Social Media – the new challenge for PR measurement and evaluation

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In the five years since Paul Noble and I wrote the second edition of our book, *Evaluating Public Relations*, the biggest change in the field has been the rapid emergence of social media in media relations and organisational communication. Although we devoted a full chapter to the online environment, social media has rushed ahead in terms of its usage for communications and in the demands for measurement of its effectiveness. In this short paper, prepared with help from AMEC, the International Association for the Measurement of Communication, some of the issues that PR practitioners must consider are discussed.

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Instead of Social Media, think about 'conversations' about your organisation's or client's brand and reputation online: What are they communicating, what are you doing to influence the conversation, and how do you measure the impact? These conversations take place every minute somewhere in the world and combine to exert a significant influence over what consumers buy, how they think and what they do.

The explosion of broadband coverage means that people have more ways to access content. On the web, a PR practitioner cannot solely try to distribute key messages in a one-way manner because of the mass of competing information. Instead, he or she must engage the audience in a conversation that persuades the social media community to engage with the client or organisation.

There is no single formula in Social Media evaluation. It is a complex, complicated and fast changing space. The challenge is to understand how consumers interact with brands and organisations through Social Media, and to do so in a cost-effective and meaningful way.

Social Media measurement criteria can be tailored to the client's needs. Don't let anyone tell you that Social Media cannot be measured! There are very real and tangible metrics that can be applied to Social Media. As more money is spent, so too will the demand for tangible results.

1)   Be clear on your measurement goals

Is your goal to be increased traffic on the web? Is it content? Or what people are saying about your organisation on the web? Standard Internet measures such as search engine ranking and website traffic give an indication of volume. Qualitative information, which reveals and measures the actual web conversations taking place and how they are driving choices in the marketplace, will become more important going forward. The most fundamental search metric - the link - can be thought of as an engagement metric, and that there's evidence that the main search engines incorporate other engagement metrics in their algorithms.

Qualitative

Agree what you want to measure: Is it increased membership? Increased donations? Is it increased requests for sales information that have been driven by Social Media? Or is it corporate reputation – what people are saying about your client's company or product

through conversations? If your objective is to measure what people are saying, you can set up benchmarking metrics through questions like these:

- Is your client part of the product or industry conversation?

- If not, who is dominating the conversation?

- How is your client talked about on the web, compared with competitors?

- How well are your client's target issues and planned messages discussed?

From this point, as a measure of success, you can ask whether you can:

- Build better relationships with primary audiences?

- Join in the conversations where previously the company had no or too small a voice?

- Influence the conversation positively.

Quantitative

If the goal is to measure traffic, sales or Search Engine Optimisation ranking, a quantitative approach can be considered. There are free tools to help analyse your company's blog traffic, subscriber count, keyword optimisation and additional trends. A check list could include:

- Search Engine (SEO) optimisation ranking

- Web analytics including number of unique hits to website or blog

- Ratio: number of comments to blog posts

- Tonality of key messages

- Duration (time spent on the site)

2) How do you know you if a Social Media programme is working?

One approach is to classify blogs with A (most important), B and C rankings to give customers an idea of the importance of the blogs that write on relevant topics. Several criteria affect the categorisation of A, B and C, such as publicity (Google page rank, number of linking sites, Technorati authority), status as a multiplier, frequency of posts, rate of discussion /conversation, and content (focus, spectrum).

What do you want to know from Social Media measurement?

Let's look at value: In public relations, clients expect to see the value from their expenditure. With a Social Media programme, you can demonstrate the value of a Social Media programme by building in clear and measurable metrics. Unless you integrate a plan to measure Social Media before you start as part of the planning process, money is being thrown away. Set specific criteria by asking questions which only apply to Social Media.

These will vary according to the company's specific measurement goals but might include:

- What is being said about your brand or reputation online?

- What are they saying – and why?

- How customers are interacting with your brand using Social Media?

- What's the best way to respond to a developing issue or crisis?

- What does the marketplace think about your most recent product release or announcement?

- To what extent does Social Media feed and inspire print and broadcast stories and vice-versa?

- Frequency with which your brand or organisation is mentioned on key sites

Another expression of "value" is direct engagement and for a company to enable their customers talk to them directly.

3)   Who is doing all the talking?

Are the same spokespeople/influencers or thought leaders showing up in both traditional and Social Media content? If not, this represents a big opportunity for PR practitioners. You may discover a new group of influencers in Social Media who are more receptive to your outreach than mainstream media contacts. On the other hand, you may find that they are talking about topics that aren't relevant to your organisation or client. Therefore you should move on and find commentators who are talking about topics relevant to you. It is important to know:

What is the community talking about?

- Conversation Index (ratio between blog posts and comments-plus-trackbacks)

- Influential Ideas (how long does a message remain in the arena of public opinion and interaction?)

- What is the relationship with the community?

Content (what is the focus of the community?)

- Relevance: How relevant to the organisation is a particular blog post?

- Tone: What is the sentiment associated with the response: positive, neutral or negative?

- Positioning: Compare how the company wants to be positioned *with* how the public and/or their customers are ACTUALLY positioning them in conversations. This dissonance is very important to consider.

Participation (What is the community doing; what are its actions?)

- Engagement: The recipient not only responds to a message but acts on it as well;

- Community Activation: Specific actions - are recipients reacting to the message?

4) Insights and considerations

The sheer scale of the web presents a number of reputation management challenges, not least of which is the ability of anyone – including Google – to monitor everything. When deciding what to monitor, the reputation manager must make decisions about what's worth paying attention to and what isn't.

Finally, here are three top tips for effective Social Media sourcing and analysis:

1. Normalise your Social Media evaluation - remember, this is just another media type;

2. Don't do it in isolation, integrate it with your mainstream media analysis so you have the ability to view a complete and comparable media landscape which reflects the consumers media experience and it also reflects the consumers' perspective, seeing mainstream and consumer generated media side by side;

3. Don't become obsessive about seeing and analysing everything in the blogosphere and social media. It is misleading and can send costs spiralling as 'coverage' volumes build. Again, the consumers' experience should be the benchmark.

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Tom is an active researcher, focusing on professionally-important topics such as measurement and evaluation, reputation management, and issues management. He also researches and writes on the history of public relations and has established the International History of Public Relations Conference. Tom is a member of the Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation, and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and Founding Fellow of the Public Relations Consultants Association

He was awarded his PhD in 1995 from Nottingham Trent University in England for research into models of evaluation in public relations. He is co-editor of the Journal of Communication Management and has guest edited for Public Relations Review. He is on the editorial board or reviewer panel of four other journals.