Social Media Strategies in the Corporate Culture

Jane Student

The University of Memphis
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Abstract

This paper examines the use of social media to promote collaboration and creativity in the workplace with emphasis on corporate culture and employee empowerment. Sources cited include definitions of social media terms and examples of tools for user generated content, curation and collaboration. Included is an examination of changes to business practices caused by online media tools especially with regard to users who desire more interactivity in both personal and professional use of these tools. Reasons given for supporting social media use by employees include the positive encouragement it gives the employee to step outside a subordinate role and make creative contributions to the company, increased productivity and company loyalty. Readings cover a range of material including creative collaboration, social media, employee empowerment, and open leadership.

Keywords: Web 2.0; Internet; empowerment; collaboration, participation
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Social Media Strategies in the Corporate Culture

Research about the role of social media in corporate culture shows that the power to co-create offered by Web 2.0 tools can strengthen the effectiveness of corporate cultures by fully involving employees and, thus, empowering them to the greater effectiveness of the corporation in an evolving business environment. This empowerment leads to long term benefits for the corporation by opening up collaboration and creativity and, optimally, can lead to long term employee satisfaction and loyalty.

During the last forty years, businesses have changed as a result of the collaboration that the Internet enables. Since the World Wide Web (WWW) allows rapid access to information and publishing tools, the ways that people access information in the workplace and elsewhere have changed dramatically and the ways that people interact with businesses have also changed. Corporations have used different strategies to address these changing interactions and their success or failure is reflected in their bottom line. Some businesses have tried to control their employees’ social media use by restricting access. Others, who have given full Internet access their employees to promote their concerns online, have found their businesses under attack by hackers or disgruntled employees. Finding the balance between the two extremes is critical for businesses hoping to grow in the coming business environment.

Online tools have literally upended businesses like retail storefronts and print newspapers, books and magazines, since anyone with an Internet connection can be a publisher, buy and sell, review and comment. One viral video showing an uncomplimentary side of a business can eradicate all the perceived goodwill carefully planted by the public relations department in more traditional advertising venues. The typical consumer is no longer dependent on traditional news outlets and businesses are scrambling to find a niche in the Internet to regain
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

their footing. Advertising agencies, grown rich on the cream of corporate ad campaigns, struggle to learn new methods of communicating. While consumers are empowered by access to information and tools, so are employees who are looking for the same kind of empowerment on the job.

The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual (Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger, 2000) called for a change in the typical business environment starting with “learning to speak in a human voice” which the authors defined as being “not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about “listening to customers.” They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf” (p. xxii).

Taking a fairly radical stance, the book admonished businesses to tear down the walls of “business as usual” and advocated for a collaborative conversation fueled by empowered and connected employees. Corporations are accused of only knowing a sort of “talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal.” They offer a warning, “Employees are getting hyperlinked even as markets are. Companies need to listen carefully to both. Mostly, they need to get out of the way so intranetworked employees can converse directly with internetworked markets” (p. xxi-xxii).

While the book has been printed and distributed in the traditional manner, it is also posted in its entirety online freely available to any who wish to read it. Cluetrain Manifesto predicted and promoted the current technology-assisted collaboration where people no longer sit passively in front of the television reading a newspaper. Instead, they publish their complaints and compliments online and it is that feedback that corporations both want and fear for collaboration brings change and change is not something easily controlled. In particular with regard to
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Corporate policy, the authors advocate for a bottom-up intranet built by engaged employees who are not constrained by fear and legalistic rules (p. xxv).

Literature Review

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0” (p. 61) and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (UGC). UGC “can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media” (p. 61), for example, writing blogs, writing reviews for online purchases, posting photographs on Flickr, and tweeting daily news or opinions. The authors note that the Internet began as a collection of online bulletin boards designed to share information and software between users. The habit of sharing which developed in the early days of online communication along with the non-commercial nature of much of the shared information led to the development of online journaling and eventually to homepages, blogs and the development of social media sites (p. 60-61).

The Internet is the term for the overarching network of desktop computers, mobile phone devices and the mainframe data structure that supports it. While the World Wide Web (WWW) is a part of the Internet, it is not an interchangeable term. The WWW is the part of the Internet users typically access using web browsers and “Web 2.0” is a term used to describe the varied ways that people use the web. Social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Flickr are part of Web 2.0. These websites enable collaboration like the exchange of UGC between people and the power that people have to comment on brands, products and services is changing the public relations business. Kaplan concludes with advice to corporations on social media guidelines which includes choosing carefully the applications to be used and how they are
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

aligned, making a plan to integrate the use into the corporate culture and allowing access for all employees (p. 66).

