

Social Media: Changing the World of Business Communication

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Every day on the radio and television we hear about Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs, MySpace, and YouTube and are asked to “follow” organizations through social media to provide feedback or stay up to date on news events or product releases. It seems social media are a driving new force that is affecting the way people communicate, both personally and professionally. Businesses are finding social media a great way to communicate with customers and their own employees in a more cost effective way.

As business communication educators we may wonder how many people are actually using these sites and, out of those who are accessing social media, are they just young college-age people and computer “techies”? Are businesses adopting these new communication tools or are social media sites just a fad that will pass in a year or two?

As we know, communication within a business setting drives course content for business communication classes. So, if businesses are using social media, then are business communication educators teaching it in their classes? If they are not, then should it be part of the curriculum?

Review of Literature

A thorough review about social media began in order to find answers to the questions posed. The first journal to be investigated was *Business Communication Quarterly*, since this is one of the primary publications for business communication educators. After searching through the past several years of issues, no articles about social media were found. However, there was one article about what content is taught in U.S. business communication courses. This would help to answer one of the main questions posed – Is social media being taught in U.S. business communication courses?

According to a study published by Travis Russ late last year, the category of social media was not mentioned as course content by those business communication educators surveyed (2009). Written communication was the most covered topic, but an increasing number of courses balanced oral communication with written compared to previous audits (Russ, 2009). Respondents also gave emphasis to résumé writing and effective email strategies (Russ, 2009). Less time was given to other technologies such as instant/text messaging and video conferencing (Russ, 2009). No reference to social media was found in his study.

Russ (2009) speculates that one reason for the absence in his study of technologies that compete with email may be that these media have only recently been established in business settings. In addition, he states that instructors may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with these media and do not believe they are competent enough to include them in their courses.

This was helpful information, but more searching was needed to answer the other questions. Thus, the search was expanded to various communication and business-related databases using key search words

such as “social media” and “social media in business.” However, few academic journals contained research on social media, either theoretical articles or published studies of their impact in the classroom or in a business setting. The next step was to conduct a general search using Google. This wider search brought up articles, mostly from mass-media types of publications, Web sites, and blogs that discussed who is using social networking sites and how they are being used, especially by businesses.

Findings

Thanks to the introduction of social media, the power of consumer-driven communication is transforming how businesses communicate. It is a revolution in communication that is shaking up the traditional one-way communication where a message is controlled by a business and delivered to its audience. Now the consumer determines the message and has access to communicate in an interactive, two-way communication with hundreds, thousands, or even millions of other people.

Williams and Williams (2008) make a profound statement - “The introduction of social media tools may be the most revolutionary change to communication since the introduction of the Internet” (p. 35).

Shao (2008) echoes the far-reaching impact of social media - “User-generated media (UGM) are fundamentally changing the world of entertainment, communication, and information...” p.8).

Another quote in *Inc.* magazine sums up the effects of the new social media on businesses today.

It’s not just who you know. It’s also who *they* know, and what they know. Online social networks have the potential to connect you to a vast world of people and resources, and they’ve gone from fad to fact of business life (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 54).

Fernando (2007) claims social networking is the “next frontier of marketing.” He says that conclusion is evident with the large number of advertising and promotion conglomerates scrambling to work out agreements with social media giants such as Facebook and LiveWorld.

Who is Using Social Media?

From the article search, social media are not just communication tools for teens and college students anymore. Research shows there are huge increases in online older adults using social networking sites. Brennan (2010) states, “Although Facebook initially appealed to the young, now the fastest growing demographic is those at least 35 years old, and the majority (more than two-thirds) of Facebook users are out of college” (p. 8).

The rate for American adult Internet users who had an online social network profile in 2008 increased four-fold since 2005. Thirty-five percent of online adults had a profile. The same study shows that 65% of online American teens were using social networks (Lenhart, 2009).

A 2008 Pew Internet study reveals, though, that the percentage of online adults having a profile on a social networking site does go down with age:

- 75% of online adults aged 18-24 have a profile on a social network site

- 57% of online adults 25-34 have a profile
- 30% of online adults aged 35-44
- 19% of online 45-54 year olds

The numbers decline to 10% for ages 55-64 and 7% for those over age 65.

