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## Adoption of Social Media for Public Relations

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**Abstract:**

*Over the last decade, the number of people that read magazines is shrinking and radio is splintered whereas social media forums have grown exponentially. There are millions of Facebook users, bloggers and twitter users. It has become an integral part of the lives of millions of people by allowing them to connect and communicate with others online. The popularity of social media represents a major transformation in the way the world communicates and more importantly in who is doing the communication. As the traditional media is disappearing, PR practitioners are forced to use social media. Social media presents a number of challenges when it comes to managing public relations. It is not possible for organisations to compartmentalise audiences and messages since social media is public and universal in nature allowing all audiences to read communications intended for any one of them. However, PR practitioners cannot assume that a message through one social media platform will reach all the audiences. Social media is fragmented. There might be a possibility that an individual may or may not see the information in a tweet or on the Facebook page of the organisation or on a blog. To act effectively on behalf of the organisation, public relation practitioners need to monitor and keep track of both traditional and new sources of media for potential use and respond accordingly. The digital revolution has presented a new communication challenge in front of the practitioners: Social Media. This paper explores the trend of PR practitioners adopting social media and the challenges public relation practitioners face with regard to social media.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, PR, public relation, Word of mouth

### 1. Introduction

World Wide Web is accessible to majority of the world population and is also embedded in the functionality of public relations practice. World Wide Web provides an all purpose communication medium through which information on any subject can be found out. Organisations today not only must be aware of their identity on the traditional forums of marketing but also be aware of their reputation and corporate image in the cyberspace. Organisations can use social media networks to build relationships with publics such as shareholders, investors, customers etc. Organisations can also use social media channels to provide information about the organisation to the diverse group of public. Social media enables organisations to communicate with the traditional media such as news reporters, journalists etc in a more efficient and effective manner and also serves as a means of correcting misinformation about the company if any. The organisations need to deal with a number of factors in this rapidly changing and competitive climate in which they operate. Social media adds to the complexities by changing the communication environment in which public relation practitioners operate. According to the Middleberg/SNCR survey 2009, approx. 70 % of journalist's use social networking sites, 48% journalists are using Twitter and other micro-blogging sites, 66% are using blogs and 48% are using online videos, the risks incurred by not managing online information are quiet high. Public relations which were until recently an informational medium has now become increasingly social. Publics have become more in control of what they read hear and watch due to the development of social media channels. Social media enables publics to be active and selective in their exposure to public relations messages. Social media has led to stakeholder empowerment by giving them the resources to communicate with one another, to make groups on the basis of common interests and to broadcast their opinions about a business organization and in turn threaten the organisations reputation. This empowerment in the hands of stakeholders has shifted the power to influence from the hands of the business executives to their audience. The business organisations can no longer control their organisations messaging, reputation and status in the society. In this day and age businesses throughout the world need to redefine their strategies and embrace social media. It is no longer a strategic business option, but a necessity and a huge opportunity. Businesses need to learn to exploit social media as a communication tool by integrating it into all key areas of business especially public relation which plays an important role in creating and maintaining a certain point of view about the business, its products, brand name, leadership and political decisions in the eyes of investors, partners, present and prospective customers, employees and the general public.

