From Twitter to Facebook, social media is globalizing the 21st century world in ways no one could have ever anticipated. Social networks can be public relations tools and nightmares for both companies and prospective employees, peddling their wares in the worst job market since 1974. These free, powerful communities mean the difference between socially-aware and socially-ignorant organizations. Now, learn how they tweet, friend and update their statuses into the most influential game of online representation this world has ever seen.

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A Social Media Revolution: What it Means for a Company’s image and the 21st Century

Job Search

Introduction

At 10:43 GMT on June 24, 2009, Aimee Mitchell, also known as “AimsMitch,” made the first undeleted tweet about Michael Jackson’s death: “…hmmm Michael Jackson passed away? no way” (Picha, B., 2009). Although no one truly knows the real identity of Mitchell or how she heard about Jackson’s death before it was reported by TMZ.com, it is firmly believed that this seven-word message created one of the greatest internet-overloads of the 21st century. The 66,500 tweets spawned by Jackson’s death caused Twitter to crash. Also, sites for Google, BBC, CNN, CBS, AOL and the Los Angeles Times completely crashed or greatly slowed. As Twitter becomes the leader in breaking news, the cyber world looks toward a future of social media and its potential globalization and power. Understanding the history of social media, the current importance of Web 2.0, its effects on company image and job search as well as social media on-the-rise will illustrate the current community landscape and depict social media as not only a fun means of connecting with others, but also a powerful instrument in a modern capitalistic nation.

Abridged Social Media History (Chapman, C., 2009)

World Wide Web (1991)

The World Wide Web or Internet went public on August 6, 1991. Although only available to those with military, government or university ties in the beginning, by 1995, it became available to everyday United States citizens.
Forums (Late ’90s) Interests-based

In the late ‘90s, people began actively speaking their opinions on certain topics in the first form of social networking: forums. Here, people could relate to one another on particular topics and voice their opinions candidly. However, forums are still criticized as a non-social media Internet tool due to the fact they do not allow a user to have a community of cohorts.

SixDegrees (1997) Friend-based

By 1997, the first modern social network, as we know it today, was launched: SixDegrees. It acted much like Facebook where users could create a profile and have friends. Its popularity grew to over one million members before it was shut down in 2001.

Friendster (2002) Friend-based

Still active today, Friendster was founded in 2002 and garners over 90 million active users, primarily from the continent of Asia. Friendster operates with personal profiles and users’ abilities to become online friends with friends-of-friends. The site is often seen as a network-expanding social site.

Photobucket (2003) Photo-based

Photobucket became the first prominent photo-sharing site on the Web in 2003. It allows users to share photos and albums publicly or via password-protection.

LinkedIn (2003) Colleague-based

In 2003, the first business or colleague-based social network was established: LinkedIn. It prompts users to create a profile, which essentially represents an online résumé. Then, users can connect or link with colleagues or previous colleagues, receive recommendations, and be introduced to new contacts, furthering their professional network.
**MySpace (2003) Friend-based**

Established in 2003, MySpace quickly grew to the largest social media site in 2006, just prior to the rise of Facebook. MySpace capitalized on customizability of profiles, allowing users to create original backgrounds, embed slideshows, music players and photos, as well as mating the profiles with respective user blogs. In many instances, MySpace serves as direct Web sites for DJs and musicians.

**Facebook (2004) Friend-based**

In 2004, Facebook started out as a Harvard-only networking site started by an alumnus. However, it eventually grew to allowing only users with “.edu” e-mail addresses join to their corresponding universities and colleges on Facebook. Since then, it has opened its doors to everyone. Facebook uses personal profiles and fan pages to connect people all over the world. Recently, it has incorporated thousands of applications and games to customize one’s profile even further. In 2008, Facebook surpassed MySpace as the largest social media site and continues to grow with over 100-million users, 70 percent of which are non-American.

**Digg (2004) Interests-based**

Founded in 2004, Digg is an interests-based social site which allows users to share links and other Web-based info and then vote on or “Dig”/”Bury” the shared information. Digg is still an active site today.

**YouTube (2005) Video-Based**

In 2005, YouTube debuted as the prominent video-based social site and search engine. As of 2009, it was the second largest search engine after search-monster, Google. Like all the other social media sites, users can create profiles and upload videos they have created. YouTube has also contributed to numerous musicians’ and singers’ successes in the music industry.
Twitter (2006) Status-based

Established in 2006, Twitter debuted as a micro-blogging, status-based social media site. It capitalizes on Facebook’s “status updates” and uses the “tweets” as the main means of communication between users. Twitter has since become a social and Web phenomena, where celebrities are “followed” by fans on the site and even followed in real life based on their tweets. Twitter is also closely monitored by news agencies for breaking news as users turn to the site to update the world as to what’s going on in their lives as it happens.

