

Integrating Social Media Into PR Plans

What You Need to Know

BY HOLLY POTTER

By now, PR professionals accept that social media is here to stay. Now the hard work begins: How do we shift social media from being a fad to being an integral part of our strategic plans?

When I started out as an independent consultant, I often had clients declare that they needed a brochure or a website — convinced that a piece of collateral would solve their communications challenges. I dreaded the meetings where I had to explain that those tactics alone wouldn't solve the underlying communications problems.

Today, our clients clamor for a blog, a Facebook page, a YouTube channel or a Twitter handle, convinced they hold the solution to their problem. Yet the faulty logic still holds true. An individual tactic — no matter how popular — cannot substitute for a solid PR strategy.

How then do we move from engag-

ing in social media as a one-off to integrating it into our strategic planning? As with every idea, we need to understand our communications objectives before we can figure out how to integrate those tactics. Furthermore, it is critical that we understand both the risks and benefits of the tactics we choose.

The risks

Like many PR professionals, I stepped into social media reluctantly — not because I was unfamiliar with the underlying technology, but because I understood the risks involved. In my personal life, I had been active in online social communities since the mid-1990s and started blogging in 2004. I knew how social communities behaved, and I understood the reputational risks involved.

Social communities require the

willingness to be transparent and to engage in — often uncomfortable — two-way dialogues. Simply put, credible and authentic engagement in the social space makes controlling the message challenging.

By the time that social media started becoming mainstream, I was working at Kaiser Permanente, the nation's largest integrated health care provider. Health care is a highly regulated, and by extension, highly risk-averse industry. As a result, increasing our presence in social media did not come easily.

Our social media journey began in response to inaccurate commentary in the blogosphere about the organization's electronic health record project. At the time, we naively believed that since the speculation started online, the story would not be seen as credible. We did not respond quickly enough,

photoblibrary

and we were unprepared for the result.

As the story gained traction online, it attracted the attention of traditional reporters, ultimately landing on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

It was then that we understood there was not a dividing line between traditional and social media. We also learned that conversations about our brand would happen with or without us. With the support of our CEO, we decided to actively participate in online conversations about Kaiser Permanente. Since that time, digital media has become a central component of our efforts to both promote and protect the brand.

The benefits

After watching a story about our company move from blogs to newspapers, we started our work in social media by embracing the concept of bloggers as citizen journalists. By acknowledging that certain bloggers carry far more sway than traditional reporters within their spheres of influence, we added them to our earned media outreach efforts.

While we still provide pre-embargo interviews to mainstream media reporters, we are just as likely to offer them to influential bloggers — and they have noticed.

Social media can also extend the reach of traditional media efforts. For example, Kaiser Permanente recently published a study that showed an increase in the number of extremely obese children. That study gained significant media attention — more than 400 stories. But the traditional media

According to a June study by Digital Brand Expressions, only 41 percent of companies using social media vehicles said they have a strategic plan to guide their activity in that space.

success is only half of the story. Along with sending out a press release and pitching, we posted an interview with one of the study's authors on YouTube. That video was embedded on a variety of blogs and websites, including NPR.com, Time.com and USNews.com. Furthermore, tweets about the study resulted in an estimated 184,000 impressions.

While social media is an important extension of our earned media efforts, greater value may actually result from the relationships we are developing online: relationships with influencers, relationships with consumers and relationships with employees. Participating in social media lets us develop a deeper connection with these audiences, who ultimately drive word-of-mouth marketing.

The strategy

Preparation is essential if you intend to make social media an integral part of your public relations strategy. Here are three elements to consider:

1. Listen

Before jumping into social media, be sure you know what is already being said about you or your brand online. Spend some time monitoring blogs, Facebook and Twitter to get a sense of both the good and the bad. Context matters — there is nothing worse than joining a conversation when you've missed the first half of it. Social media activities need to be firmly rooted in an understanding of pre-existing conversations.

At Kaiser Permanente, we monitor what is being said about the organization in the online space. During the first year of monitoring, we selectively responded to correct misinformation but did not

proactively engage until we clearly understood both the threats and opportunities that came with stepping into a public two-way dialogue.

2. Plan to invest

Don't be lulled into believing that social media is cheap. Just because you can create a WordPress blog, a Facebook page and a Twitter handle for free does not mean that they are low-cost solutions. Social media strategies are extremely resource intensive — human resources, that is. Social media requires more maintenance than any other communications tactic.

You need to continually generate new content and be prepared to respond to concerns in real time, 24/7. Think about how you will staff this. At Kaiser Permanente, we created a director of digital media, but we also made social media engagement a job requirement for every member of the PR team.

3. Field Test

Before introducing a brand onto a new platform, be sure you understand how it works. Take time to test the platform to get a sense of how your audiences will (and will not) engage with.

Reading articles and reports about social media cannot substitute for first-hand experience. The better you understand the technology and the people using it, the better equipped you will be to integrate it into your strategy and use it to further your client's objectives. ■



Holly Potter is vice president of public relations for Kaiser Permanente. She oversees efforts to promote the company's story and achievements through all PR channels, including social media. Twitter: @htpotter.