



## EMPLOYER BRANDING: THE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Management theorist Peter Drucker once wrote about the pace of change and its impact on business. He began with a hypothetical 15th century monastery, asking readers to imagine being the abbot.



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#### Conference

*A Brave New Branded World:  
The Challenges and Opportunities for  
Employers in the Age of Social Media*

**Y**our monks support themselves by transcribing royal decrees and sacred texts. They each can produce up to a dozen pages per day, depending on the illustrations and flourishes that embellish the pages. You have arranged with the local prince for protection from bandits. Your order is prosperous and respected throughout the land.

Then Johannes Gutenberg develops the first movable type press, producing up to 3,600 pages per day. The demand for printed matter increases exponentially.

In 1517, a German priest nailed 95 complaints to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, challenging the bishop to a debate. Previously, local clerical authorities were able to silence reformers and keep controversy contained within a small area. Once printers learned about Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, however, they began to print copies on their own to sell widely. As word

of these ideas spread, the Catholic Church could not contain the Reformation and the course of civilization changed.

Within 50 years the demand for hand manuscripts vanished. The abbot who so assiduously built up the calligraphy trade had to find new ways to support his order. And, lest we think that this was a fate befitting the relatively primitive people of medieval Europe, Drucker observed that it has been roughly 50 years since modern computing came into existence. The real impact of the digital era is just beginning to be felt through social media.

Like our apocryphal abbot, perhaps we hope social media are trivial or transitory. But we are learning that they represent a new form of communications that is shifting power away from institutions to the masses.

Consider the 2009 Iranian elections, which many believed were rigged by the government. Protests began and the regime shut down various media and eventually the Internet to keep the world from knowing about the unrest. The government had to maintain cellular communications, however, in order to contact militia. Protesters used their own cell phones to broadcast images and reports about the uprising to the outside.

In another example of the power of social media, Lucy Kellaway of the Financial Times noted how vitriolic people are about BP for the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico. When Union Carbide had a chemical leak in Bhopal, India 25 years earlier that killed thousands nearby, there wasn't as much hatred then as there is for BP now. Why?

"...there is the internet, with its power to turn personal emotion into a global epidemic overnight. Hating companies is now fun, easy and varied. There are so many different ways of doing it. You can hate BP on Twitter, Facebook and, most rewardingly of all, YouTube."

### THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The biggest mistake an organization can make when thinking about social media is to try to control it. It cannot be done.

True, companies can block Web sites from work computers and disable texting on company-issued cell phones. But employees have their own computers and Internet access, and you cannot stop someone from texting on their personal Blackberry or iPhone.

The first priority for employers must be to establish policies regarding social media. Perhaps you cannot stop it, but you can prescribe what the penalties are for misuse. Remarkably few organizations have taken this fundamental step. In a study conducted by Deloitte in 2009, only 22% of companies reported having a formal social media policy; less than a fifth (17%) regularly monitored what was being written and shown about them on the various social media.

Crafting a social media policy should be a cross-functional exercise, including not only Human Resources but also Marketing, Legal, and Corporate Communications teams. IBM used an interim policy that is the essence of elegance while its task force labored six months to create their current policy. The temporary policy said simply, "Don't do anything stupid." According to many at IBM, it worked very well.

Once you have an approved social media policy, make sure it is thoroughly communicated to your employees. Only when you are sure your workers know and understand the policy can you reduce promoting it (Deloitte also found that 24% of employees didn't know if their employer had such a policy, and another 11% knew there was a policy but did not know what it was).

Secondly, you must monitor social media to know what people think about your organization. This should not be relegated to a junior staff member or intern; it is a full-time job. If there isn't anyone suitable on your staff, consultancies will monitor the Web and report on what is being written and by whom. Most will also recommend ways to deal with negative comments or chronic complainers (also known as "trolls").

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### THE OPPORTUNITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The great opportunity of social media is the ability to connect with prospective as well as current employees. Brands are essentially relationships, and the best way to build strong relationships is through dialogue.

The first step in developing your social media program is to define what you want the program to achieve. Too many employers skip this step and dive into tweeting or blogging. Unless you know what you want your audience to do and why, your efforts will have no unifying purpose. Spend time to think through your goals and objectives before you begin.

Next, make sure you have the infrastructure – technical and organizational – to support your social media efforts. Technical infrastructure include things like a well-functioning corporate careers Web site, an applicant tracking system, a candidate relationship marketing (CRM) system, and internal tools such as an intranet. Smaller employers may not need all of these because the intimacy of a small company can compensate for its lack of technical sophistication. Organizational infrastructure means having the staff and budget necessary to properly manage the program.

Social media allow you to be more personal with visitors to your Web site or Facebook page. Many employers, for example, use videos of employees to give prospects a sample of the culture and what it is like to work there. Some even enlist employees or summer interns make the videos using inexpensive digital video cameras. This user-generated content (UGC) is what you most often see on YouTube. The lack of sophistication gives these videos an aura of authenticity that slick, expensive corporate videos lack.

Having your employees write blogs or tweets about working for your organization also personalizes it and makes it more approachable. If you plan to host a blog or maintain a Twitter account, however, you must prepare your senior leadership for the fact that your author(s) will occasionally have a bad day or frustrations on the job. These negative sentiments should not be censored; they let your audience know that a real human being is behind the writing. Having only positive comments alienates readers because they recognize it for what it is: puffery.

## WHAT IS THE RETURN ON YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA INVESTMENT?

Measuring the impact of social media on an organization is difficult. The industry is still trying to develop standardized metrics to allow comparison and evaluation of the various platforms. This is complicated by the fact that social media are evolving and changing faster than the metrics can be devised and tested.

Forrester Research recently surveyed over 300 companies about the effect of social media on their firms. The respondents responded as follows:

- » 72% reported “positive impact on productivity in the front office”
- » 70% reported “improved IT productivity”
- » 86% reported a “positive impact on brand reputation”
- » 78% reported a “positive impact on customer service”

Employers can assess the impact of their social media efforts in several ways:

- » **Exposure** – How many more people are aware of your opportunities since you began tweeting and blogging versus before?
- » **Engagement** – Who is visiting your careers Web site? Is the proportion of visitors who go on to apply increasing? Staying the same?
- » **Influence** – To what extent are your social media efforts influencing behaviors? How many visitors, for example, come to your site from a tweet?
- » **Action** – Are more people signing up for your blog or applying for jobs online?

Social media are here to stay and their impact on communications and employment is already being felt. The sooner you understand them and integrate them into your employer branding efforts, the more your organization will become recognized in the brave new social media world we are only just now beginning to comprehend. 