Importance of Social Media in a Cyber Economy

Effective Marketing

According to the World Bank, March 2009 marked the worst economy since World War II, with world trade on its largest decline in 80 years as well. However, just one month prior to this declaration, Facebook garnered its 100-millioneth member (Stone, B., 2009). It seems that as the economy turns for the worst, social media is growing exponentially, and according to many economists and Forrester Research this may help companies continue effective marketing through social and less expensive means. According to Forrester’s 2008 research on interactive marketing, “…social applications like communities, social networking sites, and word-of-mouth marketing are proving themselves, and they depend on an abundant resource - your customers - rather than a scarce one - advertising dollars” (Bernoff, J., et al., 2008).

Government Watchdog

Much like traditional media acts as an agenda-setting tool for policy and government, social media is forcing those in power to stay on their toes and actually listen to what the American people are saying to the government and about the government. Recently, the Obama
Administration has started archiving all social media references to the government, the first time this has been done in presidential history. Whether the administration is actually analyzing the data collected is still unclear; however, the archived social media content will be organized and easy to access in the future (White house, 2010).

Breaking News Source

As shown previously with Aimee Mitchell’s first known tweet about Michael Jackson’s death, social media, and more specifically, Twitter is becoming a lead, unconfirmed source for breaking news. There have been other instances where tweets spawn further investigation into newsworthy stories. For instance, “JKrums” tweeted a picture of the US Airways plane which landed on the Hudson River on January 15, 2009 along with this: “There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy. (Twitpic, 2009)” One can only assume that this received many views and many retweets, potentially catching eyes of preoccupied journalists. In their own right, Twitter users and all social media users may eventually be considered journalists, much like bloggers are today.

What Social Media Means for a Company’s Image

Case Study: Dave Carroll, United Airlines and YouTube

In July 2009, a small-time country-esque singer made a musical YouTube video that rocked the cyber world to its very core, and its title was “United Breaks Guitars.” The song explains how United Airlines broke Dave Carroll’s $3,500 Taylor guitar while tossing it around on the runway tarmac. After months of unresolved dealings with customer service, Carroll decided to turn to the Web for justice. He posted the humorous song and video to YouTube, causing not only a reimbursement for the damage, but a social media image crisis for United.
Since the initial video, Carroll has released two more YouTube sequels and the airline company has claimed to have changed its baggage handling practices. Currently, Carroll’s first viral video has over eight million YouTube views.

**Case Study: Michael Werch, Heinz and Twitter** (Turbow, J., 2010)

In November 2009, a journalist took on the role as a “twitter squatter” and searched for an unsuspecting company to sit-on through the social media site. Michael Werch took up the twitter user name hj_heinz, referring to the respectable ketchup and condiments manufacturer, after much research into companies lacking Twitter representation. Luckily, Werch wasn’t intending any image-slander to the Heinz corporation. He just wanted to see how long he could pose as the company without being caught. Amazingly enough, ten days later Werch received a user name change to NOThj_heinz after Heinz and Twitter administration caught on. During the ten days, Werch tweeted about recipes using Heinz products and responded to customer service tweets. After the ordeal, Werch penned an article for *Advertising Age*, titled “My Life as HJ Heinz: Confessions of a Real Life Twitter Squatter.” The situation could have been a lot worse for Heinz and all other businesses should take note if they have no social media presence.

**Building Stronger Relationships**

Although social media sites can wreak havoc on a company’s image, as seen in the aforementioned case studies, they can also be extremely beneficial- almost worth their weight in gold. By participating in two-way communication outlets with consumers and stakeholders, companies show they care, giving rise to a strong sense of corporate social responsibility. Instead of seeing businesses as soulless, revenue-searching entities, they are being looked at as “friends” or reachable organisms that care about their constituents.
Faster Damage Control

In addition, because corporations know more about their customers’ opinions and complaints via social media, they can react more quickly to maintain good relations. In many cases, customer service departments are taking to Web 2.0 to connect with people instead of using traditional communications means. Corporate reputation strategist Ruth Kinzey states, “Organizations that fail to listen and engage with customers, special interest groups and employees in the social media world will likely find they have relinquished control of their reputation to others” (Managing, 2010)

What Social Media Means for the 21st Century Job Search

Web Visibility

Just like corporations need exceptional visibility on the Web, job-searchers need the same. Some people have turned to sites like LinkedIn to advertise their academic assets to potential employers, and some have even purchased domain names for online portfolio and résumé purposes. However, just like any other public relations effort, there is good visibility and bad visibility.

Productive and professional Web presence like LinkedIn and online portfolios is very effective in the 21st century job search. Sales management strategist Stephen Kohnle claims, “The bottom line: In today's competitive job market, it will be the resourceful and self-motivated participant in social media that will find the perfect job” (Kohnle, S., 2009).

