

How social media will change the way we communicate

By Lee Smith, Gatehouse Consulting

The language may be distracting, but social media, which includes blogs, podcasts and wikis, is set to change the practice of employee communication forever. Here the ICA's *Lee Smith* examines the evolution that is taking place in the way people and organisations interact, and considers how it might impact communicators over the coming years.

From David Cameron to David Brent, blogs and podcasts are suddenly everywhere. No longer niche channels for the techno-literate, they are now a firmly established part of mainstream culture, used by individuals and organisations alike to educate, entertain and connect with growing numbers of people.

But while PR specialists and marketers have been quick to embrace these new channels, the response from internal communicators has been less than enthusiastic. Whilst there is a fair amount of discussion about the subject at specialist conferences and in the professional press, to date very few organisations outside the IT sector have started experimenting with blogging, podcasting and other techniques internally, and even fewer have developed a proper social media strategy.

Yet, as we shall explore during this short article, social media has the potential to revolutionise communication both inside and outside organisations. For internal communicators it offers much more than a new set of tools that can be used to supplement existing channels. Social media tools are part of a wider trend that many commentators believe will have profound and far reaching implications for communication professionals.

The basics

The term social media encompasses a wide range of web-based communication tools, including internet chat rooms, video and photo sharing websites, bulletin boards, internal discussion forums, email lists, collaborative wikis, blogs and podcasts.

Made possible by the rapid growth in broadband internet access (about a third of UK households currently have broadband access, with that figure set to double by the end of 2008), what these tools have in common is their ability to connect people, to give them a voice and to create rich conversations around a subject of mutual interest. It is these three characteristics that set the social media apart as technological developments internal communicators should pay attention to.

The other reason is their enormous popularity. At the start of November 2006, Technorati, the leading search engine for blogs, was tracking a staggering 60 million blogs globally. Although the pace of growth has slowed slightly in recent months, that number is still growing by around 100,000 every single day. There are an estimated 50,000 podcasts in existence already, and sites like MySpace (social networking) and YouTube (video sharing) are now used by more than 70% of 16 to 24 year olds in the UK. These statistics alone suggest the impact of social media is much more than a temporary blip.

In the beginning...

The Cluetrain Manifesto, a web-based collection of 95 theses which was published in book form in 1999, is viewed by many as predicting the emergence of social media. Passionate, if slightly messianic, the Manifesto argued that the web would dramatically change the dynamics of business by enabling consumers and employees to communicate and share their knowledge more freely. Seven years on and the world the Cluetrain's authors envisaged is beginning to emerge.

Central to the Manifesto was the notion of the market as conversation. The authors argued that markets – and organisations – consist entirely of human beings and they pointed out that human beings thrive on conversation, self expression, sharing stories and swapping ideas. It is this fundamental truth that is fuelling the growth of websites like Flickr (photo sharing), Digg (citizen journalism) and Del.icio.us (social bookmarking).

These hugely popular sites are part of a phenomenon that has become known collectively as 'Web2.0'. The buzzword is used to describe the current generation of web-based services that emphasise online collaboration, user-generated content and file sharing. In contrast to the static, brochure-ware web of the past, the new style 'conversational web' is being created and driven by ordinary people.

Witness the phenomenal success of the travel advice website Trip Advisor (www.tripadvisor.com). It now features more than 5 million independent hotel and holiday reviews, all of them submitted by ordinary travellers. No matter how attractive a hotel's website is, a poor rating on Trip Advisor can spell doom. It is precisely that sort of 'people power' that employers – and internal communicators - must now learn to harness.

But what exactly does all this mean for internal communicators? Will it really impact the way we communicate inside organisations, or does it merely provide us with a few extra tools for our kit bag? Like an increasing number of commentators, I believe that a fundamental shift is taking place and that social media has the potential to radically alter the way leaders and employees communicate. Let me explain.

From distribution to dialogue

Every PR and communication undergraduate is familiar with the work of Grunig, who underlined the importance of two-way symmetrical communication more than a decade ago in the IABC's landmark study, Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management. The importance of feedback and listening was, of course, identified by communication scholars long before that. It's something communication professionals inherently know and understand.

Yet the harsh truth is that most internal communication remains essentially one way. Even now many intranets are akin to brochure-ware websites, used to pedal the corporate line with limited, if any, opportunity for employees to question, challenge or contribute. Other channels, from employee magazines to plasma screens, exist primarily to distribute information to employees, rather than to create a dialogue with them.

Much face-to-face communication, from the glitzy annual conference to the monthly team meeting, pays lip service to dialogue and remains fundamentally 'tell and sell'. A ten minute Q&A following an hour of Powerpoint is not a conversation.

We may ask employees for their input, survey them regularly, run suggestion schemes and invite them to the occasional brown bag lunch with the CEO, but these tactics, important as they are, are a far cry from the sort of dialogue stakeholders are now demanding.

As social media takes hold, employees – just like consumers and shareholders (indeed they are often the same person) – will expect a more open, honest and sustained dialogue with their leaders. They will be less accepting of distant and inaccessible leaders and of cultures that are all tell and no listen. Some disgruntled employees will take their talent elsewhere, while others will no doubt blog about their experiences.

For those organisations that decide to embrace them, these technologies will enable a much richer conversation to take place internally and, in the process, will help connect employees, turn them into ambassadors, capture their knowledge and ideas and unlock greater discretionary effort.