Lincoln (2009) provides a basic overview to the concepts of Web 2.0 and addresses the reluctance of employers to embrace new tools. The author believes that “social media is more about the ideas that you share, collaborate on, create, and participate in rather than observe” (p. 10). She notes that employers are reluctant to fully use social media tools because they are not only synonymous with change but with giving up control, “operating as hierarchies with controlled communication” (p. 32). It is the giving up of control that she believes can yield the biggest benefit by improving relations between employees and the company. This resource is an overview of a rapidly changing field of commerce and the study of power structures with predictions for the future as the boundaries of the world draw closer together driven by the power of the Internet and its ability to cross international lines (p. 193).

Corporations have traditionally been organized using a top-down management style where employees are sometimes viewed as resources more than as individuals capable of autonomous action. Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal (2008) consider the elements of empowerment via online involvement on four levels: personal, interpersonal, group, and citizenship. Generally defined, empowerment is “to equip or supply with an ability, to enable.” With regard to the corporate environment, “E-empowerment” primarily refers to factors involving long-distance teamwork, group decision-making tools and networking (finding similar others) via the Internet. The authors refine the definition of empowerment as such: “Empowerment links the individual and his or her well-being to the wider social and political environment in which he or she functions” (p. 1776). The authors note that:
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

E-empowerment is not a given and will not occur simply by connecting every citizen of the world to the Internet. Rather, empowering tools and opportunities are available via CMC (computer-mediated communications) – far more of them than exist in the offline domain – but unless a person takes advantage of them, many of the processes that lead to greater empowerment of the individual will not occur. (p. 1786)

These ideas show that corporate technology involvement must be more than simply giving employees email and word processing tools. It must include more than online videoconferences that follow a set formula transposed from the past. In order to be fully involved, the employee must know that use of social media tools is encouraged and that creativity is desired in the corporate culture. They must know the rules of engagement and know that management would like their input.

Li (2010) writes about how social media can be used by leaders and defines “open leadership” as “having the confidence and humility to give up the need to be in control while inspiring commitment from people to accomplish goals” (p. 14-16). She suggests that open leadership is not about what leaders keep back but what they share. She says, “The thing I keep going back to is that leadership is all about the relationships that you can form, and having trust and credibility in them.” (Veron, 2011, p. 79) It is the building of trust which managers have difficulty with. Typically, managers have been taught to withhold information but open leadership calls for more transparency and it is transparency that is promoted by social media tools that make it easy to share by forwarding, commenting, saving and rating. In this way, Li says:

The ideas, rather than the people and the context where they come from, have a greater chance of succeeding. I think that's the incredible equalizer. I think about it as the
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

democratization of ideas, but it's also the platform on which ideas can form just simply
because people share. (Veron, 2011, p. 78)

Li calls for leadership rules beginning with “respect that your customers and employees
have power” and recommends leaders share constantly because it builds trust. That shared
exchange of ideas and trust will lead to relationships. She recommends leaders “nurture curiosity
and humility” by acknowledging the need for learning and admitting when wrong. Still, she
adds, “hold openness accountable” by making rules clear as well as consequences if a mistake is
made. Finally, she adds that the “corollary to accountability is forgiveness (p. 14-16). Her ideas
can form the basis for a new style of leadership in an evolving corporate marketplace. Cited
studies include data about corporations who encourage their employees to be spokespersons for
the business rather than mere cogs in the wheel as depicted in Charlie Chaplin’s film, Modern
Times (1936).

Bingham and Connor (2010) argue that “emerging technologies enable a new kind of
knowledge-building ecosystem (p. xvii)” and detail the change in on-the-job training or
knowledge sharing from old styles of top-down teaching to a kind of shared learning. The
authors advocate for social learning and note that the Internet enables learning/teaching across
time and geographical zones in ways not possible in the past and claim that their book is “for
people who are specifically interested in how social media helps people in organizations learn
quickly; innovate fast; share knowledge; and engage with peers, business partners, and the
customers they serve. (p. xviii)”

Social learning is not new but they maintain that understanding and using social media
tools can enhance learning in ways not previously imagined. The authors identify three
converging trends in the workforce as being pivotal for social media learning: “Expanding
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES
opportunities for personal connection, emerging expectations from shifting workforce demographics, and increasing reach of customized technology (p. 12).” Their book covers a variety of social learning tools from micro-sharing (communicating in short bursts like Twitter) to immersive (simulation type online environments like Second Life). In closing, they note that social media “is not just about being social. It’s not just a matter of having the right tools. It’s about making learning a priority and using the tools of social media to facilitate a culture where we get better at getting better” (p. 166).

