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Reputations. Designed, built, managed.

Harvard Public Relations social media whitepaper

Map, monitor & engage:

An approach to understanding and harnessing the power of social media networks.



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Foreword: the impact of web 2.0

The communications landscape is radically altering. New models of influence are being continually defined and the rules of engagement for communicating with audiences are being rewritten. Is this an opportunity or a threat? In my view, it's most definitely both. Social media - by which I refer to any new wave technology which alters the way in which social networks form, communicate and develop - is revolutionising the reputation models of individuals, companies, organisations and governments alike. As a collective, communications professionals need to embrace the opportunity that these platforms offer, whilst simultaneously guarding against the issues that these networks also present. The onus is on us to evolve and adapt to the new landscape. Old thinking around traditional media will not cut it in this new content rich, transparent and democratised media environment.

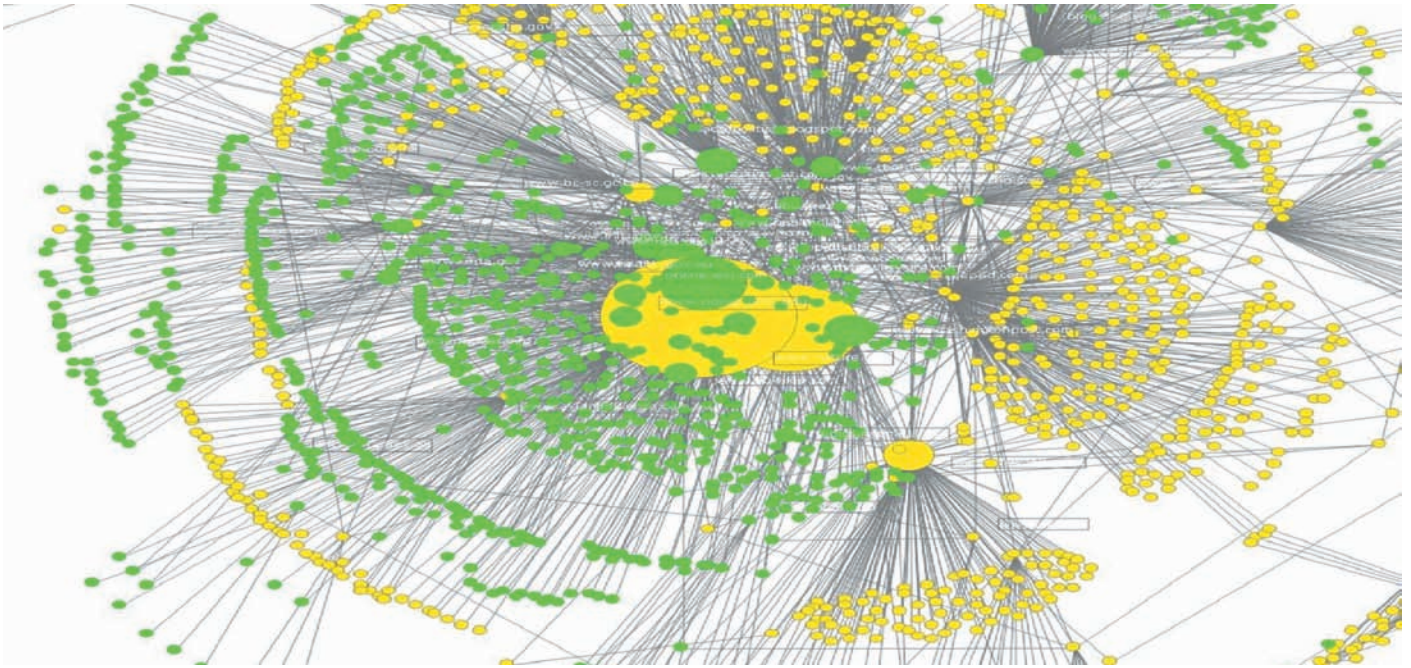
Many business leaders are increasingly asking me to counsel them on the communication challenges presented by what is commonly being defined as 'web2.0' - and by web 2.0 we simply mean all the web sites out there that get their value from the action of users. There is a clear fear for those that are not savvy with online content that discussions are taking place which are detrimental to their business.

