



AIRFOIL

What in the world is
web 2.0?

Ethical outreach in a transformed communications marketplace

The original version of the World Wide Web, retrospectively termed Web 1.0, was Niagara Falls — a torrent of information flowing from a deep network of sometimes murky sources, along with miscellaneous runoff, that was tapped to create incredible new power for consumers. Suddenly, people could bank online, shop online and book travel online. They could replace their encyclopedias, road atlases, phone books and letterhead with fingertip-accessible online versions.

Web 2.0, by contrast, is a global water-pistol shootout, sometimes a one-to-one arena and other times a massive-many-to-one field, where targeted information fires back and forth between originator and key audiences. Rather than being deluged by the flow, participants in Web 2.0 can choose their niches and become part of communities that enable a tremendous amount of personal interchange.

The nature of the Web 2.0 world

First tagged with its somewhat pretentious name by Tim O'Reilly at a San Francisco O'Reilly Media Conference in October 2004, Web 2.0 is viewed by many as “the second-generation Web” and is characterized by two-way communication. In computer terms, some have suggested that Web 1.0 was “read-only,” while Web 2.0 is “read-write.” The central factor that makes Web 2.0 distinctive is that what we once called “users” now become “contributors” and full participants in the generation, modification and extension of Web content. Virtually all virtual content becomes infused with collaboration, responsiveness and networking.

The Web 2.0 world revolves around both technical and social developments that have evolved on the Internet in recent years. Increasingly, the Web is being used as a digital platform — with games, social areas, search capabilities, mobile programs, news aggregators and other capabilities aggregated on sites like Yahoo!, MSN and Google. Further, programs that once

resided on individual computers have become available as “services,” Web-based applications — everything from word processing to project management — that reside “in the cloud” (actually, hosted on a provider’s server, rather than the user’s) and are universally available from any location and at any time. Businesses have begun leveraging these services to build customized applications from components available online.

Simultaneously, we’ve witnessed the emergence of social networking, which has capitalized on the popularity of these Web applications. So we have blogs and wikis and podcasts, but also “mashup” pages in sites like Facebook and MySpace that aggregate a number of applications and text formats to bring together an endless array of text plus photos, video, audio, calendars and message boards. Business-focused versions of these social networking sites — LinkedIn, Zana, Plaxo and others — have become popular and increasingly effective ways to maintain networks of colleagues, recruit talent, uncover business-development opportunities, sense consumer attitudes, and call on corporate and collegiate alumni for assistance.

More recently, “tagging” has become popular via photo sites like Flickr, as well as social-bookmarking and popular-information sites like del.icio.us and digg.com, allowing networks of online friends to easily share the “coolest” photos, news stories and Web sites with each other. Searchable “tags,” or labels, can be attached to an item so that others can find, comment on and re-tag items.

Web 2.0 not only is its own new world but it’s made possible other whole new worlds, exemplified by Second Life where individuals buy and sell property and goods, establish relationships and live out virtual lives as avatars. While the number of people who can participate in virtual communities is limited technically, and while the landscape is subject to speculative marketers, these environments have become hotbeds of activity and, in some instances, media darlings along the way.

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In its report on the “Hype Cycle in Emerging Technologies, 2007,” the research firm Gartner calls Web 2.0 a “transformational” development for business processes and models. Specifically, the Gartner report observes:

“The collaboration facilitated by wikis, blogs and social networks can significantly enhance employee productivity. Social networks can be used for expertise location and management, providing quicker responses to changing business conditions, better leverage of business relationships and appropriate skill selection when staffing projects. Mashups can create a new class of tactical and personalized applications that correlate multiple sets of data at the presentation layer.”

Social networking has changed everything

For marketers and public relations professionals, the technology of Web 2.0 is interesting, but its social-networking ramifications are crucial. Formal and informal social networks are changing absolutely every aspect of marketing products, ideas and information to the public. They have led newspapers around the world to restructure the way they write and distribute the news and have sent industry pundits scrambling to attempt to define just who is a journalist these days. The people and institutions that once were America’s major influencers now have been pushed down the screen by niche bloggers and YouTube contributors.

