverage or rumors.

Some sites will welcome input from a company spokesperson. In the blogosphere – and elsewhere in social media – everyone has an ax to grind. You have a right to “have a take” – to promote your product, to correct a mistake or misperception – but your communication must be transparent, credible and honest. Decisions on whether (or how) to respond to sites that are innately hostile to your company, industry, or profession should be made on a case-by-case basis.

When you engage, don't spam. Make your messaging and communication appropriate to the outlet. Get your story straight, and tell it transparently and honestly. Make it useful, credible and robust enough to withstand challenging comments. When you comment on blog posts, discuss wide-ranging changes, trends and issues in your industry as candidly as possible; don't simply plug your product. To avoid tit-for-tat arguments, redirect the discussion by linking to credible third-party sources that can provide perspective and a fuller understanding of the issue at hand.

Once you engage properly, you will have started building the relationships you need to meet your communications goals in the social media environment.

4. MONITOR & ANALYZE. Track important conversations in key blogs and begin to measure the impact of social media communications.

It is important to be aware that conversations and relationships evolve over time. Therefore rigorous monitoring of the conversations in your target blogs and social media outlets is important to understand the strength of your relationships and the traction that your story is getting in the communities where you have engaged. Track the issues being aired that are important to your organization, and summarize the discussion. Leverage positive social media interactions and blog mentions with mainstream media, when it makes sense to do so.

At the outset of your monitoring and analysis activity, determine how you will measure success and set benchmarks for results. The conversational nature of social media requires that you make decisions about whether to participate (and how) in near real-time; you will need to develop a means of assessing issues that you are monitoring as they are aired. As in all multiple-spokespeople situations, you also may need to develop guidelines for employees or management who wish to engage social media on those issues.

Reporting is critical. Roll up real-time and daily evaluations into weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual trend reports to provide context. Then publish and disseminate your findings to as broad an internal audience as possible on a regular basis. Use the feedback for ongoing updates to your own messaging, positioning, and your strategies for contributing to the social media conversation.

Relationship management platforms can apply best practices in analysis and evaluation from the world of mainstream media coverage to social media. Cision's evolving methodology for social media measurement will draw on the company's industry-standard processes to measure Prominence, Tone, Impact Score and Net Effect of messages you are trying to communicate. This kind of feedback is the final element that you need in your relationship management platform. It enables you to understand where the conversations are going and how well you are managing the relationships you need to achieve your objectives.

THE FUNDAMENTALS STILL APPLY

The brave new world of social media has revolutionized communication while creating unprecedented challenges for professional communicators. But you can meet the main challenges to effective social media engagement by following fundamental and time-tested principles of public relations practice:

- Identify a finite universe of key outlets.
- Communicate clearly and transparently.
- Know your audience and stay on top of the dialogue in those key outlets.
- Engage in the dialogue in intelligent and constructive ways.
- Endeavor to understand the impact these conversations are having on your brand and corporate reputation.
- Evaluate in real-time and be ready to adjust the dialogue as it evolves and address new issues as they arise.
- Use the feedback to give back to the conversation in intelligent ways.

Communicating in the right ways is imperative if you want to stay afloat and successfully navigate the sea of social media. Productive participation in this environment has until now been more art than science. But the tools required for an effective relationship management platform are improving daily. And – as with traditional PR – common sense application of the fundamental rules of communication and relationship building will take you a long way.

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