New Media, New Influencers and Implications for Public Relations

A Research Study by the SOCIETY FOR NEW COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

With the support of Institute for Public Relations and Wieck Media

Society for
New Communications Research

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SNCR PRESS

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PREFACE

Finding Our Tradition in the Nontraditional

by Frank Ovaitt
President and CEO, Institute for Public Relations

New media and new influencers speak to anything but tradition. Nevertheless, the Institute for Public Relations' support for this work by the Society for New Communications Research reinvigorates a tradition of research going back to the mid-1980s.

That's when we published *New Technology and Public Relations*, a book that included an early look at the Internet's impact on our profession. We returned to this overall theme in 2006 by launching a new research program with Wieck Media, the Institute's online technology partner, whose funding made this SNCR project possible. Our goal is to build rigorous knowledge regarding the impact of digital technology on public relations and corporate communications practice today.

As an independent nonprofit dedicated to the science beneath *the art of public relations*™, the Institute for Public Relations bridges the academy and the profession, supports research and mainstreams this knowledge into practice through education. "New Media, New Influencers and Implications for Public Relations" connects with all of these elements of our mission.

The Institute and Wieck Media salute the Society for New Communications Research for its groundbreaking work in an area that is essential to understanding this profession and its future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research study was conducted by a team of Society for New Communications Research Research Fellows and was made possible by a grant from the Institute for Public Relations and Wieck Media.

The research team for this study was comprised of five SNCR Fellows: Joseph Carrabis, John Cass, Paul Gillin, Richard Nacht and Greg Peverill-Conti. The Society for New Communications Research thanks these individuals for their work on this study.

In addition, the Society thanks the many participants in the survey and case study portions of the study and extends its appreciation to the Institute for Public Relations and Wieck Media for their support of this important research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Media, New Influencers and Implications for Public Relations

by Paul Gillin
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

Marketers and public relations professionals today are confronted with an astounding array of new communications channels. Internet-based social media tools like blogs, podcasts, online video and social networks are giving voice to the opinions of millions of consumers. While mainstream media continues to play a vital role in the dissemination of information, even these traditional channels are increasingly being influenced by online conversations. The "new influencers" are beginning to tear at the fabric of marketing as it has existed for 100 years, giving rise to a new style of marketing that is characterized by conversation and community.

Marketers are responding to these forces with a mixture of excitement, fear and fascination. They're alarmed at the prospect of ceding control of their messages to a community of unknowns. Yet at the same time they're excited about the prospect of leveraging theese same tools to speak directly to their constituents without the involvement of media intermediaries.

The Society for New Communications Research set out to conduct an examination of how influence patterns are changing and how communications professionals are addressing those changes by adopting social media. The goals were to discover how organizations:

- Define new influencers;
- Communicate and create relationships with them;
- Use social media to create influence; and
- Measure the effects of these efforts.

Another goal of the study was to use these discoveries to offer a set of recommendations to professional communicators.

Methodology

The study utilized a web-based survey created in Qualtrics. The survey was conducted from September 2007 - November 2007. The survey focused on "social media power users," *i.e.*, communications professionals with a deep knowledge and heavy usage pattern of social media tools including blogs, podcasts, online video, social networks, and other new and emerging communications tools and technologies.

The Sample

Of those organizations surveyed, 78% use blogs, 63% use online video, 56% use social networks and 49% use podcasts in their organization's communications initiatives. The total sample size for the survey portion of the study was 297 communications professionals: 37% of whom were public relations / marketing communications professionals working within an agency, 35% of whom were in-house public relations and corporate communications professionals; 22% were public relations and marketing communications consultants; 4% worked for media companies and 2% were advertising and/or brand marketing professionals.

Respondents represented a wide range of industries including aerospace, arts, banking, chemicals, communications, computers, drugs, education, electronics, energy, financial services, food and beverage, government, health services, insurance, internet, manufacturing, media, non-profit, real estate, retail, telecommunications and utilities (Table 1). The respondents' roles and responsibilites ranged from determining

Table 1:
What best describes your industry (or the primary industry you represent if you work for an agency?

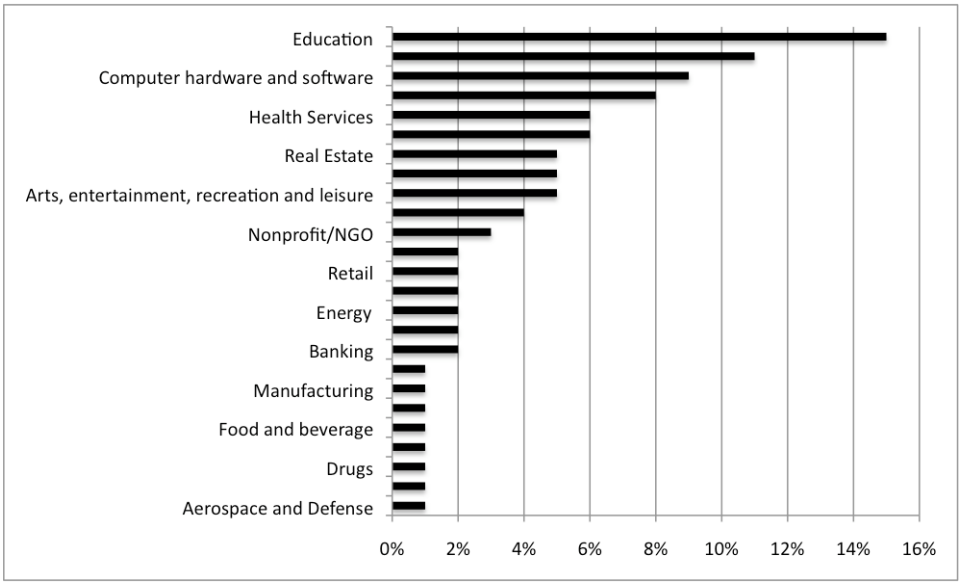
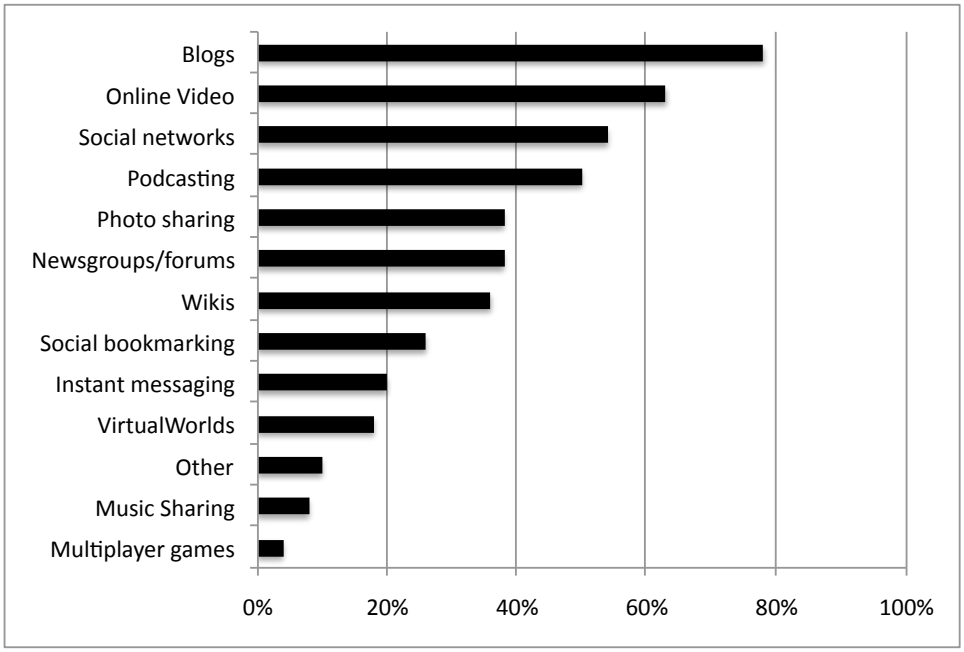


Table 2:
Which of the following online tools has your organization used in at least one campaign?



strategy to managing social media programs.

Case Study Component

In addition to the survey component of the study, seven in-depth case studies of organizations utilizing social media were gathered via telephone-based interviews by the SNCR Fellows with a wide variety of organizations including BlendTec, EepyBird, MARC Research, The Mayo Clinic, Quicken Loans, the American Red Cross, Emerson Process Management, and the Union Gospel Mission.

Social Media Channels

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that social media tools are becoming more valuable to their activities as more customers and influencers use them. Twenty-seven percent reported that social media is a core element of their communications strategy. Only three percent stated that social media has little or no value to their communications initiatives.

While blogs, online video and social networks were ranked as the most popular social media tools, respondents spread their activities across a wide range of channels. Podcasts, newsgroups, photo-sharing sites and wikis have also been widely deployed (Table 2).

The respondents indicated an overall high satisfaction level with the media they've used and no one tool emerged as a clear top performer. In fact, the variance in perceived effectiveness among the five most popular tools was so small as to be statistically insignificant (Table 3).

Turning to the metrics that the respondents use to evaluate influence generated by their

own social media campaigns, the researchers were surprised to find that standard Internet measures like search engine ranking and web site traffic were perceived as being more useful in determining their organization's own influence and success than audience awareness or bottom-line results. The popularity of these quantitative criteria was particularly intriguing because the benefits of conversation marketing initiatives have been widely touted to be brand awareness and customer satisfaction.

One explanation is that "awareness" is difficult to measure and changes slowly over time, while immediate improvements in search engine rankings offer quicker gratification to campaign sponsors. Another is that lack of industry consensus on measurement criteria for social media initiatives forces PR and communications professionals to fall back on those metrics that have worked in the past (Table 4).

When asked to rate their criteria for assessing the *overall performance* of social media initiatives, though, respondents cited awareness and engagement factors ahead of hard metrics (Table 5).

Criteria for Assessing Organizations's Influence and Success with Social Media Initiatives

Fifty-one percent of respondents are formally measuring the effects of their organization's social media initiatives. The metrics they value most are enhancement of relationships with key audiences, enhancement of reputation,

Table 3:
Please rate your perception of each tool's effectiveness toward achieving campaign goals
(1= not at all effective; 5= very effective)

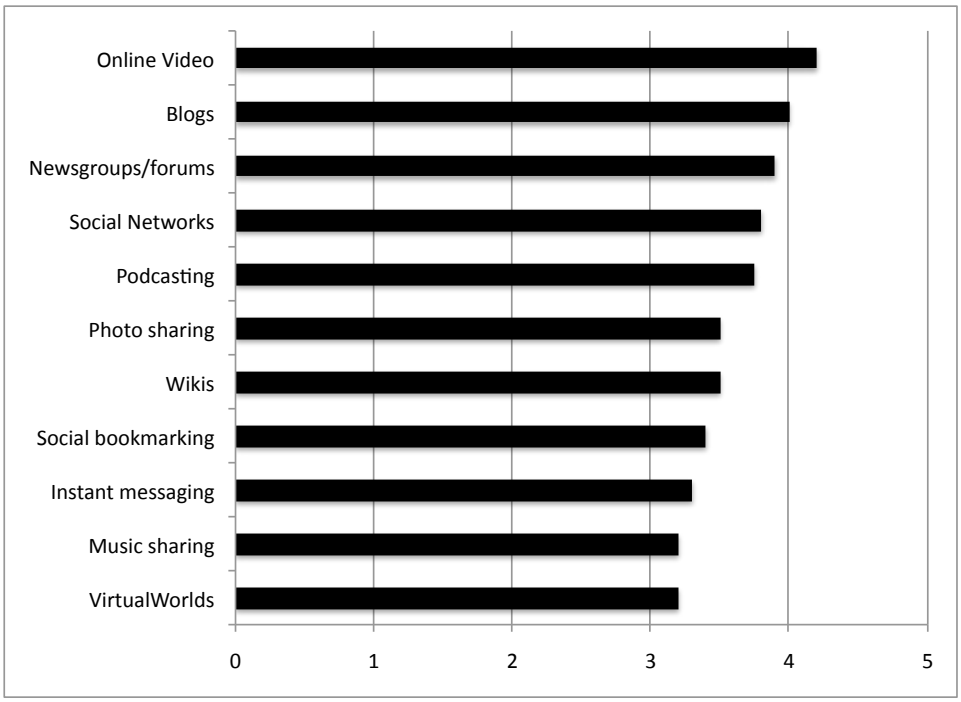


Table 4:
In evaluating the influence of your organization's social media initiatives, which criteria do you consider to be the most important? *(1= not at all effective; 5= very effective)*

