

# TAP INTO THE BUZZ OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT

BY BILL BRADLEY, PRINCIPAL, BOTTOM LINE COMMUNICATIONS

**T**he rush of social media has swept over us like a tsunami. Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Bebo, Hi5, Friendster and many other social networks boast hundreds of millions of subscribers, and millions more visit these sites regularly on an ad-hoc, read-only basis.

With numbers this large and growing every day, social networks are a buzz marketer's dream, so it's tempting for PR pros to use the social media to promote their company or clients like they do with mainstream print, online and broadcast media.

But business communicators are inviting the devastation of a true tsunami if they try to interact with social media the same way they do mainstream media. The blogosphere has made this point crystal clear; the vast reach and growing influence of social media takes the bedside manner of media training to a whole new level of importance.

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If you remember nothing else about the social media, it must be these two points:

- 1. You cannot manage the social media as you often can mainstream media.** Why not? Because, as the blogosphere has taught us, you cannot manage what you cannot control. Just like the World Wide Web and the Internet itself, no one controls the social media. Accept it and learn how to benefit from it.
- 2. Social networks are not the place for PR pitches.** Social media is about building and leveraging trusted relationships; it's not about generating coverage or delivering marketing messages. But social networks love gossip and pass-along personal experiences. That's why the buzz conveyed through social media can spell boom or bust when it comes to your organization's branding and characterization of key personnel.

## Get Involved and Then Monitor

Joan Stewart, "The Publicity Hound," offers these suggestions to help avoid being blindsided by unwelcome content on social networks.

Consumers are going online to search for everything from product reviews to conversations about companies they might some day do business with. I tell companies that many of their customers, potential customers, vendors, shareholders and others are talking about them online. That's why companies need to be actively involved in the conversation.

I encourage them to become actively involved in social media long before negative news surfaces. A company that suddenly finds itself the target of a blogger's rant, or mentioned in nasty comments on somebody's Facebook wall but doesn't know how to respond immediately, will have to spend precious time learning the social media landscape first. By then, it could be too late. I tell companies to:

- Monitor their brand online by setting up Google Alerts for their company name, Web site URL and relevant keywords. Respond to blog posts as often as you possibly can, regardless of whether the news is good or bad. Join the conversation about your industry.
- Create their own blog and blog regularly. A blog is also a great way to present information quickly to the public during a crisis or bad news situation.
- Capture e-mail addresses at their Web site so they can push out their marketing message regularly via something like a tip of the week or a weekly newsletter.
- Use Twitter. Some of the biggest and best companies and nonprofits are Twittering. This is a great way to build an army of followers who will be interested in following what you have to say.

Grounded on relationships, reputation management, not publicity, is the name of the game when dealing with social media. But some things never change: Perception is still reality. That brings us to the crux of any discussion on media training and options available when you see something you don't like in the social media, regardless of how it got there.

## MASTERING THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

“You cannot keep the client's name out of social media—it's impossible,” says Joan Stewart, aka The Publicity Hound. “It's like trying to prevent people from talking about you at a cocktail party.” Stewart, who publishes a newsletter and blog, provides training on social media as well as traditional media. “Companies no longer have complete control over their brand. The idea is to monitor your brand, join the conversation, stay on top of what is being said about you and respond immediately,” she adds. “A benefit of participating in social media is that you might also capture the attention of mainstream media, many of whom also participate in social media.”

Laura Fitton has similar advice. Fitton runs Pistachio Consulting and is one of the first prominent microbloggers, with roughly 6,500 readers on Twitter. “You listen. You adapt. You practice respect for others and remain open to diverse opinions,” she says and explains what she means this way.

**Listen.** Agencies and companies are vulnerable if they are not listening carefully to the social mediasphere. They should at least be using free tools like Google, blog search, search.twitter.com and also look at paid services like Radian6 or Cymphony.

**Adapt.** Realize that, unlike the days of “command & control” and “negative PR,” these spaces can be quickly self-healing when handled well, and can even lead to greater opportunity. Be honest, address the concern early, honestly, openly and authentically. In short, as Google has preached, “Don't be evil.”

