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## Web 2.0: The medium is the message, but what's the result?

by Caroline Kealey

Let's face it: These are tough times to be a professional communicator.

Our audiences have taken the reins of what is indisputably the dominating mass communication medium of our era: the Internet.

Web 2.0, characterized by social media applications for peer-to-peer collaboration such as [YouTube](#), [MySpace](#) and [Wikipedia](#) is challenging all of our basic assumptions as communication practitioners. The astonishing rise of social networking structures and content is in effect challenging the very existence of the traditional corporate communication function.

The tidal wave of Web 2.0 has been unleashed, and with it comes a whole new set of expectations, and cultural and consumer norms. The "www" has come to stand for the Wild, Wild West for communicators.

### Turning corporate communication on its head

As last October marked the 100th anniversary of the [first press release](#), the traditional "spray and pray" rules of issuing messages through static, hierarchical and largely one-way channels are fading into obsolescence—at Web speed.

Consider the following:

- There are now 57 million bloggers worldwide and counting, according to Forrester Research's "QuickTake: The Three Rules of Social Computing."
- MySpace has over one hundred million users, and is growing at a rate of half a million new users a week, according to *Wikinomics* by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams.
- Jupiter Research reports that among online users, 25 percent are active creators of online content—they have created web pages, blogs or forum comments.

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### Related Resources:

- [Eight Meaningful Measures of Social Media](#)  
Those who want to measure the ROI of their web sites should consider looking beyond the standard page view, which is proving a less effective and relevant metric as more interactive features emerge.
- [How to Measure Social Media: A quick and easy guide to choosing metrics](#)  
It's social media measuring made easy! Answer three critical questions, and find which metrics you can use to gauge your success.
- [Measuring Social Media Marketing: It's easier than you think!](#)  
The first step in measuring the ROI of your social media marketing efforts is to determine your overall marketing goals.

**What's next?**

As communicators, we may have met our biggest challenge yet in delivering and demonstrating value in the context of the "digital commons"—where the majority of our audiences now live, work and play.

While measurement has historically been the communicator's Achilles' heel, it is particularly important to consider effective ways of tracking success as we navigate the new waters of Web 2.0.

What follows is a simple step-by-step guide to help you get started in delivering and capturing communication value in the social media landscape.

**1. Define success.**

The single most important consideration in embarking on any activity related to social media is to begin by defining success. Ask yourself:

- What are the specific objectives of the social media initiative?
- How are these objectives tied to our corporate objectives?
- How will we know when we've succeeded?

An example of this results-based orientation is Ernst & Young's highly innovative and successful student recruitment program on [Facebook](#). The firm has young employees who "sit" on a message wall and engage Facebook users in conversations about career opportunities. In addition to the soft benefits of securing a competitive advantage in brand positioning among its target market, the firm can demonstrate success by virtue of having sound objectives tied to targeted results. Meaningful metrics could include:

- Number of qualified candidates engaged.
- Number of leads to career fairs generated.
- Number of hires/cost per hire.

A sound evaluation framework anchored in clear statements of objectives and results in alignment with corporate objectives in areas of recruitment and branding can demonstrate the value of this initiative.

**2. Build a performance indicator matrix.**

Once the objectives of working in a social media context are clear (e.g., build brand awareness, solidify stakeholder relationships, conduct reputation management), the next step is to build a meaningful matrix of relevant indicators to track. Provided here is a suggested [Communications Performance Indicator Matrix](#).

A "chain of evidence" demonstrating various facets of success will help refine the communication approach based on a fulsome understanding of the implications of the initiative. This focus on carefully predetermined indicators will also equip you to illustrate sound, evidence-based results.

**3. Focus on the value of relationships.**

Social media are about relationships—people connecting to people to exchange ideas, co-create and foster knowledge.

How then are communicators to deliver and measure value in this messy, amorphous context of human relationships?

The basic principles of results-based communication management apply. The key is to go back to the definition of success: What are you trying to achieve in terms of relationships using social media channels?

For example:

- Dove's extremely successful [campaignforrealbeauty](#) is about deepening customer relationships by engaging its market in a conversation about self-esteem.
- [Sermo's](#) online platform for building community among physicians is designed to identify emerging market opportunities in health care.
- [Sun Microsystem's](#) executive and employee blogs aim to build staff and customer engagement.

Communicators can add significant value to their organizations by using Web 2.0 spaces to engage audiences in relationships that help achieve objectives.

The caveat is that this work must be done within the social and cultural norms of the "digital commons." By definition, social networking forums are spaces for sharing ideas and co-creating—they can be used very effectively to track issues, test approaches or refine product development based on user feedback.

Practitioners can, and should, proactively monitor social media sites relevant to their sector/industry and contribute content or offer corrections as appropriate.

Just remember: This is about collaboration and creation, not about command and control.

The communication profession is at a critical point—we are recognized for our ability to be agile and responsive. We have expert understanding of messaging and how ideas are shaped and propagated. Now, the trick is to embrace the power of social media and apply our strengths strategically in this new arena, the online meeting place where ideas, insight and information can flourish.

If we can achieve that, our potential will be limitless.

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