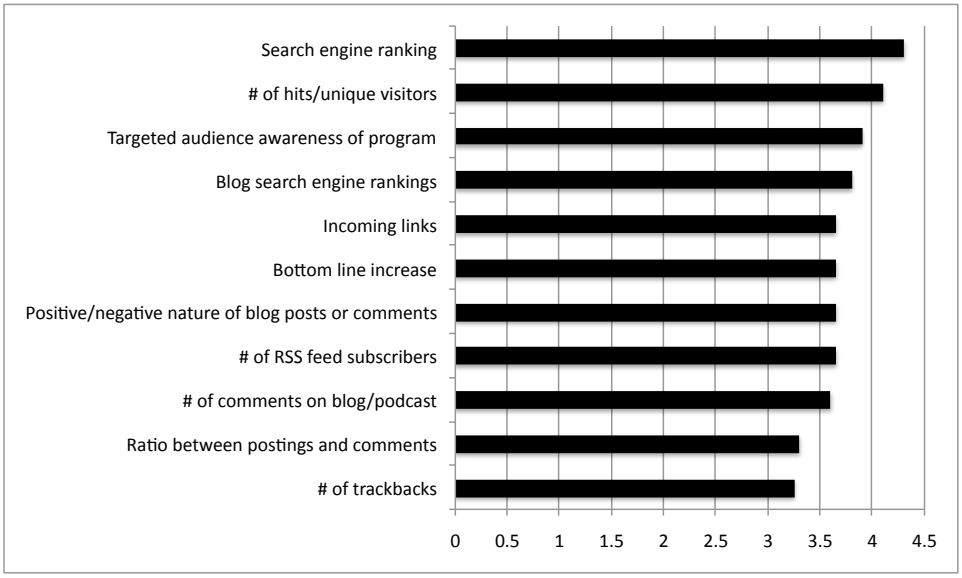


Table 5:
Which metrics do you consider to be the most important when measuring the effectiveness of your overall efforts in comunicating with the "new influencers?"

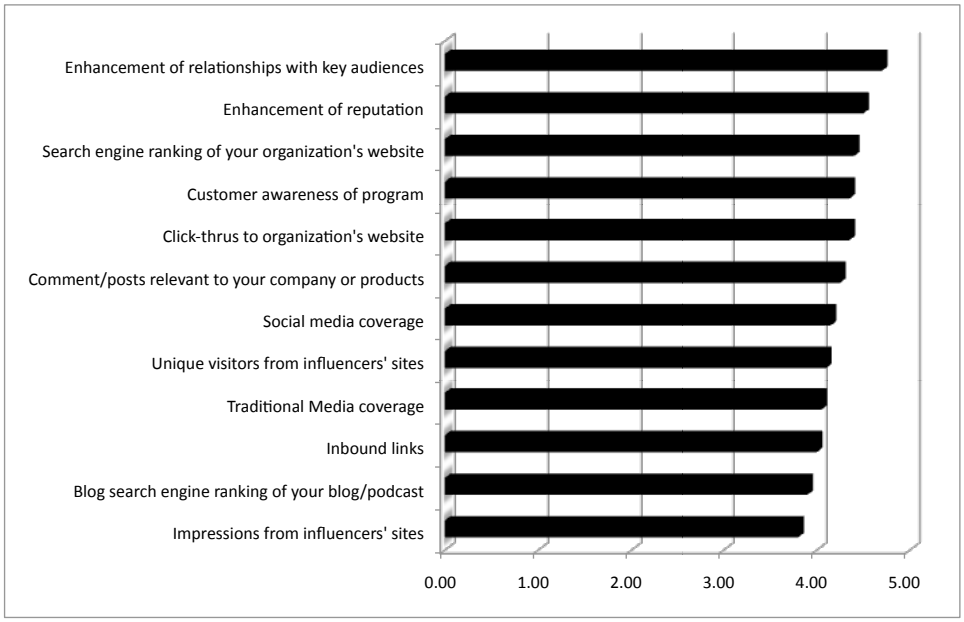
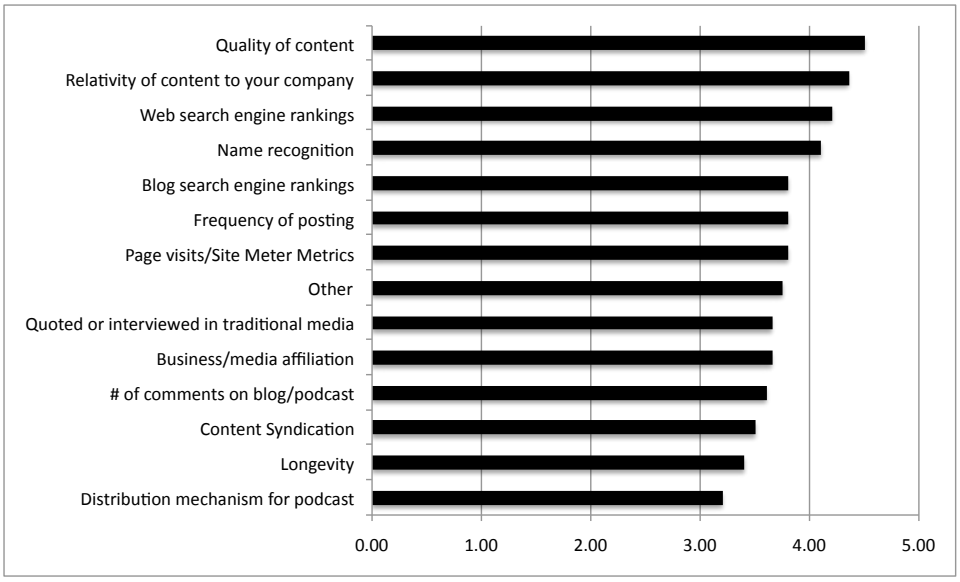


Table 6:
In evaluating the importance of a blogger or podcaster to your PR or marketing communications programs, which criteria do you consider? *(1= not at all important; 5= very important)*



customer awareness of program and comments/posts relevant to organization/products. Close to the bottom of the list for measuring social media impact was traditional media coverage of those efforts.

Criteria for Determining the Most Influential Bloggers and Podcasters

Interestingly, there was no clear agreement among respondents on the best criteria to use in determining influence. A wide range of factors were cited as being important, ranging from difficult-to-measure criteria including: "Quality of content" to highly measurable factors, including page views and search engine rank. The top three criteria for determining the relevance and potential influence of a blogger or podcaster are: quality of content on the blog or podcast, relevance of content to the company or brand, and search engine rankings. Surprising to the researchers was the fact that criteria that measured online engagement for blogs and podcasts were among the least important to the respondents. The researchers were surprised to find that intangible criteria were at least as important as quantitative data in this regard. (Table 6).

Criteria for Defining Influence In Social Networks and Online Communities

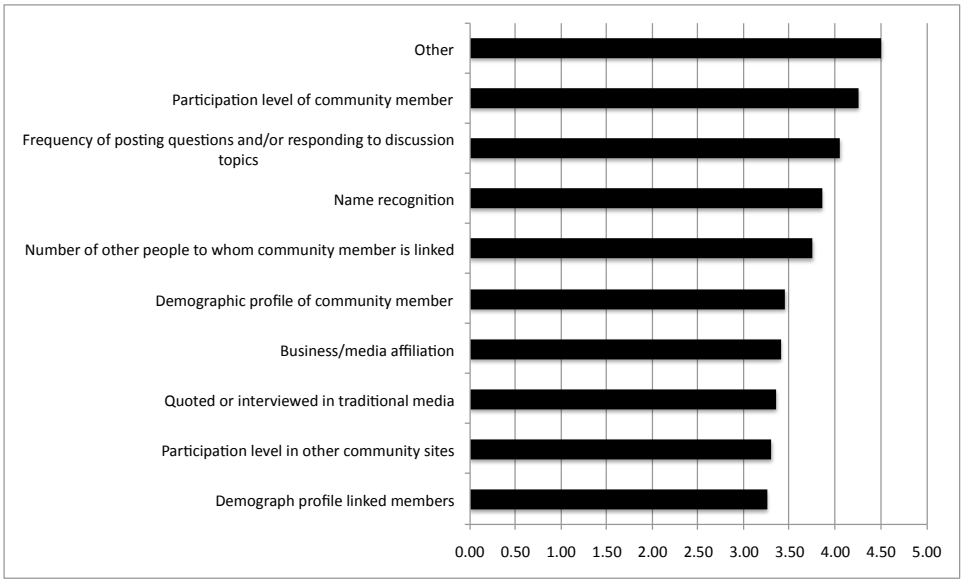
Confusion was also evident in respondents' ranking of their criteria for determining influence within social networks such as MySpace, Facebook and Flickr. In fact, "other" was their number one choice, atop a list of 11 response choice.

Where respondents did specify a preference for measurement criteria, their choices mirrored

the standards that they applied to blogs and podcasts. Their top three criteria for evaluating influence reflect the importance of online engagement: participation level, frequency of posting by the community member and name recognition of the individual.

The principal difference between these social network metrics and those for blogs and podcasts is that many social networks are gated and so don't show up on search engine results. Therefore, the quantitative metrics that communicators favored were more aligned to the number of connections an influencer has within a network and the overall level of his or her activity as indicated by questions and comments (Table 7).

