

Social Media: The Fewer, The Higher

By Chris Lukach

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Thanks to social media, the "straight line" is becoming a reality for communicators.

Conventional communications programs rely largely on media relations — with media acting as gatekeepers and middlemen, risking distortion or omission of your message. Now, web-based social media — blogs, wikis, message boards, listsevs, etc. — enable communicators to reach high-interest users directly without relying on third parties. A straight line, and a fine complement to any communications program.

But, paraphrasing author Leo Aikman, the shortest distance also may be under construction. Social media are dynamic, evolving, and not without their risks and hurdles. Here are some tips to keep you on point and out of trouble when building a social media strategy.

Believe it or not, being active in social media lets you better control your messaging ... take advantage of this.

Being active with social media opens doors to a new world of direct-to-consumer out-



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reach. Without an intermediary, your message reaches your audience undistorted and as you intended it. What a unique opportunity!

Ah, but it's not quite that simple. Social media is the great equalizer; everyone — including your organization — is given equal opportunity and position. Anyone with an Internet connection can dissect your message or counter your argument through the same easily accessible venue through which you distributed your message. (And, barring foul language or libelous comments, you can't restrict others' comments without sacrificing your credibility.) Many communicators can't yet stomach the thought of this very public discourse.

But communicators who forego this great opportunity for "fear of feedback" overlook one very important capability: the opportunity to respond to and contain critical messages before they get out of hand. If your organization has stakeholders of any kind, it's safe to assume you are already being (or will soon be) talked about on the Web — you don't have to be Fortune 500 for this to apply to you. Become active in social media — participate and even house this dialogue — so you can comment and defuse appropriately.

Maintain your communications ethics.

Communicating to a Web-savvy audience is risky. Those active on Web-based social media channels feel a sense of ownership over the technology. Because of this, social (continued on Page 26)

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media are especially self-policing.

A week rarely goes by without a well-publicized case of an organization losing face through a very embarrassing social-media misstep. Fake blogs, or "flogs," are the most common. (For two textbook cases, Google either of the publicly lambasted "All I Want for X-Mas is a PSP" or "Wal-Marting Across America" blogs.)

With embarrassed companies publicly apologizing with some frequency, why would clients even dip their toes in the social media water?

It's important when incorporating new media programs to hold onto the realization that bad things seem to happen to companies that make bad decisions. You will rarely see companies disparaged in the media for being transparent and honest. That's why so many high-interest users respect social media venues, and that's why your organization ought to respect them, too. It is deceitfulness that lands companies in the World Wide Web's doghouse.

Manage expectations about ROI; fewer numbers, higher impact.

Public relations effects are intangible and difficult to demonstrate. Many organizations simply cannot afford to invest in tools to measure changes in opinion, and public relations isn't always a direct line to behavioral change (i.e., successful public relations doesn't necessarily equate to increased sales). Hence, the adoption of patchwork metrics such as publicity value and media impressions. They're widely used because they are easy to compile, low cost and show a payoff in terms of dollars. At the same time, most practitioners take these metrics with a grain of salt.

In its infancy, social media are generally without a commonly accepted metric, at least one that can demonstrate ROI in dollars. (Most social media programs evaluate success on page views, links, or "trackbacks.") At many organizations, management has grown accustomed to conventional metrics, and even rely on them to gain support for PR.

When pitching social media programs, it is important to emphasize this: social media metrics seem less impressive if you go strictly by the numbers, but they matter more. Much more. If the goal of your communications program is to reach a certain audience to influence thought or behavior, why rely on inherently wasteful mass distribution techniques?

Instead, stress that those who are active participants in social media are a very engaged audience — one where your message has a better chance of resonating, one already interested in your category ... engaged, accessible and ready to dialogue.

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