

Chapter 14

Always On: Managing Online Communities in a 24/7 Society

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ABSTRACT

Social media is often viewed as a solution to service sector engagement issues, since it presents a cost-effective alternative to traditional promotional strategies; acting both as a promotional platform and a forum for customer engagement. Social media is increasingly being used by service sector organisations to engage with communities and create dialogue between organisations and their service users. In a world where consumers are increasingly 'always on', the challenge is how to effectively use social media as a key promotional, communications and engagement tool, and to move its use from broadcast platforms to forums for online customer engagement. The aim of this chapter is to understand how service sector organisations are engaging with social media platforms and customer communities; to identify whether, in an 'always on' world, this represents the ideal method of community building, or whether it is being used as a more cost effective broadcast tool; and to identify areas of good practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is often viewed as the ‘panacea’ to service sector communication issues, since it presents a cost effective alternative to traditional media relations. However social media is not only an efficient broadcast tool; as Solis & Breakenridge (2009) argue, social media is empowering audiences and enabling people to be both influenced and to influence, which represents a shift in the traditional influence paradigm. Social media is increasingly being used by service sector organisations to engage with communities and create dialogue between organisations and their service users. From smartphone applications to twitter outreach, service sector organisations are experimenting with digital and social forms of engagement in order to maintain contact with communities and encourage dialogue. Social media communities can transcend boundaries of time and space, allowing people to share common interests across cultural and geographical divides and to develop more meaningful, and potentially economically beneficial, relationships. However, the picture is less clear with regard to emerging economies, where the ‘digital divide’ may prevent effective communities from forming. What is clear, however, is that service sector organisations in emerging economies reliant upon customers from more developed economies, those in tourism and hospitality, for instance, can effectively use online communities to maintain and develop relationships which benefit their organisations.

The challenge for service sector PR departments is how to move the use of social media from broadcast platforms to forums for community engagement. An understanding of the needs of the community members, a clear set of goals and guidelines for community interactions are all prerequisites for the maintenance of a successful online community. Using industry case studies and examples, this chapter will explore the ways in which service sector organisations are using social media to connect with consumers, as well as the ways that social media is being used by those consumers to raise issues. The aim of this chapter is to understand how service sector organisations are currently engaging with both social media platforms and stakeholder communities; to identify whether social media represents the ideal means for community engagement by service sector organisations, or whether it is simply being used as a more cost effective broadcast tool and to identify areas of good practice in service sector online community engagement. The chapter will also explore the extent to which communications practices take into account social capital and online social influence in the communities with which they seek to engage, and the extent to which participants draw on key influencers in the design of their social media campaigns.

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