

PRWEEK

Published: May, 2010

New Rules For Media Spokespeople In The Sea Of Social Media

Susan Neisloss, president, Big Bite, Inc.

The surging popularity of social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook has helped to create millions of people form ad hoc communities online. These niche web groups represent myriad interests and points of view but, with all of the competition for visibility, the most effective way to communicate is via social media. Its power, immediacy and global impact is forcing major changes in the way companies, individuals and professional communicators disseminate their messages. Social media sites require a new language, style and heightened understanding of niche audiences to be effective. They demand that spokespeople be authentic and approachable, (no more touting the company party line), and that all team members be involved with targeted messaging strategies.

Content now has to find an audience rather than relying on an audience to find content. This is a complete role reversal from the good old days of traditional media where if you had something to say or sell, you'd go to the reporter at your local newspaper or TV station. While the media is now run largely by the Googles and Microsofts of the world, they are controlled by the user. That is what sets them apart from the traditional media many of us grew up with.

Here are some key principles to remember to be a trusted voice in this brave new world filled with activist niche sites:

- Understand, prepare and control messages with care, customization and candor to achieve positive visibility.
- This growing “power to the people” movement requires that communicators craft and disseminate targeted messages quickly, but be agile in changing those messages depending upon shifting topics of interest and clout of individual blogs and user opinions.
- Immediacy rules the day as information is created, consumed and commented on in real time with social media.
- Media training specific to social media is an increasingly critical communications tool to deliver timely messages to a wide variety of virtual audiences, e.g., video via YouTube, a blog, podcast, Tweet.
- All social media demands messaging that is conversational, clear, and concise disseminated by a “real” voice within a company.

- Media training is not a natural conversation given the preparation and strategy required. To communicate with social media you must develop three-four succinct talking points that turn facts into an engaging and simple conversation, i.e., you speak “with” not “to” your audience.
- Enhance your brand and credibility by building a relationship with super bloggers who cover your area or industry; understand what they do, read what they write and be a reliable quotable resource.
- You can't rely on a single spokesperson to address all media issues. You need a small team of trained spokespeople who are experts in niche segments, e.g., technology, management, to maximize your organization's presence on-line.
- Be consistent in the tone and style of all responses no matter who the spokesperson is.
- The most effective media trainings involve customized videotaped sessions and role-playing scenarios allowing designated spokespeople to practice their delivery and increase their comfort level in “humanizing” their messages.
- Using real-world examples and relevant data is key to enhance credibility and clarify what distinguishes you or your company from competitors.
- Successful media spokespeople rehearse and practice their messages especially in the world of social media where immediacy is key.
- Assign a team member to assess daily what is being said about your brand or client to ensure you know what is being said and by whom.
- Savvy organizations monitor online criticisms and the responses they receive and measure the success of their communications not by the number of critical comments but by rebuttals posted by other people – real people – that reinforce the company's messages.
- Quarterly media training sessions are recommended for all team spokespeople and a core element of any marketing or communications program that includes social media. This is essential to ensure “everyone is on the same page” with consistent messages and how to “package” them for on-line media.
- It is critical to build a “trust bank” with social media by providing reliable and thoughtful information with a human voice. Building trust as a valued spokesperson protects you against “withdrawals”, i.e., negative news that can result when a single social media user decides to create a problem for you.
- There's no guarantee your messages will be received positively but you can optimize your chances of a balanced story by crafting succinct talking points that consider every eventuality and social media audience.
- Create and rehearse quarterly a crisis plan that includes any scenario that would damage your company's reputation. Media training is a central piece of this plan and should include messaging and simulating crises with the designated core media team, e.g., company bloggers, CEO.

It is time to make social media a priority. It is not a trend. It's an established, evolving and multifaceted channel that needs to be part of your overall communications and capacity-building strategies. Think of social media and its various forums as an investment in your future. One important measure of your organization's success is the extent to which you clearly inform your constituents, create a movement, and drive innovation and ideas that can live for years. By expanding your understanding and appreciation of social media and networking, you can become a respected spokesperson and invaluable resource while disseminating your messages to the forefront of an ever-expanding audience.

--

Susan Neisloss is president of Big Bite, Inc., an LA-based communications firm. She has conducted media and presentation training seminars for more than 200 senior executives, and has significant crisis communications experience as a corporate spokesperson and in her work with clients. Susan also is a seasoned former broadcast journalist and has produced numerous award-winning videos for a variety of Fortune 500 and non-profit clients.

Susan earned her B.A. degree in English from Stanford University.