

Social media requires clear strategy

Less than a third of professional communicators surveyed feel confident about using social media as part of an integrated communication strategy, according to Melcrum's new report "How to use social media to engage employees". Yet despite the lack of strategy understanding revealed by the global study, many are going ahead with setting up tools inside their organisations – some 60% of organisations will have some form of social media in place by the end of 2007.

The new report combines key findings from a global study into social media and corporate communication, with case-study examples and expert advice on how to develop a social media strategy, launch new tools – such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and social networks – and monitor their progress.

For the purpose of this survey, social media was defined as: The online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with each other. A few prominent examples of social-media applications are Wikipedia (reference), MySpace (social networking), YouTube (video sharing), Second Life (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and Miniclip (game sharing). These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis and vlogs to allow users to interact. Source: Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media.

The survey was completed by 2112 professional communicators (VPs, directors and managers) working in internal and corporate communication. Responses came from 41% in Europe, 32% in North America and 16% in Asia-Pacific. Of these respondents, the financial services sector accounted for 13%, professional services 15%, government and public administration 12% and technology 10%.

Potential pitfalls

The potential pitfalls of launching social media tools without an understanding of the best way to use them is covered in the "Strategy" chapter of the new report, available for free download at www.melcrum.com/offer/socialmedia/pdf/Social_Media_Chapter_1.pdf. Ross Chestney, head of communication services at BT – where he has overseen the introduction of blogs, wikis, podcasts and social networking – comments that: "There are an awful lot of people who are very excited about this technology, but still have no real idea what it's about."

In the same chapter, Philippe Borremans, IBM's new media lead in Europe, talks about the strategic mission for social media at IBM and urges practitioners to develop a different mindset and strategy when it comes to introducing new tools: "Your social media strategy must look unlike a traditional communication strategy. It's not an enforced strategy – full of campaigns and 'push' models.

"The first step in building a social media strategy is to recognize that it's not for every company or every employee," says

Borremans, "I can't claim this is a natural fit for every company. It all stems from understanding what kind of company and culture you're working in. But for us, it's the right way to go."

Strategy issues to consider

Based on the experiences of organisations such as BT, IBM, American Electric Power (AEP) and Nortel, the report identifies 10 issues that communicators should consider when developing a social media strategy, including:

- Assess your organisation's cultural readiness.
- Think about the business purpose of the tools.
- Be experimental and involve employees.
- Clarify what employees can and can't do.
- Take a hands-off approach to marketing the tools.

In addition to advice on strategy, the report shares key findings that shed light on what communicators expect to gain from using social media inside the organization, and which tools they feel are most relevant to them.

According to the 2100 corporate communicators who responded to the global survey, the top perceived benefits for implementing social media tools are:

1. Improved employee engagement (71%).
2. Improved internal collaboration (59%).
3. Improved internal community development (51%).
4. Improved two-way dialogue with senior executives (42%).

Engaging employees

A chapter is devoted to each of the tools considered most relevant to internal communicators: blogs, podcasts, RSS, online video, wikis, social networking and virtual worlds and the 3-D web.

Each chapter shares key findings from the global survey together with advice on how to introduce the tools and case-study examples of how they're being put to use to engage employees in organisations such as BT, IBM, Unilever, The World Bank, Scottish & Newcastle, Microsoft and Nortel.

The report ends with a chapter on measurement, which shares advice from practitioners and experts on how to monitor the progress and outcomes of social media tools.

Ongoing research

"How to use social media to engage employees" forms part of Melcrum's ongoing research into trends and best practice in corporate communication and was published in May 2007. Melcrum is a research and training business with offices in London, Chicago and Sydney. Founded in 1996 by Robin Crumby and Victoria Mellor, Melcrum has customers in over 90 countries. For more information, email .