

ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE TRUTH BEHIND YOUR ACTIVITY

Continual changes in the media industry – including print news sources switching to online formats and users generating greater amounts of content – have forced many marketing and public relations professionals to rethink their communication strategy. At the heart of this evolution has been the tactic of using social media to engage audiences and enrich relationships.

Although many PR and marketing practitioners have developed excellent social media skills, communicators still have much to learn about both the potential and the limitations of social media. Novice and experienced users alike are realizing that the waters of online activity can often be murky, and that the sea of information surrounding social media is often clouded by myths and misconceptions.

Debunking 5 Common Social Media Myths

It is not always simple to separate fact from fiction when it comes to social media. One reason for this difficulty: while social media's impact relies on the wide distribution of content, few social media users, in general, check the veracity of information sources. (For instance, five bloggers and a major media outlet may link to, or tweet about, the same material, therefore, the cited material must be accurate, right?) We try below to upend five common myths surrounding social media.

- ▶▶ **Myth: Social media will soon replace traditional media as the most viable source of news.**
At least once every week, or so it seems, someone comes out with a "traditional media is dead" article or warns that "we shouldn't waste time on traditional media and advertising." It's true that the content provided by the print media leaves something to be desired lately, especially as traditional outlets continue to debate how to best protect their revenue streams. But it's also true that the amount of original content found in social media still pales in comparison to the output of traditional media. In fact, most news content is first confirmed by, or published in, the print or web editions of major news outlets, and then picked up on social media networks and blogs. Thus, without traditional media, there would be very little news to fuel social media.

- ▶▶ **Myth: Public relations and marketing professionals looking to connect and engage with stakeholders and brand constituents should turn to social media because it's easy to implement and is cost-effective.**

Engaging your audience via social media is certainly cost-effective in the sense that most of the sites available for participation are free to join (at least for the moment). However, it *will* cost you in terms of the time needed to establish and maintain a profile or account. If looking to hire a dedicated person to handle your company's social media, you should know that in the U.S., the median salary for a "social media manager" is nearly \$70,000, whereas the median salary of a "community relations manager" is over \$83,000. That assumes you want to hire a dedicated person to handle your company's social media.

If you're going to use someone who's already on your team, you'll have to factor in the additional expense associated with the time the person spends on other tasks, as well as on the newly added responsibility of maintaining your company's social media presence, the training the person may need to undergo (such as html and graphic design for more advanced campaigns, or the learning curve associated with novice users), and the cost of any equipment or software (e.g. video camera and editing programs). Whether you choose to expand your team or stay within your current group, you also must consider how much you'll spend on social media advertising, how you'll incorporate it into your existing web initiatives, and how social media will fit into your overall communication strategy and budget.

In the U.S. The median salary for a "social media manager" is near \$70,000 a year. To hire a dedicated "community relations manager" that could cost upwards of \$83,000 a year.

Debunking 5 Common Social Media Myths, Continued

- ▶▶ **Myth: Hiring a special “social media agency” or some other form of social media “guru” is a must if you want to successfully take part in social media.**

A quick search on Twellow¹ (The Twitter Yellow Pages) reveals that, out of the 19 million profiles indexed, the phrase “social media” appears in 37,800+ bios, and “new media” appears in 6,700. Whether known as a guru (288); expert (486); manager (334); agency (193); pro, maverick or maven (273); or by some other name, we’re all merely students at various stages of development. If you feel you need to get the help of an outside consult, that’s ok. But don’t think you’re “doomed” just because you “go it alone” or that someone must know more than you just because they have “social media [insert title]” next to their name. There are plenty of successful companies, PR pros, and brands that are doing just fine in social media on their own.

- ▶▶ **Myth: Content posted online or in social media is exempt from copyright or anti-piracy laws.**

It has never been easier to disseminate content across the web, and the expansion of social media has only accelerated the process. Unfortunately, many communications professionals, like many Internet users, labor under the misconception that anything residing on the web must be free or covered by the doctrine of fair-use.

