The Social Media Mindset: A Narrative View of Public Relations and Marketing in the Web 2.0 Environment

Deborah H. French

Abstract

With widespread access to a vast array of tools for creating and distributing messages across the globe, people with no special training or expertise are now empowered as participants in mass media, an arena formerly characterized by one-way messaging and dominated by an elite few. Web 2.0, a term that has been used to describe this social media environment, has established a new order based on a conversational model of two-way messaging in which the demand for authenticity has replaced blind reverence for authority. Significant evidence suggests that many public relations and marketing professionals are lagging behind the curve in adapting to the new media environment, clinging to a traditional messaging approach that is no longer viable. Narrative psychology offers a frame through which we may view this dynamic, taking into account the ongoing process of identity development and the role of the larger community in the stories we make of our life experiences. This view may be useful for marketing and PR professionals in adapting their roles to meet the changing needs, and demands, of consumers.

Introduction

Public relations professionals, as well as all those who own or work in any business or organization that depends upon the public for revenue or funding, membership or votes, are directly impacted by the emergence of new social media tools. Seasoned PR people have become accustomed to the sobriquet “spin doctor” – a term that tends to connote dishonesty and deception. But the rules of mass communication have changed, and those who want to stay ahead must adopt an outlook distinctly different from that of the days when radio, television and newspapers were the primary vehicles for media coverage. The tag line of Fox News’s controversial talk show host Bill O’Reilly may or may not be true for the Factor, but it’s good advice for anyone in the business of sending public messages in the new socially mediated world order: “The spin stops here” (O’Reilly, 2009).

Effective public relations and marketing has been redefined in response to the ways social media is fundamentally changing how people provide and receive information. If “spin” and “hype” were the keywords of the past, their Web. 2.0 counterparts are “authenticity” and “transparency.” In a report presented by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007), the authors assert, “We must shift
from changing perception to changing realities” (p. 16). “In a word,” they claim, “authenticity will be the coin of the realm for successful corporations and for those who lead them” (p. 6)

The Theory: What Narrative Psychology Contributes to Our Understanding of the New Media Mindset

From a narrative psychology perspective, this quest for authenticity can be understood as an important aspect of identity development. If we consider our concept of self as an ongoing process in which we create stories based on our life experiences, it is reasonable to conclude that identity continues to be shaped throughout adulthood. McAdams (1993) asserts, “Once an individual realizes that he or she is responsible for defining the self, the issue of self definition remains a preoccupation through most the adult years” (p. 96). As our adult experiences increasingly expand our human networks through active participation in media, it is also reasonable to conclude that these connections will play a role in the ongoing refinement of our personal narratives. Thorne and Nam (2007) note that “personal identity is not only a unique individual project, but is also contoured by macrocultural values and, more proximally, by the people to whom we tell our stories” (p. 120). They further suggest that, for the Western world, expanded opportunities to choose the direction of our lives has contributed to an increased focus on identity development:

In the twentieth century, the concern for identity has grown stronger as Westerners face a proliferation of occupational and ideological choices. In addition, many social critics have lamented a growing alienation among twentieth-century adults who, more than ever before, have lost faith in authoritative institutions (p. 84).

McAdams (1993) tells us “we must seek credibility in our life stories” (p. 111). He adds, “In identity, the good story manifests itself more than the mere appearance of credibility. It must really be credible, and accountable to facts that can be known or found out” (p. 111). Social media has given equal voice to those who were formerly planted firmly on the receiving end of media messaging. Our ability to not only respond but create our own messages, often bypassing traditional media altogether, allows us to challenge the assertions of powerful corporations and government officials, news reports and television advertisements. Bloggers and Twitterers and Facebook users are now asking each other what they think and deciding for themselves who, and what, to believe. Consumers’ search for authenticity, coupled with direct access to millions of other people, presents a formidable challenge to those marketers and PR professionals who cling to the one-way messaging of the past.

