

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

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Power of the Crowd: *Being a Communications "Socialist"*

Whether it's the running of the bulls in Pamplona or a stampede of reporters and photographers racing up courthouse steps toward your company's executive, crowds often elicit feelings of anxiety and loss of control. It's no wonder some professional communicators have tended to avoid crowds.

In the realm of social media, however, it's all about embracing crowds – and the public relations and marketing community is taking steps here to shake any agoraphobic tendencies. Still, huge gaps remain. Three big questions emerge about how far we have to go to realize the full potential of social media:

- Is the power of "social" really being tapped to gather ideas and brainstorm with peers?
- Is employee participation being encouraged in the right public forums and communities?
- Are these forums being used to encourage idea exchange and brainstorming with customers, employees and outside experts?

For most communicators, the answer to these questions is: maybe a little, no and no.

Swarms

The digital universe has long been enjoying the buzz of its swarms engaged in collective thinking, or "crowdsourcing," as popularized by author James Surowiecki in his 2004 book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Surowiecki argued against placing trust in conventional experts because "... under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them." Examples of early crowdsourcing on the Web include customer product reviews that feed recommendations to users, community editing on Wikipedia, and consumer-generated Super Bowl ads collected via YouTube.

Now even journalists are listening closely to what online crowds have to say. A recent

survey by Cision and Don Bates of the George Washington University found that the vast majority of journalists now rely on social media for researching articles. Of those participating in the survey, 65 percent said they turn to sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and 52 percent said they gather information from Twitter and other microblogs.

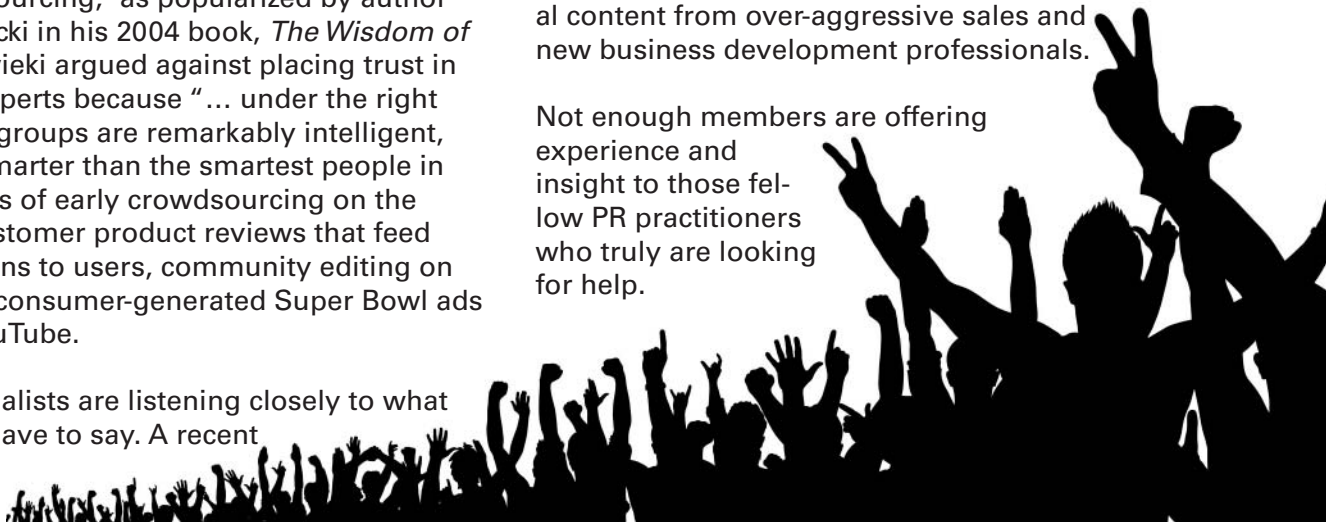
Follow the Leaders

One example of a social forum for communicators is being led by media Pied Piper Peter Shankman – a.k.a. @skydiver on Twitter – who created HARO (Help a Reporter Out) to provide up-to-the-second requests from journalists looking for information from the PR community. Based on a proven model, HARO works because it uses social media to provide journalists with immediate access to a large community of PR practitioners who generate a regular supply of content.