On the other hand, unproductive and careless Web presence like drunken photos on Facebook and swearing on status updates is an easy way to eliminate oneself from a job candidate list. Job seekers in education and government especially take concern in such online
activities. Even if a scandalous Facebook or MySpace account doesn’t prevent someone from getting hired, they have enough power to get someone fired. Karen Shuele and fellow CPAs report, “In a 2006 survey of executive recruiters, 35 percent reported removing a job candidate from consideration based on information they had uncovered online, according to www.CFO.com” (Shuele, K., et al., 2010).

**Expanded Network**

Social media sites or social networking sites do exactly what they claim to do: expand the users’ networks. However, when job searching, it’s more of a professional network than a social one. Using social media sites will not only heighten the candidate’s Web visibility, but will also expand his or her professional network, bettering the chances of job placement. Kohnle notes,

“I expanded on this by making active use of Twitter in conjunction with whoshouldifollow.com. This allowed me to find people I wanted to follow —those that may be interested in hiring me or assisting me in my job search —and market my skills to them through tweeting, where I share resources and respond to their interests and queries, as well” (Kohnle, S., 2009).

**Job Search Customizability**

One job search aspect that is especially social media-focused is customizability through unique industry communities. Many industries have their own social networking communities that work similarly to LinkedIn, but include a narrowed base of members. On top of these sites, forum-type sites like www.glassdoor.com allow users to interact and discuss companies, recruiters and job positions in more candid detail. The site gives candidates an opportunity to get an inside look at what a company is really like before an interview or can give vital contact
information for particular companies. However, at the end of the day, the focus on social media while job searching should always be quality, not quantity of connections. Shuele claims,

“Lauryn Franzoni, vice president and executive director at ExecuNet (www.Execunet.com), a networking site for executives, advises social networkers to focus on quality rather than quantity in building their networks. “Networking is not about how many people [you’re] connected to,” she explained to BusinessWeek. “It’s a matter of connecting to people who will help [you] get results” (Shuele, K., et al., 2010).

**Social Media on the Horizon** (Wylie, P., 2010)

**Loopt (2005) Location-based**

Founded in 2005, Loopt is a cell phone-based GPS sharing network. It’s compatible with most PDA style cell phones and has been integrated into Facebook and Twitter. Status updates with a location link can be sent via Loopt to a user's Twitter status or Facebook status. Loopt has been a pioneer in “geosocial networking”. Loopt currently has three million users.

**Groupon (2008) Purchase-based**

Although typically seen as another run-of-the-mill coupon Web site, Groupon has socialized the thrifty world by making the savings localized in separate markets. According to Wylie, “The site uses social networking to get users to share offers with their communities, in order to reach the target number of customers the “Groupon” requires to activate” (Wylie, P., 2010).
**Blippy (2009) Purchase-based**

Another purchase-based social network on the rise is Blippy. With users’ permission, the site posts their recent purchases and allows fellow users to comment on them. Here, Wylie describes the potential of the site, “If the service begins to attract a large user base, this community could be very valuable to retailers looking at general purchasing trends” (Wylie, P., 2010).

**FourSquare (2009) Location-based**

Established in 2009, FourSquare is another location-based social networking site; however, it is unlike Loopt in the regard that it gives users points as they “check-in” at certain registered locations. Currently, 800 establishments are offering incentives through FourSquare to customers who check-in at their locations.

**Google Buzz (2010) Status-based**

Another Google product came out this year, marrying two already existing applications, Google Maps and Gmail. Google Buzz is fairly similar to Facebook and Twitter where users create profiles, update statuses and can upload photos and videos. However, through Google Buzz users can make comments about vendors and locations on Google Maps.

**Social Television (unreleased)**

In this ever-changing economic landscape, corporations seem to be disappearing, merging, and even acquiring those on the verge of disappearing. For example, in early December 2009, Comcast acquired NBC from General Electric, and even before that in May 2008 Comcast acquired web address book and social media company Plaxo. This very acquisition may hold the key to the future of social media and television as one, single time-consuming phenomena.
According to Nielsen’s A2/M2 Three Screen Report for the first quarter of 2009, Americans were spending the majority of their media time watching television and then using the internet. As of March 2009, Nielsen also cited three out of every ten people using the internet also utilize the social media site Facebook. These overwhelming trends in television and social media use can also foreshadow the use of both as non-mutually exclusive entities.

Companies like Motorola, BT and Intel have all been working on the “social television” experience, and one can only assume that Comcast would potentially venture into the same innovation after its purchase of Plaxo.

**Conclusion**

Free, impactful, global. Social media is drastically changing the Internet and public relations landscape for not only job-searchers and corporations, but also everyone with Internet-access and a desire to friend, tweet and update a status. Overall, understanding the history of social media, its impact on the corporate image and the current job search as well as social media of the future will equip every culturally in-touch individual with the tools needed to succeed in this 21st century, cyber-economic, capitalistic country.
References