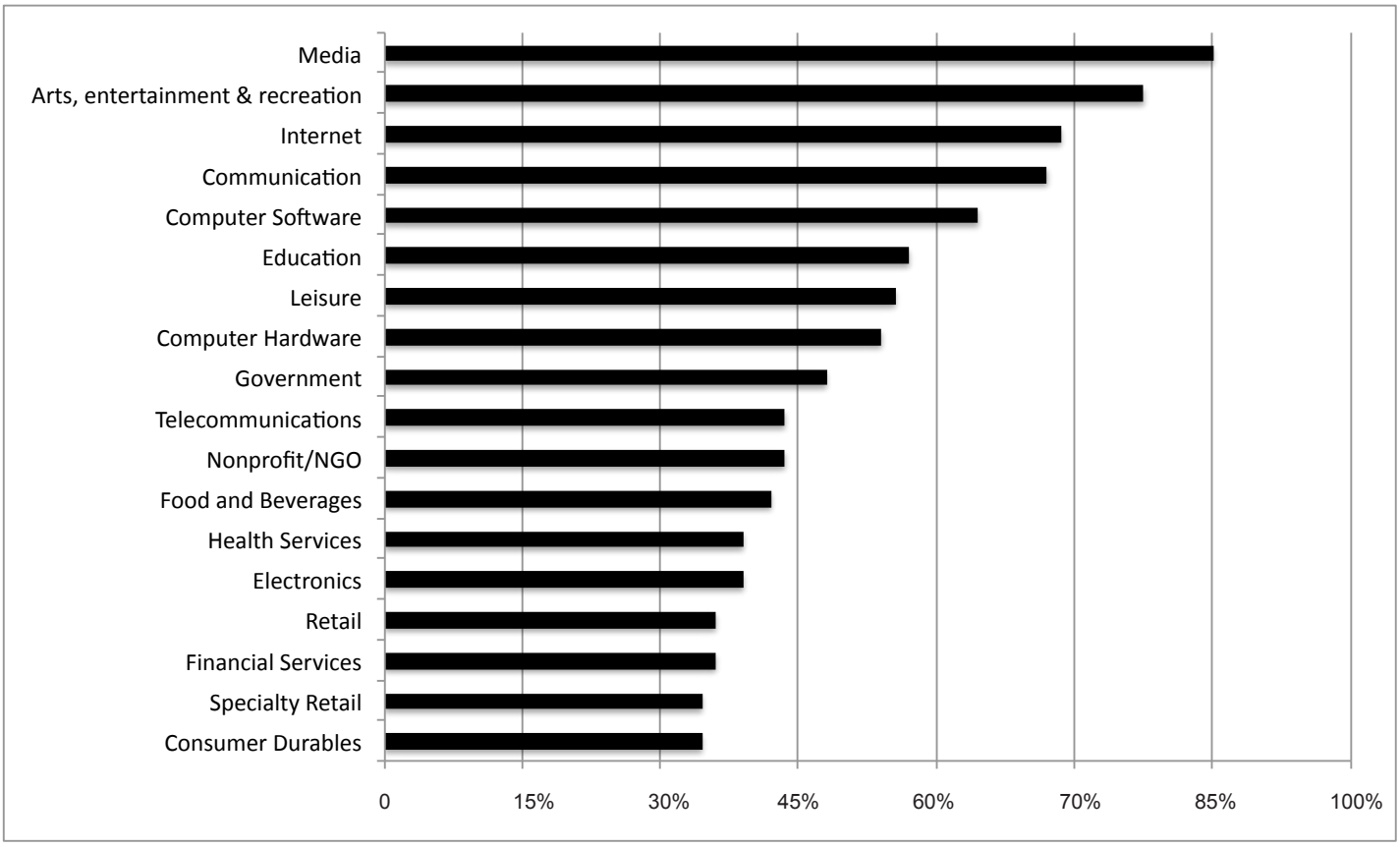
Table 7:
What criteria have you found valuable in defining the influencers that matter to you within social networks? *(1=not at all valuable; 5=very valuable)*



Vertical and Demographic Perceptions

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about the application of changing patterns of influence with regard to specific vertical industries and age groups. The results here were not surprising. Industries that have led the way with social media, including media, entertainment and technology were perceived as being well ahead of the pack in terms of their ability to use social medial tools to enhance their influence. Respondents cited the following sectors: arts, entertainment and recreation;

Table 8:
Which industries' customers, employees, suppliers, etc. do you believe would be most likely to be influenced by social media?

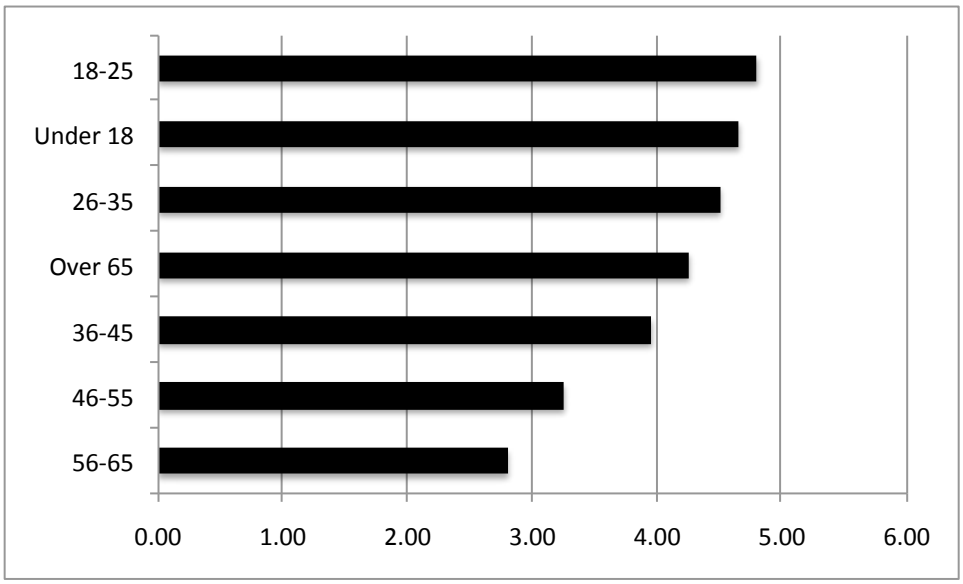


communications; computer hardware and education.

Those industries that were perceived to have the lowest likelihood of using these tools to enhance their influence were principally heavy manufacturing, materials management and construction (Table 8).

Similarly, social media were perceived to be more effective when targeted at younger age groups. It's interesting to note, though, that the Myspace-savvy under-18 group actually came out in a close statistical tie with the next two oldest demographic categories, 18-25 and 26-35. In fact, respondents perceived people under 45 to be about equal in their willingness to use and be influenced by social media (Table 9). And in terms of household income, respondents stated that they believed that those in the two middle income brackets (*i.e.,* $50,000-$70,000 and $70,000-$90,000) would be the most likely groups to be influenced by social media. (Income brackets choices ranged from less than $30,000 to $100,000+.)

Table 9:
How likely do you believe the people in the following brackets are to be influened by social media? *(1=not at all likely; 5=very likely)*



Conclusions

Based on these findings, the researchers arrived at the following top-line conclusions:

- Social media is rapidly becoming a core channel for disseminating information. Fifty-seven percent of this group of early social media adopters reported that social media tools are becoming more valuable to their activities, while 27% reported that social media is a core element of their communications strategy.
- Blogs, online video and social networks are currently the most popular social media tools, but PR and corporate communications professionals are using a wide variety of means to reach audiences, depending on their unique situations.
- Currently, the top criteria for determining the relevance and potential influence of a blogger or podcaster are: Quality of content, relevance of content to the company or brand and search engine rank; however, new metrics are emerging and these criteria could quickly change.
- The top criteria for evaluating a person's influence in online communities and social networks are participation level, frequency of activity and prominence in the market or community.
- About half of the communicators are formally measuring the effects of their social media initiatives. Their key goals are to enhance relationships with key audiences, improve the reputation of their businesses, drive customer awareness of their online activities and to solicit customer comments and feedback.

In short, social media are clearly changing the way we think about media and influence, but even as more companies adopt social media, they are still struggling to find effective metrics for deciding who are the most influential players. These findings reflect an ongoing debate over the applicability of conventional metrics to new media, and the lack of clearly defined best practices for measuring social media. The question of metrics will probably remain fluid until the industry settles on some broadly agreed-upon standards. It is our hope that this study helps to move this debate and discussion forward as we work together as an industry to determine the most relevant criteria for determining influence and measuring success in this new media sphere.

INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES

by Greg Peverill-Conti
2006-2007 Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

While the survey data illustrates how individuals are thinking about social media, the following case studies demonstrate how individuals and organizations are actually using social media and different ways that influence is understood.

Eepybird/Coca-Cola

Despite some initial misgivings, Coca-Cola demonstrated its appreciation of the role on the new influencer by its willingness to embrace and support Eepybird in its ongoing videos showing the effect of mixing Diet Coke and Mentos. Created by two independent artists in the woods of Maine, the Eepybird videos have generated billions of impressions and illustrated the power of the new influencers.

M/A/R/C Research

Merrill Dubrow, the chief executive officer of M/A/R/C Research represents another face of influence. His blog provides him with an opportunity to be himself and to express his thoughts on any topic that interests him. Rather than being solely focused on professional issues, Dubrow writes about what is happening in his life – personally as well as professionally. The result is a fun, informative and quirky blog that has attracted a growing and engaged following. It has also led to more and more opportunities for Dubrow to speak publically, write and exercise his influence.

Blendtec

Like the Diet Coke and Mentos videos, the "Will it Blend" videos by Blendtec had become a genuine online sensation. While Coke benefitted from existing user-generated content, Blendtec recognized the potential of using new channels of influence when creating their popular videos. They also considered the pitfalls, but given the no-cost/low-cost nature of the program decided it was worth a chance. Not only have the videos themselves become a hit, but Blendtec is now regularly approached by other companies with products to be blended.

Quicken Loans

Quicken is the country's largest online mortgage lender and is constantly seeking new ways to reach and engage with customers old and new. To accomplish this Quicken stepped up its online activities to include an employee blog, integration with Facebook and a number of "blue sky" projects. One of the most important things the company has learned is that the customer experience rarely begins at QuickenLoans.com. Recognizing this fact, Quicken has established a presence online. One of the most successful examples is on Yahoo Answers. Here Quicken created the "Home Loan Guru," which provided clear responses to questions. This proved to be so successful that Yahoo invited Quicken to become a Yahoo Answer Knowledge Partner. This demonstrates the types of opportunities created by building influence through sharing expertise and providing guidance to customers and the public.

The Mayo Clinic

Working with social media and the new face of influence is easier in some markets than others. While the Mayo Clinic has been an enthusiastic adopter of social media – particularly podcasts – it is just beginning to consider how it might engage with new influencers. Because the Clinic has a strong reputation (as evidenced by the popularity of its podcasts), it now plans to work with similar organizations to provide quality content to the public. The Mayo Clinic envisions a day where experts within their organization, at other institutes and even non-professionals will be able to work together to provide accessible answers to people's heath care questions.

Emerson Process Management

Emerson Process Management has a number of experts in the areas of industrial automation and manufacturing control systems. As is the case in so many industries, potential customers are looking to new channels to learn about the challenges they may face and how they might be solved. Emerson recognized this trend and started a blog of its own to give its experts an opportunity to share what they know if a less formal and more natural way. As with the Mayo Clinic and Quicken Loans examples, Emerson's Experts blog is another demonstration of how an organization can enhance its influencers within its industry by sharing its knowledge and expertise through new media channels.

American Red Cross

An organization as large and influential as the American Red Cross attracts a lot of online attention. Hundreds of comments appear every day and the organization recognizes that any and all of them can carry weight. To understand what is being said, Wendy Harman, the organization's senior associate for new media integration, reads all the posts and comments she can find. Even those with few readers or limited engagement are important because many of those are written by people who are as passionate about the organization as anyone; and all of them have influence with someone.

Union Gospel Mission

The 76-year-old Union Gospel Mission in Seattle is dedicated to helping people who are struggling get back on their feet and get themselves heading in a positive direction. Sharon Thomas-Hearns, the director of public relations for the Mission, monitors what is being said online about the Mission. Thomas-Hearns uses the content she finds – often in the form of blog entries – as an opportunity to engage and influence a far larger audience than she can by contacting members of the traditional media. While this engagement is important and growing, it isn't yet clear to Thomas-Hearns that it has the credibility and the influence of the traditional media.

Regardless of how mature or savvy these various organizations may be in their efforts to apply social media thinking and techniques, all have become active because they recognize the changing face of influence. Each of them has recognized that direct communication – in a conversational voice – supported by real people with an independent interest – can make a huge difference in the way people understand and interact with their brands.