The malt shop of the 1950s, the hootenanny of the ’60s, campus bar of the ’70s, the mall of the ’80s and the coffeehouse of the ’90s all have been replaced by the chat-room-cum-video-photo-mp3 Web as the preferred gathering spot for those in the know. And the number of people who can interrelate in any one location today far exceeds any place we’ve ever built before.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) eases this communication process by automatically pushing blog posts, online news and

other material to individuals who subscribe to such sites with the click of a button, so influential sources can spread that influence effortlessly and immediately to millions of individuals.

Anthony Bradley, who is research director for applications and Web technology for Gartner, tells Airfoil Public Relations, “What distinguishes Web 2.0 from all other technology is the ability for massive amounts of people to collaborate. Previously, we could only get 25 to 30 people to collaborate effectively in sync. This is about getting millions of people collaborating, and that’s the key differentiator.”

This new level of collaboration is visible throughout the social Web. Bloggers will pick up a common theme (whether Britain’s fears or Britney Spears) all around the globe, linking to each others’ comments and creating an instantaneous buzz that even the fastest broadcast outlets cannot approach. Bradley reports that General Motors solicits online input on future vehicle designs. In January 2007, Procter & Gamble launched a similar effort at Capessa.yahoo.com, a Web site for women that P&G describes as “an online community where women can share inspirational stories, as well as practical tips and information...” P&G says that it anticipates the online community will allow it to learn more about the interests and product needs of women, adding that “P&G considers Capessa as a way to better understand digital space, as well as how the company can be more relevant in the lives of their consumers.”

“This kind of feedback replaces focus groups,” Bradley says. “An extremely large portion of the customer base is in there, and the company is mining the information for marketing purposes.”

How Web 2.0 is changing news media

To capitalize on social networking, news media are changing in ways that could not have been envisioned even as recently as the heyday of e-commerce IPOs. For example, local newspapers are becoming hyper-local newspapers, publishing separate

editions for — and by — residents of individual neighborhoods, with textual, visual and audio contributions by those who, in the Web 1.0 world, would have been merely recipients of the information flow.

A study released in July 2007 by the Bivings Group, which analyzed media's use of interactive elements among the top 100 highest-circulation newspapers, found big leaps in the use of Web 2.0 type offerings. Ninety-two percent offered video on their papers' sites, up 31 percent from the previous year. An amazing 97 percent of the 100 papers provided RSS feeds that push new and updated articles automatically to online readers. That's up from 76 percent in 2006. And just about half (49 percent) of the papers offered podcasts, compared with the previous year's 31 percent. Equally telling is the fact that 95 percent of reporters have blogs.

With these elements in place, newspapers are providing more opportunities for readers to comment and participate in Web 2.0 fashion. The Bivings Group study revealed that a third of the newspapers allow comments from readers, up from just 19 percent in 2006. Twenty-five percent accept articles, videos and photos from readers; and the incorporating of social networking features directly on the newspaper sites has begun to emerge. Fifty-three percent create stories and images to be read on mobile phones, and 44 percent (up from just 7 percent in 2006) enable bookmarking of articles.

In its report, Bivings recommends that papers shun generic content from wire services and other sources and offer hyper-local information that cannot be found in other media. That's the path on which the Gannett newspapers have set out, as exemplified by the Cincinnati Enquirer. As reported on July 24, 2007, by Wired magazine, the Enquirer now produces 270 niche publications that focus down to the neighborhood level with blogs and response opportunities.

As a consequence of "crowdsourcing" — a newspaper's publishing of content generated by the public — no longer can

we say "the medium is the message," but perhaps "the media are the masses." Regarding the Enquirer's publications, Wired notes, "The readers — their thoughts, their half-baked opinions, their kids' Little League scores — are at the center of them all."

The result, according to Wired, has been a 38-percent jump in the Enquirer's Web traffic in the past year, and Gannett papers overall have leaped 25 percent in that period.

Crowdsourcing quickly became a standard technique for cable news networks during 2007. CNN, for example, encourages citizen "i-Reporters" to send in video, while the network offers hourly podcasts and regularly covers the Web as a newsbeat.

Every media outlet of every type is being heavily influenced by the social-networking aspects of Web 2.0, and this "disintermediation" — the bypassing of journalists and editors in news reports that are generated directly by the public — carries the opportunity for new views to be expressed while at the same time carrying the potential for rumor, speculation and manipulation to crowd out journalistically sound reports.

