

A LITTLE MORE CONVERSATION

There is much debate about how organisations can best harness the power of social media. For Mignon van Halderen, its strength lies with the opportunity it gives companies to engage in conversation with their stakeholders.

Text Russell Gilbert

The dialogue between companies and stakeholders has taken on a new dimension of importance in recent years, particularly as our networked and interconnected societies have become more aware, concerned, and inquisitive about the issues that affect them. What stakeholders expect from organisations is engagement in public discussion. What's more, they want organisations to not just listen to their concerns, but to explain their perspectives and stance on whatever these issues may be.

"For many companies the big issues are very much social ones – climate change, energy efficiency and human rights, for example," says Mignon van Halderen, Assistant Professor of Corporate Communication at RSM's Corporate Communication Centre.

ExxonMobil - a company that for years had ignored the public debate going on around it about climate change – realised the potential of social media and began blogging. A reflection of how important they consider this open dialogue is the fact that the blog is fronted by the company's vice president of public and government affairs, who personally expresses the company's viewpoint on matters that are of serious concern to stakeholders (www.exxonmobilperspectives.com).

But why – where is the value in this? Van Halderen explains: "Because of the way society

works today, companies can only keep their licence to operate if they are responsive to the concerns of stakeholders, especially as non-governmental organisations and institutional investors become more powerful and have opinions that carry greater weight."

Social media, she asserts, is a powerful way of building conversations between companies and diverse groups of stakeholders, and companies should use it as means to improve and leverage their corporate reputation. "Social media is unique in that it allows companies to tell their own side of the story rather than have others – usually those with antagonistic perspectives – do the talking for them," she says.

Developing a social media strategy

In the education programmes run by the Corporate Communication Centre, Van Halderen notes that, increasingly, managers are asking how their organisation should go



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Mignon van Halderen is Assistant Professor of Corporate Communication with RSM's Corporate Communication Centre. The centre conducts scientific and applied research for the business community and offers a wide range of courses.

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about including social media in their communications strategies.

“Too many companies think a social media strategy means all they have to do is get themselves on to Facebook and Twitter and start saying things they presume people want to hear,” she says. “That is blindly following the social media hype. It is absolutely essential that managers at the top of organisations have a clear idea of how they want to position the company, what key messages they want to get across and in what kind of style.”

Van Halderen distinguishes four types of social media approaches, which can be categorised along two dimensions common to reputation management: “The first is whether the social media strategy is focused on *Opportunity* or *Risk Aversion*. The second dimension is whether the company is to be *Proactive* or *Reactive*. Combining the two gives four different approaches.”

When making the transition from a reactive-risk aversion approach to a proactive-opportunity focus, Van Halderen believes that many organisations struggle because they feel uncomfortable with the transparency of social media. “Taking a proactive approach to the potential reputation management risks of social media is a learning curve, one that some companies handle better than others,” she says.

One company often cited as offering an example of best practice in social media communications is Kodak. The company has numerous blogs and multiple profiles on channels such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter.

“Their presence has a consistent look and feel about it – regardless of which channel you are on, which is important for identity projection purposes,” she says. “They have put together an impressive

policy handbook, one that provides clear guidelines for employees and also explains very clearly the thinking behind their social media strategy. Kodak have even made it freely available for the public to download, which is a great move and shows that they are forerunners in the strategic use of social media.”

Such an open attitude helps reinforce organisational understanding of what is perhaps the greatest revelation concerning social media – that communications between organisations and the outside world are no longer essentially one way.

Aside from a well-formulated social media strategy, “Companies would do well not to underestimate the power of tone of voice,” she says. “Nestlé learned this to their cost when a public outcry developed over their use of palm oils. Claims were disseminated on YouTube by Greenpeace that the production of it caused deforestation in Indonesia and thus endangered Orang-utans.”

Amid cries of “Kit Kat Killers” and “Give orang-utans a break”, Nestle responded aggressively, demanding the video be removed and, astonishingly, verbally

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Five point plan for developing a social media strategy.

1. **Assess your reputation goals. Once defined, see how social media can help you reach those goals and which channels can do so specifically.**
2. **Make sure you have clear guidelines in place for all employees that identify and explain the organisation's goals, standards and expectations, and the reasons behind them.**
3. **Understand that a shared voice is best when communicating through social media. This means developing one collective personality organisation-wide and using one tone of voice in all conversations.**
4. **Adapt a conversational mindset. You cannot have a conversation if you are not listening to the other person.**
5. **Empower your employees to use social media. Give them the tools and procedures to do so.**

attacking people who had expressed their concerns on the company's Facebook page. It was a public relations disaster for Nestlé and a resounding triumph for the Greenpeace campaign.

“Taking a defensive stance and using an aggressive tone of voice when dealing with stakeholder concerns is a big mistake,” Van Halderen warns.

Once upon a time corporate communications were primarily about expressing organisational perspectives outwardly. But with social media, exactly as with conversations in every day life, the secret is in knowing how to listen – and responding to what people are saying both directly to you and about you in a way that develops real engagement among your stakeholders. “This,” says Van Halderen, “is the true strength of social media that companies should be looking to leverage.” ■