Just how, I am asked, does one go about gaining an understanding of what's being said and where, in the face of the sprawling, unregulated, unstructured internet? Well, it can be done. The fundamental strategies of PR remain true. The battleground is simply enlarged.

I have challenged my colleagues to remain at the forefront of this revolution, helping and supporting clients achieve business success through understanding how to make sense and ultimately manage online discussions. This paper outlines the Bell Pottinger methodology for engaging with social media. I hope it serves to reassure you that, first and foremost, social media channels represent an opportunity more than they do a threat.

Kevin Murray – Chairman, Bell Pottinger Group

Figure 1 - The Explosion of Complexity – a social media discussion map



Introduction: broadcast, print, online – introducing the 3rd wave

*"It is difficult, indeed dangerous, to underestimate the huge changes this revolution will bring or the power of developing technologies to build and destroy - not just companies but whole countries."
(Rupert Murdoch)*

The rise and popularity of social media has been phenomenal and excited discussion surrounding this 'revolution' continues unabated. Across a range of media outlets, 'blogs', 'podcasts', 'wikis', 'folksonomies' and 'social networking' are the watchwords for media, marketing and public relations commentators. The hyperbole cannot be understated. But the reality is far from being defined. We are still very much at a stage where we are all trying to make sense of what it all actually means and how it will actually impact upon the day to day operations of communicators.

This paper is not here to regurgitate the well-trodden arguments surrounding the scale, impact and potential influence for social media outlets to redefine how we communicate at an individual and corporate level. Consensus has been reached that the landscape is changing, and that communicators need to adapt to the new, evolving environment. As communicators we now need to understand the action to be taken to ensure we harness the power of Web 2.0.

The New 'Rules Of Engagement':

- The '3rd wave' of media outlets fundamentally offers a new means of content creation and content distribution, which is no longer monopolised by 'traditional' media organisations
- Content is no longer controlled or constricted – and credibility stems from quality, two-way and transparent communications, not just brand
- Media power is shifting to new groups and individuals
- We are in a time of borderless communications
- We can be held hostage to speed as we move out of an era of predictable, structured and time-bounded publication cycles
- Two-way dialogue waters down the ability to commutate on a mass-audience basis. Communication is increasingly becoming one-to-one
- Agendas are defined by the audience
- Like-minded individuals may become activist groups
- PR campaigns need to recognise that there are no divisions between broadcast, print, 'old' new media, and 'new' new media (social computing) – stories can seed in any environment before then spreading and cross referencing into and through other media platforms.
- A story never dies – it simply evolves and feeds related narratives
- Companies can no longer deliver monologue messages – they must enter into conversations with stakeholder groups

Fundamentally, **the means of media production and distribution have changed...**

Figure 2 – new 'Rules of engagement'

Old media networks	Social media networks
Mass media	Customisation
Rolling news	Connected media
Control the message	Join the conversation
Letters page	Blog
Multiple deadlines	Live web media
Chatham House rules	Glass house rules
Message delivery	Content amplification
Powerful media	Powerful networks
80:20 media relations	20:80 media relations
Evaluation reports	Real-time radar

Where are we now?

Harvard - technology, media and telecoms specialist within the Bell Pottinger Group recently undertook research into current attitudes and perceptions of marketing communications professionals towards social media, particularly in regard to the development and deployment of dedicated PR strategies. The main findings are listed below, but the top line take-away was one of a cautious awareness of the need for organisations to engage with social media platforms. However, although there was an understanding of the importance and potential influence of social media platforms, the market is clearly at the collective stage of considering just how to move from awareness to action.

