Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

Who is responsible for what? Examining strategic roles in social media management

Marlene S. Neill [*], Mia Moody [1]

Department of Journalism, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97353, Waco, TX 76798-7353, United States

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the strategic roles associated with social media management through the lens of role theory. By analyzing the responses from participants in two focus groups and a survey of public relations and human resources practitioners, we identified nine strategic roles and the associated responsibilities including policy maker, internal collaborator, technology tester, communications organizer, issues manager, relationship analyzer, master of metrics, policing, and employee recruiter. Public relations lead most of these activities, but human resources are a close collaborator. Study findings also provide specific insights into online reputation management processes, exact content of social media policies, and the most common metrics used for social media channels.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Individuals can send interactive communication messages more widely than ever before using Web 2.0. Social media contain Internet-based operations that build on this technology, which enable users to interact and exchange content and/or information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Capitalizing on the medium's advantages necessitates learning about the various Internet tools and technologies and understanding their capabilities (Gower & Cho, 2001). The implications of the platform for public relations and marketing are the same—to improve visibility, image, and branding.

Moran and Gossieaux (2010) suggested that social networking sites are valuable due to the potential to increase demand for products; the ability to identify key influencers, and provide insights about consumer wants and needs. For these reasons, corporations, as well as governmental and nonprofit agencies, must increasingly reconsider the roles of those who manage social media for strategic communication.

Recent study results indicate employers favor and are requiring new media skills (e.g. Kim & Johnson, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2012). A review of the literature revealed numerous articles with an emphasis on how public relations practitioners utilize social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2012).

Although these articles and many others focus on the impact of social media on the public relations industry, there is very little scholarly research in communication or public relations journals regarding social media management. To fill this void, this study analyzes how mid- to senior-level human resources and public relations practitioners visualize their roles in this area. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: What are the strategic roles associated with managing social

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 254 710 6322.
  E-mail addresses: Marlene_Neill@baylor.edu (M.S. Neill), Mia_Moody@baylor.edu (M. Moody).
[1] Tel.: +1 254 710 7247.

media? How do company executives divide these roles and responsibilities among departments? How do executives view their role in online reputation management? How are they incorporating policy into social media management? What social media metrics do they employ in the management of online communications?

Using mixed-method research, this study synthesizes the results of two focus groups and an online survey. As social media grow in importance, public relations practitioners and the professors who educate them need a solid understanding of the strategic roles affiliated with managing online reputations and how their roles align with other internal departments. Ignoring new platforms can be detrimental to a company and PR practitioner's success. This type of analysis is imperative in today's rapidly changing media climate and this study provides key insights into these issues.

1.1. Role theory

Scholars have identified two primary roles in public relations: the public relations manager and communication technician (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier & Broom, 1995), and classify the practitioner based on the role he or she practices predominantly. Some of the specific responsibilities that have been associated with the managerial role include counseling management, making communication policy decisions, evaluating program results and planning public relations programs (Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998); these responsibilities would likely be associated with social media management. In contrast, a communication technician is described as "a creator and disseminator of messages" (Dozier & Broom, 1995), which would be associated with writing blog posts and individual tweets, a more tactical function.

Neill (2013) indicated that the rise of social media has increased public relations practitioners' power and influence in companies, due to their role in online reputation management. In a longitudinal study, Wright and Hinson (2012) found 85% of respondents reported that public relations was responsible for managing social media in their companies or organizations up from 64% in 2009. These findings are significant because until recently industry leaders suggested which department should manage social media was still up for debate (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

More recently, Breakenridge (2012) asserted that the eight strategic roles associated with public relations' management of social media involved developing employee policies, internal collaboration, technology testing, pre-crisis management, relationship analyzer, reputation task force, and master of metrics. Gurău (2008) suggested a cross-functional approach to managing social media activities meaning internal departments should collaborate, especially due to the range of stakeholders they are likely to communicate with including customers, employees, investors, the media, as well as the social community.

However, the question remains: Who is responsible for what? Solis and Breakenridge (2009) asserted that organizational structure and the individual practitioners' expertise should be considered as part of the determining factors regarding oversight of social media. While junior public relations practitioners are expected to know how to use and communicate using social media, at the management level, this role likely involves more strategic responsibilities such as monitoring and managing the company's online reputation, measuring campaigns, and developing social media policies for employees.

1.2. Online reputation management

Many of the management roles associated with social media are likely to fall under the umbrella of branding or online reputation management. However, the challenge is multiple parties contribute to brand meaning such as popular culture, customers, and influencers such as the mass media. "Consumers play active roles as meaning makers in their brand relationships, mutating and adapting the marketers' brand meanings to fit their life projects, concerns, and tasks" (Fournier, 2009, p. 7). Brand reputation is considered to be "owned by the public," while image represents how the company wants to be viewed (Lyon & Cameron, 2004, p. 215). Public relations' reputation management/issues management is comprised of five core components: predicting potential problems, anticipating threats to the organization, minimizing surprises, resolving any issues that do arise and preventing crises (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). All five of these responsibilities are achievable to varying degrees with social media.

Tied to online reputation management is customer relations as consumers are more empowered than ever to share their experiences through social media channels and distribute more widely, even globally (Barnes, 2008). Breakenridge (2012) suggested that this reality calls for having the best monitoring tools in place and identifying, in advance, the appropriate employees who should be involved to handle specific issues when they arise. A key resource is a "social media crisis org chart" that identifies exactly who should be involved at a given time and for a given issue (Breakenridge, 2012).

1.3. New media metrics

Setting up the appropriate metrics and reporting the results has always been a part of strategic communication (Breakenridge, 2012) and is essential in social media management. In place of readers and viewers are friends, fans and followers (Bowen, 2013). Social media have expanded the industry's metrics vocabulary as retweeting, sharing on bookmarking sites and "liking" on Facebook are measurable actions. Online users also follow links to web sites, where existing Web analytics can connect action to sales. Social media also provide audience profiles that indicate where they are