What Web 2.0 means for PR practitioners and marketers

Similarly, the way public relations professionals and marketers interface with the public is undergoing rapid metamorphosis. The Council of Public Relations Firms examined this phenomenon in a recent report called "Relating to the Public: The Evolving Role of Public Relations in the Age of Social Media," compiled by Paul M. Rand of Zócalo Group and Giovanni Rodriguez, an independent consultant, in July of 2007. They interviewed nine leading PR professionals who determined four themes that they anticipated would impact corporate communications in the next five years:

- Addressing and embracing information and influence coming from new sources
- Realizing corporations and marketers are not in control any longer and that the most valued brands may be those that are least "controlled" by their owners [rather than consumers]

- The disciplines composing corporate communications are converging, with online marketers, ad agencies and Web-design firms taking on aspects of one another
- Corporate communicators must build trust with audiences with more authentic information and greater transparency.

A fundamental question underlying these issues is how public relations professionals and marketers should respond to and participate in the online communities that are so influential, yet seemingly so tenuous? With potentially millions accessing any particular blog site or posting, a misstep online can kick up globally disastrous consequences. A too-obvious pitch likely will end up on The Bad Pitch Blog (<http://badpitch.blogspot.com>). A less-than-brilliant comment on socially sensitive issues at the company picnic may readily find its way to YouTube and, from there, hundreds of thousands of socially networked sites.

In the cautionary words of Sgt. Phil Esterhaus at the Hill Street police station, "Hey, let's be careful out there." Or you may end up on the Web blotter, with mug shot, video and multiple tags.

Several executives failed to heed that warning and have found themselves the topic of ridicule. A legendary case was John Mackey, co-founder and chief executive of Whole Foods Market, Inc. It was discovered that, over an eight-year period, he posted comments about a competitor, Wild Oats Markets, Inc., in a stock-market forum on Yahoo! while using an anonymous ID. The notes boosted his own company's performance while bashing Wild Oats.

Other online phenoms have disguised their real identities, real intentions or real circumstances to attempt to pose as consumers praising a product or service when, in fact, they were paid to do so. Some large national PR firms have attempted to position paid individuals as independent consumers to boost a client's reputation. Others have sent expensive electronic products to bloggers for "reviews" and invited them to keep the device thereafter, a practice that could be perceived as bribe-for-praise. A number

of communicators have tried to revise the content of information about their companies in Wikipedia to remove negative material from the online encyclopedia that is written by contributors around the world. But now these "anonymous" revisions can be spotted through their IP addresses and exposed by a site called WikiScanner.

Less than ethical practices are subject not only to skepticism from consumers but accusations of manipulation and an onslaught of criticism from bloggers throughout the community that can quickly wreck a company's reputation.

The rules of the road

In many ways the rules of the road in the Web 2.0 world haven't changed from those of ethical journalistic practices: never lie, never disguise a source, never take advantage of the consumer. But in other ways, a whole new set of stop signs and curves in the information superhighway mark the landscape for public relations practitioners and marketers who want to participate in the "blogosphere" and the interactive Web world.

In fact, the issue of how to reach out ethically to the Web 2.0 world was the first concern to be tackled by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association when it was founded late in 2004. According to its Web site (www.womma.org), the organization, which was formed by public relations practitioners and other communicators, "Ethics had been a major issue since the founders first met to discuss the future of the industry. We were all worried about the shady practitioners and how to clearly separate those guys out from the rest of the industry," recalled Jonathan Carson, president and chief executive officer of BuzzMetrics.

WOMMA subsequently developed 10 principles for ethical contact by marketers, under the motto: "Consumers come first, honesty isn't optional and deception is always exposed." These principles enunciate a framework in which to relate to bloggers:

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1. I will always be truthful and will never knowingly relay false information. I will never ask someone else to deceive bloggers for me.
 2. I will fully disclose who I am and who I work for (my identity and affiliations) from the very first encounter when communicating with bloggers or commenting on blogs.
 3. I will never take action contrary to the boundaries set by bloggers. I will respect all community guidelines regarding posting messages and comments.
 4. I will never ask bloggers to lie for me.
 5. I will use extreme care when communicating with minors or blogs intended to be read by minors.
 6. I will not manipulate advertising or affiliate programs to impact blogger income.
 7. I will not use automated systems for posting comments or distributing information.
 8. I understand that compensating bloggers may give the appearance of a conflict of interest, and I will therefore fully disclose any and all compensation or incentives.
 9. I understand that if I send bloggers products for review, they are not obligated to comment on them. Bloggers can return products at their own discretion.
 10. If bloggers write about products I send them, I will proactively ask them to disclose the products' source.
- Before you pitch a blogger, spend some time on the site, just as you as you would spend time building a relationship with traditional media. Comment on blog posts, read the site and know what that blogger's interests are.
 - Honesty is always the best policy. Never pretend to be a fan or a reader if you're not.
 - Don't send press releases to bloggers. Talk to or e-mail them as if you're in a conversation. Address them by name (not "Dear New Shiny Blog").
 - Search the blog to see if it has a PR policy. Some are open to pitches, some are not. If not, they will tell you.
 - Stay on topic. Don't pitch a new tech gadget to a fashion blog unless it has something to do with fashion.
 - Befriend bloggers in social networks only if you've had some sort of previous contact with them. If you're a regular reader and comment on the site, then engage them in social networks, as well. And don't pitch outright in social networks. Relationships rule, and it takes time to build trust.
 - Disclosure and honesty are consistent themes in online ethics codes, and paying an agency, blogger or third party to write about a company without disclosure is frowned upon. Instead of paying bloggers or having another party post company information on wikis or tag them through social bookmarking sites, targeted, concentrated blogger outreach will provide better long-term coverage.
 - Don't try to alter bad news on blogger or wiki sites. Instead, reinforce the good news on your own site. Wikipedia is only as anonymous as your IP address. If you feel passionate about Wikipedia and free information, then sign up and contribute to areas that are of interest to you but don't edit the site solely for a client or competitor.
 - Having an agency "Digg" companies (rating them highly on www.digg.com and similar sites) is not ideal and has been flagged negatively online and in the media. Media even have

The advice from Airfoil

Airfoil Public Relations advises its clients to retain the rules from traditional media relations but reshape them for the interactive Web 2.0 environment. Among the tips from Airfoil's Social Media unit:

- Always offer your true identity when posting or replying to the posts of others and not just because you may be caught (i.e., your e-mail and IP address can be tracked), but because it is the right way to interact.

revealed a few cases of companies and agencies paying the most active “Diggers” to promote their products.

- PayPerPost, a site through which bloggers are paid to boost the reputation of products and services through fake endorsements, has a reputation for not disclosing paid posts. Many blogs have railed against the practice, and the company as a result, and others routinely “out” companies that use the service. Recently, Google eliminated the page rank for these blogs, essentially equating them to spam, and as a result, they no longer appear near the top of the search engine results page.

Virtually unlimited opportunities

Beyond blogs and wikis, the emergence of social networks has produced special opportunities for communicators who invest the time to participate in, or at least monitor, social networking sites. Airfoil recommends that companies take these steps to plant their flag in this virtual territory:

- Executives should create business-oriented profiles on LinkedIn and similar sites that enable them to link to associates, associates of associates, and associates of associates of associates, shortening the contact process for new partnerships and customers.
- Submit your company domain to Facebook so that it can be designated as a “group” enabling your employees, partners and customers alike to network amongst each other.
- Create a corporate presence on MySpace where other online visitors can learn about your innovations and your offerings.
- On these sites, join in the local online groups that relate to your interests or your market, or create a new group that will draw individuals facing common issues (avoid commercialization, however).

- List products or job openings in the marketplace sections of these social-networking sites.
- Monitor and participate within your social-network site domain. It does no good to “open your door” if you don’t talk to the potential customers. You’ll also want to know if your company is the subject of negative (or positive) conversation.
- Likewise, monitor replies to blogs you post in your social-network space so you can strike up conversations with supporters and, even more important, be responsive to those with a gripe or a question.

The new Web math: 2.0 x 2 + forethought=value

For the most part, common sense will produce valuable relationships in the Web 2.0 environment. Remember that it’s a two-way medium, so you should consider your comments or postings thoughtfully before you issue them. Every comment or opinion you express is subject to responses, contradiction or — more preferably — support from an often unseen world of influencers.

Just as you wouldn’t blast your way into a publication’s newsroom to demand to be heard, don’t expect to succeed by blasting bloggers or plastering your manifestos across the Internet. Finesse, courtesy, and a thorough understanding of your target audience are crucial to communicating in Web 2.0 and building your brand, reputation and credibility in the niches that you seek to influence.

“Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies, 2007,” 32 contributors, ID number G00149712. Published July 13, 2007.

Monitor and
participate
within your
social-network
site domain.



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