Vignettes: A roll of mints, a jug of cola and "Wow!"

by Paul Gillin
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

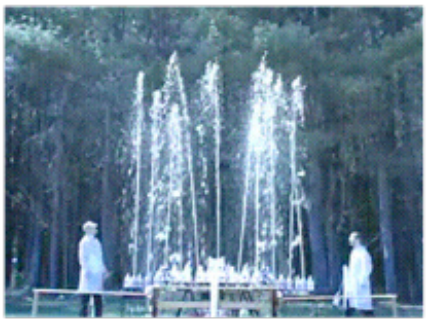
Buckfield, Maine isn't the place you'd normally expect to find a world-renowned entertainment team. The town of 1,723 inhabitants, which sits astride the unofficial border between eastern and western Maine, has one pizza parlor, a small grocery story and no stoplights. Its largest industry is a maker of wooden dowels.

But Buckfield also has the Oddfellows Theatre, a small playhouse that has won a following throughout New England for its eclectic mix of offbeat fare. It was Oddfellows that brought together Stephen Voltz and Fritz Grobe, two men who would create one of the greatest viral marketing phenoma of the Internet age.

Voltz and Grobe were both performers by nature. As a boy growing up in San Francisco, Voltz, now 50, had learned to juggle and eat fire, and had performed on street corners near Fisherman's Wharf. In later life, he had put his circus ambitions behind him to become a successful trial lawyer in the Boston area.

The 40-year-old Grobe was that rarest of all artists: a professional juggler. In 1993, he won the International Jugglers Festival individual championships, one of five gold medals he accumulated over several festivals. He now made a living working with circuses and performing at parties and business events.

In addition to their love of entertainment, the two men were born tinkerers. In the summer of 2005, they had started experimenting with a chemical phenomenon known as nucleation. That's the scientific term for what happens when a liquid that's super-saturated with gas comes in contact with an object that causes bubbles to form. Their experimental media of choice were bottles of Diet Coca-Cola and a brand of breath mints called Mentos, produced by unit of Italian confectioner Perfetti Van Melle. People had known for years that dropping Mentos into a bottle of Diet Coke caused an impressive geyser of foam to shoot several feet into the air. But Voltz and Grobe had taken the concept a step further. By tinkering with the aperture of the Coke bottle, drilling holes in various places in the candies and using an assortment of other tricks, they had achieved geysers of 15 feet or more.



Stephen Voltz and Fritz Grobe's "experiments" redefined Coke marketing and spawned hundreds of imitations.

In June, 2006, the pair decided to show the world their results. Armed with a single video camera, 101 bottles of Diet Coke and 523 specially prepared Mentos, they recorded a display of carbonated wizardry that would rival anything Las Vegas' Bellagio Hotel could produce. The synchronized eruptions of dozens of Coke bottles was all the funnier because the two performers, clad in white lab coats, uncorked them with such matter-of-fact disinterest. Music by the techno/pop/funk band AudioBody added a, metallic backbeat and the three-minute clip ended with Voltz and Grobe choking on an over-carbonated victory toast.

It was funny as hell, but neither performer was ready for what came next.

Inside the Tornado

On June 3, Voltz posted the video on a website they named Eepybird.com after a fictional character created by a friend. He sent off a single e-mail a brother in San Francisco, asking him to take a look. The brother notified Fark.com, one of the top linklogs on the Internet. Within hours, thousands of visitors were swamping Eepybird.com. The videos were a viral phenomenon the likes of which had never been seen before. Over the weekend, staffers at Late Night with David Letterman learned of the video from a blog in Australia. By mid-day Monday, Voltz and Grobe had invitations to perform the experiment on Late Night and the Today Show.

Everything's been a blur since then. The pair scrambled to pull off twice in two days on national television what had they only accomplished once before, and with barely any preparation. But the TV appearances went well. "There were articles in The Wall Street Journal, Rolling Stone called us 'wizards', The New York Times said we were 'hilarious'…we were even in GQ," says an account on the Eepybird site. "We were on Mythbusters twice, and we even went to Las Vegas to do a live performance at Caesar's Palace for HBO's The Comedy Festival."

Perfetti, which was struggling to make a name for itself in the crowded US candy market, jumped all over the publicity, carving out a chunk of its homepage to show off the experiment. According to an article

in MediaPost, “The Bellagio Fountain video was downloaded 20 million times and more than 10,000 copycat mint-soda videos were posted online, which created a multiplier effect: Mentos tallied a staggering 215 million mentions of its product in TV, print or radio stories over the past nine months, and estimates the free publicity was worth $10 million to the company - half its annual marketing budget.” Sales climbed 20%.

At Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, though, the mood wasn’t so exuberant. Coke lawyers fretted about liability problems from amateur chemists trying to duplicate the experiment. When the Journal called for comment, a spokeswoman said the “craziness with Mentos ...doesn’t fit with the brand personality” of Coke. “We would hope people want to drink [Diet Coke] more than try experiments with it,” she said.

But Coke’s interactive marketers saw a gold mine. Sales of Diet Coke, which had been flat for some time, spiked between five and 10%, the company’s interactive director told MediaPost. In August, they contacted Eepybird asking how they could help pull off more experiments. Voltz and Grobe, who were tired of buying out the local grocery’s stock of soda, were happy to accept. In October, they recorded “The Domino Effect,” involving 251 bottles, more than 1,500 candies and a network of tripwires, pulleys and nozzles that sent choreographed foam spewing in every direction.

The Internet ate it up. Google and Yahoo featured the clip on their video home pages. Voltz and Grobe personally contacted dozens of bloggers who had helped along the first experiment, encouraging them to link to the latest video. Eepybird was flooded with traffic, more media outlets called and offers began coming in from casinos and corporate events departments asking for command performances.

Coke supported the experiment with unlimited supplies of beverages, ad buys on Google and a sponsored contest with Voltz and Grobe as judges. Coke got 1.5 billion ad impressions from the stunt.

Coke’s Change of Heart

Coke was convinced. Traffic to the Coke’s video home page doubled and, while Coke didn’t disclose sales figures, Perfetti’s report of a 15% jump in business can’t have been far off the mark. In February, 2007, Voltz and Grobe put on a command performance before thousands of wildly cheering employees at Coca-Cola headquarters. By summer, Coke had relaunched its corporate website around an multicolored logo showing a geyser erupting from a soda bottle. In September, EepyBird broke the world record by triggering more than 900 geysers at a demonstration in Holland. By December, Voltz estimated that the videos had been downloaded more than 40 million times.

The success of the viral videos has made it possible for Voltz to set aside his law practice and for the two men to pursue Eepybird full-time. They’re talking to Coke about “a wide range of projects,” Grobe says, while tinkering away at other “cool stuff” they aren’t yet talking about.

What Eepybird hasn’t done is go big-time. “We’re two guys in the woods of Maine exploring things off on our own, and that’s what we love doing,” Grobe said. And they think that genuineness is part of the viral videos’ appeal. “I think that’s what people like seeing: something that’s made by real people for them,” Grobe adds.

The pair has resisted offers from studios to film their stunts with professional crews. Voltz explains that the amateur feel of Eepybird’s work is one of the secrets of its success. “We want to make production values as high as they need to be to tell a story, but no higher because that can get in the way of the story,” he says. The experiments continue to be filmed with a single off-the-shelf video camera.

Home-brewed production doesn’t mean skimping on preparation, though. Voltz and Grobe can spend months preparing for a new experiment. As accomplished performers, they understand that their deadpan looks and personal chemistry are essential to the package. That’s why Voltz recommends involving professionals in viral video campaigns, even if the production values are anything but.

The duo also fight to keep branding subdued in their experiments. “We actually had a lot of discussion with Coke about branding,” Voltz says. “Our concern wasn’t for Coke but for our own viewers. If we started using typical TV commercial product shots, our audience would tune out.”

Grobe adds that the experiments’ success testifies to the power of viral promotion. “Having worked in theatre for 20 years, you understand how important word of mouth is,” he says. “It can carry you right to the top.”

The CEO blogger

by Paul Gillin
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

There's nothing predictable about Merrill Dubrow's blog. In 10 days time, his topics included the best date movies of all time, an interview with the president of a leading market research firm, his painful experience taking a Bikram yoga class, and a roundup of his favorite board games.

It's not the kind of material you expect to read on a CEO blog, but it works for Merrill. It works very well.

The numbers are respectable: about 900 unique visitors a week. But what's remarkable is the comment activity: an average of 47 comments per week. Some posts draw 40 or more comments. The feedback energizes Dubrow, whose president and CEO of MARC Research, a 100-person market research firm in Irving, Texas.

"It's led to speaking engagements, new hires and proposals for work," he says. "When I'm at a conference, 10 or 15 people will come up and comment about the blog."

Conventional wisdom says you shouldn't run a blog this way. Blogs are supposed to be focused and professional, full of insight on topical issues. The reason Merrill Dubrow can get away with his approach is that he's, well, Merrill Dubrow.

"I'm a connector;" he says. "I know a lot of people, and I'm extremely visible in the market research industry. I help people connect with each other."

He's also got a style that people find appealing, and the blog reflects his personality. It's an approach to blogging that can be enormously effective if you have a voice to make it work and you're not afraid to hang it out on the edge a little.

Dubrow describes his voice as "Sincere. Opinionated. Goofy. Crazy." The blog, whose rather prosaic title is The Merrill Dubrow Blog, "is stuff about life. It's Seinfeld-esque," he says, citing the hit TV show that was about nothing in particular.

Dubrow and his associates are serious about measuring response, though. In addition to standard Web metrics, the company measures the average length of comments (106 words) the total number of comments (1,700 in a little more than 18 months) and the number of people who have contributed more than four comments each (115), among other factors. Dubrow also tracks his performance on Google searches, keywords and RSS subscriptions.

The ROI? It's uncertain, but the value in name recognition and reader affinity has been well worth the modest cost, he says.

The CEO takes a disciplined approach to his task. He posts new entries on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and generally keeps them under 400 words. He actively encourages visitors to comment and has used marketing tactics like a stock market guessing game and a book club to stimulate repeat traffic. Tried and true topics like a face-off between Yankees and Red Sox lovers are guaranteed hits. Offbeat subjects like his skydiving experience also work. He frequently crafts his content in the form of questions to the audience. "If you love to watch people, where is the best place to go?," asked one recent entry. Twelve people told him.

It's not all just fun and games, though. Dubrow leavens his content with discussions of new trends in market research, profiles of industry colleagues and interesting findings from his company's own research. This is, after all, an executive blog.

Some secrets that Dubrow has learned from more than 18 months of active blogging:

- **Start slow and don't try to post every day**. Make sure you have the systems and the time to respond to reader comments.
- **Have an objective in mind?** Are you trying to promote a book? Get a job? Generate business? Tell the world about your vacation? Your content strategy starts with your goal definition.
- **Don't go it alone**. Have a partner to brainstorm topics, proofread copy and help with technical glitches.

For executive bloggers just starting out, he recommends:

- **Be creative**. Look at what is working for other bloggers and adopt the techniques that are most comfortable for you.
- **Be personal**. A blog should reflect your personality and give readers a sense that they know you. The more you personalize the content, the more successful you'll be.
- **Do what comes naturally**. Dubrow doesn't speak on many webcasts because he likes to engage with an audience interactively. He loves getting comments, and so structures his blog as a conversation rather than a lecture. That won't necessarily work for you, but whatever you choose, it should fit well with your style and voice.

Dubrow says the power of the blog never ceases to amaze him. It hits him every time conference goers say they came to his session because they'd read his blog and felt compelled to meet him. "Your words are very powerful now," he says, "more powerful than they've ever been."

CASE STUDY
Blendtec

A viral video sensation

by Paul Gillin
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

The idea sprang from a pile of sawdust on a laboratory floor. Fifteen months later, it had transformed a company.

