



Research in brief

How public relations executives perceive and measure the impact of social media in their organizations

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ABSTRACT

Decisions about social media in organizations are not made lightly. Corporate executives are faced with an ever changing and in many cases, uncontrollable opportunity with social media. This study provides insights obtained from 25 interviews with communication and public relations executives to identify their opinions about what drives social media in organizations, what challenges they face, and what questions they have about social media and its measurement.

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1. Introduction

The emergence and increasing popularity of social media have changed the practice of public relations. Social media offer numerous opportunities for public relations practitioners to interact with a wide range of stakeholders. In their annual social media study, Wright and Hinson in 2010 found most public relations professionals felt social media tools were important in their organizations. Specifically, 77% of respondents felt social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn were important (14% felt they were unimportant), 65% felt micro-blogging sites like Twitter were important (23% felt they were unimportant), 65% felt video sharing like YouTube was important (22% felt it was unimportant), and 57% felt blogs were important (33% felt were unimportant). Compared to the 2009 study, the 2010 study found an increase in importance for each tool except blogs. Because of the high importance organizations place on social media as well as its growing popularity among various publics, companies are becoming more involved in trying to measure and manage social media.

As more forms of social media emerge, public relations practitioners must understand what tools to use, how to use them appropriately, and how to measure their effectiveness (Paine, 2009). Social media change the relationship between a company and its employees, customers, competitors, suppliers, investors, the media, and essentially anyone who has an impact on or who can be impacted by an organization (Yang & Lim, 2009). Spreading a message in this environment can be easier, faster and more efficient (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009), but dedicating the proper amount of staff to implementing tactics with the proper tools can be challenging. The challenge for public relations practitioners is not just trying to find the best way to incorporate social media strategically, but also to determine the best way to measure it beyond merely counting followers or fans (McCorkindale, 2010).

While studies have explored the use of social media in public relations, most research has focused on lower level communication employees. Although these employees are typically the people involved in its day-to-day use, they are not who

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make the corporate decisions involving social media. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain new insight into corporate use of social media in public relations by exploring the perceptions of top corporate communication and public relations executives.

2. Method

A total of 25 qualitative Web-based interviews using a purposive sample of public relations and communication executives were conducted in May and June of 2010 by the Social Media Understanding Group (a group composed of academic and executive social media subject matter experts). The executives were asked questions regarding the opportunities and challenges their organization faced when using social media, how they measured social media, and what more they would like to know about social media. Interview participants included 12 members of the Board of Trustees of the Arthur W. Page Society, nine members of the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Public Relations and four current participants in the Future Leaders Program of the Arthur W. Page Society. Of the 12 corporate communication participants from the Board of Trustees of the Arthur W. Page Society, five held positions with *Fortune 500* companies, two were with public relations firms, two were with universities, two were consultants, and one was with a nonprofit organization. Of the nine corporate communication participants from the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Public Relations Society, five held positions with *Fortune 500* companies, one was with a public relations firm, one was with a university, and one was a consultant. Of the four corporate communication participants from the Future Leaders Program of the Arthur W. Page Society, three were from *Fortune 500* companies and one was with a public relations firm. All participants worked at the executive level in communication or public relations. Researchers analyzed the interviews using a thematic analysis technique and grouped the responses to identify recurring themes.

3. Results

Overall, the communication/public relations executives in this study expressed mixed beliefs about the importance of social media in affecting an organization's bottom line. While the majority of participants felt social media were important, six felt it was unimportant in driving business results.

3.1. Factors driving social media in organizations

Most participants acknowledged the manner in which society consumes news and information as the driving force behind the popularity of social media. This in turn influences why and how participants are using social media in their organizations. To communicate effectively, organizations must go to where their stakeholders are. In fact, as one participant stated, the greatest risk is to "ignore social media and to allow conversations to happen without awareness or participation."

