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7 reasons why the business world hates social media

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social media

note: this is an unabridged version of my article publihed on Bnet.co.uk

In our previous article about social media, we have described the 8 reasons why managers love social media and we have also debunked a few commonplace myths. In this new instalment we'll look at the flip side of corporate social media perception, the negative one, and we will also discuss the rationale behind each of these arguments.

- **#1. All these online conversations could be dangerous, we'll be losing control":** it's true that social media is about employees, clients, partners and members of all kinds of eco systems talking to one another. There is often that perception that these conversations might lead to the disparagement of the brand. Such discussions are often perceived negatively by managers, as if they didn't feel quite sure about how reliable or likable their brand actually is. Hence they fail to assess and nurture brand loyalty through these discussions, although such discussions are often led by volunteers and afficionados. Also, in essence, this is what a brand is all about. A brand is what your clients "say about you when you're not in the room" (probably by Jeff Bezos but the source is unclear and many versions of that quotation exist). And such discussions, good or bad, are bound to happen anyway, for social media (aka web 2.0) has made free expression available to all Internet users. Use social media to harness all these discussions rather than pretending you can prevent them. There are more opportunities than risks associated with it when you think about it. As Intel's Ken Kaplan once declared at a 2008 Blogwell conference in San Jose : "social media is not something to fear but to embrace",

- **#2. "Social media is a legal minefield"**: a good proportion of the managers who are opposed to social media are afraid of the potential risks associated with freeform comments and trackbacks (back links to your site from external blogs/social media sites). The latter are indeed perceived as a means of injecting external content within a company's website and managers are afraid of legal consequences. Yet, to put it in the words of my own lawyer: "a legal advisor's role is not to frighten but to protect. Above all, we are business partners" (I like this guy!). And we did find a solution for our social media initiatives, from a legal point of view: all our blogs and community sites have been placed under a separate legal entity which led us to shift the responsability from the main entity to another. Comments and TrackBack moderation is also a good idea which should not be overseen. The issue in this instance is about prevention, not irrational fears. And don't forget that

it's a lot harder to address criticisms in traditional media. Comments can be moderated, unauthorised or – even better – give you an opportunity to respond,

- **#3. Online negative buzz monitoring is often on most social media opponents' radar screen too:** I am flabbergasted by the ability of certain buzz monitoring software vendors who spread fear about the blogosphere around them to sell their wares. Often, if not always, the so-called *Kryptonite Blogstorm* example will be quoted. The very title sounds like a legend and indeed it is. The problem is that this example is grossly exaggerated. Traditional media influence can still be a lot more damaging than online media if you don't take care. I can't imagine the New York Times being treated as if it were a social media website. Once again, there is more opportunities than risk in social media (full story about what really happened is available here).

- **#4. Managers don't want their employees to be headhunted because of corporate blogging:** so I heard one day an Exec tell me that it was out of the question that one of his most prominent consultant be seen on the Internet. I subsequently checked the blogger's name on Google and immediately found him in LinkedIn as well as on his own personal blog. My reaction was then to encourage that blogger to blog for us. At least, now he is devoting his energy and time to promoting our company and its reputation. Besides, he knows that he is a valued employee of ours and that his work is acknowledged. One more reason to stay with us, and not leave!

- **#5. "All that Internet stuff is not serious/businesslike, it's just for techies":** with Internet usage penetration averaging 70% in the UK (expressed in percentage of the total population, versus 48% in Europe, and the UK being outdone only by the nordics and the Netherlands), this is no longer true. Whereas in the 1990s, people believed that the Internet was made for train-spotters (see that picture taken from a 1996 AOL flyer), it is a sure bet nowadays that most web and social media users will be representative of the overall population. From a marketing point of view, each social media site has its target audiences. Social media is therefore a tool for doing business, as long as you are choosing the right platform for the right geography, population and/or business sector. For instance, facebook is pervasive in the UK but not in France where only top users and IT experts are logged in. LinkedIn is big in the UK but in German-speaking countries, only Xing is used, don't even bother to invite someone on LinkedIn there, it is virtually never used. In France, Viadeo is by far the leading social network, but most IT pundits will want to be seen in LinkedIn and will snub Viadeo users. So this is complex and more segmented than it seems, and I haven't even talked about LinkedIn groups which make it possible for you to target micro populations. Social media definitely is a business tool and a place to start networking and building partnerships,

