New Media, New Influencers and Implications for the Public Relations Profession

by Paul Gillin, Senior Fellow, Society for New Communications Research

The following is the executive summary of a research study conducted by a team of Fellows of the Society for New Communications Research, made possible by a grant from the Institute for Public Relations and Wieck Media. The full report will soon be made available by the SNCR and the Institute for Public Relations to their members and the industry.

Marketers and public relations professionals today are confronted with an astounding array of new communications channels. Internet-based social media tools like blogs, podcasts, online video and social networks are giving voice to the opinions of millions of consumers. While mainstream media continues to play a vital role in the dissemination of information, even these traditional channels are increasingly being influenced by online conversations. The "new influencers" are beginning to tear at the fabric of marketing as it has existed for 100 years, giving rise to a new style of marketing that is characterized by conversation and community.

Marketers are responding to these forces with a mixture of excitement, fear and fascination. They're alarmed at the prospect of ceding control of their messages to a community of unknowns. Yet at the same time they're excited about the prospect of leveraging theese same tools to speak directly to their constituents without the involvement of media intermediaries.

The Society for New Communications Research set out to conduct an examination of how influence patterns are changing and how communications professionals are addressing those changes by adopting social media. The goals were to discover how organizations:

- Define new influencers;
- Communicate and create relationships with them;
- Use social media to create influence; and
- Measure the effects of these efforts.

The larger goal of the study was to use these discoveries to offer a set of recommendations to professional communicators.

Methodology

The study utilized a web-based survey created in Qualtrics. The survey was conducted from September 2007 - November 2007. The population of interest was "social media power users," i.e., communications professionals with a deep knowledge and heavy usage pattern of social media tools including blogs, podcasts, online video, social networks, and other new and emerging communications tools and technologies.
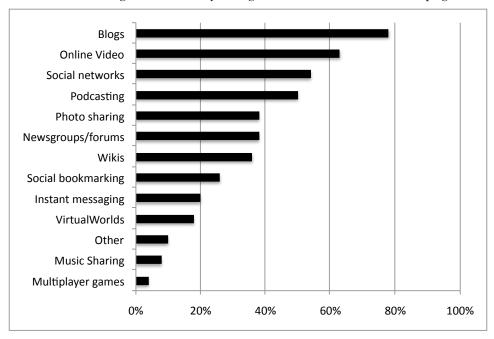
The Sample

Of those organizations surveyed, 78% use blogs, 63% use online video, 56% use social networks and 49% use podcasts in their organization's communications initiatives. The total sample size for the survey portion of the study was 297 communications professionals: 37% of whom were public relations / marketing communications professionals working within an agency, 35% of whom were in-house public relations and corporate communications professionals; 22% were public relations and marketing communications consultants; 4% worked for media companies and 2% were advertising and/or brand marketing professionals.

Case Study Component

In addition to the survey component of the study, seven in-depth case studies of

Table 1:
Which of the following online tools has your organization used in at least one campaign?

organizations utilizing social media were gathered via telephone-based interviews by the SNCR Fellows with a wide variety of organizations including BlendTec, EepyBird, MARC Research, The Mayo Clinic OX2, Quicken Loans and the Red Cross. (The case studies will be made available as podcasts via the SNCR's New Communications Conversations podcast series and in full text in the final report.)
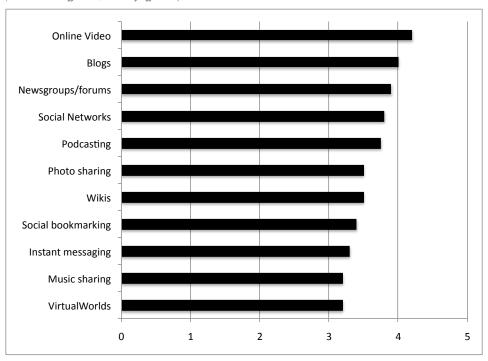
Social Media Channels

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that social media tools are becoming more valuable to their activities as more customers and influencers use them. Twenty-seven percent reported that social media is a core element of their communications strategy. Only three percent stated that social media has little or no value to their communications initiatives.

While blogs, online video and social networks were ranked as the most popular social media tools, respondents spread their activities across a wide range of channels. Podcasts, newsgroups, photo-sharing sites and wikis have also been widely deployed (Table 1).

