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Rethinking the R.A.C.E. model for a social media world

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Abstract

This practical paper offers a method for the development of a social media strategy for organizations—and especially to organizations in crisis. The authors argue that traditional models for communications planning, like the RACE formula, must be updated to embrace a new environment characterized by the democratizing force of social media, and more specifically, the ways in which the power to frame an issue have shifted. Rather than a linear formula, the authors advance an iterative methodology for communications planning that involves a multifaceted qualitative and quantitative research program, which is grounded by the principle that a social strategy should always remain in beta. The authors conclude that social media are an invaluable resource for organizations to deliver on offline goals and are especially relevant to communications professionals during times of crisis.

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At 8:30 p.m. on July 29, 2012 an Edmonton police officer tweeted a photo he had taken earlier that day at work. Captured from behind the barrel of a gun, the caption of the photo read: "This is how I spent my morning. Waiting to be released from an Armed 'Standoff' that was resolved peacefully" (CstPower, 2012). Officer Constable Brendan Power was part of an Edmonton Police Service program that used social media, like Twitter, to help recruit new police officers for the city's forces. Of the six participating officers in the Edmonton program, Constable Powers was arguably the most popular, with 3300 followers.

The photo resulted in strong, albeit mixed, reactions from the public. Some individuals thought the photo was distasteful, others believed it was both

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dangerous and inappropriate. Mainstream media, like CTV Edmonton, picked up the story and published an article online titled, "Tweet by EPS officer raises eyebrows" (Parrish, 2012) caused some people to charge the media outlet with creating controversy where none existed. Although the Edmonton Police Service stood by its employee during the controversy, the crisis caused Constable Powers to resign from the voluntary social media program.

Social media are "ideal tool[s] for organizations and individuals for two-way communication, if used effectively through careful monitoring, research, and planned engagement" (Veyret, 2009, p. 39). Organizations that once communicated via a select few, well-briefed, spokespeople can now employ less traditional tactics to engage with an audience in a variety of ways, which can offer new opportunities to engage, but—as witnessed by the Edmonton Police Service—can also open the organization to harsh criticism from the public and the news organizations that serve this public. The real-time and raw nature of social media has changed the way organizations interact with the public and can change the way they are seen by the public. Some organizations have mastered this new environment, while others are still trying to gain their footing. Participation on social media must be strategic and establishing trust is paramount. This environment, therefore, has dramatic implications for the way public relations are practiced. As a result, corporate communicators' old models of developing communications strategies—both proactively and reactively—must evolve.

This practical paper outlines the changes caused by this new environment and offers advice to practitioners on how to adapt the RACE formula—a long-standing process used by public relations practitioners that includes research, analysis, communication and evaluation—in order to develop communications strategies for this new era.

Shifting influence: Social media enable the two-way symmetrical model

Traditionally, communications planning was a four-step process and while there are many acronyms for the framework, the steps essentially involve research, planning or analysis, implementation, and evaluation. Understandably, the emerging digital communication landscape is intimidating for many organizations. Theoretically speaking, however, it was recognized long ago that the optimal type of communication involved a two-way flow of information whereby source and recipient alternate. Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe four different types of communications practice including (a) the press agent/publicity model, (b) the public-information model, (c) the two-way asymmetric model, and (d) the two-way symmetric model (p. 13-14). While the theory was introduced at a time when the internet was not widely used, we know that theory is not static (Grunig & Grunig, 2011) and that it should be evaluated to consider how it fits within ever-evolving communications environments.

The internet and social media have made the two-way symmetric model a reality. It is now possible for anyone to publish his or her viewpoints online. Twitter, for instance, "embodies [the] ideals of the internet; it is both a one-to-one communication channel and information disseminator, concurrently acting as a source of information for current affairs, ideas, thoughts, opinions and status" (Veyret, 2009, p. 37). Recent figures demonstrate the fervor with which ordinary citizens have to taken to communicating to the digital masses: "Every 60 seconds in social media, two million videos are viewed on YouTube, 700,000 messages are delivered by way of Facebook, 175,000 tweets are fired off into the ether" (Van Grove, 2012, p. 2).

Old models of developing communications strategies must be revisited. It's true that "[c]onventional techniques of public relations are being undermined by the mobile nature of new media and… this requires public relations practitioners to rethink how they relate to publics" (James, 2007, p. 141).

Communicators' response to the new environment

According to one study, 40 per cent of business decision makers believe that it is more difficult to plan for a crisis today as opposed to five years ago (Burson-Marsteller, 2011, p. 27). These decision makers cite: (a) the need to respond quickly (50 per cent) (b) the overall challenges of digital communications (37 per cent) (c) the increased public demand for transparency (31 per cent) (d) the rise of citizen journalism and social media (25 per cent) (Burson-Marsteller, 2011, p. 28) as reasons for the shift.

