

# Social Media Creates New Communication Forums

BY LAURA HALL

**T**he term "social media" is appearing everywhere in the business landscape today. While blogs, social-networking sites, video and photo-sharing sites, and "wikis" may seem limited to the twentysomething crowd, businesses are quickly learning how to harness social marketing's influence. Today, social-media tools can be leveraged to reach audiences faster and more effectively than ever before.

What makes social-media applications so prominent? Aside from the fact that they are designed for anyone to use, the real reason is that they allow us to reach more people faster and with fewer marketing dollars. The key to maximizing the potential impact of social media is to engage the audience in a dynamic, two-way conversation served up with meaning and zero marketing speak. Although a critical component of any marketing strategy, the "social" side of social marketing must be free of corporate culture, key messages and, of course, spin.

As the spectrum of social-media outlets continues to expand, companies should seek engagement to avoid being left behind.



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**BLOGS** The "patriarch" of the social-media family, blogs (short for "Web logs") are news and opinion-oriented articles or columns posted online. Companies can rely on trusted employees to write content and to cultivate relationships with other bloggers. Posting comments on other well-known blogs within an industry is also a smart approach to having your voice heard. And it is good practice to add bloggers to your company's media lists for news releases and invitations to special events. Be sure to institute a company protocol so that bloggers don't reveal sensitive or proprietary information or stray from the purpose of the blog. Remember, anyone speaking on behalf of your business becomes a spokesperson, so it's necessary to narrow that voice.

**SOCIAL NETWORKING** Online networking is the practice of exchanging personal and professional profiles, interests and activities. In the last few years, it has been such a vibrant venue for communicating and sharing ideas that each age bracket seems to have its own site — from Facebook for the college set to MySpace for young people and arts and entertainment enthusiast to LinkedIn for the experienced professionals. Social networking also can play a major role in recruiting new talent for your business, as well as positioning professionals as leaders in their industry, simply by revealing a personal side or highlighting their community contributions or activities.

**MULTIMEDIA** The "fun" category for many users are image and video-oriented Web sites such as YouTube, Flickr and Photobucket. These online venues afford individuals and companies the opportunity to upload their own content for public viewing. They can also

provide a subtle marketing push for videos that depict a unique story or memorable product. Video clips can range from client interviews to product demonstrations to quirky outtakes. Basically whatever content you are comfortable having "out there" is prime material for these sites. These clips sometimes can even provide educational value and have a significant shelf life thanks to viral, word-of-mouth marketing. Additional benefits are gained through relevant links back to your Web site, which improve your search results. Should you pursue this approach, be sure to obtain permission from any organization that holds copyrights to videos you are interested in posting to the Web.

**WIKIPEDIA** This user-written and edited encyclopedia relies on the wisdom — and honesty — of its users instead of experts for content, and it has something on nearly every topic imaginable. This site receives such massive traffic that it's become a search engine all to itself. A Wikipedia posting can take the form of a product or company profile or highlight an organization's service. What has created even greater exposure for Wikipedia entries is when content is optimized with standard keywords to enable more search engines to find an entry, so take that into consideration. Be mindful of some caveats, however, when posting an entry. Even though Wikipedia entries have become gospel to some users, the material can't be subjective or promotional, and the information must have a verified third-party source in the posting.

Experimenting with these communication tools might just get you hooked. It also might get you ahead of your competitors. So get started by posting a blog on your Web site or tracking down a compelling video clip — then see what develops.