So what sites are more popular? The top five social networking sites, in order, by U.S. market share of visits as of August 2009 include Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Tagged, and Twitter, according to marketingcharts.com as reported in “Social Networking,” chapter 14 of *Consumer Behavior*. Facebook boasts of having 200 million users worldwide (McKee, 2009) while more than 60 million people have signed up for a LinkedIn account (Hempl, 2010). Twitter has more than 40 million users monthly (Gelles, 2009).

Comparisons of usage among the top social network sites were broken down by generation as reported on andersonanalytics.com, published in “Social Networking, chapter 14.”

- The Millennials are almost split between Facebook and MySpace with fewer than 10% using Twitter.
- Generation Y is using MySpace over Facebook, but the percentage of users on Twitter goes up to 14%.
- Generation X has 76% using Facebook with 57% on MySpace and the percentage on Twitter rises to 18%.
- Baby Boomers overwhelmingly use Facebook almost 2 to 1 compared to MySpace and fewer of them are on Twitter – 13% when compared to Generation X.
- 90% of the WWII Generation is using Facebook; 23% access MySpace; and Twitter use jumps to 17% (Social Networking, 2010). (See figure 1.)

Breakdown of Social Media Site Usage by Generation – Figure 1

	Facebook Usage	MySpace Usage	Twitter Usage
Millennials	61%	65%	9%
Generation Y	65%	75%	14%
Generation X	76%	57%	18%
Baby Boomers	73%	40%	13%
WWII Generation	90%	23%	17%

Source: www.andersonanalytics.com, reported in “Social Networking,” chapter 14

According to a 2010 report by Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr, adults are more likely to use Facebook over MySpace, and they will use Twitter and LinkedIn more than young adults or even teens. Twitter is not popular among teens and is used even less by children in the 12-13 age group. Adults are even demonstrating a fragmentation of their online usage with 52 percent reporting they have two or more different profiles, which is up from 42 percent in May 2008 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

In more study results, adults over the age of thirty are increasing their usage of blogs with 11 percent now maintaining a personal blog, while online 18-29 year-olds maintaining a blog dropped from 9

percent to 15 percent (Lenhart et al., 2010). However, another study conducted by Forrester reports a slightly higher usage of blogs where 20 percent of online youths publish a blog at least once a month, 36.6 percent read a blog and 26.4 percent comment on a blog at least once a month (Baker & Green, 2008). Their survey results corroborate the 11 percent of adults publishing a blog at least once a month as reported by Lenhart et al (2010) but goes further to report that almost one-quarter of online adults read a blog, however only about 14 percent comment on a blog (Baker & Green, 2008). This is lower than the Millennial age group of 18-29 year-olds.

So far the use of social media has been broken down by age groups, but what is the gender breakdown for social media usage?

“More than one-half (53%) of the U.S. female internet population actively participated in some type of social media at least weekly” (eMarketer.com, 2009). A study using Google Ad Planner numbers conducted by Information is Beautiful, concluded that more women than men use popular social networks (Chen, 2009). Fifty-seven percent of users of Twitter are women with the same percentage using Facebook and 55 percent of Flickr users being female (Chen, 2009). Chen reports that LinkedIn and YouTube are about equal between men and women users.

Auren Hoffman, the CEO of Rapleaf - a company that collects and analyzes large amounts of social data for Fortune 100 companies - states in a *BusinessWeek* article titled “The Social Media Gender Gap” that the future of social media is going to “look pink” because it is going to be all about women. He adds that men are early adopters of new technologies, but women are at the forefront of social media.

This women-centric social media conclusion is supported by a Compass Study by BlogHer and iVillage conducted in March 2009. Of the 79 million U.S. women online, more than half or 42 million of them are active weekly with some type of social media (Compass, 2009). Their activities include social networks (e.g. Facebook MySpace), blogging - by reading or posting, and message boards and forums or status updating (e.g. Twitter). The most activities women reported are on social networks and the least participation is on status updating (Compass, 2009). Seventy-two percent of women surveyed log onto their social networking site at least once per day, a figure that jumped by one-third from a survey in 2008 (SheSpeaks, 2009).

