THE PITFALLS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are increasingly implemented by organizations as tools for communication and education. It is important that we develop an understanding of how they enable and constrain the communicative activities through which information transfer is accomplished because it is these dynamics that constitute and perpetuate interest in our ophthalmic businesses.

In the short time in which they have been present, social media seem to be used in two primary ways. The first and more commonly studied is for organizational communication with external parties, such as customers, vendors, and the public at large. Most organizations that use social media to communicate with external parties have a multipronged strategy that crosses various platforms.[1] For example, they maintain pages on popular public social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and they broadcast messages on microblogging sites such as Twitter. Colleagues also write blog posts on news websites and, occasionally, host social tagging sites. Communication on these platforms is faced externally.

The second and less commonly studied way in which organizations have employed social media is for internal communication and interaction. Unlike external uses of social media that cross many public platforms, most organizations implement an integrated social media platform for internal communications that contains several functions.[2] Internal communication via social media is underdeveloped in most of our clinics; however, it can be an outstanding tool to educate the team and stimulate mutual interaction. For example, email allows people to exchange messages with specific individuals, while question-and-answer forums and message boards allow people to broadcast messages to broad, unknown audiences.

CONSIDER THESE THREE PITFALLS

There are, however, three pitfalls when using social media that are worth considering.

No. 1: Social media is a leaky pipe. In using the metaphor of a leaky pipe, I mean to suggest that the directionality of a particular communication (to whom it is directed) and the content of that communication (what the parties involved said to each other) are visible to people who were not involved. Although the message may be communicated for a specific audience, many others for whom the communication was not intended can learn that two people are communication partners and what it is that they communicated. This is because the technologies make not only the message public but also indicators of who the sender and recipients were. The advantage is that broad knowledge helps build bridges across nonredundant groups.

No. 2: Social media is an echo chamber. A commonly voiced concern is that the Internet, through its ability to link people to content that reflects their preferences, operates like a giant echo chamber. Like-minded people connect, and conflicting ideas are avoided.[3,4] Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are perfect examples of this. Recommendation systems and search algorithms, for example, present us with results that are linked to our past behaviors and interests, in effect filtering information that may challenge our current views.

No 3: Social media is a lubricant. We are increasingly aware of the need to be more social, as exemplified by the increased interest in social networks. Social media contribute to the development of social capital within an organization. Because social capital is easier to create when people know what others are doing, individuals who are kept abreast of the knowledge and social interactions among their colleagues will have an easier time establishing connections with people simply because they have more fodder for beginning conversation with unknown coworkers. For example, being informed about people's activities and whereabouts, both work-related and social, eases the opportunity to informally contact each other—either online or at the coffee machine. Such small talk creates a sense of belonging and lubricates connections. However, too many social-related signals can

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scatter one's attention and increase absentmindedness. Also, sometimes nonwork communication and gossip become commonplace. As members of Generation Y are known for using social media in their spare time to hang out with their friends, follow others' social lives, and chat about nothing in particular,[5] introducing this communication genre in corporate life can easily create interruptions that can be detrimental for productivity.

A PLATFORM FOR COMMUNICATION

Social technologies are becoming pervasive and are functioning as platforms through which much communication occurs. A great deal of the discussion about social media has emphasized the powerful effects they can exert on the ways in which organizations connect with customers and external stakeholders and explore issues linked to marketing, branding, and customer relationship management. In contrast, this introduction illustrates that such technologies can have significant implications for communication inside the workplace, influencing communication issues such as interaction with new employees, knowledge sharing and management, and the staff's abilities to form relationships and build social capital.

Outcomes from social media use are a result of the interaction between the social context in which they are embedded and their material features—the affordance view reveals that both positive and negative outcomes can result from the use of social media in our offices. Do not view your internal marketing talent or your external agencies as resources solely to be wasted on mere marketing campaigns but as designers of your best offerings: the experiences that drive demand for your company.[6] Practices need to create major platforms. These are distinct websites—which of course need to link to others—where a practice can create a unique web experience outside of the normal parameters expected of an ophthalmology website. Create a futuristic environment where the visitor can be exposed to new technologies. ∎

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