



White Paper

Social Media

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So what is all this Web 2.0 and social media hullabaloo you keep hearing about? Well, it's a little hard to explain. The Internet is evolving at an astonishing rate and just as most people were getting used to e-mail and Web sites, all these newfangled trends have popped up and are making the World Wide Web more complicated.

The good news is that it's not all that confusing.

Change is happening and there's no stopping progress, but that doesn't mean you have to be left behind. If anything, technology is becoming more accessible. There have been technological advances up and down that set of tubes we call the Internet, but the real revolution is in the behavior of Internet users.

Surfing Then and Now

Surfing the Web isn't a passive activity anymore. It's not just about searching for and reading information, it's about contributing, editing and even self-policing. This is Web 2.0. Web 2.0 sites foster participation and active involvement. Web sites aren't just places where one party shoots a message at its audience anymore. Today, the most effective sites and those with the most traffic offer visitors ways to interact with one another and the Web site owner.

Social media sites, like Digg.com or Flickr.com allow users to contribute and share content. In the case of Digg, news stories are democratically voted, or dugg, by users, not an editorial staff. The most dugg stories get promoted to the front page, while stories deemed inappropriate or irrelevant are buried. The functionality and powerbase of a site like Digg depends entirely on its users.

The staff itself works almost exclusively on maintaining and promoting the site or improving the algorithm that promotes or demotes stories.

Another example of the changing behavior and expectations of Internet users is the rapid adoption rate of RSS technology. Although many people don't realize it, they've been using RSS for quite awhile. Not sure if you use it or not? If Google is your homepage, you probably do.

If you've customized your Google homepage to display headlines and story summaries from news outlets, that's being done with RSS (for a more complete rundown on RSS, check out our white paper on it).

Although most Web 2.0 applications and Web sites are designed to foster user interaction, many professional communicators fail to see the immense power behind seemingly simple ideas.

Twitter

Twitter.com is a Web site that allows to users to keep up with one another through short, blog-like posts. Superficially, Twitter bills itself as a great way to keep yourself updated as to what your friends are doing at any given moment.

Relatively short character limits encourage more frequent and consistent posting, but more importantly, they allow Twitter to send updates to mobile phones via SMS or text messaging.



This ability is what makes Twitter a real killer application. Companies that create and use a Twitter account can effectively build an announcement or notification system for employees or clients, where messages are sent directly to their cell phones.

And this can all be done for the price of setting up a Twitter account...which is free.

Social Media and the Professional Communicator

Social media has drastically changed the role, function and ability of the professional communicator. Reporters and public relations practitioners are no longer the gatekeepers of information. Public relations professionals in particular are finding themselves being pressured into facilitator roles.

Successful communicators are those who understand that influence, conversations and discussions about their companies are happening in places where they may not have any control, such as the comments section of someone else's blog or a news Web site. Not only do they recognize this is happening, but they are proactive about participating in the conversation.

Following the conversation and actively participating in it can drastically effect public perception of a company.

It's no secret that listening to audience complaints, suggestions, questions or concerns and responding to them creates an enormous amount of goodwill at best and an open dialog with an organization's audience at worst. Social media is a vehicle that allows companies to do this in a meaningful and immediate way.

As communicators, we will always produce messages, but social media has given us the extra responsibility and opportunity to create effective two-way communication with our audiences.