The Harvard research¹ looked into current levels of awareness of and engagement in social media within companies operating within the TMT sector. The headline findings from the research were as follows:

- *Lots of talk, but little action* – The reality behind intense media coverage is that just one in eight PR teams are actively embracing social media communications channels as a mainstream PR activity. Clearly those who have formalised a strategy are in the minority.
- *Early adopters* – US companies lead the way in exploiting new social media opportunities, with those with a b2c proposition also ahead of the pack.
- *RSS marches on* – Over a quarter of PR departments are now employing RSS feeds as part of their media relations activity
- *There may be trouble ahead* – One in five of those surveyed have suffered damage to their reputation from blogs; and of the rest, three-quarters have yet to put in place procedures to protect themselves in terms of crisis communications.

Although still very much in its infancy, it is evident that the conceptual discussion taking place in the feature pages of business and marketing publications is relatively far removed from the practical reality of communications departments across the Atlantic, the vast majority of whom are still grappling with developing coherent and executable strategies.

It is against this backdrop that Bell Pottinger has developed a methodology which serves to help clients turn curiosity (or anxiety) towards social media into a workable PR strategy which not only provides peace of mind through the maintenance and protection of brand, but which also helps augment current 'traditional' public relations campaigns in helping foster improved relations with audiences.

The context for the development of Bell Pottinger **MapMonitorEngage** was one of providing a framework which would offer clients the ability to make sense of their own online environment. That is, to segment the online universe to such an extent that they not only understood what their key themes were (issues), but also who was discussing them (influencers), where they were being discussed (channels) and how those channels were interwoven with other social networks (influence and centrality).

A divide and conquer strategy, the Bell Pottinger proposition allows for companies to understand just where to begin in addressing the social media question. The advantage of social networks is that as quickly as a negative story spreads so too can a positive one. The seeding of positive information, delivered through a conversation, can significantly support the development of a public relations campaign, establishing a direct relationship with those influencers who hitherto have only been accessible by means of traditional media. If implemented correctly, a dedicated social media campaign should serve to support and extend the reach of traditional public relations activity.

But before one begins to consider engagement tactics, it's first necessary to define the universe; to know just who, out of the 60 million plus blog (and that's just today's figure), is making a difference to your business.

Footnote 1

Social Media within Public Relations - A quantitative survey into client-side adoption, attitudes and opinions

Harvard's MapMonitorEngage - a bespoke approach to developing an integrated strategy for engaging with social networks

MAP

- How do I make sense of the social media environment?
- There are so many blogs and other user generated content and forums how do I know which are relevant and which are important to me and my organisation?

Bell Pottinger has worked with a team of computer scientists to create a software application which in its most basic form analyses the online environment based on a specific term, issue or brand, for example, 'mobile television' or 'Vodafone'.

The mapping software is able to follow a discussion online to build up a diagrammatical representation of the online flow of discussion, but not simply in terms of volume, rather in terms of value. By this we mean that the application can assess how central (i.e. influential) certain sources are to the discussion in question. It is not a numbers game, but one of painting a picture based on how key a source is to seeding information across the social networks which interlink across the internet. It's very much a case of influence over popularity.