## 2. Social Media

The era of social media started when Bruce and Susan Abelson founded “Open Diary” a social networking site that brought together online diary writers into one community. At the same time the term “Weblog” was first used and abbreviated as “blog” a year later when one blogger transformed the noun “weblog into a sentence “we blog”. Growth of internet added to the popularity of the concept, leading to the formation of social networking sites such as Myspace and Facebook. In turn the term Social media was coined and contributed to the prominence it has today. To understand the term social media a distinction has to be made between two terms that frequently named in conjunction with social media- Web 2.0 and user generated content. Web 2.0 was coined in 1999 by Darcy Di Nucci and was popularized by Tim O'Reilly at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 conference in late 2004. It is a platform whereby content and application are not only created by individuals but are also continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative manner. Personal web pages, online encyclopaedia Britannica and the idea of content publishing belong to the Web 1.0 era; they have been replaced by wikis, blogs and collaborative projects in the Web 2.0 era. Tim O'Reilly describes Web 2.0 as “a business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform.” In the year 2006 he provided a general business aspect in relation of Web 2.0 as the “harnessing of collective intelligence”, in which Web 2.0 provides platforms and fills the Web with user-generated content where all individuals – the former audience are able to take part in instead of important decisions made by a few people. In short, Web 2.0 is the platform for the evolution of social media. The term user generated content became popular in the year 2005 and represents the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media. It describes the various forms of media content that are available publicly and are created by end users. User generated content according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, needs to fulfil three basic conditions in order to be considered such. Firstly, content should be made publicly available over the internet, secondly, it should reflect a certain amount of creative effort and lastly it should be created outside of professional routines and practices. Based on Web 2.0 and user generated content, social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. The Universal McCann report (2008) defines social media as “online applications, platforms and media which aim to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and the sharing of content”. Saffo and Brake have defined social media as “activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media”

## 3. Potential of social media

Social media channels have been able to attract millions of users since its introduction many of whom have integrated these channels into their daily practice. The aim of social media is to build an online community that promotes the individual and encourages him to build relationships with others on the basis of similar background and interests and emphasises on individual's relationships within the community. The ability of social media to build trust and relationships is what appeals greatly to public relation practitioners. Social media platforms are growing rapidly. According to the Universal McCann Wave 3 report, 394 million people watch video clips online, 346 million read blogs, 307 million visit friends social networking profile page and 303 million shares a video clip. This high amount of usage has prompted public relation practitioners to reconsider traditional methods of communication and consider how social media can be effectively utilised. Social media public relation is the process through which practitioners can promote organisations websites, brand name, products or services via online social channels and tap a much larger audience base. If effective, social media PR can provide organisations with a feasible and an inexpensive strategy that has the capability of providing organisations far more at a far less cost as compared to other marketing channels. Even social media platforms have understood the benefit they provide to organisations. Facebook is allowing its users to publicize their purchases on their networks thus providing an opportunity to create brand advocates through word of mouth. It is essential for PR practitioners to properly leverage social media so that they can communicate effectively with consumers through word of mouth, brand awareness and message broadcasting. Social media offers PR practitioners the opportunity to create brand awareness; spread messages virally, examine the opinion of consumers, and identify who the opinion leaders are. If a proper strategy is designed, organisations can infuse trust and credibility within a brand that help in enhancing the reputation of an organisation.

## 4. Word of mouth

Word of mouth is the most powerful source in the hands of PR practitioners who also refer to it as word of mouse and is defined as the interpersonal communication that takes place between the consumers about products and services. It is basically communication that involves passing of information between a non commercial communicator i.e. someone who is not paid for it and a receiver concerning a brand, product or service. With the advent of social media the importance of word of mouth has become increasingly crucial. The inherent nature of social media is to enable users to collaborate, contribute and voice their opinions. The development of social media has provided a platform to consumers through which they can actively participate in the marketing sphere by expressing and sharing their opinions and experiences. The biggest challenge for organisations is to manage millions of people that have the ability to demote or promote the brands identity. To counter this challenge organisations encourage consumers to engage actively with the organisations brands or products. This enables consumers to be part of the marketing process and helps develop a unified relationship between the brand and the consumer. InterContinental Hotels group has effectively employed this tactic. To increase room bookings the group selected 150 members from the loyalty club. They were then offered a chance to earn triple points for every 3 night stay they made at any IHG hotel worldwide within the next 6 weeks. These members were given a redemption code to use and 3 codes to pass to friends and family. In 6 weeks the viral campaign generated over 1600 registrations and increased the revenue of the hotel group by 25 million dollars.

