

Optimizing Your Public Relations With Social Media



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A Guide to Blogs, Wikis, and Social Networks for PR Professionals

Introduction— The Emergence of Social Media

In September 2006, Hitwise, an online marketing research firm, reported that the majority of traffic to online music retailer, HMV.co.uk, was referred from MySpace, a social networking Web site. This traffic surpassed searches from two of the most popular search engines, MSN UK and Yahoo! UK. While connecting users with information and content was once defined by complicated search algorithms, MySpace's impact indicated a profound shift in the structure of the Internet was on the horizon.

Today's communication's environment increasingly relies on content generated and distributed by users like you and me. This is the world of social media.

Evidence of the growth of social media is everywhere:

- In 2006, the Blogosphere had grown 100 times in three years, and accounted for 50 million blogs (Technorati, 2006).
- 57% of teens who use the Internet can be considered content producers in some way or another (Fox & Lenhart, 2006).
- More than half (55%) of all online American youths ages 12-17 use social networking sites (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).
- In April 2006, 35,000 new videos were being posted daily to YouTube and in February 2006, YouTube attracted 9 million visitors who viewed 176 million pages (Liedtke, 2006).
- Wikipedia consistently places in the top-10 results for Google searches on fortune-500 brand names (Fadner, 2006).

The Evolution of Media

As with all forms of media, social media has evolved with society. The advancements in our culture have created new vehicles for communicating with the public.

Two centuries ago, media was used in reference to newspapers. As Thomas Carlyle (1869) noted, they were the fourth estate: the medium that existed between the political sphere and the individual citizen. The newspaper editor's job was to frame political issues and provide local citizens with the information needed to make political decisions.

In the twentieth century we saw a new paradigm of communications emerge, mass media. The introduction of radio, television and film ushered in a new way to broadcast messages to a mass audience. As with newspapers the messages that were broadcast were still controlled by a small group of distributors, resulting in relatively uniform content tailored to appeal to a broad demographic.

The 20th century, however, brought with it a change that would fuel a massive shift in communications' availability, reach and content—the Internet. In arguably, the biggest shift to date in communications, the Internet blurred the lines between production, distribution and consumption of media content.

As the Internet grew and became a staple of society, early information and communication technologies (ICT) such as Usenet, Multi-user Domains (MUDs), listservs, and BBS systems emerged to assist in the adoption of this growing medium. But as a broader population went online, many commercial and academic efforts focused on making ICTs less complicated and more accessible to all kinds of users.

The results can be seen throughout the past several years with the emergence of blogs, podcasts, social networks and a number of other innovations we collectively refer to as social media. Several common traits define social media:

- **User-driven** - Content is not controlled by editors, distributors and other outside influences but instead is primarily generated by the users themselves.
- **Organic Content** - In social media, content is constantly being reshaped and repurposed. An article posted one day may be edited the next day, while a video may reappear mixed or "mashed" with another video days later.
- **Community-oriented** - Collaboration, participation and shared interests are the foundation of all social media, creating a distinct community to each site.
- **Easy to use** - Taking advantage of social media is simplified to be accessible for broad audiences, enabling anyone to post or share within the community, regardless of their technical training or aptitude.

The New Social Media Outlets

New social media outlets have sprung up throughout the Internet, including:

Blogs

Despite the early years of the Internet, Web development was only for the technically savvy. Over time, Web publishing tools have become easier to use, opening up publishing opportunities for even non-technically savvy users. Around the year 2000, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) made it possible to syndicate Web content. These two developments: simplification of Web development and RSS set the table for the explosion of the blogosphere—the interconnected world of blogs.

Although some use their blogs as a publishing platform, most successful bloggers interact with their audiences through comments and with other bloggers through hyperlinks and Trackbacks¹. With an informal tone and very limited editorial review process, if any, blogs have become more timely than the mainstream media in many cases.

Podcasts

Although podcasts are normally defined as audio versions of blogs, it is not entirely accurate. They do share many characteristics with blogs, such as RSS and the personalized tone, but the production effort is currently substantially higher than with blogging. Podcasts also lack the interactive nature of blogs. For example, while text allows the blogger to include hyperlinks, it is far more difficult with audio or video.