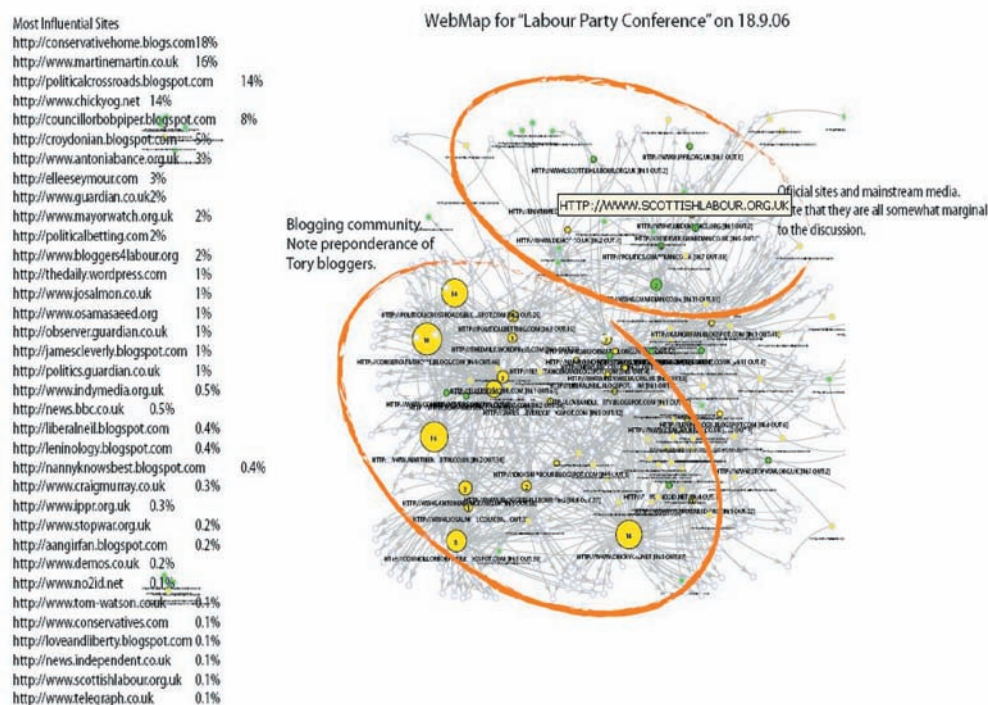
Once this application runs its searches - based on inserted content developed through standard issues mapping frameworks - we produce a web map (see figure 3 for example) demonstrating the influence universe for that conversation. This is basically a map to show the most influential (i.e. viewed, tagged and linked to) traditional online media as well as social media (i.e. blogs and wikis) sites. Numbers are assigned to the sites which refer to the levels of 'connectedness' for that source – and the more connected, the more central they are to the debate, and therefore informing the rest of the network. We use the term 'centrality' to define this.

Crucially, they also show how debates in the social media sphere come to influence discussions in more traditional online media. The cross referencing nature of the internet means that discussions frequently slide between traditional reference sites and blogs and wikis.

Key outcomes of the mapping process:

- Online Influence Network Mapping
- Online Influencer targeting and segmentation
- Ego map creation

Figure 3 – An online map outlining discussions and key influencers surrounding the Labour Party conference



MONITOR

Understanding the parameters of the debate

- I can't keep up with all the blogs – how do I know what is important?
- Am I following the right debate? How do these debates relate to my company?

The second stage of the Bell Pottinger/Harvard approach to social media is that of on-going monitoring, based on influence maps. This is necessary to really understand the flavour and nature of the discussions taking place over time, to see how issues ebb and flow between sources.

However, this process is entirely dependent on having created the correct maps to begin with. The monitoring of inappropriate or peripheral sources is a fundamental waste of resource. It is imperative, therefore, that maps are produced and digested regularly over time. Debate changes and evolves from one minute to the next. Therefore the balance of influence also changes over time. The only way of staying on top of this, and directing energy to those sources which are affecting your reputation right now, is to map based on an evolving issues framework, to ensure relevance and timeliness.

This is important in bringing the maps to life, to give some further substance of the context provided by the maps.

Ongoing mapping of the core influencers allows for issues monitoring and management, providing a early warning system to those perhaps seemingly innocuous discussions that could spark into a mainstream media story (high profile examples of which have included the Apple iPod Nano story and the Sony PlayStation Netherlands' billboard advertising campaign for the PSP white).

Clearly, on-going monitoring delivers a true insight into the propagation of stories, whether they emanate from online, print or broadcast. The key point to reiterate is that stories will move between these platforms. And although traditional media monitoring flags topics and issues within perceived mainstream media networks, they do not pick up on those stories which may be bubbling under with core online stakeholder groups. Without on-going online monitoring, the risk is that the issue that may impact on your company will only become visible once it's in print.