Mortleman (2011) addresses some of the reasons for the reluctance of corporations to use social media as well as the need for them to develop a plan for its use. For example, a corporation might resist allowing employees to use social media on the job because it is perceived to be time taken away from primary tasks and that casual social use could compromise the company through leaks or by allowing hackers to access company records. He notes that even when social media use is prohibited, “people still use social networking sites, on personal devices … be it at work or in their own time” (p. 9). and that such use can open the company either to reputational damage or by making confidential data available to hackers through potential malware, phishing scams or outright attacks. He advises that companies must develop a plan for social media use, making clear delineations for employees and making sure sensitive data is protected. Although there are risks for companies who open their organizations to social media, it is noted that social media network users increasingly expect to be engaged online and that the attempt to block progress may do more harm in the long run through decreased productivity (p. 11).

Bernoff and Schadler (2010) recommend that businesses build a strategy around empowering employees to experiment with new technologies within a corporate structure:
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

You can build a strategy around empowering employees to solve customers' problems …

Freeing employees to experiment with new technologies, to make high-profile decisions on the fly, to build systems that customers see, and to effectively speak for the organization in public is not something most corporations or government agencies are accustomed to doing. (p. 95)

They call for this employee empowerment as an alternative to head-in-the-sand attempts to prevent free technology use by employees. Rather than “trying to prevent such activity” they believe management should acknowledge … “employees have technology power”, set policies for its use, train employees appropriately and then “harness their creativity as a strategic source” (p. 96).

Bernoff calls for an agreement between management, the IT department and these "Highly Empowered and Resourceful Operatives" (HEROs). They must agree to innovate within a safe framework (aligning their project with company goals and IT support) and must be prepared to train others in the use of these projects. Managers must be willing to support and acknowledge success without focusing on failures. Third, the IT department must agree to support and scale up for these projects and be available to advise when safety issues must be adhered to (p. 97).

D’Aprix (2011) promotes the concept of “open communication” between upper management and employees and includes company profiles it believes exemplify this concept and examples of how these firms have worked to develop this sort of collaborative culture. He defines open communication culture (OCC) as “a culture in which non-confidential and non-proprietary information is actively and freely shared with both employees and interested stakeholders with the leadership’s blessing and proactive participation” (p. 30).
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

The reasons that D’Aprix offers for the need to develop an OCC acknowledge that social media has caused a “virtual lack of organizational boundaries (p. 29)” allowing information to move freely. This free flowing information creates the need for employee collaboration, as never in the past, however, the “wild card (p. 29)” may be the technology that is both forcing the change and continually is changing itself. Altogether this situation calls for new management styles or, said another way, “an open communication culture is one in which information flows freely and is easily accessible to both insiders and to the public at large. (p. 30)” Management is encouraged to build a strategy beginning with analyzing the current structure and calculating the developing business environment (p. 30-31).

In researching public relations roles involving social media, Diga and Kelleher (2009) found that social media expertise is viewed in the corporate setting in a positive manner. Employers favor workers who grasp social media and who can put it to use for the company. Moreover, workers who gain expertise are “more likely to report feeling empowered to be promoted in their current positions.” Because they have access to information and ideas that others do not, they have increased significance to their companies (p. 442). This study of the perceived power of social media users concludes that there is a relationship between web use and power and suggests that the power resides mostly in the perceived prestige of the user. In other words, that the person who uses the web feels empowered by the tools and may feel the “social capital” of their web savvy boosts their prestige within the company, which can increase job satisfaction and empowerment. The employer perceives correctly that they have more to offer the company than other employees who continue to use tools from the past or who resist learning new techniques.
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Bulmer & DiMauro (2009) discuss the changing business structure brought about by the “convergence of the Internet, Web 2.0, and mobile technologies (p. 93)”. They see business-to-person (B2P) communications driven by social media and online networks as the evolving business model and note that social media peer groups (SMPG) are becoming more influential. SMPGs are professional networks that can exist in places like LinkedIn or Facebook but which can also be virtual collaboration groups inside company firewalls. They note that businesses that promote B2P still sometimes neglect SMPG, thereby missing a rich form of collaboration for the company. Their findings indicate, “professionals are collaborating more outside of their organizations as a result of social media than within their organizations (p. 98).

Companies would be wise to embrace the desire and expectations by their employees to collaborate by implementing social media tools for internal (behind the firewall) purposes to enable greater connections between employees, encourage sharing of practices and experiences, and streamline communication. (p. 98)

In The New Power of Collaboration (2005), Howard Rheingold covers a broad historical view of collaboration theory beginning with prehistoric man and moving into the present world as humans are redefining what collaboration means and how it can shape the future. Rheingold, a pivotal writer on social media, is the person who coined the term “virtual community”. In this video essay, he speaks about the evolution of communication, writing, the printing press, open source production and knowledge sharing, ways in which humans collaborate. Increasingly, these forms of communication are opening new avenues to information, aided by social media. His writings and ideas on social media are pivotal to my research into open corporate communications and the collaboration that can empower people. He closes his talk with:
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Descartes said we need an entire new way of thinking. When the scientific method provided that new way of thinking and biology showed that microorganisms caused disease, suffering was alleviated. What forms of suffering could be alleviated, what forms of wealth could be created if we knew a little bit more about cooperation? (2005)

Much of the material in *Net Smart* is directed to social media skills and literacy including “five literacies not being taught in school “which Rheingold (2012) defines as “attention, participation, collaboration, crap detection and network awareness (p. 246)” . He adds that “participation, however, is a kind of power that only works if you share it with others” (p. 112).