## 5. The Trust Factor

Social groups or networks have existed since the time people were living in caves and travelled as tribes. These groups were formed because the people in it shared common interests and most importantly shared trust. Internet has changed the way the business is done especially when it comes to sales and marketing. Today the consumers are far more knowledgeable and informed and at the same time they are more cynical and mistrustful. As it is getting cheaper and faster to reach customers, it is getting less likely that they will listen to what the organisations say through paid media. Today, to sell products and services to customers it is essential to be perceived as trustworthy by customers. It has become essential for organisations to appeal to and become part of the trusted networks of consumers. According to Brown trust is trust in a person's competence, benevolence and integrity. These are the qualities that are also required to form the relationship of trust between the consumers and brands. Therefore, it is important for PR practitioners to integrate these qualities into their social media strategies and control any factor that might influence these qualities. With social media, PR practitioners hardly have any control over the messages that are being shared about the organisation. Such lack of control highlights the need for organisations to be part of the social media ecosystem to maintain and protect the credibility of an organisation, its products/services or brands. For instance the marketing team of Jack in the box, an American fast food restaurant took part in the social media ecosystem by creating a profile on social networking site MySpace. Within weeks over 190000 consumers had joined the site and were positively promoting the brand.

Consumers have a tendency to trust a virtual salesperson more as compared to a human salesperson. PR practitioners need to understand that establishing relationship with consumers is about establishing trust in the consumers about the brand and the organisations products and services. PR practitioners need to understand that social media is a twofold process that requires participating in other networks as well as becoming one for customers and prospects. The success of social media as part of the public relation strategy depends on having a balance between having a presence in the social media ecosystem and participating in it by listening to consumers and responding to them.

## 6. Challenges those PR practitioners face with regard to social media

On the part of organisations, there is resistance to enter social media as there is very little control they have on the messages transmitted about them. Nestle, a global food manufacturer had to face negative effects of social media when Greenpeace released a video on YouTube that highlighted companies alleged use of Palm Oil from Indonesia's deforested areas. The viewers shared this video on their social networking pages and within the first week the video was viewed over 750000 times. On their Facebook page, Nestle had to face a lot of negative posts. To control the crisis, Nestle asked YouTube to take down the video and started to take down the negative posts. As the organisation was seen filtering content, it saw further backlash from the consumers announcing their distrust in the company. The most important lesson PR practitioners need to learn from Nestle is that they need to listen to their public and engage and not edit. Breakenridge and Solis correctly believe that social media will put public back in public relations. Though it is risky to have a presence on social media, absence on it can lead to rumours, stories and conjecture which can adversely affect the identity of an organisation. It is better to be present and have little control than being absent and having no control. Another challenge that PR practitioners face is that consumers will react negatively to content that is produced to push sales. Public relation social media can falter if the product or service is pushed aggressively to the consumers. Organisations and PR practitioners need to understand that consumers participate in social media to develop relationships not to be influenced to buy a product. Over commercialization of social media can push consumers away. .

Fragmentation of social media presents Return on Investment problem for PR practitioners. They need to put in a lot of hard work trying to reach influentials for little result. Efforts made in the social media landscape may not work in cost-per thousand terms. With regard to social media organisations need to think in terms of cost-per-influential terms. Reaching the right audience despite their size should be stressed upon.

## 7. Conclusion

Social media is a powerful tool in the hands of PR practitioners as it enables them to create brand awareness, develop long term relationships with customers and increase the loyalty of consumers. If used effectively, social media can influence consumers, develop their trust and facilitate positive conversation around the organisation and its products and services. The ability of social media to generate word of mouth has put an increasing pressure on PR practitioners to influence and monitor conversation with consumers online. This can only be done when trust is established with the consumers. Today, it is essential for organisations to enter the social media ecosystem and become part of consumers trusted networks so as to encourage consumers to be actively involved with the organisation. In order to be successful, organisations need to be aware that they should not over commercialise their sites and be open to consumer's criticism. If used effectively, social media provides PR practitioners with an economic and feasible strategy that can reach millions of consumers and gain their support.

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