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THE CSMO's TIME HAS COME

By Richard E. Nicolazzo

Welcome to the world of social networking and social media, where the numbers are staggering.

MySpace, 263 million users. Facebook, 200 million. Tagged.com, 70 million. Flixster, 70 million. Classmates.com, 50 million. Twitter, 25 million. LinkedIn, 40 million.

And that doesn't take into account YouTube, which although not technically a social networking site, can attract upwards of 100 million hits on a single video.

Years ago, PR executives focused on major newspapers that had circulations of hundreds of thousands and network TV news broadcasts that had millions of viewers. Nowadays, those numbers seem like they're from the Jurassic age.

Things have moved at such a warp speed that major corporations (both public and private), the government, and organizations of all shapes and sizes cannot afford to be passive about how stories play out in print or broadcast media.

For better or worse, the action has moved online.

New Breed of Communications Executive

While the social networking craze now dominates strategic communications discussions and educational workshops, it's actually not a new phenomenon.

Many believe social networking began to flourish as a component of business Internet strategy in early 2005 when Yahoo launched "Yahoo! 360°". Later that year, News Corporation bought MySpace. Since then, various social networking sites have sprung up catering to different languages and countries. Wikipedia now estimates there are 200 sites on the global scene.

During the past 20 years, we've seen a litany of executive titles at the top of the communications ladder. On the corporate side, we've migrated from director of communications, to senior VP, to VP of corporate communications, to chief communications officer, to executive vice president. In the agency business, the top officer is now commonly known as managing partner.

In my view, we have now clearly reached the point where a new communications title should be established: "Chief Social Media Officer (CSMO)."

The words "social media" are critically important in this title because that is where a new generation of "reader-viewers" is headed. It's no secret that newspaper and magazine readership is plummeting and other traditional forms of media such as TV and radio are reducing editorial staffs, thus potentially compromising their coverage.

We have suddenly entered a new universe where the meaning of "media" is being re-

engineered. Are you skeptical?

CyberAlert, Inc., a fully-automated news monitoring and tracking service in Stratford, Conn., offers these products: CyberAlert 4.0, Blog Squirrel, CyberAlert VDO, and Netpinions. Collectively, they monitor 35,000 online news sources, 5 million daily blog entries, 200 online video sharing and news sites, and 100,000 online message boards, forums, and news groups.

And just recently, PR Newswire unveiled a social media monitoring tool to measure discussions and mentions across blogs and message boards. The service claims to track more than 20 million blogs, millions of forum posts and 30,000 online news sources, including videos.

Journalism is Evolving

In past decades, journalists served as the filter between information flowing from an organization and what ended up in print or on the air. While laudable in its purest form, this dynamic is changing at lightning speed.

In its last survey on media relations practices, Bulldog Reporter/TEKgroup International reported that about two-thirds of journalists use social media to research stories.

Almost 38 percent of journalists now say they visit a social media site at least once a week as part of their reporting. And approximately 20 percent receive five or more RSS feeds of news services, blogs, podcasts or videocasts every week.

Anyway you look at it, the "CSMO" needs to create alerts for negative mentions that could provide critically valuable time if a response is needed before a situation spirals out of control.

One recent example comes to mind.

In April, Domino's Pizza was caught somewhat flat-footed when a disgusting YouTube video prank depicted two employees in North Carolina putting nasal mucus on sandwiches and putting cheese up their noses.

While the company had some early indications that the video was spreading on websites and blogs, the corporate PR group was likely not prepared nor empowered to move quickly and fight back. At the time, a spokesperson for Domino's said, "...Right now, it (the video) is on web sites and blogs. It's not on ABC, CNN or USA Today."

Two days later, when the company posted its own YouTube video and apology on its website, an estimated 1 million people had already seen the original. The damage was done. In this case, one can only imagine how much business was lost over the 48-hour period, not to mention the impact on brand integrity and customer loyalty.

Given the inherent viral nature of social networking and social media, it's not likely that anyone can totally predict or control future abuses. What can be controlled is early detection and immediate response. That's why any company that does not have the proper safeguards, monitoring systems and response teams in place to deal with the blazing speed of the Internet may find themselves "Internet lightning victims."

As time has proven, more often than not it's not the crisis itself that does the damage, but how management is prepared to respond.

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