3.2. Major social media challenges organizations

The most common challenge for the participants was accepting the lack of control associated with social media and not knowing what people might say or do. Overall, participation in social media exposes companies to internal and external crises. Internally companies must be concerned with issues such as intellectual property leakages, criticism of management or the company, and embarrassing employee behavior that can damage a brand. Criticism, false information and activist groups were the biggest external concerns.

Several participants experienced skepticism in their organizations about the value of social media. Others responded that their employees did not understand how to actually use the tools or incorporate them strategically. One participant said some do not see "that these are simply a new set of tools rather than a quantum shift in the principles of effective communication."

Participants also found it difficult for staff to stay current with the rapidly changing social media environment. This was made more challenging by the involvement of "older employees who are less familiar with the medium" and teams having to "learn as they go." Adapting to the immediacy of social media has also been a challenge.

Regulated businesses found the use of social media especially challenging. For example, some of the participants talked about how the stringent regulatory environment for pharmaceutical and healthcare companies limits their ability to engage patient communities as freely as they would like. In addition, internal controls like legal may require approval while not really understanding the environment. This adds another layer of difficulty in communicating with publics.

Other challenges included determining investment decisions, establishing policies and confidentiality, along with measurement issues such as linking social media to sales, systematic monitoring, accurate sentiment analysis, and determining that "engagement is providing value."

3.3. *What communication/public relations executives want to know about social media*

Although some participants wanted to know what is the best or most effective mix of channels, others were more focused on the future. Given that new tools will constantly emerge and lose popularity, one participant stated she believes that knowing about the “newest and latest” is important, but not as effective as understanding the drivers of change.

Many of the participants stated they would like examples of best practices such as: “social media that delivered quantifiable business value,” “proven policies and management systems that balanced appropriate use of social media with risk mitigation,” “what success looks like. . .what really moves the needle,” and “effective internal sites.”

Other participants were more focused on practical uses of social media and had questions about how to:

- apply social media to specific groups like internal publics and business to business
- train staff
- properly invest resources for social media
- “assess credibility of certain media among key stakeholders,”
- “optimize community groups and encourage dialogue,”
- “engage in a meaningful and transparent manner,” and
- “serve the community while delivering value to the enterprise.”

3.4. *What communication/public relations executives want to know about social media measurement*

Social media measurement was a topic that many of the participants felt they had more questions than answers. One participant went so far as to question the ability to measure social media, but others had more experience and even provided examples such as:

In evaluating online commentary, it is important to understand what is simply noise and what is of substance or has the potential to emerge as a substantive issue. Otherwise, we will find ourselves reacting to everything. That’s not practical or a wise use of resources.

The participants also had questions about how to:

- measure “behavioral outcomes, not just reach,”
- “connect media metrics to corporate communication strategy,”
- “get concrete and meaningful measures of impact. . .influence behavior,”
- “best measure the effectiveness of social media in driving employee engagement and consumer purchases or actions,”
- “measure mobile,”
- “measure impact,”
- measure in a way that “shows it contributes to strengthening the brand,”
- measure the “age and social status of the audiences,”
- correlate with corporate reputation and behavior, calculate return on investment, and
- measure credibility.

4. **Discussion and conclusions**

The results of this research show that although most communication/public relations executives in this study understood the importance and continued use of social media, they still have many unanswered questions. Organizations are using social media to “to engage in important conversations” and to enhance understanding of markets, customers, competitors, and employees. On the other hand, some organizations have tried to put control into social media by instituting organizational social media policies. Overall, social media was seen as a cost effective way to receive greater reach for research and timely targeted dialogue.

This study explored the opinions of communication and public relations executives to determine their perceptions of social media and its measurement. By better understanding how social media is implemented in organizations along with identifying the challenges and unanswered questions, the field of public relations can work toward improvement to gain or maintain a stronger hold on incorporating social media functions strategically and appropriately in organizations.

Practical implications of this study call for social media training in organizations. This training must include not only a focus on how to use certain tools, but also how to determine what tools to use and how to effectively measure their use. Companies must be prepared to efficiently navigate through the ever changing landscape of social media tools as each day brings new forms of social media.

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