

Getting Started in Social Media...And Why You Should

by Nicole Thomas

We are living in an online age. Technorati.com tracks millions of blogs. At the beginning of this year, Facebook had over 150,000,000 active users – and their numbers have continued to grow every month. A study by the Pew Research Center found that 62% of internet users have watched online video from sources such as YouTube, with 19% reporting that they use video-sharing sites most days. It's clear: social media has gone mainstream. With more people communicating online than ever before, it is increasingly important for communications professionals to tap into the power of social media.

These new mediums require a different way of thinking than traditional marketing and PR methods. Social media is not a one-way conversation, but a way to engage consumers and colleagues. Millions of users on Twitter and Facebook are using the platform to build networks, discuss important issues, and share breaking news stories. Consumers are asking questions of companies, and the companies are answering – in minutes. Those who aren't online are missing an opportunity to truly engage their customers, and potential customers, in conversation.

Most social media networks are free, and don't require involving an IT department. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and MySpace are completely free. Blogspot.com and Wordpress.com both offer free blogs, and allow users to upgrade to premium service at a low cost. Lee Aase, Manager of Syndication and Social Media at the Mayo Clinic, refers to the "\$4.00-a-week Newsroom," an online newsroom run for just \$45.00 a year, as opposed to many online newsrooms that cost thousands of dollars each month in hosting fees. By utilizing Wordpress and YouTube, Mayo Clinic has drastically cut the cost of doing marketing and PR online, and has been called a "Healthcare Web 2.0 Innovator."

So how can your organization employ social media to benefit your consumers and your bottom line? These simple steps can help communications professionals begin to build a strong online presence.

1. Explore various social networking sites

It's a big online world. Browse some blogs of companies and people you find interesting to get a feel for "blog culture" and to learn how blogs work. Sign up for a personal Facebook and Twitter account, and see how others are using the medium. Become familiar with all of them: Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube – so that you can understand their similarities and differences. Some sites may be more popular with a younger or older demographic, and that's important to remember when you start using them.

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2. Go to TheNewPR.com website

This site is a wonderful resource for articles, white papers, interesting blogs, and more.

3. Start commenting social networking sites

Most blogs have a “Comments” section specifically for this purpose. Have a question? Feel free to ask the author; most are happy to talk to you. Use your personal Twitter account to make comments on others’ posts, or to ask questions. Find old colleagues on FaceBook. This is how you begin building your online network.

4. Get your company online with Twitter

Twitter is a “micro-blogging” tool that allows users to post 140-word “tweets,” to follow the posts of others, and others to follow you. People use Twitter to share important news stories and crisis communication and to engage other users in conversation. Groups like Healthcare Marketing (@hcmktg) hold weekly chats via Twitter, where members discuss healthcare trends, technology, social media, and more. A Twitter account is free to open, and in minutes you can begin posting. It takes little time to maintain, as posts are limited to 140 words each.

5. Get a blog

As mentioned above, you can sign up for a free blog, or for one that costs a fee. Write about topics on which you and your organization are experts. Whether that is healthcare trends and issues, telecommunications, or marketing, a blog allows you to establish yourself, and your organization, as an expert in the field. Publish information that your consumers will find useful and interesting, and they will continue to come back for more. You can even incorporate photos and YouTube videos of special events, interviews, and anything else that you find interesting.

As you learn about social media and the possibilities it holds for public relations and communications, you will begin to feel more comfortable in this digital age. You will begin to build an online reputation for your organization by demonstrating a willingness to openly communicate with your consumers. Word of mouth, the number one source of information influencing preference for healthcare providers, will quickly spread. These free and simple social media tools can be used to enhance your organization’s current communications techniques.

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