In actuality, though, much of what populates online and social media remains subject to copyright or anti-piracy laws. “Alleged Peer-To-Peer Pirate Rejects Settlement Offer In File-Sharing Case²” and “The YouTube Approach to Copyright Infringement Claims³” are just two of many headlines atop stories that shed light on copyright as it applies to the web. Even search engines are not immune to copyright restrictions. For instance, Google had to work out deals with The Associated Press for the right to use AP content, while News Corporation vows to “stop Google and others from taking [News Corp.] content⁴”.

- ▶▶ **Myth: Social media is an effective communication strategy.**

Yes it is – if your audience is attuned to social media. But your communication program should not paint itself into a social media corner. It is important to remember that social media is just one tactic in a much broader communication effort; it is a medium, not the message. To demonstrate a communication strategy’s success, it’s essential to create communication objectives that are aligned with your organization’s broad goals, and then monitor and measure accordingly.

Many communications professionals, like many Internet users, labor under the misconception that anything residing on the web must be free or covered by the doctrine of fair-use. In actuality, though, much of what populates online and social media remains subject to copyright or anti-piracy laws.

Correcting 5 Online Media Misconceptions

Like general Internet users, marketing and public relations practitioners presume certain things about online and social media activities that don't hold up under examination. Couple those misconceptions with the myths described above, and the stage is set for massive misinformation. The following is our attempt to disabuse you of five misconceptions that can prevent communication professionals from obtaining optimal benefit from online and social media.

1. **As long as I use my “privacy settings,” my employer, clients, or prospects won't see the information I publish when using online and social media.**

Setting your privacy settings can help you control some of what's made public – assuming you've bothered to implement them at all. However, social network creators and third-parties are finding ways to work around these parameters. According to a Media Post article⁵, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, “believes that ‘people no longer care about personal privacy,’ referring to Zuckerberg's justification for new privacy settings that make a host of information available by default.”

This sentiment isn't unique to Facebook. Classmates.com recently settled a suit in which users alleged that the site practiced “deceptive marketing” to get them to sign up for paid memberships. This action came just weeks after users sued over “opt-out privacy setting changes⁶” that made members' information available across the Internet at large.

Sites like Please Rob Me⁷ are quick to point out the lack of discretion that users show when posting their activities online, which some individuals then use for unsavory purposes. Other sites like Spokeo.com intentionally aggregate information (regardless of whether it is correct) from third parties that users may assume is out of the public space (e.g., household income, credit score, photos, information on family members, etc.) into a sort of “directory.” And Wired.com has said that even the federal government is “going undercover on social networks to gain information,⁸” seemingly hidden behind privacy walls or that is freely distributed, to track down suspects and to confirm alibis.

2. **The security of social media sites assures that I'm protected.**

The number of hackers, spammers, and phishing tools looking to capitalize on a site's vulnerability is at an all-time high and will only increase as social media continues to gain in popularity. Hacks to Twitter, which force users to reset passwords, and fake virus alerts on Facebook, which implant malicious viruses, are commonplace. Even traditional online media isn't immune to these threats, as researchers have identified a new malvertising strain that infects users⁹ even if they don't click on an ad. Is it surprising then that, as Sophos¹⁰ reported, 72 percent of companies believe their employees' activities on social networking sites could endanger their business' security? Not when the fear is backed up by data showing that the number of businesses that were targets for spam increased from 33.4 percent in April 2009 to 57 percent in December 2009.

Neither social media nor traditional online media and the businesses that use them are immune to the threat of hackers, spammers, phishing tools, and malvertising. Sophos reported that the number of businesses targeted for spam increased 33.4 percent in April 2009 to 57 percent in December 2009.