It was the fall of 2006, and George Wright had been marketing director at Blendtec for just a few months. Blendtec was a small, closely held appliance maker based in Orem, Utah that built blenders for commercial food service companies. The company's flagship products have a reputation for power and durability. The founder and chief engineer, Tom Dickson, would have it no other way.

Blendtec had a good commercial business, but it wanted to get into the consumer market, where cooks were increasingly demanding commercial-grade appliances. Wright's job was to execute on that strategy. The question was how? Blendtec had a small marketing department and budget, little name recognition outside of its commercial stronghold and plenty of well-known competitors. How could it break through all the noise?

That's when George Wright noticed the sawdust.

CEO Dickson was a hands-on guy, and he routinely put the company's products through their paces. Often that involved grinding all kinds of stubborn objects in the blenders to see if they would break Dickson had been building blenders for 15 years. He was passionate about creating the most powerful and durable product on the market. Stress-testing them with household objects was part of his routine. On that particular day, he was grinding 2-by2 pine boards

Blendtec CEO Dickson prepares an iPhone to meet its maker.

To Wright's trained marketing eye, the sawdust was a pile of gold. He persuaded Dickson to videotape some of his tests. Next, he dropped $50 on a few household items: some ice cubes, a bag of marbles, a rake, a rotisserie chicken and a McDonald's Value Meal. Blendtec's staff video producer rigged up a simple set and the group recorded five videos, each less than two minutes long. Each video showed Dickson, dressed in a white lab coat and safety glasses, nonchalantly pulverizing items from Wright's shopping bag.

Dickson reduced the pile of marbles to powder. He then blended the chicken with a whole can of Coca-Cola to make a concoction he dubbed "CoChiken." In the video, marketer Wright can be seen sampling the concoction and declaring, "That's good CoChiken." The team whipped up a little music, added some title slides and uploaded the five videos to YouTube, at the time a fledgling video-sharing site.

The rest is viral marketing history. Blendtec had no budget for big-market advertising, so employees were asked to spread the word about the videos to their families, friends and customers. Wright's small department submitted URLs to social news sites like Digg.com and alerted a few bloggers who specialized in cooking supplies. Viewers did the rest. Within a week, the videos had logged millions of downloads on YouTube. Suggestions began pouring in from viewers for other items to submit to blender oblivion.

Blendtec obliged, and in the months that followed, its CEO ground up items ranging from the ordinary (coffee beans and credit cards) to the bizarre (a Furby and Guitar Hero III game). Each spot featured the same format: a grandfatherly Dickson smiling benignly at the camera while annihilating some unfortunate tool or piece of sporting equipment. When the carnage was complete, Dickson would pour the smoldering remains onto a plate and offers a wry wisecrack. Viewers couldn't get enough.

Blendtec had a hit on its hands and it went with the flow. Video segments showing an Apple iPhone exploding into a cloud of black ash logged over 5 million downloads on YouTube and Revver alone. It also satisfied thousands of requests that Blendtec had received for an iPhone event. That barely put a dent in the inventory of suggestions, which still numbers over 100,000, Wright says.

Less than 15 months later, the Will it Blend? series was legendary. Dickson had appeared on national prime-time television and been featured in nearly every major newspaper in the country. Marketers no longer had to promote the publication of a new video; an army of enthusiasts spread the word. And sales were up fivefold. Wright had expected that the series would do well, but not this well. "I was blown away," he says. As of the end of 2007, the series had logged an incredible 70 million downloads without a

second of television advertising.

The Blendtec videos are perhaps the closest thing to a perfect viral marketing campaign that you'll ever see. They're short, funny and easy to understand. They're simple and inexpensive to produce and the stunt can be easily recreated for conferences and trade show demonstrations. They're also easily repeatable. "As long as there's something people want to talk about, we can throw it in a blender," Wright laughs.

More importantly, the videos are on message. Every time Dickson fires up an appliance, he reinforces the image of Blendtec as a producer of powerful, sturdy products. The company has even given tacit blessing to the hundreds of knockoff videos that enthusiasts have submitted to YouTube, although they caution admirers to keep their experiments safe. "There are people who take their mother's blender and put their sister's Barbie doll in it and upload the video to YouTube," Wright says. "Whenever they do that, they mention Blendtec."

And there's been one more surprise: the video are profitable. Companies have paid Blendtec to produce custom versions of the videos to promote corporate mergers. A radio station commissioned the company to grind up CD's to celebrate a new blend of music programming. Each month, the video-sharing site Revver.com sends a commission check for ad revenues that the series generates.

All this has been a windfall for Blendtec. But its success wasn't entirely an accident. Wright offers the following secrets:

- Have a plan - Although the magnitude of Will It Blend?'s popularity was surprising, the campaign's success wasn't. Wright created a marketing plan before the first video was shot, outlining a sequence of programs and strategies to promote them. The objective was never to generate millions of downloads. Rather, it was to find the right customers. "I wanted to find something that people who are in the market to purchase a blender could enjoy and help us to promote our product," Wright says. "Whether it's 50 views or 5 million, as long as it's in front of the right people, it's a successful campaign."
- Don't get fancy - The dime-store set and home-video quality of the Blendtec videos are by design. Viewers actually like the grainy authenticity of many viral videos and react suspiciously to programs that look too slick. Video quality also has to be harmonized with the limitations of Internet delivery. Files have to be small enough to be e-mailed.
- Get creative with promotion -- It was a no-brainer to market the Will It Blend? videos to cooking enthusiasts, but the company's marketers went a step further. They notified golf bloggers when Dickson ground up golf balls and football writers when the Super Bowl special was planned. Targeting these tangential markets drove plenty of traffic.
- Plan for success - When Will It Blend? took off, the company was ready to exploit the program's success. That meant clearing the decks for mainstream media coverage and public appearances. It also meant ramping up the production scheduled to provide more videos faster.

Today, Will It Blend? has transformed the company. Blendtec has become a household name without spending any money on mainstream media advertising. Moreover, the quality proposition hammered home by the video series carries over to future products. "I could show you equipment in our engineering department that would make your jaw drop," says Wright. "We're now perceived to be a high quality player. That makes it much easier to launch new products."

CASE STUDY
Quicken Loans

Social media adoption at Quicken Loans

by Richard Nacht
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

Matt Cardwell is well aware of the benefits of Internet to the mortgage process. As director of e-commerce marketing for Quicken Loans, Cardwell harnesses the power of the web to offer clients improved customer service and faster closing times – two areas that often fall short in customer satisfaction in the traditional mortgage process. Cardwell believes these product and service improvements have elevated Quicken Loans to the country's No. 1 on-line mortgage lender With just a few brick and mortar locations across the country, Quicken Loans primarily generate leads and services customers on-line. The goal now for Cardwell and web content manager Clayton Closson is to see if and how Quicken Loans can take advantage of the new Internet tools not only for product and service improvement, but also for media and public relations.

Cardwell and Closson are responsible for QuickenLoans.com, as well as many other sites, blogs and other online offerings maintained by the company. Cardwell's team supports the media team responsible for purchasing search advertising on Google and Yahoo. Quicken Loans is metric and analytic driven. For example, the company can track a lead from its beginning in a Google ad through its maturation in a closed loan client.

Cardwell says the company strives for continual improvement and interesting and innovative ways to extend what it's doing on-line. Such goals is what makes social media of particular interest to Quicken Loans. One of the company's earliest online marketing methods, search engine optimization, now requires a great deal of online content in a variety of places to be effective. Thus, even though Quicken is a retail company, they have to be in the business of creating content to drive solid search engine results.

Closson adds that the goal in creating content on sites other than QuickenLoans.com was to reach the long tail prospects. By creating content on a variety of sites with keyword phrases such as "Detroit jumbo loan mortgage" or similar phrases, Quicken Loans can communicate and connect with prospects with that particular need. By pushing content projects out to multiple sites, a synergy is created that enables Quicken Loans to be found on the web, which is critical for a company who does not have terrestrial offices in local neighborhoods.

How Social Media Changed Quicken Loans' Public Relations

As Quicken Loans evolved its online messaging, the need to integrate new media and new methods of public relations with existing branding became evident. The new information and methods had to "follow the same tone and the same kind of advice and information (as) any of our public relations," said Closson. Since the end goal was to ensure the message was consistent no matter where the conversation was taking place, this meant that the web team had to work closely with the public relations team.

Additionally, Closson discovered that social media tools were really tools of public relations, and Cardwell observed that the new social media tools inherently changed the dynamics of public relations. Although it was important to Quicken Loans that the message was consistent, Cardwell and Closson were aware that attempting to hold on tightly and trying to control the conversation around the brand would be too much of a challenge due to technology and online tools.

Ultimately, both the duo and the company had to acknowledge that there was no longer any barrier to entry for people to talk about their brand to many more people than ever before. Anyone with a negative experience could create a blog and start the criticizing. This required the web team to work closely with the public relations team to decide how to address and communicate with those people. Cardwell concluded that companies that understand the evolving realities of public relations due to new social media tools would fare better than those who didn't.

Social Media Technology and Communities

Quicken Loans's first step regarding a new media initiative was the creation of the "diff blog" (www.whatsthediff.com). The blog's purpose is intended to put a human face on the organization, since the company and its employees are found primarily in the virtual space. The diff blog would enable visitors to get a sense the company's people and their interests; thus the tag line, "searching the world for things to make a difference."

To keep the focus on its people, Quicken Loans was careful to avoid having the blog be about financial services. They also left the blog open for reader comments.

Live for about a year, the diff blog grew out of an original intent to use it for recruiting purposes, says Cardwell. And, while he perceives that it still serves that purpose by allowing prospective employees to learn about the company's culture, it also offers prospective clients an opportunity to learn about the company's employees and working environment.

Quicken's next foray into social media was Yahoo! Answers. Knowing that the vast majority of people looking for home financing did research on the Internet, Closson felt there was an opportunity for the company. His research disclosed that approximately 35 mortgage-related questions were being asked each day. He also discovered that most of the provided answers were either poor or nothing more than mortgage salespeople pitches.

Quicken Loans created a persona for Yahoo! Answers: the Home Loan Guru. The company was transparent that the Home Loan Guru was from Quicken Loans and never promoted Quicken Loans in their answers. Instead, they simply provided information and answers to the questions asked.

Quicken Loans was complimented by the marketing director who launched Yahoo!Answers, who said, "What you are doing is exactly how we envisioned companies getting involved." As a result, when Yahoo! Answers launched a beta program called "The Knowledge Partner Program," Quicken Loans was invited to become an official Yahoo! Answer Knowledge Partner. This partnering resulted in the termination of the Home Loan Guru, as the questions are now answered by Quicken Loans.

The Knowledge Partner Program was intended to improve the quality of the answers being provided in Yahoo! Answers. As a result of implementing this program, Cardwell says Yahoo! has a great focus on this program, as it is the fastest growing area of the search engine right now.

Quicken Loans is now making ready to launch Quizzle.com. Quizzle is a "blue sky project," where users can go to learn about investing in homes, their credit, and their neighborhood and utilize a variety of financial-related online tools and other offerings. Quicken Loans intends to rely on the Quizzle audience for feedback and ideas about the site. Quizzle will likely integrate a variety of social networking components and the company hopes to integrate Quizzle with Facebook. According to Cardwell and Closson, the intention was to create a community where people could interact with each other andfind valuable information about mortgage and other home-related tools, all resulting in leads for Quicken Loans.

