

WHITE PAPER

# Mastering Public Relations in Social Media

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**PR Newswire**

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Having mastered the basics of social media, PR pros are ready for more advanced techniques to help them strategize and execute successful campaigns.

Social media is reinventing the public relations playbook – and bringing with it the potential to raise the corporate profile of PR professionals. After all, PR professionals are among those who have pioneered the frontiers of social media.

It's a good thing, too, because it's not just PR that social media is reinventing – it's every industry. In the words of Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, “We think every industry is going to be rebuilt around social engagement: news, health, finance, shopping and commerce. We think, similarly, all of these things will be rebuilt by companies that work with us to put social at the core.”<sup>1</sup>

To meet the challenge of their industries being “rebuilt around social engagement” – and to raise the profile of PR in the process – PR professionals must commit to lifelong learning, since the state-of-the-art for PR in social media is likely to continue evolving rapidly for years to come.

This white paper attempts to spread the early social media “lessons learned” by pioneering PR pros to those “fast followers” who are right behind them. Based on interviews with more than a dozen pioneers, it culls out a series of lessons we think of as “Social Media 102.” Among the social media practices described below are:

- “Connecting” with your target audience in social media
- Earning more media through social media
- Crisis management in social media
- Do's and don'ts – including the classic, “don't be a jerk”

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1. Facebook's Web of Frenemies, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2011



## Moving beyond the basics

In numerous organizations, PR pros are being called upon to assume a leading role in formulating and executing social media strategy.

“For the most part people understand the basic concepts of social media – the major tools, the need to make an emotional connection,” says Kate Brodock, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the social media consultancy Other Side Group. Not everyone, however, is implementing communications strategies around those concepts.

**Leading PR professionals using social media have invested time and money in the process: they use analytical and listening tools to determine the activity level of their audience.**

And while all agree measurement is critical, it’s important to avoid being hypnotized by sheer numbers – the volume of fans and followers – because many of those connections are simply casual. “If a Facebook page has 500 ‘likes,’ the company thinks that there are these 500 people who go back to the page all the time and consume everything on it,” says Sam Whitmore, Founder and Editor of *Sam Whitmore’s Media Survey*. “Don’t worship false gods,” he asserts.

Leading PR professionals using social media have invested time and money in the process: they use analytical and listening tools to determine the activity level of their audience, their sentiment and where they “hang out” when they’re not visiting the brand’s page. And they’ve engaged their myriad audiences by participating in conversations not of their own making, at venues other than their own.

## Gaining brand acceptance

Importantly, that last point – participating in relevant conversations wherever they occur – is key to connecting with your target community. However, it requires ceding more control than PR pros are used to, or have been comfortable with. It demands that they are present in online forums other than the ones set up on clients’ sites. Further, it demands frequent, smart blog commentary (whether on a firm/client site or elsewhere), retweeting insightful messages from relevant commenters in their space and generating Facebook posts and links aplenty.

“You may even have to retweet a competitor,” notes David Berkowitz, Senior Director of Emerging Media and Innovation at 360i, a digital-marketing firm that counts Kraft Foods and NBC Universal among its clients.

How does a PR professional set about doing this? Peter Himler, Founding Principal of media-focused consultancy Flatiron Communications, reminds us that social media is more than just an outbound communications tool – it goes both ways. The first step,

therefore, is to listen. Listening to the chatter from social networks and analyzing it helps PR pros figure out how best to join the conversation, and where to join in.

“Our social media philosophy starts with listening,” agrees Lara Kretler, Vice President and Social Media Lead for Fahlgren Mortine Public Relations.

One organization that did a fine job achieving its communications goals in social media is The Allstate Foundation. The foundation’s goal was to help victims of domestic violence deal with the accompanying financial stresses, and to achieve that goal, it took to Facebook and Twitter. This posed a challenge on several levels. First, the foundation needed to activate and energize local groups that shared its goals. Second, it had to do so in a sensitive manner.

“We had to remember that we were talking about two topics, domestic violence and money, that are still somewhat taboo,” recalls Jennifer Kuhn, Corporate Relations Manager for The Allstate Foundation. “That’s a double don’t-do in many conversational circles.”

To that end, the foundation used Facebook and Twitter to link with domestic violence groups across the country, seeking both to inspire and inform. Tactically, a major goal was participating in and stimulating conversations taking place at smaller, locally based sites dealing with domestic violence and its aftereffects.