Groups on LinkedIn, Facebook and other social networks also represent online communities where communications professionals can exchange information to help one another. However, as advocates of the social media revolution, are communicators actually using these social forums in this way?

In most communications-related LinkedIn groups, for example, the discussions are filled with "spam via social media" – blatantly self-serving promotional content from over-aggressive sales and new business development professionals.

Not enough members are offering experience and insight to those fellow PR practitioners who truly are looking for help.



For example, a request for comments to be used in this very article was shared with more than 20,000 members of various professional communications groups on LinkedIn. Only three people responded.

We have an obligation to advance our profession in a manner that enhances our ability to better serve our organizations and clients. It is high time we created, participated in and set standards for online communities that truly foster “social” interaction among business professionals.

After all, why should our companies or clients listen to us preach to them about social media when we aren’t leading by example?

Social MVPs

One place to start is in the corporate home, where the constant refrain of “our employees are our greatest assets” is often heard.

Companies can become “social MVPs” by making these prized brand ambassadors more visible in the social media spaces where customers and other constituents are likely to gather.

By now, most of us have set up a company LinkedIn profile, a fan page on Facebook or a company-specific Twitter feed to share content with our audiences. But communicators who are truly helping their companies benefit from the power of “social” media are the ones helping employees to take part in these communities.

By showcasing their expertise and thought leadership in a genuine, non-promotional way, they are building rapport, credibility and enduring relationships with their target audiences. They’re probably even sharing that expertise with the same journalists who are using social media to look for information and expert sources.

There are a few companies that truly get this. IBM is probably one of the best examples. Since the early days of social media, Big Blue has encouraged its employees to blog, Tweet and use Facebook as a way to showcase its culture and expertise and build stronger relationships between employees and the company’s target audiences – including fellow employees.

Help Them Help You

The most famous line from the movie *Jerry Maguire* was “show me the money.” In another powerful scene, Jerry implores his client: “help me... help you!” Both lines are relevant to the future of social media, which extends far beyond communications and involves gathering feedback, insight, ideas and solutions that can help businesses overcome challenges and capitalize on market opportunities.


There are many examples of forward-thinking companies like Godiva, Dell and Starbucks who have smartly invited and listened to online chatter from their best customers as a way to gather ideas for new or improved products and services.

The next evolution of crowdsourcing taps into the global brain trust to help companies solve problems on a grander scale.

InnoCentive, for example, is a forum that “connects companies, academic institutions, public sector and non-profit organizations... with a global network of more than 200,000 of the world’s brightest minds” in life sciences, engineering, chemistry, math, computer science and entrepreneurship. Companies like SAP, Eli Lilly and Procter & Gamble are using this network to extend their own R&D capacity, offering financial rewards to members who help

solve challenges. The power of the crowd has paid off for both “seekers” and “solvers.”

According to the InnoCentive Web site, for example, the Oil Spill Recovery Institute posted three challenges after being unable to determine a solution internally. The first was solved by an oil industry outsider who applied his knowledge in the concrete industry to come up with the winning solution – and was awarded \$20,000 for his creativity.

Talk about the power of the crowd! 

G&S Contact Information

Cos Mallozzi
CEO
+1 212 697 2600
cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

Luke Lambert
President
+1 212 697 2600
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

New York
Luke Lambert +1 212 697 2600
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

Chicago
Doug Hampel +1 847 519 9150
dhampel@gibbs-soell.com

Raleigh
Kerry Henderson +1 919 870 5718
khenderson@gibbs-soell.com

Zurich
Kevin Horsley +41 (0) 44 205 5565
khorsley@gibbs-soell.com

Beijing and Shanghai
Amanda Zhao +8610 6530 7783
amanda_zhao@inhere.com.cn

Tokyo
Rachel Barrow +81 3 5561 2915
barrow@cosmopr.co.jp



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