And once, unfortunately, the damage may already been done. In this respect, the MapMonitorEngage model effectively acts as an early warning system, guarding against any unexpected 'surprises'.

Patterns can quickly develop in terms of conversations and levels of influence across sources. Once you are able to identify such patterns it is very simple to deduce levels of consistency and relevance.

The mapping software plays a crucial role in helping you understand where to begin your investigations, but once developed, useful interpretation is reliant upon professional insight into the content and its relevance. With a little training and hands on experience, it is possible for communications team to spot very quickly both influential or high-impact content, as well as any anomalies. This process becomes more seamless and efficient over time, meaning that it is advantageous to conduct on-going mapping. Ad-hoc mapping, although of value, can often be a little like locking the stable door once the horse has bolted. A comprehensive, on-going monitoring process can best be viewed as a strategy for treating the causes of reputation damage rather than the symptoms.

Monitoring can be segmented on the back of three principal map 'states', which either confirm expected discussion, or which deliver real insight into 'off the radar' debat.

Expected

1. **Steady state maps** – an expected and consistent discussion environment, with stable debate matching the expectations of the business based on general market trends and issues, which match those in the mainstream media
2. **Event influenced maps** – in such maps, discussion is predictably skewed by news flow, in that company-led announcements (be they corporate, service or product related) or external market-led events (such as the publication of a report, a demonstration, a competitor's announcement etc.) serve to stimulate debate and influence discussions.

Unexpected

3. **Evolving maps** – these maps are the ones which are of most interest to communications teams, offering an insight into the organic growth of stories and issues that can not necessarily be traced back to any specific event or announcement. Such discussions can quickly move on from simply 'bubbling under' to exploding into the mainstream media. They must be watched.

Key outcomes of the monitoring process:

SMWire

Concise reports on mentions of names, issues and products on a regular, time-bounded basis

SMTrend

Trend analysis and consultancy, plotting the likely path of stories and the flagging of necessary action.

SMAAlert

Ongoing monitoring of key blogs and their networks of influence not only provides an ideal early warning system, but also a channel to address issues before they become crises

ENGAGE

- Do I need to have a blog? How do I start a blog?
- What other forms of social media should I consider?
- How do I get people to read a corporate blog?
- What content needs to go in it? How do I ensure credibility?
- What else can we do? Aggregate content? Sponsor? Co-create?
- How do I control my own staff blogging about our business / utilise their existing roles within social networks?

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One could liken this process as follows:

MAP – create the outline ‘weather map’ for your company and the issues and discussions which could affect your commercial climate - to define the macro weather patterns in play.

MONITOR – using on-going monitoring to take these weather patterns and run them through time to create a satellite image assessing the micro climate conditions, and how they move through a time-bounded period of time

ENGAGE – taking on-board the climatic conditions, and the recent weather forecasts, to engage with an audience, having a keen appreciation of how external climate conditions will affect your communications.

The engagement process can only follow dedicated research into the external conditions facing you in the online world. Having benchmarked the scope and scale of the discussions, Bell Pottinger has developed a tactical tool kit which helps clients formally engage with key influences, both directly and indirectly.

It is actually within the engage stage that marcoms and PR specialists will find most comfort as the fundamental communication strategies we employ day-in, day-out remain constant – but simply targeted at new audiences. The core notion of mapping issues, then mapping your stakeholder audiences against those, identifying the key influences within these networks, and then delivering pertinent content through the most appropriate platform, remains true for social media as much as it does traditional media.

However, there does need to be more flexibility and the marcoms professional must be flexible in adapting content and delivery mechanisms in order to effectively engage with these new audiences. As mentioned earlier in this paper, a number of core characteristics define social media networks, and these need to be borne in mind throughout the engagement process.