Identifying Key Influencers

According to Cardwell, due to changes resulting in the Internet's popularity, Quicken Loans has adopted a philosophy that they need to meet their prospective clients wherever they may be. This means that there needs to be an emphasis beyond driving traffic to the Quicken Loans website. The Quicken consumer experience doesn't start at QuickenLoans.com to the degree it may have in the past, says Cardwell. Now, a prospect begins their experience of looking and searching for a loan a long time before they hit a company's website.

Therefore, Quicken Loans believes the new influencers are the new online environments where people spend time. It could be an influential website, such as Yahoo! Answers, which provides validation for Quicken Loans. Clossonalso notes that there are many inbound links to the diff blog, and when other bloggers link to the blog or otherwise says something positive, he will visit that person's blog to comment or email.

The Yahoo! partnership was particularly beneficial. While not planned, it turns out that Quicken Loans put itself in the right place at the right time to partner with a significant online influencer. As a Knowledge Partner, Quicken Loans' answers are endorsed by Yahoo!, resulting in the company's ability to leverage Yahoo's influence.

Social Media Success Metrics and Results

The diff blog was described as an experiment "in trying to articulate (some) of the excitement of what goes on in the walls (for) recruiting, and if clients saw it, it would be all the better, said Cardwell" . The company tracks inbound links, quality of comments and SEO results for the blog, all of which can be considered metrics of success. However, it was not able to measure the ROI . This is a common conundrum for evaluators of new social media tools.

Nevertheless, Closson said the blog helped Quicken Loans learn how to be real and experiment with tone of voice . As a result, the company is now integrating those types of communication into its own website and other initiatives. One lesson here is that evaluating the success of a new media tool may lie in things other than dollars and cents. If creating the diff blog taught Quicken Loans how to better communicate in the new online world and as a result, the brand is perceived as open and honest, then this is a strong asset for the organization in the current mortgage lending environment.

According to Closson, when Quicken Loans changed their Yahoo! Answers persona from the Home Loan Guru to its own moniker, there was a significant increase in the number of community members who joined the network. Closson perceives this increase to be one of the metric successes of the company's participation in this new media activity. Quicken Loans tracks the visits to their answers and can determine how many mortgage applications have resulted from them.

"It's a lot more than we thought," said Closson.

Social media adoption at the Mayo Clinic

by Richard Nacht
Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

The Mayo Clinic is an internationally-renowned medical practice based in Rochester, Minnesota, USA, integrated with hospital facilities and a medical school. Mayo Clinic evolved from the frontier practice of Dr. William Worrall Mayo and his two sons, William James Mayo and Charles Horace Mayo. The Mayo Clinic is most famous for developing an integrated patient care practice.

Lee Aase is the manager of the Mayo Clinic national media team and new media. Lee joined the Mayo Clinic in April of 2000 after a career in local, state and national political media relations. According to Lee, market research conducted by Mayo revealed that people with serious illnesses have a great deal of respect for the Mayo Clinic, and would consider going there for treatment. Surveys conducted by Mayo have "continually shown that the most important reason that people have this opinion of the Mayo Clinic is "the word-of-mouth of other satisfied patients." Lee's team closely monitors what is being said about Mayo Clinic in the news, on and offline. With the introduction of Web 2.0 tools, he saw an opportunity to begin to monitor what people were saying in social media as well.

Lee notes that the Mayo Clinic's 100-year-long reputation of excellence provided a great foundation for adding social media as a component of the clinic's communications strategy. His team focuses on monitoring social media to identify patients' stories and sharing them with the news media. Previously patient stories were shared via 60-second daily radio spots. However, Lee recognized that social media provided the clinic with an opportunity to reach an even larger audience with more detailed and targeted information.

How Social Media Changed Public Relations at the Mayo Clinic

Lee's team decided to repurpose the radio content and take advantage of some of the new media technologies to build "a more intimate, direct relationship with consumers who at some point may become patients." The first step was to put these recordings on the Mayo Clinic website as podcasts, making them available directly to interested consumers to listen to at their leisure. The goal was to have people learn more about the clinic and become more engaged. Visitors to the site could listen to the podcasts that were of particular interest to them. The podcasts generated approximately 900 downloads per month. Lee then created a feed for the podcasts and made them available via iTunes. He considered this a "stealth project," and Mayo Clinic did not publicize it in any way. The goal was simply to test how to "do" a podcast and get it distributed without any additional production or resources, and to gauge what the interest level would be.

The Mayo Clinic's podcast series quickly became very popular. Soon it was chosen as a featured item on iTunes, and ranked 29 in the top 100 podcast listings and downloads. From August 2005 when Lee first posted the podcasts on the clinic's website to October 2005, the podcasts had increased in listenership from 900 to 74,000. This led to significant increased traffic to the Mayo Clinic's website and several thousand subscriptions to the podcasts.

Since the launch of the patient story podcast series in 2005, the Mayo Clinic has created some longer informational podcasts focusing on in-depth information about particular diseases or illnesses. Lee realized that the 60-second spots were designed for the traditional broadcast media, for the mass audience, and that podcasts allow for more in-depth, compelling content that can be targeted to specific groups of people — those with the specific illness or those who know someone with the illness. This realization led the Mayo Clinic to create 15- 30-minute specialized podcasts, focusing on heart health, cancer, bones and muscle, men's health, women's health, and children's health. These podcasts provide useful expert content to patients, something that is wanted and appreciated by consumers. Lee commented about the initiative, "What we are taking advantage of is the fact that people target themselves. They are actively looking for information like this and if you can package it appropriately and make it findable for them, they will find it."

Lee also discussed the monitoring of Facebook and blogs, acknowledging the concern of the healthcare industry regarding the content on these kind of sites because of the privacy concerns and HIPAA. He notes that one of the good things that can happen is that people post and share good information about medical issues; but that negative or inaccurate information can be shared as well. But when Lee first signed on to Facebook he discovered that 1,100 of his co-workers or students from the Mayo medical school were already Facebook members. This prompted Lee to fully embrace the reality that people are engaging, sharing information and creating relationships using social media tools.

Lee and his team monitor Facebook, blogs and MySpace for mentions of the Mayo Clinic and related experiences, and they occasionally comment if they see something that is interesting. The focus so far has been to stay away from medical advise and instead to focus more on general information about the Mayo Clinic; in what Lee calls a "friendly kind of conversational" manner.

Identifying Key Influencers

The Mayo Clinic is in the early stages of experimenting with social media and has not yet implemented an outreach program to reach new influencers. Lee notes that

he expects to collaborate with large industry associations like the American Heart Association, the American College of Cardiology, and patient support groups to determine how best to engage their audiences. He foresees that the Mayo Clinic staff, even non-professional communicators communicating online could answer patient questions in a more proactive way. And, by partnering with associations and patient groups, they will also by able to present themselves as the key influencers and experts via providing this information to their access to their members online.

Social Media Success Metrics and Results

The Mayo Clinic has used traditional online measurement metrics for tracking the success of their social media efforts to date. As noted, they have measured the increase in the number of people that downloaded podcasts, that subscribed to podcasts, and the increase in traffic to the Clinic's website generated by the podcast campaign.

Lee's theory that the Mayo Clinic's long and excellent reputation provided a launching pad to maximize the benefits of new social media communication tools has come to fruition. The Mayo Clinic provides a good example of how an organization can successfully incorporate social media into its communications processes to share the stories of its customers and advocates and the knowledge of its experts, as well as to build community — thereby enhancing its influence.

CASE STUDY
Emerson
Process Management

Using Social Media to Enchance Influence at Emerson Process Management

by John Cass
Founding Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

Emerson Process Management provides automation technology and services for process control and asset optimization. The company manufactures complex control systems that require a great deal of support to customers for proper installation and management. The company launched the Emerson Process Experts blog (http://www.emersonprocessxperts.com/) in 2006 to raise the visibility of Emerson's process automation experts. Emerson identified blogs as a communications vehicle that could enable the company to provide information and support to customers using search engines to look for answers to their questions online. These customers would then find experts at Emerson who could help them.

Jim Cahill is the marketing communications manager for the Process Systems and Solutions business of Emerson Process Management and self-proclaimed "Chief Blogger." Jim writes two to three blog posts a week, primarily focusing on how one of the Emerson experts helped a customer solve a problem. He writes his posts by contacting an expert within Emerson, interviewing them, and then authoring stories and articles. Reader comments and questions often lead to future post topics. However, few readers of the Emerson blog post their comments and questions on the blog. Rather, many readers send Jim emails or call him directly. Jim believes this is because the process manufacturing industry is rather conservative and not yet comfortable sharing their problems and questions online via a blog.

In addition to authoring the Emerson Process Experts blog, Jim also subscribes to other blog and website feeds in order to monitor his industry's community. He has set up searches on industry-related keywords so that he is aware of conversations surrounding the topic of process management. He comments on sites, links back to the Emerson blog and also invites Emerson's experts to comment on other blogs.

Internal blogs are also bringing the experts' knowledge to light within Emerson. The Emerson experts are encouraged to share their expertise on internal blogs, which are searchable using an internal search engine. Emerson's internal blogging community has become a valuable resource for the company's global sales force — an easy and efficient way to find answers from the experts, supplement their knowledge, and increase their value to their customers.

How Social Media Changed Public Relations at Emerson

The development of the Emerson Process Experts blog has enabled the company to reach more mainstream media editors, and thereby to spotlight the abilities of Emerson's experts in industry news more easily. The stories and articles that Jim features on the blog are read by more traditional media journalists and generate more interest than pitching these stories via traditional media relations activities would garner. The blog has changed and extended Emerson's relationship with the media, because now reporters and editors have something they can subscribe to on the Emerson website. This means that the problems process manufacturers face are more easily discovered and can lead to story ideas. Editors often read a blog post and wanted more information immediately. They contact Jim who connects the expert with the journalist. In this way blog posts have led to feature articles within trade publications.

However, social media has not replaced traditional media relations; it is used as a complement. Jim and the traditional media relations person at Emerson monitor the important RSS feeds within the industry. This allows them to respond to developing stories. RSS feeds allow them to discover what is happening within the industry quickly. And the two-way nature of blogs allows Emerson to comment on stories and receive comments back on their ideas from the community. Jim believes this type of monitoring via RSS has provided Emerson with an early adopter advantage.

Jim also follows the blogs of editors in the automation space very closely, and writes blog posts that build upon those ideas and offers an Emerson expert's perspective. He asks his experts for their opinions, who in turn provide him information he develops into a blog post. As a result, writers and editors of trade magazines often communicate with Jim or his colleagues about those ideas. Such a relationship would often not have happened in the past. In fact Jim believes that it is because of blogs that he has been able to build many such relationships, participate in his industry's community, discussion and add to its knowledge base.

Identifying Key Influencers

Social media tools are already being used by many of the influential people within traditional media in Emerson's industry. The use of blogs and other social media technologies gives Emerson Process Management opportunities to develop relationships in a way that it was not able to in the past, and to understand the development of stories and themes within the community at a much earlier stage. Reporters and editors who are using blogs

are publishing their embryonic ideas, which can be followed through an RSS feed by the team at Emerson. This then gives Emerson the ability to understand and react to the early development of ideas and stories in their beginning stages. Rather than giving Emerson the ability to connect with new influencers, blogging and social media is giving Emerson the ability to more easily connect with existing influencers in traditional media who are using social media to monitor and communicate with the industry.

Social Media Technologies and Communities

Emerson Process Management is also encouraging its customers to use social media tools and technologies like LinkedIn, Wikipedia, del.icio.us, and blogs. By encouraging the customer community to use these tools, Emerson believes there will be wider understanding of the benefits of these technologies in enhancing communications and relationships between the company and its customers. And because Emerson is an early adopter of social media, the company will continue to be seen as a leader in the industry as their customer community adopts and uses these tools and technologies.

