

Social Media is a load of time-wasting rubbish!

So say some CEOs.

The need for business to communicate effectively has never gone away. But these days the channels that we have available to use are more varied and numerous than ever before.

And unlike previous channels, these new ones allow our markets to talk back to us! That can be scary!

Some evangelists loudly proclaim that social media is a communication revolution on a par with Gutenberg's Press.

Social media changes the playing field

In just a few short years Social Media, Web2.0, Social Networking (call it what you will) has changed the face of online communication.

This web2.0 stuff is not just the realm of geeks anymore, or fun, wacky, zany, madcap teens... the largest demographic group on Twitter, for example, is aged between 30 and 45! So too with *Second Life* – the average age of someone in *Second Life* is 34! As an aside, do you ever wonder what happened to *Second Life*? Well, it's as busy as ever, with corporations and learning institutions using it for networking and to deliver training cheaper and quicker and more effectively than *Real Life*!

The latest research shows that Social Networking (that's Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Bebo, Second Life and so on...) is used more than email as a way for Aussies and our Kiwi counterparts to communicate with their friends and family.

The growth of social networking in Australia is phenomenal. Each day 900 people sign up on one of the social networking sites, and the trend curve is steeply upward. And it's not just a lower socio-economic phenomenon: the aver-

age income of those who 'social mediarise' is around \$73,000 per year and they are often tertiary-qualified.

They are choosing to spend their time in different ways: the time they would traditionally have spent watching TV and reading newspapers and magazines is now spent online, engaging with their peers and sharing their passions with others who have similar interests.

There are few areas of Australian life that are not touched by social media. If you have an interest in primetime tv soaps, palaeontology, and post-menopausal naked underwater basket weaving... all of these interests and more are 'covered' by blogs, podcasts and even video in some

instances. To the surprise of many, the decidedly 'un-sexy' business of business communication is covered! There are blogs, podcasts and even video shows devoted to the subject (and I produce one of them).

Politicians are 'tweeting'

Even the stodgy old area of 'Politics' is now a part of the social media realm. More and more politicians are using social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs to connect with their constituents and the Australian public at large. South Australia's Premier, Mike Rann, a convert to Twitter after cyclist Lance Armstrong put him onto it, has recently started calling 'traditional' media – such as radio, tv and newspapers – 'old' media. He now spends more and more of his time engaging with fellow Twitterers and can often be seen hopping straight onto his Blackberry to 'tweet' as soon as he is out of meetings and in his government car.

The HR conundrum

Of course, where politicians go is a reflection of where the population is already at, and have been so for a while.

facebook

is the fourth largest country in the world

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Businesses are now wrestling with the various 'do we/don't we' questions around social media: "Do we ban Facebook at work or don't we?"; "Do we allow our employees to blog or don't we?"; "Do we allow our employees to Twitter or don't we?"

Naturally, with the advent of smart, internet-enabled mobile phones it matters very little what the 'official' company policy is: 'always on, always connected' employees of all ages simply turn to their iPhones, Blackberrys, Nokias and Samsungs when they want to get their message out, or read and contribute to what their industry peers or friends have to say.

But where are smart companies now sourcing their employees? Yes, where the future employees already are—on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and so on.

Smart companies use LinkedIn to find the first pick, then refine that pick by searching for the blogs, podcasts and vidcasts of the thought leaders within that group.

Conversation has never been easier.

But it's not just employees who can engage in conversation; so, too, can customers and clients. If they're happy with your products and services they can shout about it; but equally, if they are unhappy they can shout about it too.

More and more you can find examples of customers using social media tools to try to connect with companies, offering both product suggestions and product complaints. The expectation these days is that the company will be 'listening': monitoring the various social media channels for mentions of their name, the names of their brands or their executives and key personnel, so that they can respond quickly.

Today's online social networking expectation is such that companies that take longer than 24 hours to respond—even if it is just a "thanks, give us some time to look into this and get back to you"—have 'dropped the

ball' and are 'old school'. Being 'old school' is equivalent to being irrelevant and those customers will quickly find, through their network of peers, other companies who will listen to them!

The challenge for business communicators

Of course, for business communicators the challenge is simple: more channels to monitor than ever before, with more channels being added every week, and an audience that fully expects you to respond immediately (or certainly within 24 hours).

All that plus your normal communication activities; it's no wonder that some communicators are feeling 'burnt out'.

But communication will increasingly become a major cause for concern for CEOs: even the US military recognises that communication, in all its varied forms and channels, is crucial to the 21st century army. Not just for recruiting and reducing attrition, but for engagement with the American populace, the ever-hungry media and the rest of the world.

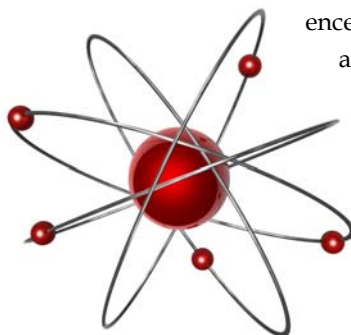
Former U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, in an address for

the *Council of Foreign Relations* podcast entitled 'New Realities in the Media Age' (you can find it on iTunes), stated categorically that communicators were key to the future of the US military. Social networking is fast becoming the principle method of ongoing communication between the military and its outside audiences.

So the message is...

The social media genie is out of the bottle and it won't go back in!

The wise communicator will get involved as soon as possible, even if just in a small way, lest their own career prospects become limited.



**"We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race."
Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody***

Lee Hopkins is a sought-after international speaker on Social Media strategies and tactics for corporate communicators. He blogs at www.LeeHopkins.net and has over 200 articles on business communication for free reading at www.LeeHopkins.com

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