This new social environment is shaping the way organizations interact with the publics they serve: "More and more, consumers are sharing their opinions about products, services and the behaviours of companies (Eikelmann, Hajj & Peterson, 2007, p. 1). For communications professionals, new media provide opportunities to target an audience, monitor conversations of interest (Eikelmann et al., 2007, p. 2) and engage within and among stakeholder groups (James, 2007, p. 137). For an unprepared organization in crisis, this rapid sharing and exchange of information exchange can be overwhelming. Indeed, organizations that refuse to adapt to this new reality are left highly vulnerable: "Building competency with the new platforms is not an option; it's a requirement for any company that wants to ensure its reputation is not hijacked," (Eikelmann et al., 2007, p. 3).

Those who have developed a strategic plan, however, see social media as invaluable assets. In fact, not participating in this new environment can lead to both missed opportunities and increased vulnerability. Communications leaders, especially those facing crisis, can use data available online to craft a strategic communications plan: "the instant and direct nature of the Internet… is especially ideal for communicating in times of crisis when quick decisions must be made and information must be immediately distributed" (Champion, 2010, p. 98; James, 2007). This ideal application has not yet been fully realized as we've seen many companies begin to use social media, but these efforts have not been fully extended to crisis communications efforts (Wigley & Zhang, 2011, p. 6-9).

Shifting influence explained: Framing theory

In times of crises, the framing of an issue will impact the way in which it is interpreted. With social media, the power to frame has shifted—and is always shifting. Where once only public relations professionals and mass media had access to the resources and tools to communicate with audiences, now through access to social media tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, a democratization has occurred assigning power to any interested or affected member of the public. This section will summarily discuss framing theory, priming, agenda setting and attribution theory as they relate to framing a message or position in times of crisis.

The theoretical concept of agenda-setting "refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues… and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences" (Sheufele & Tewsbury, 2007, p. 11). It is similar to the notion of 'priming,' often discussed in political communications literature as "changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63 as cited in Sheufele & Tewsbury, 2007, p. 11). A correlate of agenda-setting theory is framing theory, which is founded in the "assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Sheufele & Tewsbury, 2007, p. 11). Entman (1993) describes framing as "selection and salience" (p. 52). Framing occurs when certain features of a news story or circumstance are emphasized (Coombs, 2007a, p. 167). Entman notes, "frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience" (1993, p. 53).

Frames can "become invaluable tools for presenting relatively complex issues…efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas" (Sheufele & Tewsbury, 2007, p. 12). This is particularly valuable for organizations to understand in the democratization of communications and its influences on their daily work. Communications professionals can use new media to better understand the public and create relevant frames that help to build relationships and, in some cases, mitigate—and even resolve—a crisis.

Traditionally, it has been the role of official voices of politicians, heads of organizations and the mass media to construct and communicate frames. This is described in Entman's cascading activation model (2003). The cascading activation model is based on a hierarchy of framing in media and public opinion. Those at the top of the hierarchy, will "enjoy the most independent ability" (Entman, 2003, p. 420) to select frames. Where communicators traditionally had relatively uncontested power to frame, social media have allowed for once silent voices to be elevated in the public sphere and heard by a relatively greater audience. It is crucial that communicators, and media, consider this change in influence.

To illustrate this shift, let us return to the example of Constable Brendan Power with Edmonton Police Service presented earlier. The initial news item from CTV Edmonton was framed as "Tweet by EPS officer raises eyebrows" (Parrish, 2012). Almost immediately, many members of the local community responded with their support of the office on social media. This uproar changed the story. The next day, CTV Edmonton came out with a new headline: "Support swells for Edmonton Police tweeter" (CTV News, 2012). After initially announcing he would be leaving the program, Constable Power announced he would return to the Edmonton Police Service's Twitter program and continue serving as a brand ambassador for the Police Service.

Use of the RACE formula in public relations

When John Marston created the RACE formula (research, action, communication and evaluation) in 1963, the acronym was an attempt to map out a plan of action for the practice of public relations similar to the approach advertising had to its profession with the "AIDA" formula (attention, interest, desire and action) (Marston, 1963, p. 161). Marston writes:

> In the public relations world a new formula using the letters R-A-C-E can accomplish the same result. These letters stand for a sequence of words used in attacking a public relations problem—Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation. Remembering these words won't make a dull man bright, but orderly consideration of them will prevent any mistakes or omissions. (1963, p. 161)

Marston's definition implies a linear execution of each of the elements. The Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) most recent Manual for Accreditation in Public Relations acknowledges that the words used to explain RACE have evolved: "Different organizations and different authors use different acronyms: RPIE [Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation], RACE [Research, Analysis, Communication, Evaluation], PPAE [Program, Planning, Analysis, Evaluation], etc. Whatever you call it, public relations planning is typically addressed as a four-step process. Research, Planning/Analysis, Implementation/Execution/ Communication, Evaluation" (PRSA, 2010, p. 38).