Blurring boundaries

The boundaries between the organisation and its environment are blurring. This trend started some time ago, but it is accelerating rapidly thanks to these latest developments in technology. In the wake of numerous high profile corporate scandals, stakeholders are now demanding greater levels of openness, transparency and accountability from the organisations they interact with. They want to have their say, to be heard and to see organisations respond positively to their suggestions.

Increasingly this dialogue is taking place on line. Social media is connecting large numbers of likeminded people and giving them a powerful platform from which to question and challenge organisations. Those organisations that choose not to participate in this discussion – to hide behind their firewall - are effectively gagging themselves and losing their ability to influence the debate.

The environmental charity Greenpeace provides an excellent example of a well conceived and expertly targeted on line campaign. It created the website www.greenmyapple.com to question Apple's environmental performance and to pressure the computer manufacturer to clean up its act. The site pays homage to Apple's own website and, unlike many lobby campaigns, is positive in its orientation toward the brand (the site slogan is "I love my Apple, I just wish it came in green").

At the heart of the site is a section called .mAct which enables visitors to spread the word using a variety of social media tools. To date more than 100,000 people have visited the site, over 1000 blogs now link to it, and more than 12,000 people have written directly to Apple's CEO Steve Jobs demanding change. Although this campaign is aimed primarily at consumers, I have no doubt it has also been equally successful in educating and influencing Apple employees.

The boundaries between internal and external communication will blur even further. Those organisations that give their employees the freedom to blog will create a powerful direct dialogue with the marketplace, circumventing traditional communication channels. This dialogue has the potential to build, defend or demolish corporate reputations. I believe reputation management will increasingly rest in the hands of ordinary employees and will succeed or fail according to how engaged and informed those employees are. Internal communication, in this context, will become central to reputation management.

Control is history

One of the most profound implications for communicators concerns message control. Those of us who were trained in traditional media relations techniques operate from a control mentality – we carefully craft and refine key messages, we limit the number of corporate spokespeople and we carefully groom them on what to say and how to say it. We monitor the media and, if we think a report is unfair, we write to the editor to seek redress.

Social media turns all this on its head. You cannot control a conversation. As a form of word of mouth, blog posts spread like wild fire. They become a matter of public record as soon as they are posted, no matter how well or poorly informed the author is. There are no editorial standards in the blogosphere and there is no editor to complain to when things go wrong. More worrying still, blogs are increasingly influencing the agenda of the traditional media. In such an environment communicators will have to learn to let go and operate 'freestyle'.

Kryptonite, a US-based manufacturer of bicycle locks, provides a compelling case study on the potential for bloggers to damage a reputation, and a balance sheet. In 2004 stories and videos began to appear on blogs showing that the corporation's locks could be opened using a standard Bic pen. Kryptonite had not embraced social media. It was slow to respond and, when it did eventually issue a press statement, it was too late – bloggers ridiculed its classic defensive response. Forced into a corner, Kryptonite has since spent more than \$10million replacing faulty locks. The story may have been different if Kryptonite had had an army of employee bloggers fighting its corner and responding to on line criticism quickly and personally.

Employee ambassadors

Whether you like it or not the conversation is already happening. In the same way that employees have always talked about work down at the pub, so too will they discuss their employer on line. A recent Intelliseek study found that around 9 per cent of people posted to blogs – their own and others - to comment on or defend their employer. That same study found that employees were more influential in determining consumer intent to purchase than either a product news story or an advertisement. As well as managing your reputation, it seems that ordinary employees will play an increasingly important role in marketing your business. Those organisations that can turn their employees from passive observers to passionate on line advocates will secure a real competitive advantage.

Transparency rules

As social media takes hold it will become increasingly difficult for organisations to get away with spin, exaggeration or half truths. In the blogosphere, authenticity and transparency are key and organisations that are perceived to ignore those guiding principles will inevitably suffer.

The PR firm Edelman recently came under fire in the US after a blog it developed for retailer Wal-Mart was exposed by BusinessWeek magazine as a promotional tactic. The blog, entitled Wal-Marting Across America, featured a pair of seemingly ordinary Americans, Jim and Laura, travelling across the country in a motor home and stopping overnight in Wal-Mart car parks. Their blog postings were often overtly positive about Wal-Mart. Jim and Laura were, in fact, a freelance writer and photographer respectively and were being funded by a group called Working Families for Wal-Mart, itself a creation of Edelman. Following sustained criticism both on line and off line, the blog was closed in October.

Conclusions

A shift from distribution to dialogue, a blurring of organisational boundaries, an inability to control the conversation, greatly empowered employees and increased transparency – just some of the profound ways that social media is changing the landscape for internal communicators.

These changes won't happen overnight and nor will they affect all organisations (there will always be those that prefer to operate behind a veil of secrecy) but what is certain is that the way the majority of us practice internal communication will change.

For some this change will represent a revolution, for others a long-awaited return to communication basics (conversation, storytelling and dialogue is arguably where it all started). As a profession we will have to move beyond the rhetoric and start making dialogue, genuine dialogue, a reality. We will have to relinquish control. We will have to learn to listen more and to talk less.

There are risk involved and not every culture or sector will be able to make the transition, but those organisations that are able to fully embrace social media will, I believe, see real business benefits. Rather than being a 'human resource', genuinely engaged employees will, thanks to these technologies, play a key front line role in attracting business, servicing customers, retaining fellow employees and building and defending the corporate reputation.

Author notes

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