The 2nd Annual Social Media Study conducted in October 2009 by SheSpeaks concludes that Facebook is much more popular than Twitter among women, but there is room for both networks in women’s lives. The study concludes that women log onto Facebook for a number of reasons - to stay connected with friends, for fun, and to get feedback on their posts, while Twitter is used more for learning new things, promoting oneself, and following celebrities (SheSpeaks, 2009).

Hoffman (2008) reports that among twenty-somethings, women and men are just as likely to have profiles on social networks, but young women are much more active on sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Flixster. Males over age 30, especially those who are married, are not even joining social networks except for LinkedIn (Hoffman, 2008). However, that is not the case for married women between the ages of 35 and 50, who are the fastest-growing segment, according to Hoffman.

The Rapleaf CEO attributes the gender disparity to the distraction males have with video games, such as role-playing fantasy games, first-person action games, and casual games like poker. They do not seem

interested in social networks once they are married since they are not looking to interact with the opposite sex (Hoffman, 2008). Married men use LinkedIn, which is more transactional, gathering intelligence, and making introductions, and Hoffman (2008) concludes that women, on the other hand, are less transactional and more relationship-driven. They spend their time on social networks “building relationships, communicating with friends, and making new friends” (Hoffman, 2008).

The core fact is that “social media is less about technology and more about being social” (Lichtenberg, 2009). He continues that the reasons women turn to social media include the natural need to share information about themselves (self-disclosure), relationship-building, and communication; they want to know what others think and what works and does not work, as well as develop self-awareness and growth.

So what does this gender information mean to businesses and why should they be interested in social networks? Women make 80 percent of the buying decisions in most American households (Chen, 2008; Gogoi, 2005). Working women ages 24-54 “have emerged as a potent force in the marketplace, changing the way companies design, position, and sell their products” (Gogoi, 2005). Women’s decision-making authority is due in part to the increase in households headed by women, 27 percent - a quadrupling of the rate since 1950 - and their buying power has jumped 62 percent (Gogoi, 2005). Because women use social networks more, “a dollar spent marketing to acquire a female user goes a lot further than on a male user”(Hoffman, 2008).

How are Companies Using Social Media?

Social media are changing the rules (Fernando, 2007) (Paine, 2008) of communication and business. Fernando (2007) concludes that while individuals first started using social media, companies have been paying close attention to how it has been used and are devising ways to capitalize on it as well. In a 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study, 59 percent of Americans who use social media are interacting with companies, and 93 percent of respondents feel companies should have a social media presence (Leary, 2009). Over half also reported feeling a stronger connection with companies that do have a presence (Leary, 2009).

The old techniques of communication consisted of who could yell the loudest and reach as many ears/eyeballs as possible with the least amount of cost (Paine, 2007). Now the success of your message is not measured by reach and frequency but about how deep your network is (Paine, 2007).

Social media are also replacing the traditional paper method when communicating with employees. A study published by Watson Wyatt Worldwide concludes that companies will be using social media more in 2010. Eighty percent of companies surveyed already increased electronic communication in the past two years. The study shows that social media are increasing in significance, and it is “set to change the way people communicate” (Perry, 2009).

The Gartner Group, a leading information technology research and analysis company, conducted a study that takes this conclusion even further. It concludes that Twitter-like tools will replace email as the primary communication method in a few short years. In addition, by 2014, twenty percent of organizations will use social networking tools, and within the next couple of years, more than half of global businesses will use some form of microblogging platform (Mari, 2010).

More than half (or 60%) of the Fortune 1000 companies with a Web site have created some type of online community in order to connect to customers. However, Gartner provides some negative results about social media usage in that 76 percent of small businesses have not found social media helpful and 86 percent have not tried social media to get business advice or information. Experts say that is a mistake. Using social media can be very effective in bringing in more business and establishing customer loyalty. Online marketers speculate it may have to do with unclear goals of what businesses are trying to achieve or they did not give social media at least six months to a year to work (Ginsburg, 2010).

From the review of articles, here are just a few of the hundreds of examples of how businesses are using social media to their cost-effective advantage.