**Respect.** Treat your employees, customers and other stakeholders with basic dignity and respect across the board and your company will avoid many negative PR situations in the first place. Also, respect your critics. Treat them fairly even when they do not treat you fairly, and you have the opportunity to come through the conflict looking good.

**Be Open.** This is Fitton's most instructive insight, in my opinion. “Let go of trying to control the message because you no longer do,” she says. “Aggressive and persistent critics who know how to spread their story online can quickly come to dominate search results and other conversation around your company, brands and products. You're better off creating open spaces at your own Web sites that permit people to speak candidly about your products where you can at least respond maturely and productively. Closing comments does not stop the commenting; it just moves it into a venue outside your sphere of influence.”

Adds Todd Defren, principal with PR firm Shift Communications, “The lessons of social media are the lessons of kindergarten: Be yourself, be respectful, be truthful, be generous and do your homework,” he says. “If you follow these five tenets, you don't have to worry about negative PR in the blogosphere. Because if your online

## Consult the Experts

The social media is nothing if not dynamic and evolving. Those who are savvy navigators of this sometimes quixotic realm tend to be courteous and helpful in sharing their wisdom, since that's precisely how social networks operate anyway.

Reach out to the gurus below with your questions and comments. Some of them contributed generously to this article, and I thank them for their input.

- Andy Beal, internet consultant, aka Marketing Pilgrim. E-mail: [andy@marketingpilgrim.com](mailto:andy@marketingpilgrim.com); [www.marketingpilgrim.com](http://www.marketingpilgrim.com)
- Todd Defren, a principal at Shift Communications. E-mail: [tdefren@shiftcomm.com](mailto:tdefren@shiftcomm.com); [www.shiftcomm.com](http://www.shiftcomm.com)
- Erica Driver, principal of ThinkBalm. E-mail: [erica@thinkbalm.com](mailto:erica@thinkbalm.com); [www.thinkbalm.com](http://www.thinkbalm.com)
- Laura Fitton, Pistachio Consulting. E-mail: [Laura@Pistachio-Consulting.com](mailto:Laura@Pistachio-Consulting.com); [www.pistachioconsulting.com](http://www.pistachioconsulting.com)
- Charlene Li, thought leader on social and emerging technologies. E-mail: [charlene@charleneli.com](mailto:charlene@charleneli.com); link to her blog at [www.altimetergroup.com](http://www.altimetergroup.com).
- Margo Mateas, aka Media Relations Maven and principal of Public Relations Training Company. E-mail: [margo@mediarelationsmaven.com](mailto:margo@mediarelationsmaven.com); [www.mediarelationsmaven.com](http://www.mediarelationsmaven.com)
- Jeremiah Owyang, analyst with Forrester Research. Link to his blog at <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/>
- Brian Solis, principal of FutureWorks PR. E-mail: [brian@future-works.com](mailto:brian@future-works.com); [www.future-works.com](http://www.future-works.com)
- Joan Stewart, aka The Publicity Hound. E-mail: [jstewart@publicityhound.com](mailto:jstewart@publicityhound.com); [www.publicityhound.com](http://www.publicityhound.com)

reputation is based on these principles, you can rest assured that when your company does screw up, an army of external defenders will rise up to urge that you (or your company) get the benefit of the doubt.”

Common sense remains the guiding principle in media relations, whether it’s social or mainstream networks: Don’t reveal anything that you don’t want the world to see.

While acknowledging the challenges of dealing with the social media, Defren reminds us that there are exciting new opportunities for business communicators. “The work of reputation management in the social media era is exponentially harder as a result of the PR industry’s need to talk to many more influencers, on a much more individualized basis, and with the recognition that our work is now much more public than ever before,” he says. “That is the so-called bad news—but it is also the good news. We’re having more fun.” **PRN**

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*Bill Bradley, a 30-year PR veteran, is principal of Bottom Line Communications, where he works with clients in information technology and other fields.*