ELSEVIER

Social media for public relations: Lessons from four effective cases

CrossMark

Ilhem Allagui [a],[*], Harris Breslow [b]

[a] Northwestern University in Qatar, P.O. Box 34102, Doha, Qatar
[b] Department of Mass Communication, American University of Sharjah, PO Box 26666, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper employs the collective case studies approach in an examination of four award-winning public relations campaigns conducted across a variety of social media platforms in order to determine the best practices of, and near term trends, in the effective use of social media for public relations. In their examination of these campaigns the authors discern the following trends in best practices: social media campaigns employ digital storytelling techniques that are both immersive and emotive, and that promote various forms of content sharing; these stories involve members of the target audience in at least one form of open-ended offline engagement that involves sharing behaviors; the content is optimized for mobile displays and controls; and, finally, the content is timely. The authors conclude that, although marketers think of social media in terms of brand awareness and reputation management, the effective use of social media in Public Relations campaigns can generate conversion, facilitate brand positioning, and maintain continued brand sustenance. The authors conclude that the effective use of social media is disrupting the PR campaign cycle: the role of campaign events to generate publicity in service to a PR campaign may, in the future, be displaced by social media campaign tactics which belong to an entirely different ecosystem where the act of sharing social media content generates publicity in lieu of a campaign event.

1. Introduction

Public relations scholars and practitioners alike agree that social media are changing the PR industry and increasingly playing an important role in the business planning process. Marketers and professionals find that social media have transformed businesses priorities; Brown, Sikes and Willmott (2013) report that 56% of executives say digital engagement with customers is at least a top-ten company priority. Marketers typically think that social media goals are predominantly related to brand awareness. In fact, 87% of marketers believe that the goal of social media is to increase brand awareness; while 62% find that social media increase web traffic; 61% report that social media improve a brand's or client's reputation, 45% use social media in order to generate leads, while 40% use social media in order to increase sales and, lastly, 38% of marketers find that social media improve customer service. From another perspective, journalists have also spoken in favor of being reached via social media; one in four journalists report that they prefer that PR professionals contact them through social media (Institute for PR, 2013).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ilhem.allagui@northwestern.edu (I. Allagui), hbreslow@aus.edu (H. Breslow).

There is reason to believe that social media are becoming the preferred channel of engagement, both with the target audience and service providers. This paper investigates the practices that have enabled better interaction and engagement among companies and their target audiences. As Valentini (2014) suggests, empirical evidence of the use of social media for public relations remains anecdotal and depends on the specific case studied as well as current practices. This paper attempts to address this by providing evidence of good PR practices using social media: through our examination of prize-winning social media awarded campaigns in international and regional PR festivals and competitions, we argue that the integration of social media in the strategic communication mix adds to the effectiveness of a campaign and is, quite often, highly impactful. Furthermore, and to address Valentini's critique, we conclude with a series of prescriptions for future success in social media campaigns.

2. Literature review

It is increasingly evident that new and social media have reshaped the practice of public relations. DiStaso and McCorkindale (2012, p. 76), for example, suggest that, "The importance of social media to the field of public relations cannot be underscored, and is essential for the operations of many organizations". Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012, p. 11) argue that, "social media must be at the heart of public relations activities because social media can enhance organization-relationships by increasing and improving community relations." Moreover, Valentini (2014), Wright and Hinson (2012) and Shin, Carithers, Lee, Graham, and Hendricks (2013), have found that there is a pervasive discourse in the public relations literature that the use of social media in PR has positive consequences. For instance, the extended use of social media may lead to higher levels of engagement and positive behavioral impact (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013). Smith (2013) argues that social media enables the development of the relationship between marketing and public relations by enabling a greater capacity of interaction and relationship cultivation.

Perhaps, more importantly, the literature also suggests that social media and public relations exist in a natural symbiosis with respect to what we will discuss, below, as engagement. Here we refer to the strongly held belief that both social media and PR exist to foster relationships with, and to promote interaction between, members of a target audience and the firm, and among members of the target audience. For example, Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012, p. 6) write that, "definitions of social media focus upon the behaviors and interactions that are established among individuals, that is, for what individuals use social media. . . social media do not exist without users." Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012, p. 8) claim that, "Participation and collaboration should be the mantra of online public relations in social media environments." Moreover, Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012, p. 8) go on to describe participation and collaboration in terms of engagement: "Social media and social network sites should be conceptualized as online social environments that enable people to engage in relationships of a different nature for example, professional, personal, and spiritual ones." The engagement of users has become an essential component in social media campaigns that strategic communication specialists need to pay attention to (Paek et al., 2013; Bronner & Neijens, 2006). This is not to say that social media do not have their doubters: Barlett and Barlett (2012, pp. 13–14) have argued that "Whereas social media have built legitimacy alongside traditional media, the ways they impact publics are less clear."

One aspect of communications campaigns rarely examined in relationship to public relations is creativity. Green (2010, p. 6) defines creativity as a, "process that results in novelty, which is accepted as useful, tenable or satisfying by a significant group of others at some point in time." Green goes on to write that,

> By 'significant group' of others' he [Morris] means those who have influence or power to determine what is recognized as of value in a group. In a public relations context, 'significant others' could be defined as fellow practitioners, or users and consumers of our product or service, such as journalists and clients (p. 6).

While the use of technology is widespread in public relations, it should not be seen as either a substitute for either the creative execution of strategy or the production of content. Indeed, Green (2010, p. 141) warns that "Creative thinking in using social media should be focused on its content rather than its technology." While we agree with Green's assertion that the focus of any use of social media in a PR campaign should be on content, we would also note that, increasingly, the development of PR strategies and the creative design, development and deployment of PR content must take into account the communications technologies through which this content is delivered. We discuss this point further, below.

3. Research question

Following Hardy and Waters's (2012) discussion of the Silver Anvil awards, which analyzes the communication campaign as a process, we examine the objectives and innovative solutions to PR problems and/or goals in social media. Like Hardy and Waters, this paper analyzes award-winning campaigns while paying special attention to the following questions:

(a) What objectives do the awarded campaigns focus on?
(b) What strategies are employed in the campaigns?
(c) Are there any trends that can be identified from the campaigns that we analyze?