To recap, these are:

- There is only scope for a two-way dialogue – no longer can companies deliver a controlled one-way delivery of message
- Direct engagement (i.e. not necessarily mediated through traditional media)
- Transparency – credibility is key and discussions need to be open and their scope defined by the audience, otherwise content will be disregarded as marketing gloss
- Time is a scarce commodity in reacting
- Marketing communications becomes an international discipline, no longer segmented by national borders
- Integration of media channels (broadcast, print, online) require integrated thinking re PR campaigns

The need for content of substance cannot be emphasised enough as it is only the quality of your content that will deliver you credibility (and therefore interest). Blogging, and the resulting democratisation of content development and delivery, has resulted in a greater reliance on the fundamental insight being offered. With so much content out there, the cream really will rise to the top, and audiences will quickly shift through traditional message-led content, moving towards those sites which offer perceived independent content, delivered through a conversational rather than a reference model.

Too often companies are racing to create ‘corporate’ blogs which are clearly written for the CEO by the PR department.

It's only when CEOs really have the time, inclination and willingness to share genuine market insight (which is market-led, not focused on his or her own services or products), that such blogs will become a destination site for key influences.

Sometimes for internal reasons (time, resource, regulation, lack of initial credibility) providing such candid and transparent insight may not be possible. However, this is not to rule such companies out of the engagement process. There are many other tactics (as outlined in figure 4) which are on-hand to offer the ability to engage with social media networks.

Such tactics include the aggregation of content from across the web to offer audiences a single platform for them to access and digest the wealth of information available (and through which, as the aggregator, kudos can be received for having demonstrated that you are in-touch with the issues and discussions that matter). This essentially allows for the generation of credibility (through content association) and visibility, as you become a conversation hub, and in turn a destination site. There is also the option to co-create content with established bloggers, and even to sponsor influential blogs, forums or wikis.

And, of course, there is direct blogger engagement through more traditional media relations tactics, such as one-to-one briefings, product or service review opportunities and dedicated content provision (from RSS feeds through to supplementary ad-hoc delivery of truly value adding content – i.e. not a re-edited press release).

There are no hard and fast rules for the engagement process with such individuals and it's very much a case of creating bespoke processes for each and every one, based on their own expectations of what they want from you. The key point to remember is that it is a discussion on their terms, as they have many content options open to them, and hence will only visit sources which cater to their needs.

