Challenges and Implications for Using Social Media in Public Relations

First Last

University of Montana

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Challenges and Implications for Using Social Media in Public Relations

Summary

Social media have transformed passive publics into active communicators. Engaging publics in an organization's communication poses five key challenges for reputation management: networking and openness, speed and disintermediation, user control and participation, differentiation and niche building, and transparency and measurability.

Relevance and Applicability

These five challenges have far-reaching implications for the practice of public relations. Through social media, "each participant in a network is simultaneously a potential sender and receiver of information" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 27). Though organizations lose some control over the content, they have the potential to gain insight into their public's opinions (Hoffman, 2011, p. 27). Social media enable organizations to directly target key publics, thus downplaying the significance of the mass media in reaching the intended audience (Hoffman, 2011, p. 28).

With the significance of the mass media downplayed, it becomes increasingly important to establish credibility and trustworthiness (Hoffman, 2011, p. 28). Low distribution costs mean it's not necessary to reach a mass audience; targeted groups can be easily reached quickly and inexpensively (Hoffman, 2011, p. 28). Finally, social media offers practitioners unparalleled richness of information to evaluate a campaign's effectiveness. Organizations seeking to create efficient, cost-effective, two-way communication with targeted publics would do well to invent organizational resources to developing and maintaining a social media presence.

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Context

Guth and Marsh (2012) agree social media has great potential for monitoring what people say about an organization online. According to a 2009 report by *Public Relations Journal*, 45 percent of surveyed companies "hired 'external agencies' to keep track of what is being said about them online. Another 34 percent indicated they conducted this monitoring in-house" (as cited in Guth & Marsh, 2012, p. 201). Additional research suggests few organizations using social media "are tapping into its potential for customer feedback" (Guth & Marsh, 2012, p. 201).

Critical Evaluation

Hoffman clearly identifies five challenges for reputation management and discusses why they are relevant to the field, yet he makes no recommendations for overcoming them in practice. Though the article is peppered with examples of organizations that are successful at social media, not every challenge includes a case study illustrating how it could be overcome.

In addition to relevant case studies for each challenge, it would be helpful to extrapolate key learnings from each case study which could be applied in practice. Especially given the growing relevance of social media as a public relations technique, it is important for PRPs to understand the issues social media creates so they can plan accordingly and successfully execute plans. As best practices emerge, it is to the benefit of the field that they are shared widely and adopted as standard operating procedure. The article would have been more beneficial if it identified these best practices.

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References

Guth, D. W., and Marsh, C. (2012). *Public relations: A values-driven approach* (5th ed.).

Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Hoffman, C. (2011). Holding sway. *Communication World*, 28(6), 26-29.

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