Video podcasts have increased in popularity over the past several years. They share many traits with standard audio podcasts, including the same challenges to interactivity. Interestingly though, interactivity may enhance video podcasting before audio podcasting. Several organizations are looking at ways of embedding hyperlinks into video. For example, Siemens is developing a method that would train technicians with video manuals that would allow them to click on components in the video to retrieve more detailed video clips on that component (Economist, 2006).

Social Networking sites

When Microsoft Outlook was introduced, people were able to place their rolodexes online and communicate with their contacts through e-mail. Social networking takes this basic function and adds two important facets. First, in social networking sites you create a personal profile: your own personal Web page to represent you on the Internet, including general statistics, hobbies and anything else you would like to include. Second, social networking provides an opportunity to extend your personal network. Social networking sites allow you to extend your personal network, to include your friend's and their friends.

These sites have opened up the Web for users to socialize virtually. Creating your online persona, you are now ready to connect with the people you choose with no geographical boundaries.

Over time, the capabilities offered through social networking Web sites have become increasingly sophisticated, incorporating file sharing, instant messaging, forums and Blogs. With over 150 million users on MySpace alone, social networks have also become the single-most popular form of social media.

Wikis

In its most basic form, a wiki is a Web site that fosters collaboration. Imagine you are sitting in a brainstorming session with several of your co-workers. Suddenly, you have a great idea so you walk up to the white board and begin to sketch it out. Once you finish, a co-worker has a complementary idea and walks up to the board and adds onto your original sketch. Another co-worker mentions that they had a similar idea months ago, so they snap their fingers and it suddenly appears on an adjacent white board. And so on and so on.

Most wikis store each version of a document, allowing you to review versions to view the various modifications that a document has undergone over time. In many cases, there is an open discussion about the documents they are collaborating on.

Wiki software drives Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia and an increasingly influential online resource. Wikipedia's rapid ascent is in large part a result of being completely user-driven. All of the content is collaboratively developed by writers and editors around the world.

¹ Trackback is a method that allows Bloggers to be notified when their content receives traction through the Blogosphere.

Media sharing sites

In February 2005, three friends and former co-workers at PayPal registered a domain name with the intention of launching a Web site to allow users to upload, watch and share videos. Over the next several months, they developed the site and attracted venture capital funding, which allowed them to accelerate its development. Fast-forward a little over a year and that small company called YouTube was sold to Google for \$1.65 billion in stock. Due to their rapid and astronomically lucrative ascent, YouTube has become a household name and the leading example of a media sharing site.

While YouTube's focus on video played a major role in their high market valuation, media sharing sites can involve various types of media including photography (e.g. Flickr) or news (e.g. Digg). Alternatively, they can focus on emerging media like Adobe Flash (e.g. Newgrounds) and even Web bookmarks (e.g. Del.icio.us).

Media sharing sites offer users the ability to upload and share different types of media. In addition to being platforms for sharing media, they are also distribution points for public consumption. Content on highly visible pages within the site, like the home page, are normally decided through democratic processes. The tagging process, in which a user adds descriptive information to a piece of content, allows users to share content (including multimedia content) that is not easily read by search engine crawlers.

Media sharing sites are not only about sharing media, but like all forms of social media, they are about sociability and dialogue.

Advantages of Social Media

Social media is important for a number of key reasons:

- **Stickier than traditional media** - Social media has the potential to attract and hold the attention of a vast demographic of people who have grown numb to more traditional forms of marketing and advertising. According to a study conducted by InsightExpress, a market research firm, consumer trust in advertising has decreased 41% over the past three years (Elkin, 2005). Meanwhile social media engages consumers in a way that encourages trust and profoundly increases message retention. According to the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), 92% of consumers cite word of mouth as the best source of information on new product ideas.
- **Viral Nature** - Social media has a tremendous viral capacity to reach wide audiences in just a short amount of time, a substantial opportunity and threat for communications professionals. While a well-placed outreach effort can reap tremendous rewards if executed properly, it can just as easily result in a negative viral outcome for organizations that were not properly prepared to deal with the ensuing firestorm. For example, Warner Brothers has attributed almost \$100 million in revenue for March of the Penguins, to positive buzz generated from the independent podcast 'Mommycast' (Gilllin, 2006). Whereas, Dan Rather can attribute his demise to Rathergate, when rumblings of unauthenticated documents spread throughout social media and ended up in the celebrated news man's early retirement.
- **Interactive** - Traditionally, media organizations would make investments in research in order to assess the efficacy of their media efforts. Through social media, organizations can now communicate and get immediate feedback from users, encouraging a process of dialogue between user and organization. Enabling comments on a corporate blog, for example, has resulted in a positive impact for many organizations that have been able to gain valuable customer feedback from the practice.
- **High visibility on the 'Net** - Social media has grown up on the 'Net. As a result, social media holds a favorable position for visibility. Wikipedia is perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon. Spannerworks, a search engine marketing specialist, recently reported that social media platform Wikipedia appears in the top 20 Google search results for 88 percent of searches for the top 100 global brands (Mayfield, 2007).

Incorporating Social Media to Optimize Your PR

Social media presents a wide array of risks and opportunities and the stakes are high. Through social media, PR professionals can reach their target audience in new, engaging ways. At the same time, the potential to misstep and encounter an ensuing backlash is high. Vocus' PR platform solves this problem by providing its customers with the tools and information necessary to approach social media in an informed and appropriate manner and accomplish positive results.

Vocus can optimize your social media strategy through:

Monitoring and Analysis

News Monitoring has always been an integral part of a PR strategy. In traditional media, it would often take days for news to travel. In the Blogosphere, news can travel in a matter of hours- reputations can literally be made or broken overnight. Vocus users obtain near real-time coverage of news sources including the Blogosphere, alerting you when your brand or issue is being discussed in the social media space the moment it happens.

Social Media Outreach

Social media represents a new opportunity for PR professionals to reach their target audience and optimize the retention of their intended message. At the same time, it is a whole new array of outlets to learn and target. With Vocus' bloggers profiles, customers are armed with in-depth profiles on the most influential bloggers online to ensure they are approaching the Blogosphere appropriately to accomplish positive results.

Distribution

According to the Social Media Club (SMC), "Social Media is conversational media in all its interactive forms." For PR professionals, this means moving from a process of one-way communication to one that is more interactive. Vocus' PRWeb, the online news and press release distribution service provides tools to help users take advantage of social media. Simplifying the production of RSS feeds and podcasts, PRWeb press releases contain embedded social media functions such as comments, Trackbacks, and links to media sharing sites like Digg and Del.icio.us.

Conclusion

In just a short amount of time, social media has made a big splash. Perhaps the most significant indicator of social media's importance is its' impact on the traditional media landscape. The symbiotic relationship between the two is increasingly visible. While social media continues to borrow from the latest headlines, Newspaper journalists now have their own Blogs and the Tonight Show plays footage from YouTube.

Social media has significantly altered the world of media unlike any other medium. With its viral, informal and unedited format, it will continue to grow and change and present new opportunities for both public relations and traditional journalists. The integration of social media into the overall media landscape represents a new challenge for PR professionals. Vocus has positioned its customers to be at the forefront of this new technology by providing them with the tools they need to understand and interact with social media. Vocus will help optimize your PR by integrating your social media efforts and ensuring your success as a PR professional in today's new media landscape.

The key is getting started and Vocus can help! To learn more about Vocus or schedule a demo, please visit www.vocus.com or call (800) 345-5572.

About Vocus

Vocus, Inc. (NASDAQ: VOCS) is a leading provider of on-demand software for public relations management. Our Web-based software suite helps organizations of all sizes to fundamentally change the way they communicate with both the media and the public, optimizing their public relations and increasing their ability to measure its impact. Our on-demand software addresses the critical functions of public relations including media relations, news distribution and news monitoring.

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