Key outcomes of the engagement process

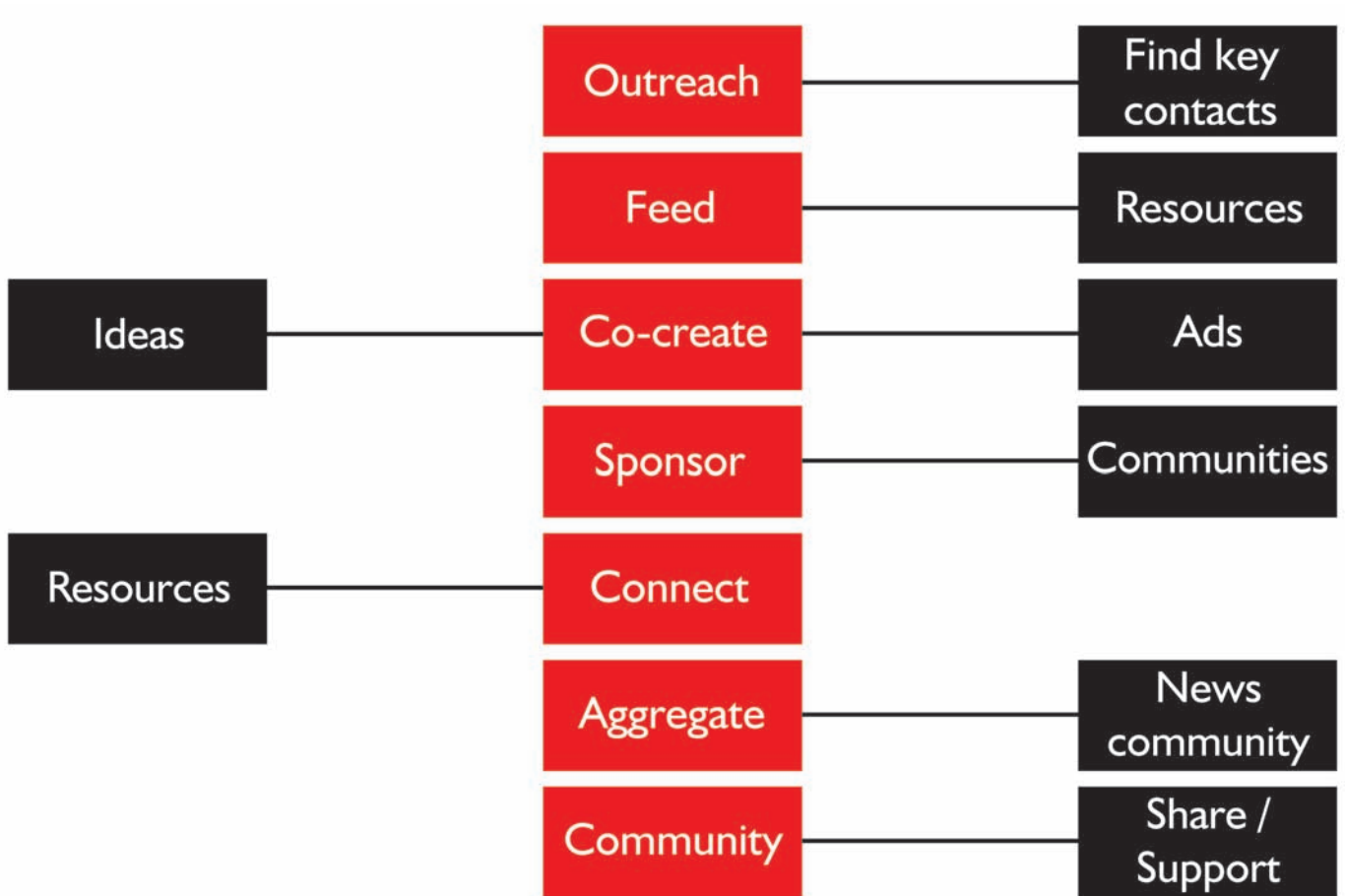
Engagement Planning Workshop - choosing the right way to engage. Corporate blogs are difficult to create and are seldom read – but do you have the individual personalities capable of authoring personal blogs? There are other avenues to consider, contribution to other blogs, aggregation of content, provision of information to key blogs and sites etc. What matters is doing what is right and what feels natural.

Implementation Checklist - Bell Pottinger has a clear implementation check list process that ensures that clients are aware of the requirements and commitments necessary before engaging with social media activities. The check list includes:

- Formal blogging policy agreed
- Blog authors identified and trained
- Assessment of content and content 'stream'

SafeBlogger certification service - Bell Pottinger also offers a 'secure practice area' where we can host your blogs in a closed environment to allow authors to practice. We will provide formal reports and feedback on these practice blogs before an agreed sign-off and go live procedure with the client.

Figure 4 – Tactical options for social media engagement



Summary

Social media is redefining the landscape for marketing communications. The role of organisations in communicating with stakeholder audiences has changed both in its purpose and execution. We are entering a new era in which we have conversations and build long-standing relationships based on the transparent and trusted exchange of information and opinion. A more grown-up and genuine form of communication, the opportunities for companies in exploiting the knowledge, insight and constructive comment from audiences is enormous. Yes, social networks do pose a threat for companies; offering, as they do, a platform for criticism which is unlimited in its reach and speed of impact.