- Shel Israel's book *Twiterville – How Businesses Can Thrive in the New Global Neighborhoods* provides dozens of examples throughout the 250+ pages of businesses/start-ups offering discount coupons through viral marketing, communicating with employees as a collaboration and training tool, fielding customer complaints and demonstrating company responsiveness to satisfy customers, finding or posting jobs, providing communication alerts, managing public relations crises, conducting e-commerce, and creating brand identity.
- The CEO of Wistia.com surfs through Twitter looking for sales leads and concludes "success" after only one year (Quittner, 2009). Quittner continues by telling how local San Francisco bakeries and coffee shops are getting the word out about their products as well as offering coupons to customers through Twitter. He adds that companies are using social media sites to research potential clients before making sales calls.
- Johnson and Johnson, the baby product giant, is using Facebook and YouTube to reach "mommy bloggers." Moms are sharing their experiences with fellow moms and creating excitement for products through viral word-of-mouth (Wright, 2009).
- The Sterling Bank is connecting women online and offline through educational and networking seminars by creating a social community on LinkedIn. American River Bankshares uses podcasting to get its message out because it is hard to get businesspeople out of their offices (Cocheo, 2009).
- The head of global recruiting for accounting giant Accenture plans to make as many as 40 percent of his hires through social media. "If you don't have a profile on LinkedIn, you're nowhere," John Campagnino concludes (Hempl, 2010, p.76). Home Depot searches for employee prospects for supply chain, information technology and global source positions through LinkedIn (Hempl, 2010). According to a study by Harris Interactive conducted for CareerBuilder.com, "about half of U.S. employers are going to the Internet to verify résumé details and responses to interview questions, determine whether an employee fits the culture of an organization, and flush out inappropriate behavior" (Brennan, 2010, p. 9).
- Coca-Cola used a "Blog Blast" to conduct an initiative called "Walking the Talk to Sustainable Growth" for its 20,000 employees to engage them in an open dialogue about the company's values (Culhane, 2008).

- Numerous examples in the literature were evident where companies hire employees to “monitor” social networking sites to learn what consumers are saying about their products or brand - whether bad or good. Alan Scott, senior vice president and CMO of Dow Jones Enterprise Media Group states that social media was a needed tool to stay close to their customers (Reid, 2009). Tim Walker, an analyst and host of Hoover’s Business Insight Zone warns that businesses that aren’t using social media have lost opportunities to join in their customers’ conversations (Reid, 2009). Walker adds that customers are probably talking about your business on Twitter anyways (Reid, 2009).
- Entrepreneurs are using Twitter to get through Web site crashes and to notify customers of weather-related transportation problems in delivering products. Innovative Beverage Group Holdings Inc.’s Web site crashed after it could not handle the incoming traffic following a news story broadcast on Fox News about the company’s so-called “relaxation beverage.” The owner of the beverage company kept potential customers informed through “tweets.” The same was true for United Linen & Uniform Services who notified customers of their order status during an ice storm that was affecting its truck deliveries (Needleman, 2009).
- As consumers, individuals are turning to their “network” of friends to find out about which products to buy. Erik Qualman (2009) in his book *Socialnomics: how social media transforms the way we live and do business* states that people are more likely to trust the opinions of their friends than Google. Qualman gives an example of “Steve” who wants to know which type of baby seat to buy. He types in “buying a baby seat” into Google and is not impressed with irrelevant search results. Instead, he performs the same search on his favorite social network and finds out that 23 of his 181 friends have bought a baby seat in the past two years and 14 purchased the same make and model. Eleven of the 14 posted reviews, two being videos. He respects those 14 opinions, therefore, purchasing the same baby seat (Qualman, 2009).
- Examples of employee social media usage were presented at the Third Annual New Media Academic Summit hosted by Edelman. McDonald’s uses a “Station M” portal to communicate with employees through interactive tools, including blogs, games, and photo posting which it reports that 70 percent of those using Station M feel like they matter more to the company. General Electric utilizes wikis and blogs in a knowledge-sharing Web site called “GE Connect” while Alcoa uses webinars for information dissemination throughout the company and provides Flip cameras to employees to record video messages so leaders can respond to questions or concerns (Engaging the new influencers, 2009).