Acknowledging the role of new media and the expanded communities it creates as important factors in identity development constitutes a valuable framework for marketers and PR professionals who seek to adopt new approaches and new measurements of success. Thought leaders in marketing strategy, though they may not have any formal background in psychology,
have recognized intuitively that the mindset of the consumer has changed and that successful marketing and PR campaigns must change accordingly. If we think of it in narrative terms, for decades marketers have collectively told themselves a story that goes something like this: “We are the experts; we possess the knowledge and the power, and we must use these to persuade those with less knowledge and power to buy what we have to sell.” But, as Thorne and Nam (2007) note, “Our stories get challenged, applauded and amended by others, and sometimes come back to bite us” (p. 120) Advocating a socially situated approach to the life-story perspective, the authors point out:

*In terms of psychological development, we know that individuals tend to remember and struggle to make meaning of experiences that disrupt their expectations, and that disruptive events may get incorporated into the life story as turning points, high points, low points, or dismissed as irrelevant to who one really is* (p. 120).

We can consider, then, that as people have increasingly experienced disappointment and frustration with the goods, services and ideas they have been sold, and that simultaneously we have increasingly engaged in new networks of communications enabling us to share these disruptions in our expectations with others who have been similarly affected, this story has been adapted on both the personal and collective levels. The personal stories we create are unique to each individual; the collective story, however, is the narrative that draws on our shared experience. It is this collective narrative that savvy leaders in marketing and PR seem to have grasped, while many professionals in the field struggle to adapt to the changing landscape.

**The Practice: What Thought Leaders in Marketing and PR Are Saying**

In The New Rules of Marketing and PR, marketing strategist David Meerman Scott (2007) observes, “The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media. Blogs, online news releases and other forms of Web content let organizations communicate directly with buyers” (p.11). “Instead of one-way interruption,” Scott says, “Web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a buyer needs it” (p. 7). As noted, “buyers” may be people who purchase a product or service, or they may simply be those we want to attract to our cause, for any number of reasons. Cindy Gordon (as cited in Scott, 2008) vice president of new media and marketing partnerships for Universal Orlando Resort, underscores the importance of two-way participation:

*“The power of the Internet makes it easier for people to fall in love with you faster. But beware - - it also makes it easier for them to fall out of love with you faster. It’s a double-edged sword. Listen constantly to what’s being said about you. Social media technologies do not make a brand viral; they merely allow consumers to tell others about good brands”* (p. 6).

The new PR isn’t aimed at the short-term goal of selling products or services so much as it is on building relationships for long-term success. Scott advocates publishing free content, through blogs (or vlogs), podcasts (or vodcasts), e-books and other social media tools, to meet specific needs of audience members – without mentioning one’s business or product. The owner of a pet
supply store, for example, might create a vodcast (podcast with video content) demonstrating puppy training tips; an attorney might provide free legal advice on her blog. The short-term marketing mentality resists giving away what we can sell; the long-term outlook recognizes that this approach builds trust and establishes the marketer as authentic.

Bryan and Jeffrey Eisenberg (as cited in Scott, 2007), authors of Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?: Persuading Customers When They Ignore Marketing, devised a successful campaign to promote their book that began with posts on their blog. Their strategy included sending one news release every day for several months via PRWeb – but rather than pitching the book itself, the authors promoted the concepts contained in the book. Waiting for Your Cat to Bark reached number one on the Wall Street Journal Business Bestseller list (p. 27). Josh Morgan (2009) tells of finding a request on LinkedIn for a public relations firm with expertise in the education arena – his specialty. He provided his company’s background along with a link to the website, but points out that even more significant was his inclusion of links for several other competitor firms, demonstrating his own company’s confidence and knowledge. Morgan focused on establishing his authenticity, even at the risk of losing customers to his competitors, because he understood the value of relationship-building. His firm won the contract.

These examples highlight the approach that many forward-thinking marketers are successfully employing to promote their products and services without the hype that characterized former strategies.

Phillip Sheldrake (2008) emphasizes the importance of respecting the audience: “Your stakeholders now collectively define what your brand means, what it stands for, based on their lifelong interactions with your organization… You can’t tell them, you can only make sure your brand values permeate everything you do, continuously, so they end up reaching the conclusion about your brand that you want them to” (p.13). In order to provide relevant content, it’s critical that we understand who our audience is, and to develop what Scott calls “buyer personas.” Who are the individuals and groups that influence the organization’s success? What are their characteristics? Their interests and needs? What people are seeking, Scott explains, “is content that first describes the issues and problems they face, and then provides details on how to solve those problems” (p.33). Once the buyer persona has been identified, Scott recommends logging onto the blogs and websites those individuals are likely to read, and even adapting the language of our messaging to their style. “Building buyer personas,” Scott adds, “is the first step and probably the single most important thing that you will do in creating your marketing and PR plan” (p.117).