The foundation posted links to its own research and retweeted messages from domestic violence survivors and advocates (notably *Dancing With the Stars* regular Cheryl Burke). It also passed along information about tools that evaluate financial health and literacy, and issued its share of “Follow Friday” shout-outs to like-minded Tweeters. (See below for a sample selection of the foundation’s tweets.)

**EXAMPLE:**

**Allstate Foundation**

The following tweets were sent out by **The Allstate Foundation (@ClickToEmpower)** as part of its initiative to financially empower victims of domestic violence. All were retweeted and recirculated by followers and local groups who share the same organizational goals or are similarly involved in issues surrounding domestic violence:

**// TWEET 1**

Check out this great post CAEPV on how to start a conversation if you suspect someone is in an abusive situation <http://tinyurl.com/yicsxcn6>

**// TWEET 2**

Empower Hour starts now! For every #Tweet4YWCA tweet tallied between 3-4pm CST, The Allstate Foundation will donate \$5 to the YWCA.

**// TWEET 3**

Check out this recent interview with Cheryl Burke of #dwts as she shares her domestic violence story <http://bit.ly/cSse73>



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We made sure our messaging was clear and direct, and we kept in mind the sensitivity of the topic. **Don't forget that people go to Facebook for fun first.** You can educate in that environment, but only if you are precise and genuine with your messaging.

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Jennifer Kuhn  
Corporate Relations Manager,  
The Allstate Foundation

Says Kuhn: “We made sure our messaging was clear and direct, and we kept in mind the sensitivity of the topic. Don't forget that people go to Facebook for fun first. You can educate in that environment, but only if you are precise and genuine with your messaging.”

## Earning more media

A key fact gathered by the *2010 PRWeek/PR Newswire Media Survey* is that 58% of journalists have Twitter accounts, and they are using them to do research. PR pros think of this as an opportunity to put their best foot forward and build relationships.

Leading PR professionals use the listening techniques mentioned above to find journalists and bloggers writing on topics related to their own or their clients' brands. Then they follow those individuals' Twitter feeds, read the content they are talking about (especially articles and blogs they themselves write) and get a good understanding of their interests, explains Victoria Harres, Director, Audience Development for PR Newswire.

When they feel they've started to really know the key journalist and blogger twitterers in their industry, they start to connect, Harres explains. They comment on their tweets, their articles, their blog posts. They join in casual discussions and formal chats. They also offer tips as appropriate

– but that content is not always connected to a direct benefit to the PR pro. Providing content of intrinsic value with no strings attached means that when you are ready to promote something that fits your audience's needs, you won't be a stranger – you'll be a trusted source.

And when the time comes to tweet out about a press release, for example, don't just tweet the headline, Harres asserts. “You need to extract a quote, or a stat – some interesting bit that makes for an interesting tweet and at the same time compels the reader to click on your link for the full release,” she says.

Based on similar thinking, Fahlgren Mortine's Kretler has defined a formula for good PR practice in Twitter that she calls “The 70/20/10 Philosophy.”

“Seventy percent of your content should not be about you at all – it should be about information that is of real value, interest or use to your audience,” explains Kretler. “It could be articles from a magazine that are not about you, but are just important to your audience. Twenty percent should just be interacting – back and forth conversation about anything. It's showing that you are actually a human being behind that Twitter account. And then 10% can be hard-core promotional.”

“If you do the 70 and 20 right, you can be blatantly promotional and nobody will mind,” Kretler adds.

## Social media DOs and DON'Ts

The leading social media PR practitioners interviewed for this paper identified the following set of eight ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’:

- Do... establish a set of social media principles
- Don't... forget to review/rethink them on a regular basis
- Do... collaborate across departments
- Don't... put up too many internal roadblocks
- Do... replenish the content flow early and often
- Don't... limit or frustrate transparency
- Do... set goals and measure yourself against them
- Don't... be a jerk

With regard to the first point, social media-savvy PR pros say establishing principles, not rules, is the key. Too many variables are involved, ranging from competitive landscape to vertical industry, for a one-size-fits-all, rules-based approach.

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**You can't take two weeks to approve a Tweet. Heck, you can't take two days.**”

Peter Himler  
Founding Principal,  
Flatiron Communications

However, they agreed on one universal rule: “The prevailing rule of ‘don’t be a jerk’ still reigns,” quips Flatiron’s Himler.

Many items on the list have to do as much with organizational infrastructure as they do with messaging. The social media era demands that organizations be willing and able to make fast decisions. “You can’t take two weeks to approve a Tweet. Heck, you can’t take two days,” Himler says.