However, the democratised nature of blogs and wikis has shown that their self-governing nature (based on the wisdom of the crowds concept) has proved effective. Without credibility you are a lone voice on the internet. Hence, eyeballs are only drawn to those platforms which provide considered, balanced and honest content. The rest of the mass of blogs and online forums remain on the periphery and are of little consequence. Yet the core characteristics of respected blogs ensure that should you discover where these sources lie, how they want to interact with you, and what they need to know, minds can be influenced, and social media networks can massively aid in enhancing reputations.

These are still early days, but within months, not years, social media strategies will sit alongside, or more precisely be totally integrated with, those currently developed for more traditional forms of media.

Same approach; same strategy; new audience; new flexibility in engagement –should become the new communications mantra.

Integration of media channel strategies is a core requirement and an 'out of sight, out of mind' mindset will simply not be good enough moving forward. As a minimum, marcoms professionals must now know who is saying what and where, in guarding against potential crises flaring online and in print. Better still, as an industry we need to embrace proactive strategies for engaging with social media networks in order not just to seed information, but also to forge relationships with those audiences that can provide real value to us in feeding back on product and services.

Social Media does have an impact on the role of professional communicators across all types of organisation. It has certainly changed many of the rules of the game. But, let's not forget, it has not changed the game itself. Understanding how to influence the thinking and behaviour of audiences is the core skill at the heart of our role. The social media phenomenon has created a new type of influencer, and new channels of influence, but it has not altered the simple truth that successful communications are about knowing who to speak to, how to engage with them and understanding what they need to hear.

Appendix:

Getting started with social media – useful links, tips and definitions

Social networks: communities based around easy to create websites, email, blogs and message boards.

Blogs: online journals, which can be subscribed to.

- Sign up for Bloglines: www.bloglines.com – it's a free and easy-to-use reader service
- When you find a blog you like you can subscribe to it either by clicking on the RSS symbol / button or by clicking "Add" on Bloglines and pasting the name of the blog into it.
- If you find a blog that you really like, take a look at what blogs the author reads – most have a "links" or "blogroll" section with a list of recommended blogs.
- Here are some interesting / useful blogs you may want to subscribe to first of all:
- <http://www.economist.com/> - The Economist
- http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/blogspotting/ - BusinessWeek's blogs
- For national newspapers there is a handy list of subscription feeds here: <http://dave.org.uk/newsfeeds/>
- If you want to try out blogging there is the free Blogger service from Google (<http://www.blogger.com/start?hl=en>), the popular Wordpress blog service (<http://wordpress.com/>) and Typepad (<https://www.typepad.com>), which is a subscription service but gives you features like being able to password protect the blog so you can experiment with blogging on a closed circuit.
- Also take a look at social networking sites like www.myspace.com and www.facebook.com

Blog search

- There are a number of blog search engines that are useful, including:
 - Google Blog Search: <http://blogsearch.google.com/>
 - Technorati: <http://www.technorati.com/>
 - Blogpulse (also has some interesting, though imprecise analysis tools): <http://www.blogpulse.com/>

RSS (Real Simple Syndication):

- The BBC website has a useful explanation here of how RSS / subscriptions work online : <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/3223484.stm>

Podcasts: a series of audio files which can be subscribed to

- If you use iTunes / and iPod simply click on the "Podcast" link on the left hand side of iTunes then "Podcast directory" at the bottom of the screen and get subscribing.
- Alternatively, you can subscribe via Yahoo Podcasts (<http://podcasts.yahoo.com/>).

Wikis: a reference website anyone can contribute to

- Here is the URL for Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) and the definition of Wikis (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>).
- If you're interested in trying out working with Wikis have a look at SocialText (<http://www.socialtext.com/>) and also JotSpot (<http://www.jot.com/>).

Folksonomies: ways of online communities collaborating to organise information, e.g. Flickr

- Here's a Wikipedia definition of a Folksonomy: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy>
- The photo-sharing service Flickr is available at www.flickr.com
- The tech news service where members vote on stories is at www.digg.com
- The bookmark sharing service is called del.icio.us and can be found at <http://del.icio.us/>