One obstacle for those who want to promote themselves, their business or their client’s business is the temptation to jump into a social media platform without identifying clear goals. Establishing a presence on Facebook, which boasts over 175 million active users (Facebook.com, 2009), may be a great way to increase exposure – but without clearly defined goals the value of that exposure is questionable – and potentially damaging. When people visit business pages on Facebook, their interest should lead them to the business's website and/or blog. If these sites don’t exist, or fail to offer valuable content, potential customers are likely to be deterred. Because these people are active users of social media they have tremendous word-of-mouth power to spread opinions -- positive or negative. A thread containing critical
commentary has the potential to defeat a business owner’s intention of expanding his customer base. Furthermore, in a reversal of the expected outcome, effectively increasing the number of contacts yet failing to provide valuable content may cause a business to end up worse off than if nothing had been done at all. Nicole Jordan (2008) Director of PR & Marcom at the Rubicon Project based in Los Angeles says, “Eyeballs and general awareness of your company does not create critical mass quantities of customers without continuous work on many fronts beyond media relation’s activities” (para. 9).

The tools of social media will be effective only when marketers ensure that every outreach measure leads to the content people are seeking. “Know the goals, and let content drive the action,” Scott urges (p. 37). “At successful organizations, news releases, blogs, Web sites, podcasts and other content draw visitors into the sales-consideration cycle, then funnel them toward the place where the action occurs” (p. 38).

A second obstacle to success is reliance on inappropriate measures to determine how successfully marketing goals are being achieved. It’s important to keep in mind that the most significant change brought about by the new social media wave is not the tools themselves, but the ways in which they empower users to communicate. This change is radical; that cannot be overstressed. Social media is all about giving voice to the underrepresented; it’s a tremendous mistake to ignore these voices or to underestimate their potential impact. Furthermore, we can’t employ a Neilson-rating strategy to the social Web; for one thing, demographics are still very fuzzy in these media. On Facebook, for example, Dickman (2008) tells us that “targeted advertising cannot be created by looking at ethnicity, income, religious/political views or language at this time” (p. 2). Facebook users, like the users of other social media, are not required to supply demographic information to participate. Furthermore, the number of people who visit a Web site, blog or Facebook page does not necessarily correspond with the number of consumers who will take action, or, if they do, what action they will take. A salient feature of the social media environment is its viral nature. Those consumers who find what they are looking for will share their positive experiences with others; those who are disappointed will communicate their negative views. In either case, these opinions will continue to proliferate through ongoing contacts with increasing numbers of others. Scott (2007) writes:

“Many marketers and PR people focus on the wrong measures of success. With web sites, people will often tell me things like, ‘We want to have ten thousand unique visitors each month to our site.’ And PR measurement is often similarly irrelevant: ‘We want ten mentions in the trade press and three national magazine hits each month’” (p.115).

Scott supports the notion that traffic is generally a poor measuring stick, pointing out that it’s less about how many people see or hear your message than it is about what they do next. A white paper by BuzzLogic (2008) reinforces the point:

“Many marketers embracing social media are bringing old skills to a new game, and they’re making a critical miscalculation. The social media phenomenon is not just a new set of communications vehicles for broadcasting value propositions to a target market. It’s about customers sharing information to make better decisions, precisely because they’re jaded by the packaging and spin that typifies most marketing and advertising campaigns” (p. 2).
Universal McCann’s (2008) report based on a study of 17,000 internet users in 29 countries identifies a fundamental reality that marketing and PR professionals must embrace if they are to make the most of social media: “The truth cannot be managed in the way it was when a few gatekeepers controlled the distribution of information” (p. 32). For businesses that manage their own public relations, as well as for PR professionals who represent the interests of their clients, it is critical to adopt new ways of thinking to accommodate the new ways in which people are communicating. Marketing strategist Linas Simonis (2008) goes so far as to warn companies against letting public relations firms run their blogs, noting that PR people tend to dismiss bloggers as non-experts and as a result often fail to engage in authentic conversation. It is true that many bloggers offer unsubstantiated opinions -- but their influence, nonetheless, cannot be underestimated.