Intra-organization communication is key; the product group shouldn’t be taken by surprise when marketing tweets out information about an upcoming launch. This means that social media can’t exist in a silo of its own. While leadership has to come from a single person or group, every organizational tentacle must be in on the action. “Social media doesn’t work when a mid-level marketing or PR person is the only program cheerleader,” Brodock warns.

In August 2010, for example, Dell, Inc. decided that centralizing social media communication in a single department isn’t practical. Instead, it set up a social media university for employees across all of its divisions and also created a social media command center, “a kind of mission control that provides resources and overall strategy.”<sup>2</sup>

2. “Are You Talking to Me?: Yes, thanks to social media. And the best companies are listening,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2011



The company reports that 9,000 employees have taken its basics course on how to use social media and 1,000 of those have completed all four courses the company requires for employees to become “certified” to participate in social media.

**While many believe building an audience is the hard part, feeding fans and followers a steady diet of information tends to be more of a challenge.**

Once an organization has aligned its resources and adapted its mindset for the social media era, the next step is developing and curating content to feed the network. While many believe building an audience is the hard part, feeding fans and followers a steady diet of information – useful, interesting information, not company propaganda – tends to be more of a challenge. “It takes time and money and personal interaction,” Berkowitz notes.

The content shouldn’t be all self-generated press releases and videos; content produced by other influential bloggers and tweeters can be aggregated, curated for applicability to your audience, and shared, linked to, retweeted, etc.

For example, procedures must be put in place to deal with contingencies that could pop up at a moment’s notice. What’s the process for handling overseas sales leads that come in via Facebook? How about if sensitive information about a business practice or top executive is exposed on Twitter? When should a customer service complaint be addressed publicly, in addition to the appropriate person calling the customer to set things right?

Finally, PR in social media demands not only precise measurement, but also constant campaign tweaking in its wake. Diving headfirst into social media without at least a directional goal is like advertising on television without having anything to hawk. If an organization’s sales force wants qualified leads, the goal should be nudging its social media connections towards, say, an online form where their information can be captured. The success or failure of the campaign would then hinge on how many individuals clicked through to that form and how many individuals actually handed over their data.

## **Recalibrate your organization’s response time**

As Flatiron’s Himler pointed out, the approval for a Tweet can’t take two weeks. Social channels operate in real-time, so your organization will need to learn to operate in an environment that requires the brand to be much more participatory. Before your organization establishes presences on social networks, you’ll need to prepare for responding to your audience in the moment. Sarah Skerik, Vice President of Social Media for PR Newswire, offers four tips for doing so:

1. First, determine the most common questions your audience asks. Talking to your customer service and sales teams is typically the best approach – they can tell you what questions and issues most often arise. Locate and “lurk” on industry discussion groups – you’ll quickly get a feel for questions that recur.



2. Give your front line social media participants blanket approval for certain types of communications. Once you have a handle on common questions and issues, prepare talking points and arm your teams with information they can convey quickly and confidently. At the same time, be sure your teams understand what sort of information needs approval before public discussion.
3. Train your public-facing teams to handle those moments when they don't have an answer – or don't have approval – with grace. A simple “Thanks for your question. I don't know the answer myself, but I'm tracking it down,” can go a long way because it signals to the person with the query that someone hears them.
4. Bring all hands on deck – Legal, Marketing, PR, the C-Suite – to ensure everyone understands the necessity of responding quickly to situations in social networks. Create processes enabling fast approvals when needed. It's best to have this conversation and create this understanding before a real-time response is required and the organization finds its collective feet in the fire.

## **Develop dexterity in dealing with negative comments**

It's probably safe to say that any PR pro contemplating a foray into social media for the organization he or she represents has been concerned about negative comments. Negativity happens in social media, and your organization does need to be prepared. PR Newswire's Skerik offers the following five points:

1. First, understand the difference between trolls – chronic complainers who delight in stirring the pot online – and legitimate issues. Honest problems from customers should absolutely be addressed. However, if you detect a troll, you may want to sit back and see if your audience rises to your defense. Messages from members of your community are extremely credible, and communities often don't tolerate trolls.
2. Be sure anyone representing the company in social networks understands it's never, ever okay for them to be snide, snarky or dismissive in tone. The same goes for execs who may not be prepared for the candor of online audiences.
3. Prepare for radical openness and transparency. When doing any sort of communication planning, it's wise to assume that any and all facts or sides of an issue will be made public – even if (and especially if!) the organization would rather that information doesn't see the light of day. Practice communicating openly and honestly. Your audience will appreciate it and your organization's credibility will soar.
4. Be sure your public-facing teams are truly prepared. Brief them on any and all customer communications – even a mundane-seeming service update to a subset of customers can make its way into social channels. If the company has communicated it, your representatives in social networks need to be prepared so they can respond to questions with grace.