I believe that it is this sharing of power, enabled by interconnected social media tools and an open leadership program, which can transform ordinary business routine. Much corporate jargon involves the words “team” and “work” but those words grow cold if management only pays lip service to the true power of the team, which must involve participation by equals.

Rheingold accurately points out that:

The Web’s architecture of participation enables you and everybody else to act in your own self-interest in ways that create value for everybody. Participation points both inward and outward: it’s about personal empowerment and also building things together (p. 249).

Discussion and Conclusions

The power of Internet tools and networking includes everything from the web, email, mobile phones, and instant messaging to blogs and social online networks. Consumers are pouring their opinions and feedback out to websites like Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter. They are buying from online merchants and instead of reading the local newspaper they are variously writing or aggregating their own feeds (building their own news readers) that feature the news
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

and commentary they wish to know about rather than what media corporations want them to read. Instead of watching television according to the connect-the-dots schedules set up by the broadcasting media, they watch only the media they wish to, in the order they wish to and more and more often are creating their own media. For example, in January, Google announced that “60 hours of video are uploaded every minute, or one hour of video is uploaded to YouTube every second.” (YouTube, 2012) The quality of much of that video may be debatable but the motivation toward UGC is undeniable. People are empowered by access to the web and want to create as well as consume.

In fact, the massive quantities of material freely available online has created another form of online participation known as “curating.” Online curating addresses the need for indexing all the content being generated.

In 2010 we frolicked, Googled, waded, and drowned in 1.2 zettabytes of digital bits and bytes. A year later volume was on an exponential growth curve toward 1.8 zettabytes. (A zettabyte is a trillion gigabytes; that’s a 1 with 21 zeros trailing behind it.) (Rosenbaum, 2012, web)

Museum curators are professional caretakers but online curating addresses those users who are, as Rosenbaum notes, “individuals with a passion for a content area” who “find, contextualize, and organize information. (2012, web)” Services like Del.icio.us, Pinterest, and PearlTrees are available for these often amateur curators who sort, tag, and label their interests freely. In the past, businesses paid people to index and collate information but they are now discovering resources not previously considered and which would not have been feasible due to resource constraints.
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Lincoln maintains that “social media corresponds with a larger trend ... that people seek comfort in communities and in the human connection they represent. The age of spin and the mass message is over. People will no longer tolerate them” (p. 187). The egalitarian spirit incorporated in this statement was reiterated in my research. The internet offers tools that allow users to make selections and many users are choosing to expand their menu of opportunities. It is not a difficult leap to expand the word “user” to “employee”. In the corporate environment, employees are the general public and while they have been accustomed to certain practices and customs but they are increasingly becoming proficient in online services and tools (as consumers). Those who become adept at these tools are advised to bring them into the workplace. This expertise adds value to their companies and can enliven the office. An engaged and enthusiastic worker can and is often willing to do more given encouragement from their employer.

Social media tools are transforming American business and I believe that corporations who resist rather than incorporate these tools will find themselves outside the mainstream. Corporate culture must grow in step with the community of both consumers and employees and that includes recognizing that employees are consumers, fully empowered they can become the “human voice” (Levine, et al.) of the corporation. Learning to speak with an authentic voice includes realizing that the people seek human voices and experiences over that of the machine drone of past business-as-usual practices.

Corporations must provide clear guidelines for the use of social media by their employees; including expectations regarding privacy and uses either on or off the clock. Planning a strategy for corporate social media use should be a primary policy goal for businesses wishing to make a successful transition to the use of Web 2.0 tools. Their focus should be on
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

developing a framework for employees to use these tools without fear of technological failure and must include IT feedback and support for all aspects of the use.

In the corporate environment, these tools and networks can be a force for taking the collective group to new levels of cooperation and competitiveness. Corporations who wish to succeed in the future business environment will consider the effectiveness of social media use by their employees and will provide clear goals and guidelines. They will not seek to control the flow of knowledge - instead they will promote this collaboration and reap the benefits of the new ideas and markets that emerge. I believe they will find their employees working harder because they are invested in the process. They will also discover a rich vein of creativity not often found in the rank and file cubicle mazes inhabited by stereotypical burn-out victims.
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

References


SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES


Veron, L. (2011, Summer). Open leadership builds relationships: open leadership author Charlene Li opens up in this first TPM exchange about how interactive technology enables leaders to be authentic, credible, well-connected, and well-informed. *The Public Manager*, 40(2), 76+.