SmashLAB’s Eric Karjaluoto (2008, March 1) warns:

“Those who have been least successful in social media have often been so as a result of applying traditional messaging to an environment that it doesn’t resonate in. Just like in real-life, these communities tend to respond best to authentic, honest and respectable dialogue and conduct... Organizations should concentrate on delivering value to interested parties without immediately concerning themselves with the need to sell product. Effective social media efforts build relationships between companies and consumers. Consider it a ‘conversation’” (p.7).

Jennifer Leggio (2009, February 21), director of strategic communications at Fortinet, a leading network security appliance vendor, conducted an online survey of leaders in business and marketing focusing on their organizations’ public relations agencies. Her intention was to learn which agencies were making the best uses of social media on behalf of their clients. The survey, based on data collected from November 2008-January 2009, produced 541 qualified respondents who identified themselves as decision-makers in their companies, ranging in size from startup businesses to those with 1000-plus employees. Leggio acknowledges that the results of the study are not conclusive, but says that if it “showed anything, it’s that the disconnect between agencies and clients is huge” (para. 2).

MarketingSherpa (2009), a research firm specializing in tracking effective marketing strategies, conducted a Social Media Marketing and PR Benchmark Survey to understand what holds marketing professionals back when it comes to social media. They report:

Lack of knowledge is seen as the major barrier to adopting a social media marketing strategy. This lack of experience can create missteps that might scare marketers away from social media – despite education that comes fast when adopting a social strategy (para.1).

These findings are important in understanding the disconnect between marketing professionals and their potential audiences; if marketers are not engaged in the communities in which their targeted audience exist they cannot listen to the conversation, and as a result, their opportunities to learn from and contribute to the narrative is minimized.

Figure 1 shows the results of the MarketingSherpa (2009) survey measuring the most significant barriers to social media adoption.
Those PR professionals and marketers who are not yet making effective use of social media tools are not necessarily rejecting the value of these tools; there are several legitimate reasons for their hesitation. As Figure 1 indicates, the results of the survey show that only 14 percent of respondents believed social media was "not relevant" (MarketingSherpa, 2009, February 3) for their business. Following "lack of knowledgeable staff" (MarketingSherpa, 2009, February 3), concerns about how to measure ROI, the belief that available funds were insufficient, lack of support from management and the technical difficulties associated with implementing these media ranked, respectively, as the top four reasons these professionals had not adopted social media tools for their marketing endeavors. Jordan (2008, August 13) comments, “There is a massive education process that needs to occur, and it needs to happen across several industry levels” (para. 21).

If the bad news is that many of those who seem to have the most at stake in making good use of social media are stuck in a time warp, the good news may be that they’re all stuck in it together. Why is this good news? Because despite their late entry into the realm of social media, they're still no further behind than most of their competitors.

The concerns shared by most non-users in the MarketingSherpa (2009) report are legitimate; but many of these could be allayed if their companies were to take advantage existing resources. Almost every company has some employees who are knowledgeable in social media; technical concerns could be managed in a relatively short time at little cost if they were assigned the task of bringing others up to date as a first step in staff training. Carried out in conjunction with an organized company-wide effort to increase understanding by taking advantage of the vast amount of free information available on the Web, these efforts could prove to be very effective. Concerns about funding could then be addressed with clear knowledge of the goals. Most of the basic tools of social media are free or very low-cost; additional services can be implemented over time according to budgetary allowances.

If recognizing that a problem exists is the first step to solving it, marketers and PR people who are overwhelmed by the number of new tools available and their own lack of knowledge about how to use them are actually on track for progress. The most important things they must recognize are (1) now is the time to become educated in these media, and (2) education involves much more than just learning how to use the tools; it means adopting new ways of thinking about communication.

**Conclusion**

Seasoned leaders in these fields have spent years developing their knowledge and skills. The challenge to adopt new outlooks, new attitudes and new tools can be daunting. Even more intimidating for some may be the realization that, in many instances, they must be willing to accept advice from others far less experienced than they in traditional approaches. There will likely be a tendency to view these sources with some skepticism, but those who desire to succeed
must be willing to take the risk. Within the scope of media psychology, understanding the
communications that take place in new media contexts as an aspect of identity development critical
to the creation of good life stories is a first step to bridging the gap. Furthermore, as the
collective identity of the consumer public continues to be redefined in the context of
relationship-building, marketers and PR people will need to re-invent aspects of their own identity
to accommodate the shift in power that has positioned the consumer at the top. Then, and only
then, will they be equipped to contribute to an authentic conversation.

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