



## eTip #39

### How Social is Your Social Media

The question is no longer whether an organization should invest in social media, but rather how much they should invest in it? As social media becomes an important part of an organization's communications plan, it is critical to determine what roles social media play in an organization. For this month's eTip, we interviewed veteran PR/Communications expert Susan Tull on the topic of determining your investment in social media.

#### **BMC: What is your experience in PR and communications and how did you get started?**

**Tull:** I'm a former broadcast journalist-turned-PR/communications professional with more than two decades of experience. I started as a daily news TV reporter where I learned how journalists think/operate and eventually switched over to PR. At Edelman Public Relations Worldwide, I worked with global industry leaders including Texas Instruments, UPS, Greyhound Lines, La Quinta Inn & Suites, New York Life and Trammell Crow Company. I've also worked in-house – as National Director of PR for Mothers Against Drunk Driving and subsequently as Vice President of Corporate Communications for Convio (NASDAQ: CNVO), which provides software-as-a-service to help nonprofits fundraise. Since 2007, I have had my own communications consulting business.

#### **BMC: How much should an organization invest in social media as part of its communications plan?**

**Tull:** This is highly variable and depends on the extent to which: 1) an organization's target audience utilizes social media; and/or 2) the types of information you have to share lends itself to effective dissemination via social media. Are your customers regular users of Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Flickr, their smart phones and more for getting information? And to what extent are they using social media versus other communication channels? Do you want to encourage interaction and what level of company transparency is acceptable?

Any solid communications strategy begins by asking not only what is your message and call-to-action but who do you want to reach and what channels will be the most effective for reaching those audiences with the content we have. An organization's answers to those questions may suggest heavy – even exclusive or nearly exclusive – use of social media or limited, integrated use with other, more traditional communication channels.

That said, virtually every organization can benefit from utilizing social media to some extent, even if only on a limited basis. Social media allows any organization to have its own channels – channels that it exclusively controls – for reaching target audiences with accurate information and perspective. You no longer have to rely exclusively on third-parties, i.e., media outlets, to reach and influence your targets. This becomes especially important if your organization experiences an adverse development or crisis. Having a blog, as well as a presence on both Facebook and Twitter gives you some control over the information that gets disseminated and is shaping target audience perceptions.

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**BMC: In what ways can social media actually hinder business objectives?**

**Tull:** There's an element of transparency with most social media, particularly those that allow anyone to comment on your organization and/or your postings. If your organization isn't doing "the right thing", nowadays it's very easy for your competitors and consumers to call you out and seriously damage your brand, which can translate to lost revenue. For example, if a company is slow to acknowledge and also communicate its plan and take action to address a major product defect, expect to see a lot of postings on Twitter, Facebook, Yelp and elsewhere. Expect reporters to consider these sites as sources that influence their coverage. Publicly traded companies also face the prospect of losing investor confidence.

**BMC: What are the three most common mistakes you have seen organizations make when using social media as one of their communication channels?**

**Tull:** Failure to: 1) tightly integrate use of social media with other channels; 2) dedicate consistent resources to continually update their social media sites (e.g., content on blogs and Facebook pages that hasn't been updated for weeks, or worse, months); and 3) utilize the full multi-media capabilities that social media afford (i.e., photos, video, links to other relevant information, etc).

**BMC: Last words of wisdom in terms of integrating social media as part of your communications plan.**

**Tull:** Treat social media as another set of channels for reaching your target audience and use these channels to the full extent and how it makes sense. Embrace the opportunity to have your own communications channels and control, to some extent, the information you want to reach your target audiences.

*Susan Tull is a former TV newscaster-turned-award winning PR/communications professional with more than two decades of experience working with Fortune 1000 companies, start-ups and nonprofits. Reach her at [susantull@aol.com](mailto:susantull@aol.com) or 512.577.2956.*

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