5. It's okay – and even advantageous – to respond offline. If you see a tweet from an unhappy customer, for example, the best course of action probably isn't for the brand to respond in public. In effect, that would be airing the dirty laundry for all to see. Instead, have someone reach out to the customer immediately and address the issue. Delight the customer, and they are likely to tweet their happiness next.

## Crisis management in social media

Crisis management should be a key component of any PR pro's social media planning.

For PR Newswire, one such pivotal social media moment arrived during the 2008 holidays, says Skerik. With much of the organization's social media staff off visiting with family, a false rumor began to circulate that PR Newswire was planning to waive its membership fee. The staffer minding the social media shop got hold of a sales exec, and together they settled on a plan that, for the company, was unprecedented.

"They said, 'You know what? Let's do it. For anyone who signs up for a new membership by the end of the year and says that they heard about the offer via our Twitter, the fee is waived,'" Skerik recalls. The result was uniformly positive: 40 new members signed up during one of the year's dead periods, and PR Newswire received across-the-board praise for its spry response.

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**The big takeaway is that it proved to our management what we'd been saying – that people are really paying close attention to social media.**

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Sarah Skerik  
Vice President of Social Media,  
PR Newswire

"It could've gone really poorly. We would've looked silly if we didn't respond at all, and we would've looked slow on the uptake if we just said, 'No, it's not true, but you can go to our Web site and sign up if you'd like,'" Skerik adds. "The big takeaway is that it proved to our management what we'd been saying – that people are really paying close attention to social media."

Unisys Corporation took a different approach to a potentially difficult social media PR situation that occurred about a year ago, when an executive's public comment at a conference was misconstrued in the social ecosystem. There followed an immediate spike in negative comments and coverage, and management feared a potential PR disaster, explains Erin McAllister, Director of Digital Strategy and Marketing.

However: "We were able to look at the overall aggregated conversation trends across the social-scape. We realized that the entire negative spike represented only 2.5% of mentions of our corporate brand that day. So even though the initial social reactions sounded terrible to us, they were really having only a very small impact on the day's mentions of us."

The company decided that the best strategy was not to respond itself and to let the conversations play out and die off. "As it happened, industry experts started to weigh



in on the issue and add perspective to the points, thus conveying a relevant, intelligent message that helped mitigate the situation over the following days,” McAllister says. “The conversation evolved.”

## Conclusion: taking the lead

Social media really is rebuilding the core business models of many, if not all, industries – and PR is no exception. To deny it or only half-heartedly embrace it is to deny your clients a place in conversations that cut to the heart of their business objectives.

In some sense, social media demands that PR professionals do the same things they always have: identify an audience, figure out how to communicate with that audience to encourage desired behavior and then measure the results against pre-set benchmarks. Of course, that is at the highest level of abstraction; everything else about successful PR in social media requires new thinking, from faster execution, through company-wide coordination and a more authentic “human” voice, all the way to the issue of managing conversations over which you have less direct control.

However, because the core principles are the same – and companies’ audiences have moved wholesale into social media – the savviest PR pros are taking the lead in social media. The rest of us will be well served by following their lead.

### Key takeaways

- Listen and analyze before you jump in
- Remember the 70/20/10 rule for communicating in social media
- Talk with your audiences, not at them. Social media is a two-way street. Social media is democratic
- Establish a meaningful social media brand presence by actively participating in communities – not just the ones under your immediate control, but ones led by fans and independent influencers
- Feed the content monster by offering a steady flow of information – fact-based, instructional, actionable



## About PR Newswire

*PR Newswire (www.prnewswire.com) is the premier global provider of multimedia platforms and solutions that enable marketers, corporate communicators, sustainability officers, public affairs and investor relations officers to leverage content to engage with all their key audiences. Having pioneered the commercial news distribution industry 56 years ago, PR Newswire today provides end-to-end solutions to produce, optimize and target content – from rich media to online video to multimedia – and then distribute content and measure results across traditional, digital, social, search and mobile channels. Combining the world’s largest multi-channel, multi-cultural content distribution and optimization network with comprehensive workflow tools and platforms, PR Newswire enables the world’s enterprises to engage opportunity everywhere it exists. PR Newswire serves tens of thousands of clients from offices in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, and is a UBM plc company.*

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