The respondents indicated an overall high satisfaction level with the media they've

Table 2:
Please rate your perception of each tool's effectiveness toward achieving campaign goals
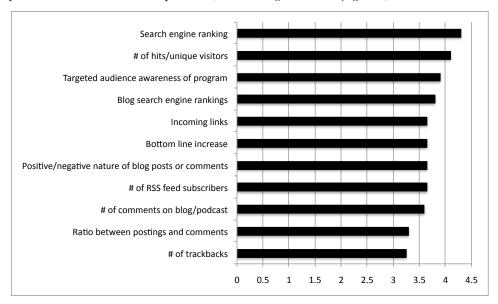*(1= not at all effective; 5= very effective)*

used and no one tool emerged as a clear top performer. In fact, the variance in perceived effectiveness among the five most popular tools was so small as to be statistically insignificant.

Turning to the metrics that the respondents use to evaluate influence generated by their own social media campaigns, the researchers were surprised to find that standard Internet measures like search engine ranking and web site traffic were perceived as being more useful in determining their organization's own influence and success than audience awareness or bottom-line results. The popularity of these quantitative criteria was particularly intriguing because the benefits of conversation marketing initiatives have been widely touted to be brand awareness and customer satisfaction.

One explanation is that "awareness" is difficult to measure and changes slowly over time, while immediate improvements in search engine rankings offer quicker gratification to campaign sponsors. Another is that lack of industry consensus on measurement criteria for social media initiatives forces PR and communications professionals to fall back on those metrics that have worked in the past (Table 3).

When asked to rate their criteria for assessing the *overall performance* of social media initiatives, though, respondents cited awareness and engagement factors ahead of hard metrics (Table 4).

Table 3:
In evaluating the influence of your organization's social media initiatives, which criteria do you consider to be the most important? *(1= not at all effective; 5= very effective)*
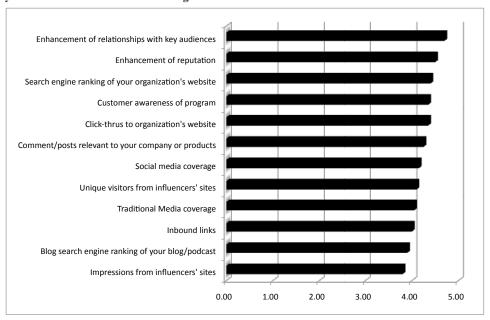
Criteria for Assessing Organizations's Influence and Success with Social Media Initiatives

Fifty-one percent of respondents are formally measuring the effects of their organization's social media initiatives. The metrics they value most are enhancement of relationships with key audiences, enhancement of reputation, customer awareness of program and comments/posts relevant to organization/products. Close to the bottom of the list for measuring social media impact was traditional media coverage of those efforts.

Criteria for Determining the Most Influential Bloggers and Podcasters

Interestingly, there was no clear agreement among respondents on the best criteria to use in determining influence. A wide range of factors were cited as being important, ranging from difficult-to-measure criteria including: "Quality of content" to highly measurable factors, including page views and search engine rank. The top three criteria for determining the relevance and potential influence of a blogger or podcaster are: quality of content on the blog or podcast relevance of content to the company or brand and search engine rankings. Surprising to the researchers was the fact that criteria that measured online engagement for blogs and podcasts were among the least important to the respondents. The researchers were surprised to find that intangible criteria were at least as important as quantitative data in this regard. (Table 5).

Table 4:
Which metrics do you consider to be the most important when measuring the effectiveness of your overall efforts in comunicating with the "new influencers?"

Criteria for Defining Influence In Social Networks and Online Communities

Confusion was also evident in respondents' ranking of their criteria for determining influence within social networks such as MySpace, Facebook and Flickr. In fact, "other" was their number one choice, atop a list of 11 response choice.
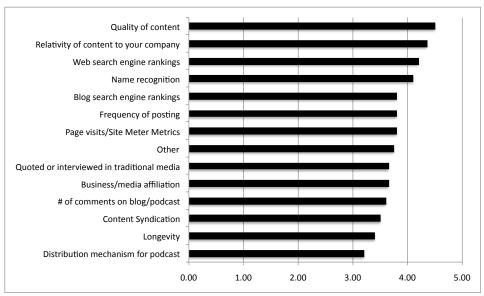
Where respondents did specify a preference for measurement criteria, their choices mirrored the standards that they applied to blogs and podcasts. Their top three criteria for evaluating influence reflect the importance of online engagement: participation level, frequency of posting by the community member and name recognition of the individual.

The principal difference between these social network metrics and those for blogs and podcasts is that many social networks are gated and so don't show up on search engine results. Therefore, the quantitative metrics that communicators favored were more aligned to the number of connections an influencer has within a network and the overall level of his or her activity as indicated by questions and comments (Table 6).

Vertical and Demographic Perceptions

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about the application of changing patterns of influence with regard to specific vertical industries and age groups. The results here were not surprising. Industries that have led the way with social media, including media, entertainment and technology were perceived as being well ahead of the pack in terms of their ability to use social medial tools to enhance their

Table 5:
In evaluating the importance of a blogger or podcaster to your PR or marketing communications programs, which criteria do you consider? *(1= not at all important; 5= very important)*

influence. Respondents cited the following sectors: arts, entertainment and recreation; communications; computer hardware and education.

