

# Social Media: The New Business Communication Landscape

LEE HOPKINS



## Social Media: The New Business Communication Landscape

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## Executive summary

THE TRADITIONAL means of communicating with audiences – such as employees, customers, investment communities – have relied heavily on print-based documents, e-mail or static internet websites. Today, these methods are rapidly giving way to a new generation of internet-based tools that enable far greater levels of two-way interaction, discussion and conversation.

The media no longer own the audience. Text, audio and video are available to everyone. The internet is now the world's most powerful publishing and broadcasting platform.

The new web tools are cheap (often free) and easy-to-use, and content is now fast and easy to produce. Communicating can become seamlessly integrated with your 'regular' workload. Everyone can communicate, not just the corporate communications team. This immediacy and integration can energise your communications, creating a relationship-building ethos in the organisation that has been absent from old-style corporate communication tools.

Indeed, so fundamental has the shift been from 'static', 'brochureware' websites to the new 'conversational' ones that many pundits are calling the 'old' internet 'Web 1.0' and this new web world 'Web 2.0', reflecting dramatic improvement based, in large part, on improved software coding and functionality.

A key pointer to this shift towards a 'conversational web' is the book

*The Cluetrain Manifesto*.<sup>1</sup> This book was the first website to be made into a book and comprises the '95 theses', which the authors called the elements of the conversational web.

The key underpinning element to the '95 theses' is that markets are now 'conversations', and unless companies are willing to enter into that 'conversation', they are going to miss out. The conversation is happening anyway, the authors contend, thus it is better to join in and have a say, than risk having lies and distortions go unchallenged in the conversations that are happening every day around the proverbial water cooler and over coffee, as well as in phone calls, e-mails, forums and online meeting areas.

The tools that enable companies to join in the conversations (happening in every industry and marketplace) have been named social media tools, because of the new social nature of the internet. Whereas mainstream media – such as newspapers, TV, radio and magazines – are traditionally one-way media devices (experts pontificate and readers have little opportunity to contribute or start any discussion with the author), social media enables players, protagonists, pundits and the public to interact, engage and build rapport more easily than ever before.

The three biggest and most widely-used social media tools are blogging, podcasting and video. It is probably impossible to count the number of blogs in the world today.

Technorati.com – the world’s biggest blog monitoring and searching service – now indexes nearly 113m blogs worldwide. One hundred and seventy five thousand new blogging websites are brought online every day and 1.6m blogposts (think of a blogpost as an article published by someone on his/her own website) are published every 24 hours – working out to be 18 new posts each second.

There are currently in excess of 100,000 podcasts and the number is growing fast, though not as fast as blogs. But Apple’s free software – iTunes – has done more to grow podcasting than any technical innovation other than the creation of the RSS code that allowed podcasting to exist. Podcasts are a powerful communication tool in any company’s communication distribution and public relations toolbox, and more and more are turning to podcasts to engage with jaded audiences who are turning away from traditional mainstream media outlets in ever greater numbers.

Add to this the recent boom in online video through YouTube and the millions of photos uploaded through photo storage and sharing services like Flickr, and you can see how the internet is transforming into a broadcasting, as well as a text-based publishing platform.

Micro-blogging services like Twitter and Jaiku are just the latest in a long and never-ending line of improvements in the technical process of communication.

Every month sees new innovations and services aiming to facilitate conversations, but keeping up with them is more than a full-time job. Without a personal network of informed, net-savvy peers, any communicator and leader would be hard-pressed to know what the right tools are in any given situation. Without a robust strategy, even the best tools can turn out to be useless.

In this report the reader will be able to tap into the collective minds of some of the world’s sharpest thinkers in the areas of business and leadership communication. The reader will learn of the various communication challenges that affect and afflict all organisations, the strategies that overcome them and the tools needed to change the way your organisation communicates to the marketplace.

The report is also punctuated with case studies, which enable the reader to learn and discover how other organisations have met the communication challenges associated with social media tools, and gain confidence to try out some of the many ideas captured in this report.

The report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces social media and looks at the evolution of communication. This chapter gives the reader a solid grounding in the major ‘players’ of the social media landscape and the underpinning technologies of blogs, podcasts, videocasts (video podcasts) and wikis. Readers can come away with tips and hard-won secrets from the trenches of the social media front line, i.e those organisations which have long been experimenting with social media tools and have learned lessons from the pitfalls.

Chapter 2 takes the reader through the virtual worlds journey, considering what kinds of virtual worlds and major players there are in each type, and their geographic, demographic and psychographic differences that exist within all of these various and varied properties.

Chapter 3 offers expert advice on how to engage your social media audience and have them positively attend to your brand, product or service. You could, of course, visit every single social networking property and spend innumerable hours on each of them, or you could utilise SMART (Social

Media Aggregation and Republishing Tools<sup>®</sup>) to better manage your valuable time. The principles of online marketing haven't fundamentally changed, but they have been reshaped by the rules of engagement in this new communication landscape.

The best tools in the world are useless without a plan and Chapter 4 examines the implementation of a social media strategy to inform internal cross-company communication, thought leadership, community brand raising, digital reputation, crisis communications and team working. This chapter also enables the reader to discover how others have solved the business communicator's perennial challenge of how to 'sell' communication innovations to senior management and how others are measuring the impact of social media on their communications and digital reputation.

Chapter 5 investigates some of the bleeding-edge tools available to business communicators and social media practitioners, and enables the reader to decipher the obscure language of the media gurus to gain a better understanding of what is on offer.

Chapter 6 analyses where the new communication landscape is leading us and why having a sense of history is vital to avoid being accused by sceptics of 'drinking the 'Kool-aid'. There is no doubt that much of what is currently unfolding in the social media space is challenging to existing practitioners, but there are lessons to be learnt from both old technologies and old practices, and benefits to be gained from applying the relevant elements of old processes with the new technologies. I hope after reading this report you will be able to recognise a pothole from a mile away.

In addition to the six chapters, there is a useful glossary of social media terms appended to the report, as well as

a list of additional resources should you wish to explore this new communication landscape further.

It's a really exciting time for business communicators at the moment and your own personal journey starts on the next page...

#### Reference

1. Levine, F., Locke, C., Searls, D., and Weinberger, D., *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, Basic Books.



## About the author

LEE HOPKINS is a management psychologist and business communicator with nearly 30 years of experience in helping businesses communicate better for improved results and financial returns.

At the leading edge of online business communication in Australia, Lee understands the transformative nature of social media and he spends a considerable amount of time advising businesses, business communities and individual business communicators on the tectonic cultural shifts that new communications technology is facilitating, and how they can best position themselves to take advantage of them.

In addition, he is currently undertaking doctoral research at the University of South Australia's School of Communication, looking at how virtual worlds can impact on the effectiveness and profitability of small to medium-sized businesses.

An internationally sought-after speaker, Lee combines his passion for employee and online business communication with his dynamic presentation skills to create 'once seen, never forgotten' live experiences.

He has written over 200 articles on business communication available for reading at: <http://www.LeeHopkins.com>. Additionally, his blogs, podcasts and vidcasts can be found at: <http://www.LeeHopkins.net>