- **#6. "All that social networking stuff is a waste of (my) time":** Social networking is often getting media attention but what's in it for business. Should business people allocate time to improve their networking skills on LinkedIn and the likes or should they consider spending more time doing proper business? The fact is that networking *is* the essence of business. It took me 4 years to build a serious network on LikendIn. What I mean by serious is the careful – not random – selection of new connections through their profile. And I don't just mean people I knew and wanted to reconnect with. My purpose was to expand that network in order to increase the number of opportunities for my business activities. And I can't count the number of opportunities leveraged by such tools, whether it meant presenting my work at a conference, or liaising with my peers, partnering with new companies or even buying new stuff I didn't know anything about before (incidentally, my counterparts must have been able to sell things too in that process). Of course, some of these encounters were irrelevant but I'd rather focus on the positive side of things by just looking at all these interesting opportunities I was able to seize. Each time a new tool appears however, users are faced with the same problem and that is

how to build (or re-build) a network of people first, before you can start reaping the benefits of such tools for business. The network of people is condition #1 for anything you do on social media platforms and it can be pretty much time-consuming mainly if you wish to target people one by one rather than inviting them all at random. As a conclusion Social media is not a waste of time unless you let yourself be driven by the tool (time-consuming tools like facebook or Twitter must be managed properly if you don't want them to take up too much of your time). In essence, it's not very different from what we went through at the beginning of the introduction of e-mail in the workplace. Managers started to oppose e-mail because they thought it could be a waste of time for them. But in essence, it was more of a status issue because their personal assistants used to filter all messages.

- **#7. "There is no ROI in Social media and corporate blogging in particular":** this final counter argument I kept for the end of my list. As is often the case with innovations, sharp criticsms as well as very apt critical analysis of blogging initiatives such as the corporate blog report by Forrester's Josh Bernoff are voiced. At that very time when people think they should give up (Gartner would call that moment the "trough of disillusionment") i.e. when the hype dies away, there appears real opportunities to work on one's ROI and reap the true benefits of the innovation in question (the "plateau of productivity" in Gartner speak). Social media is no exception to that rule. So why bother about Social media now? At times of "inflated expectations" (Gartner again) it's hard to focus on ROI. Now that the crisis is making the ROI a must, here's what we could add to that debate regarding social media in general and Corporate blogging in particular.

  o Firstly the cost of investing in social media is really negligible.

  o Secondly, the effort related to the production of the content within the framework of a blog initiative, for instance, is minimal too. In fact it does exist but it is diluted amongst the contributing experts. Social media is about user-generated content. This means that experts produce the effort as opposed to Internet managers spending vast amounts of our budget to get to the same – or even a slightly less impressive – result. And content *does* cost a lot of money. With user generated content I save hundreds of thousands of euros every year; what's that for ROI? Saying it's free would be wrong though, but the main cost of it all is change management. And producing content is very expensive.

  o Thirdly, now think about the benefits that we are getting from that effort: more motivated experts, better visibility for our brand, more efficient communications, direct debate between experts, and facilitation of the entire ecosystem, brand awareness and image improvement. The list is endless.

  o At last, when I decided to ask my boss to write for the blog, I definitely solved the ROI issue because he suddenly understood that blogging enabled him to do things which were unthinkable before. What other initiative was available for him to write about his vision on Green IT to the whole world at a push of a button?

  As a conclusion, social media offers so many new capabilities that it is worth making the effort to launch an initiative for your enterprise. Pitfalls exist – as with any kind of tool, be it IT or not – but there are ways to circumvent the problems so as to reap more benefits from this new way of communicating, more direct, more open, and geared towards direct open innovation with clients, partners and your ecosystem at large. If you manage to avoid misusing some of these tools and remained focussed on your business objectives, social media can then be a powerful ally to you marketing strategy. And don't forget that rational answers to irrational fears exist too, so that you can focus on looking at the half-full glass of social marketing.