Correcting 5 Online Misconceptions, Continued

3. **I am not liable for the content I publish online or in social media.**

Like the assumption that anything hosted on the web is exempt from copyright, many people also mistakenly assume that they're not responsible for the material they publish online. For the time being, some Internet legislation¹¹ may seem to protect users and social networks who post allegedly defamatory content. Nonetheless, legal suits have been filed and won against accused parties.

Even businesses are getting in on the action: Most corporate social media policies have a clause about wittingly or unwittingly publishing protected or defamatory content and holding the individual – not the company – responsible for employees' activities. Even if employees are official representatives of the organization, and are acting on behalf of the company at the time of posting, the individual is still responsible for his or her actions. With sites such as Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft indexing this material, even after it has been deleted or is no longer available to the public, there's even more potential for activity to damage the hard-earned reputations of brands, companies, and professionals.

4. **To make it big in social media my online content has to go viral.**

Who doesn't want to reach a million-plus viewers or fans, or have their text, video, or podcast spread across the web at lightning speed? The reality, though, is that this isn't possible for most brands or companies. Instead, you need to set a realistic standard of "viral" based on your industry or segment. Building long-lasting relationships, putting quality before quantity, and tying social media into your company or client's revenue stream should be the main priorities (in that order). And never forget that a few sets of the right eyes (e.g., a stakeholder's) can be more important than millions of random ones.

5. **My top executive(s) must be involved in the company or brand's social media or online activity for those efforts to prove successful.**

You already know that it's not necessarily the best use of time or talent for your CEO to be stationed inside a trade booth while attending an industry event. So why should the CEO have to blog? In the case of CEO Bill Marriott, who pens Marriott Corporation's On the Move blog, it makes sense since the content is in his own voice and is closely aligned with the company's strategic objectives. And after three years of doing it, Bill Marriott appears quite comfortable in his role as a corporate blogger. But he is the exception, not the rule. And the same may not be said for the head of your own company or client's. Instead of focusing on the blogger's place in the corporate hierarchy, "a company should choose its bloggers on the basis of their potential to write well and interestingly on one or more topics relevant to the company's business," writes Joel Postman on *SocializedPR*¹².

To make it big in social media, set a realistic standard of "viral" based on your industry or segment ... And never forget that a few sets of the right eyes (e.g., a stakeholder's) can be more important than millions of random ones.

Resources:

1. Figures taken from www.twellow.com as of 4.5.10
2. www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=121450
3. www.digitalmedialawyerblog.com/2009/12/the_youtube_approach_to_copyri_1.html
4. www.marketwatch.com/story/news-corp-chief-google-to-stop-getting-free-news-2010-04-06
5. www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=121759
6. www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=123888
7. www.geekwithlaptop.com/please-rob-me-website-causes-outrage
8. www.wired.com/threatlevel/2010/03/undercover-feds-on-facebook
9. www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=124344
10. www.sophos.com/sophos/docs/eng/papers/sophos-security-threat-report-jan-2010-wpna.pdf
11. www.articlesbase.com/social-marketing-articles/liability-and-user-generated-content-783323.html
12. www.socializedpr.com/debunking-five-social-media-myths-2/

About Us

BurrellesLuce helps communication professionals maximize their media relations results by identifying relevant publicity channels, and capturing and measuring all their coverage in local and national print, web, blog, online, social media, and broadcast outlets. Besides delivering content, the company's online platform, called BurrellesLuce 2.0[®], enables clients to target and connect with journalists and bloggers, track media coverage, and measure the impact of their outreach efforts. The platform has been further enhanced with the introduction of BurrellesLuce iMonitor[®], a self-guided media monitoring tool that powers instant searches covering the most local, national, and international news from free and subscription sources, including social media. Founded in 1888, BurrellesLuce has a long history of innovation and is an experienced provider of media monitoring and measurement services in the United States.

Contact Us

To find out more about BurrellesLuce media relations planning, monitoring and measurement services, please visit: www.burrellesluce.com/socialwp or call **800.840.2565**