Those industries that were perceived to have the lowest likelihood of using these tools to enhance their influence were principally heavy manufacturing, materials management and construction (Table 7).
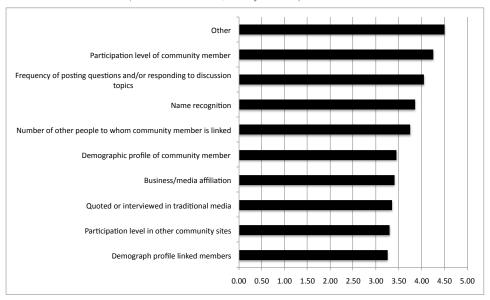
Similarly, social media were perceived to be more effective when targeted at younger age groups. It's interesting to note, though, that the Myspace-savvy under-18 group actually came out in a close statistical tie with the next two oldest demographic categories, 18-25 and 26-35. In fact, respondents perceived people under 45 to be about equal in their willingness to use and be influenced by social media (Table 8).
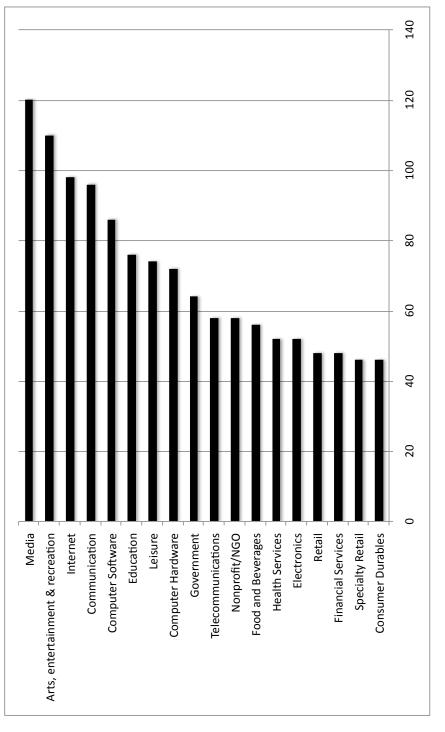
Conclusions

Based on these findings, the researchers arrived at the following top-line conclusions:

• Social media is rapidly becoming a core channel for disseminating information. Fifty-seven percent of this group of early social media adopters reported that social media tools are becoming more valuable to their activities, while 27% reported that social media is a core element of their communications strategy.
• Blogs, online video and social networks are currently the most popular social media tools, but PR and corporate communications professionals are using a wide

Table 6:
What criteria have you found valuable in defining the influencers that matter to you within social networks? *(1=not at all valuable; 5=very valuable)*

Table 7:
Which industries' customers, employees, suppliers, etc. do you believe would be most likely to be influenced by social media?
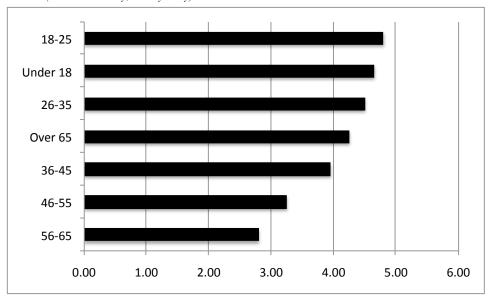*(multiple responses permitted, full list not published here)*

variety of means to reach audiences, depending on their unique situations.

- Currently, the top criteria for determining the relevance and potential influence of a blogger or podcaster are: Quality of content, relevance of content to the company or brand and search engine rank; however, new metrics are emerging and these criteria could quickly change.
- The top criteria for evaluating a person's influence in online communities and social networks are participation level, frequency of activity and prominence in the market or community.
- About half of the communicators are formally measuring the effects of their social media initiatives. Their key goals are to enhance relationships with key audiences, improve the reputation of their businesses, drive customer awareness of their online activities and to solicit customer comments and feedback.

In short, social media are clearly changing the way we think about media and influence, but even as more companies adopt social media, they are still struggling to find effective metrics for deciding who are the most influential players. These findings reflect an ongoing debate over the applicability of conventional metrics to new media, and the lack of clearly defined best practices for measuring social media. The question of metrics will probably remain fluid until the industry settles on some broadly agreed-upon standards. It is our hope that this study helps to move this debate and discussion forward

Table 8:
How likely do you believe the people in the following brackets are to be influened by social media? *(1=not at all likely; 5=very likely)*

as we work together as an industry to determine the most relevant criteria for determining influence and measuring success in this new media sphere.

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