Social Media Success Metrics and Results

Emerson Process Management uses traditional online measurement metrics for tracking the success of its social media efforts. There has been a steady growth in website visits to the company's website from the company's blog. Monthly visits are in the tens of thousands. There has also been an increase in the number of subscriptions to the company's RSS feed, which now total several hundred.

The most important metric for Emerson is that the company's search engine rankings have increased because of the company's blog. The blog has become a valued resource for process manufacturers, and an important way for Emerson to demonstrate its expertise and how it can provide solutions to its customers. As a result, the blog has become a vehicle for gaining sales leads. More than 90 percent of the response from readers of the blog is through email and direct contact. Emerson receives three to five inquiries a week as the result of the blog. Process manufacturers are interested in connecting with an Emerson expert or visiting with an Emerson representative to help them solve a problem.

Jim Cahill believes that by using social media tools to monitor and publish content on a regular basis, the company has differentiated itself from the competition and increased its influence.

CASE STUDY
American Red Cross

The American Red Cross Embraces Social Media and Improves Its Image with Key Audiences

by John Cass
Founding Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

Conversations across social media were not on the American Red Cross' radar until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. After taking stock of the disaster, the Red Cross realized that social media played a big role in giving ordinary people the ability to communicate their perceptions of the relief organization. Some criticism of the Red Cross in social media was fair, some was not. But the Red Cross was at a disadvantage in discovering criticism early, because it did not have an online monitoring process in place to review what people were writing and saying via social media. The Red Cross was therefore unprepared to respond directly to these criticisms online because it had not established a presence in social media.

Maura Kennedy, a 21-year veteran speechwriter for the Red Cross described how the Red Cross commented, "We discovered that there was a lot of misinformation about the Red Cross being spread via social media, but we didn't quite know what to do about it. We then figured out that social media allowed for two-way communication and that we didn't just have to sit back and see this misinformation spread, especially misinformation that might hurt people affected by Katrina. We figured out that we could respond and correct the record. That's very different from dealing with traditional media."

After Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross decided to hire a new media specialist to monitor online conversations. Wendy Harman was hired as the Senior Associate, New Media Integration for the American Red Cross in November 2006. Wendy's first goal was to study online conversations about the Red Cross. "I think the goal was to have someone stay on top of any bad news that was leaking out so that we could address it right away before it became a big news story," says Wendy. The monitoring did reveal negative comments, but the process also unearthed many positive comments, and the Red Cross discovered. The large volume of positive comments about the Red Cross quickly came to light, and the Red Cross set a new goal of engaging people by connecting with them online.

> ***"He said that the building was completely destroyed and it would be a few days before the residents would be allowed to sort through the rubble. He also said that the Red Cross would put the residents of that building up in a shelter if there were more than 20 people displaced."***
>
> From the *Recovering Overachiever* blog
> That Fire Last Night
> http://recoveringoverachiever.blogspot.com/2007/10/that-fire-last-night.html

Wendy was charged with not only monitoring but responding to blog posts by introducing herself: "Hi this is Wendy from the American Red Cross and I just wanted to reach out to you and let you knowÉ" Each comment is a chance for Wendy to build a relationship with a blogger. If a blogger has a problem with or criticism of the Red Cross, Wendy worked with her colleagues at the organization to address the issue. Oftentimes th bloggers will acknowledge this and thank the Red Cross with a blog post. "We've had great response and people have turned around and written additional entries that have said, 'Thank you so much for contacting me. It was such a small gesture but it meant the world to me that the Red Cross is listening and reached out to me.' So in that respect I think we're doing a pretty good job."

Identifying Key Influencers

Monitoring hundreds of blog posts about the Red Cross is a key component of Wendy's work to identify influencers in online communities. Every day she uses online search engines like Technorati to find blog posts and comments about the Red Cross. Technorati has a ranking system, where a blog with a higher ranking indicates that the blog has many other blogs linking back to that blog. Yet, for the Red Cross, even a blog with just a few links can be important and influential. Wendy describes how the nonprofit gauges the influence of bloggers: "The Red Cross is mentioned hundreds of times a day, so I try to read every entry — from the ones that have the Technorati Authority Ranking of one or zero to those that have 30,000+. Many times posts with just two links have the best stories because the blogger has written about the CPR class she just took, or the swimming lesson he just had. Those are really powerful stories."

Wherever people are publishing, be it a blog post, Facebook or Flickr, there's a lot of passion about the Red Cross. Whether what is published is negative or positive, Wendy focuses on those who are passionate about the Red Cross to identify key influencers. Measuring passion is complex and requires more focus than just a

ranking number.

Wendy describes how one blogger who writes about the Red Cross influences another and their readers, "Some bloggers are far more powerful than others but they're all important, whether they have an authority ranking of 2 or 27. Almost everyone who has a blog and donates blood is — I'm convinced of it — guaranteed to blog about their blood donation experience. I read so many of those and they're really great stories. I think people who are giving blood and writing about it have their friends read that and they are either inspired and think about donating blood for themselves. That's influence."

Culture Shift

Wendy also developed an internal presentation to educate Red Cross employees about social media. Her presence has helped to increase the understanding of the value of social media as a way to for the Red Cross to listen to its stakeholders such as volunteers, donors and others. Learning how to communicate in the online world where stakeholders have a voice has meant a big cultural shift for the Red Cross. "All of these social media tools are so different from the way that the Red Cross is used to communicating," notes Wendy.

How Social Media Changed Public Relations at the American Red Cross

Social media is changing the way communications professionals within the American Red Cross are conducting public relations. This new media channel gives the Red Cross the ability to connect directly with the public in a two-way conversation. The ability to set up their own blogs and other social media websites is especially important for the Red Cross when working on disasters or more mundane matters. Maura Kennedy explained how social media is a great opportunity for the nonprofit, "We no longer have to rely exclusively on traditional media to get information out to people about where they might be able to find shelter or specifically which services we provide. We now set up a blog for every disaster and people can go there to get information directly." However, the use of social media by the Red Cross requires an even faster reaction time than traditional media cycles, as the public wants immediate answers.

Now, unlike pre-Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross is prepared to use social media when disaster strikes. The organization has a disaster portal at http://redcross.wordpress.com. This is where the Red Cross will create all of its disaster-focused RSS feeds. An individual chapter may set up a blog and update the blog, but the feeds are aggregated at the disaster portal. Wendy explains how the national office helps local chapters with web support, "If the disaster is larger and covers a regional or national area, it may be a team of volunteers brought in to update it. They're not so much chapter-generated as disaster-generated."

> ***"I was surprised how fast they filled up and she explained that they have a little bit of vacuum. I didn't just give blood, they sucked it out of me!"***
>
> From the *Generalismo* Blog
> Give Blood; An Hour At A Blood Donation Center
> http://generalismo.com/2007/09/14/give-blood-an-hour-at-a-blood-donation-center

The Red Cross has also launched a blog called Red Cross Chat at http://redcrosschat.org/, and hopes that the blog will become a community space where people will be encouraged to tell their stories about the Red Cross. Wendy is also developing a Flickr community at http://www.flickr.com/groups/americanredcross/ where people can share their photographs online.

In addition to the national organization's blog initiatives, several Red Cross chapters also have their own blogs. Examples include:

- Santa Cruz Chapter: http://sccredcross.wordpress.com/
- The Centre Daily Times http://community.centredaily.com/ in State College, PA hosts a Red Cross blog called Paint the Town Red http://community.centredaily.com/?q=blog/450
- The Oregon Trail Chapter http://redcrosspdx.blogspot.com/
- The Galion Chapter is blogging in Ohio. http://galchaprc.blogspot.com/

Twitter, a popular microblogging social media technology, is also being put into use by the American Red Cross. People can subscribe to the American Red Cross Twitter feed. The feed is updated with alerts during a disaster. Wendy describes some of the reasons for the Twitter channel, "If there is a major disaster, we will start Twittering shelter locations and whatever important information we have. I'm sure you've heard that cell phone text messaging is the only thing that seems to continue to work in catastrophic situations, so now you will be able to receive Twitter text from the Red Cross. We also have a site called "Safe and Well." The Red Cross will receive people's Twitters letting us know that they are safe and well, so we can enter them onto our Safe and Well website and their families and friends will be able to search and find them. So if they have texting capability, they will still be able to write in and say, "I am safe and well.'"

Wendy described the future social media goals for the organization, "Our goals are to be able to offer these new media tools to do everything in the traditional PR sense in a bunch of different ways; via podcast, online videos, photos and text. Using these tools is definitely going to become a much bigger part of the overall PR strategy in the years to come. We have many annual campaigns that we will now be adding new media aspects to."

Social Media Technologies and Communities

Technorati, Google, online forums, Facebook, and Flickr are all social media technologies Wendy visits to monitor what's being said about the Red Cross. Facebook alone has 180 groups that are dedicated to the Red Cross, and at least 500 groups in Facebook mention the Red Cross. Facebook is providing some productive ways to connect to more people who are passionate about the Red Cross. Wendy is also excited about the opportunities with Flickr, and believes that there is great power in the compelling photos found on the site that are associated with the Red Cross. There are more than 10,000 pictures on Flickr tagged with the words

“Red Cross.”

“I think Flickr is potentially a really powerful tool. A picture tells a thousand words and there are so many pictures that are tagged ‘Red Cross.’ We are working on a couple of campaigns. We did one for Malaria Awareness Day with people holding pictures that said, ‘Fight the Bite’ in front of them, and tag them ‘Red Cross.’ I think there are a lot of opportunities to have stakeholders connect with one another and support each other and get more excited about the mission of the organization via Flickr.”

Over time Wendy has identified key influencers by discovering important conversations. She described the process for finding those influencers and a short cut to reaching out to them, “I keep track of these people who are talking about their Red Cross experiences and I reach out to them. There is one main group on Facebook called American Red Cross and lot of causes and chapters that have their own Facebook sites now. I think that is going to become a central place where we can reach out to people and learn about what they’re doing and thinking.”

Metrics

Finding and measuring conversations is a key metric for the Red Cross, Wendy sees trends emerging, and reports on those trends and themes. “It’s almost raw data that we can tag and come up with trends on what people are talking about. That has been really powerful for people to see what the public actually cares about — as opposed to what we think they care about. Sometimes it’s the same and sometimes it isn’t.” Wendy also uses del.icio.us <http://del.icio.us> , a social bookmarking technology, to tag every blog post she considers important at http://del.icio.us/AmericanRedCross.

Conclusion

The Red Cross’ social media initiative has more than met its initial goals. Online conversations are monitored and tracked, and the Red Cross has found its voice online and not only regularly engages in conversations, but also has paced itself at the hub through proactive social media campaigns and initiatives. The organization’s social media program has enabled the Red Cross to track sentiment about Red Cross-related issues, respond to misconceptions when they emerge, and support praise for the Red Cross where it exists. Today if you write about the Red Cross on a blog, the organization will read and be aware of your comments and concerns, and if necessary the Red Cross will respond and engage someone within days if not hours. It now recognizes that everyone is potentially an important influencer.

The American Red Cross, like many other nonprofits, corporations and other organizations, is increasingly recognizing that they cannot take the commitment, participation, and support of their employees, donors, and the general public for granted. The Red Cross also realizes the importance of knowing what is being said about the organization and to what degree key constituents and influencers are active in the new social media environment.

The Red Cross’ social media awareness strategy, made up of a variety of communication and collaboration techniques, is resulting in new levels of success with its stakeholders. By adopting a policy of connecting with interested and engaged influencers, the Red Cross is maximizing the public relations value of new social media tools.