An educator in the business communication field would be remiss not to mention that two of the more well-known publishers of business communication textbooks, John Thill and Courtland Bovée, have recently added more social media content with their Business Communication Headline News contributions and their latest text, *Excellence in Business Communication*, ninth edition. On page 42 of their new text, they identify uses of social media in business settings which reflect many of the uses mentioned above, such as product sales, internal communication with employees, team building, customer support, and customer location (Thill & Bovée, 2011).

According to a 2008 study by Awareness Networks, a social media solution provider, more companies are allowing their employees to use social media for work - 69 percent, up from 37 percent the year before. Sixty-three percent of the respondents reported their organizations are using social media to build brand, 61 percent are improving communication and collaboration, and 58 percent use them to increase consumer engagement (Companies becoming more sociable, 2008).

Fernando (2007) claims that as companies are using social media, they have to realize and understand that content is controlled not by the company anymore but by the audience of consumers. The articles also indicate that the business community needs to accept that negative comments will appear in social media and it also has to be able to accept and deal with customer dissatisfaction. These two concepts seem to be hard for some companies and could explain why some are not ready to engage in them.

Discussion

It was surprising to see that it is not just young, college-aged or younger people who are participating in social media networks. Older adults are now communicating through social media networks and they are more interested in using Twitter than their younger counterparts. It was also interesting to learn that women use social media more than men. This seems to be of special interest for companies selling products since women are more likely to make the buying decisions.

After reading how businesses are now jumping on board to take advantage of social media, it is apparent that using social media is not just a fad. In fact, some portray social media as “revolutionary,” meaning it is here to stay. This new form of media provides very unique and cost-effective ways for businesses to communicate with a large body of consumers to create a “buzz” about their products. Also companies need to be more transparent and appear genuine in their customer satisfaction efforts due to the implementation of social media.

From the articles, one can conclude that the use of social media may be more prevalent among larger companies than smaller ones, but some smaller businesses are still finding success in communicating with customers by using this new media. It also can be concluded that social media is more than a dynamite way of low cost marketing. There are so many more applications where it can be used to communicate internally as well as externally.

Another conclusion that can be reached from this search is a lack of rigorous research about social media in academic journals, especially related to business communication. A call to action needs to be made for future research efforts to focus on this new media. Academic scholars in the business communication field need to conduct studies that take a closer look at the effects of social media on businesses, so there can be more academically-based literature that is reviewed rather than the mass-media types of publications and Web sites as used in this article.

Conclusion

This review of articles makes it clear that social media are used both by a broad range of people and in a wide variety of business applications. And because of this, I believe business communication educators should embrace this new form of communication and add these tools to course content to better

prepare our students for successful business careers and be highly knowledgeable about 21st century technology.

Dr. Elaine Young, associate professor of marketing at Champlain College, states in a *BusinessWeek* viewpoint article that colleges today are supposed to give graduates the “immediate skills” they need to launch their professional careers, and they now need more digital communication skills and need to understand why they are needed.

Dr. Young advocates that students need “to know the difference between writing a news release, a blog post, and a Twitter update, or generating content for a Facebook fan page.” She claims, “Business school curricula mostly do not prepare students for this new digital world.” As educators she encourages us to catch up and integrate these skills throughout. Dr. Young encourages all business faculty, regardless of discipline, to become knowledgeable with these new media tools and “to lead students by example by knowing the mechanics of social media and showing our students how to use them strategically for the good of their employers.”

Not only is it important to realize that our students need to be knowledgeable about how to use these tools to benefit the employer, but these college graduates who are using all of the technological gadgets will expect their employers to use social media to communicate with them as employees.

Relating back to the question raised about whether we as business communication educators need to include social media in course content, the answer to this is a resounding “Yes!” As evidenced throughout the article search, social media is definitely changing how individuals and businesses are communicating. Since these tools are being implemented in companies and organizations, business communication educators need to weave more social media content and tools throughout their courses, and not simply spend a class time or two discussing them. We need to immerse social media into more of what we do in the course by not only covering them in lecture material, but to implement social media-type communication tools between students and instructors, such as Facebook groups, blogging, wikis, podcasting, and Twitter-type microblogging platforms. A call to action can also be made for scholars to study social media in businesses from an academic perspective and publish these research results in scholarly journals. It is time we caught up to the changing communication revolution.

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