“It just seems like it’s human nature to reach out and be in touch with the people who support you - our donors, our supporters, our volunteers. We have to connect with these people in order to remain a viable organization,” concludes Wendy.

Social media adoption at the Union Gospel Mission

by John Cass
Founding Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

Seattle's Union Gospel Mission provides a broad range of social services to seniors, people in prison, and individuals struggling with addiction and homelessness. The mission is dedicated to providing people with the support and help they need to turn their lives around. Sharon Thomas-Hearns is director of public relations. Susan noticed that many of the Mission's donors were older, and began researching the use of social media as a way to connect with younger potential donors. She also wanted to find a way to engage in online conversations, correct misconceptions about the Mission, enhance media relations activities and communicate with bloggers.

Sharon started using social media to monitor what people were saying about the Mission and key issues online. She monitors the web using Google's news service and blog search engine using keywords such as "homelessness," "addiction" and "domestic violence."

Sharon monitors several blogs, especially those focused on political and societal issues in Washington State. She tracks blog posts about homelessness and addiction, and through this monitoring activity has gained a better understanding of the bloggers. If she reads a post in which she believes the Mission has something to contribute, Sharon is ready to comment and participate in the conversation.

In fact Sharon believes it is easier to monitor what is happening with news in the social media space because of RSS than some traditional media. In order to monitor mainstream news sites, Sharon and her colleagues often have to search each individual website.

Sharon then began to comment on social media sites. When she discovers misinformation about the Mission on blogs, she posts a comment clarifying the Mission's position. For example, people often state that to join a program at the Mission you have to be a Christian, this is not the case, and Sharon clarifies that point, stating the Mission programs are open to everyone. In this way, Sharon is proactively monitoring the public's perception of the Mission and managing its messaging.

How Social Media Changed Public Relations at the Union Gospel Mission

Sharon notes that her interaction with bloggers and via social media sites is inherently different than her traditional media relations activities. When she responds to reporters with an email, only the reporter reads the email, and may or may not respond. By contrast, if Sharon comments on a blog post, a wider audience can read that comment directly.

Yet, despite this key difference, Sharon believes that approaching bloggers directly is similar to conducting traditional media relations. It's about building relationships and pitching story ideas that the blogger is interested in writing about, she says. The big difference between bloggers and journalists is that journalists have to cover a number of topics in depth and objectively, while a blogger will bring his or her own opinion to a topic. In addition, she notes that building relationships with bloggers requires more involvement than conducting traditional media relations with reporters and editors.

Identifying Key Influencers

The Mission is engaging bloggers, but understands that in many instances bloggers may not yet have the same credibility as traditional media sources.

Sharon comments, "I don't know if bloggers have the same credibility as the media yet, but I think that that as people become more accustomed to reading other people's opinions and are willing to accept their peers as opinion shapers, that will result in more grass roots change and blogs will become more credible and influential. And I think that will coincide with the media, but it will take also some power away from the media."

Sharon identifies potentially influential bloggers by conducting searches and reviewing their blogs and biographies. She then monitors what the bloggers write, and how those stories relate to Seattle's Union Gospel Mission.

Sharon described one incident since she started monitoring blogs. One man who recently left prison started his own blog. He writes about homelessness, and his experience at the Mission after his release. While he was at the Mission's shelter, a new director was hired. The blogger wrote about the new shelter director in a positive way. Sharon sent the blog post to the Mission's council, who forwarded it to the shelter director. The Mission thought this was valuable feedback from a client, and reinforced its belief that it had made a good decision about the new hire.

Social Media Success Metrics & Results

Sharon notes that the biggest benefit of using social media for the Mission has come from monitoring and more actively participating in what is being published online. The Seattle's Union Gospel Mission demonstrates how a small nonprofit organization with limited resources can deploy simple-to-use, free social media tools to improve its ability to listen and communicate with its various constituencies ranging from donors, to clients, to the media and new influencers.

RESEARCH TEAM

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Joseph Carrabis is a Senior Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research. Mr. Carrabis is CRO and founder of NextStage Evolution, LLC and CRO and co-Founder, NextStage Global LTD. NextStage Evolution and NextStage Global specialize in helping companies better their marketing efforts and understand customer behavior. Joseph Carrabis has authored 22 books and 225 articles in five areas of expertise. His books have covered cultural anthropology, database technology and methods, information mechanics, language acquisition, learning and education theory, mathematics, network topologies and psycholinguistic modeling. His articles have covered computer technology, cultural-knowledge modeling, equine management, knowledge studies and applications, library science, martial arts, myth and folklore, neurolinguistic, psychodynamic and psychosocial modeling, group and tribal behavior and social interactions in NYC and more. He's currently a columnist for iMediaConnections and blogs regularly on the intersection of business and science at BizMediaScience. Mr. Carrabis has been a lead speaker, guest presenter and panelist at several industry, trade and academic conferences and conventions. His knowledge and data designs have been used by Caltech, Citibank, DOD, IBM, NASA, Owens-Corning and Smith-Barney among others. He's also founder of KnowledgeNH and NH Business Development Network, and inventor and developer of Evolution Technology. He is currently working on *Reading Virtual Minds*, a book on how people interact with new information technologies.

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John Cass is a Founding Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research, and Online Community Manager for Forrester Research, where he is working on developing enterprise social media and extending Forrester's engagement strategy with clients and community. John is also the author of *Strategies and Tools for Corporate Blogging*. He was 2005/6 President of the Boston Chapter of the American Marketing Association. In 2005, Mr. Cass was lead author of the 'Corporate Blogging: Is It Worth The Hype?" study and website on the value and benefits of corporate blogging and joint lead author with Dr. Walter Carl of Northeastern University on the 2006 Backbone Media Blogging Success study. John Cass has been blogging at his PR Communications blog since 2003.

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Paul Gillin is a Senior Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research. He is a veteran technology journalist with more than 23 years of editorial leadership. Paul was founding editor-in-chief of TechTarget, one of the most successful new media entities to emerge on the Internet. Previously, he was editor-in-chief and executive editor of Computerworld magazine. He writes the social media column for Business 2.0 magazine, and is the author of *The New Influencers*, published by Quill Driver Books. Gillin specializes in advising business-to-business marketers on strategies to optimize their use of online channels to reach buyers cost-effectively. He is particularly interested in social media and the application of personal publishing to brand awareness and business marketing. Paul blogs at www.paulgillin.com.

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Richard Nacht is a Senior Fellow and Chair of the Education committee of the Society for New Communications Research. He is the founder and CEO of Blogging Systems Group. Richard has more than 20 years experience in the real estate, finance and technology development industries. Richard has focused his talents on creating e-commerce strategies aimed at producing technologies that benefit the consumer and businesses. Richard was a principal officer of a regional master franchise for a national real estate company in the mid 1980s which was sold to Commercial Credit. He founded one of the first online lending platforms in the late 1990s and took the operation from its original online birth to successful acquisition by a national lender in 2003. Richard then leveraged his online consumer and business to business marketing experience by founding Blogging Systems Group. Richard has led Blogging Systems as the leader in the rapidly growing area of corporate blogging by delivering a blogging platform that produces a low-cost, high results tool for effective communication and collaboration, competitive marketing, sales, and customer relations. He has been honored as a New Jersey Governor's Cup for Entrepreneurial Excellence finalist and he was a member of the Inc. 500 list of America's Fastest Growing Private Companies in 2003. Richard is the co-author of *Realty Blogging: Build your Brand and Outsmart Your Competition*. Richard also writes a monthly column on blogging for RISMedia. He is also a member of the National Association of Real Estate Editors (NAREE). Richard's educational achievements include a Juris Doctor (J.D.) from New York Law School and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree from New York University. He is a current doctoral candidate at the International School for Management in Paris, France.

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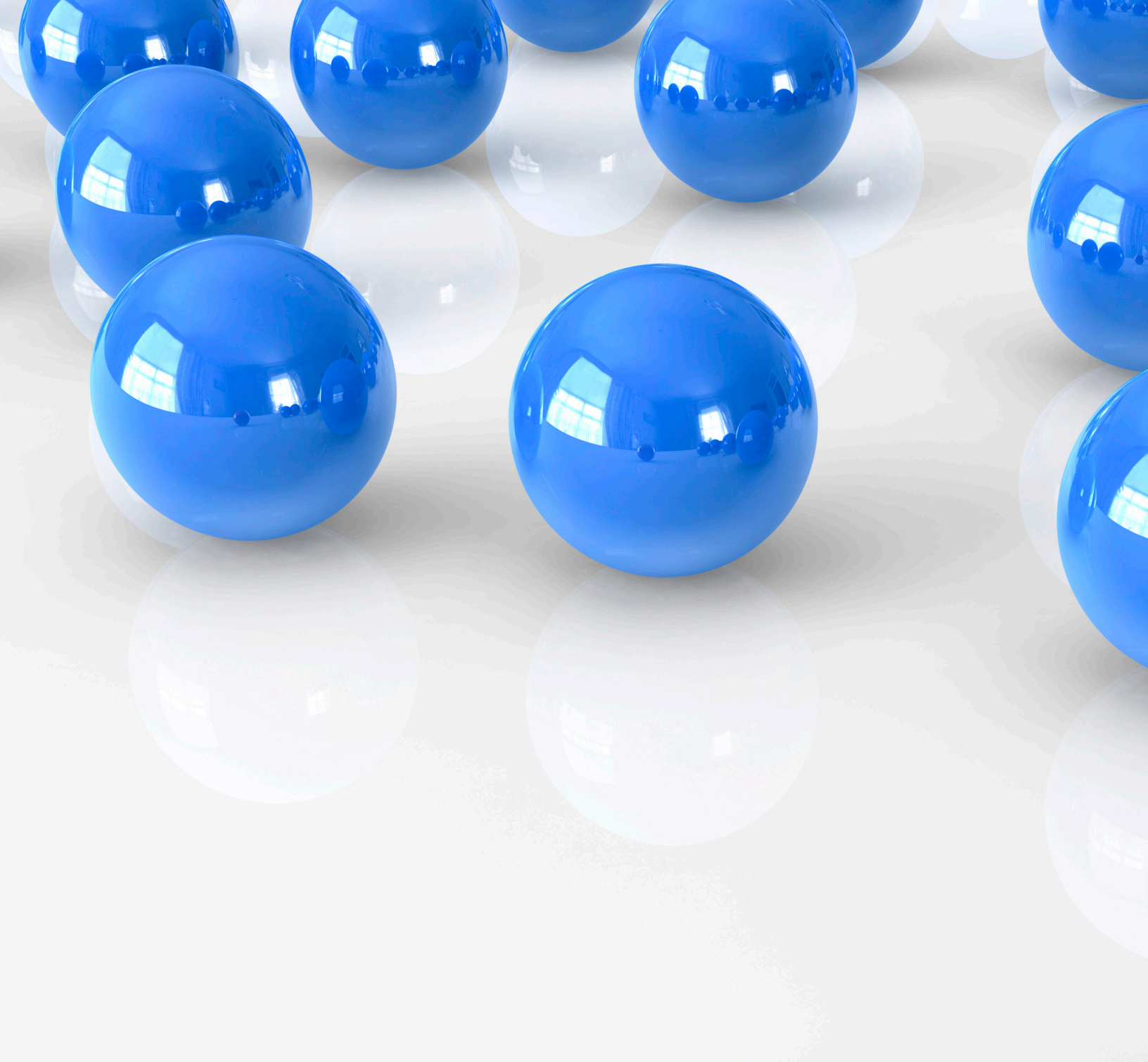

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