In 2003, David Guth and Charles Marsh evolved the model to demonstrate that in practice the RACE formula oversimplifies a very dynamic process. They preferred to explain the formula as a 'square dance:'

> The implication of a traditional four-step model is that evaluation is the last thing done. However, in this era of downsizing and increasing accountability, evaluation should occur in each phase of the public relations process. Research should identify ways to measure the effects of a public relations program. Those measurements must then be built into any plan that is developed. As the plan is being executed, we should be sensitive to the need to adjust our efforts to account for any miscalculations or changes in the environment. That, in turn, may call for additional research. Finally, evaluation provides critical information about whether the goals of the plan were met and about lessons learned for future public relations efforts. (Guth & Marsh, 2003, p. 15)

Guth and Marsh's model advanced the traditional approach, but was conceived prior to the existence of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter created in 2004 and 2006 respectively. As such, this practical paper on social media strategy proposes a further evolution of the RACE formula. We argue that modern communications is considered to be a state of being, always in beta, rather than a formula that implies a linear process. The shift will mean a more iterative approach to communications planning.

Agile and iterative: A new approach to communications planning

To help conceptualize communications planning and strategy in public relations in an ever-shifting media environment, we look to the example of agile planning in project management for software development. The principles of agile planning are applied here to highlight the movement away from a linear process or formula—to prompt communications professionals to break from the confines of a restrictive formula that may hinder successful relations with the public. Essentially this practical paper proposes the agile methodology as a metaphor for a new framework that requires implanting of communicators' knowledge to make it an effective tool.

The agile manifesto (2001) is defined as follows: "We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value: Individuals and interactions over processes and tools. Working software over comprehensive documentation. Customer collaboration over contract negotiation. Responding to change over following a plan" (¶ 1).

Our model adapts the aforementioned agile manifesto for communications professionals, an adaptation that becomes particularly relevant in times of issues or crisis management. It values: *Individuals and interactions* over processes and tools; *true two-way symmetric models of communication* over comprehensive documentation; *customer collaboration* over simply setting the corporate agenda; *responding to change* over following a plan.

Three principles from the agile methodology - which must be applied to RACE into perpetuity - relate directly to the communications model being presented in this practical paper:

- Practitioners of PR should welcome changing requirements throughout the development of a strategy.
- They should have the team work together daily throughout the project; and
- They should adjust behavior according to changes in the

environment.

While we propose RACE as a constant state of being for public relations practitioners, where each element is constantly interdependent on the others, this paper will discuss the framework in two parts: research and analysis, followed by communication and evaluation. In practice however, it is understood that all four elements are constantly and continuously applied as a result of input from the environment.

RACE revisited

It has become a well established notion that "[t]he Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics" (James, 2007, p. 138). As such, the collection of data that will inform the strategy must examine both sides of the communications model—inputs and outputs from an organization and its public—as well as factors that influence each party. Communicators cannot focus simply on what they wish to communicate because various publics now have the tools and the means to shift and frame an issue.

It is vital, especially in times of crisis, to use data collected in various internal and external environments to develop an effective—and relevant—social media strategy or crisis response. The next section will propose a methodology for practitioners. The essential elements of this methodology and subsequent strategy development, involve an environmental scan or an internal and external audit, developed through historical analysis of company documents, realist interviews and participant observation that examines similar or competing organizations as well as current or potential audience members.

Research and analysis

Reality changes rapidly with instant communications made possible by social media and it is important for communicators to have a wide variety of resources and tools at their disposal. This practical paper advances a mixed method approach, which will assist organizations in examining "different levels of the same situation or to focus on different aspects of the same phenomenon" (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 95-96; see also Luttrell, 1999; Dillabough, 1999; Mann, 1998). Methodological triangulation in social sciences involves using more than two methods to give researchers the ability to validate facts under multiple environments (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2011). Approaching the formatioin of social media strategy with the same level of scrutiny in internal and external environments provides a good cross section of insight to create a strategy.

The first stages of this mixed method approach will involve elements that may be considered part of an environmental scan, including additional processes described in more detail in the following section, which is to be accompanied by some form of directed content analysis.

Environmental scan

Broadly, the collection of data required to prepare a social media strategy for an organization may be comparable to an environmental scan. An effective environmental scan in the communications planning process will look both inwards and outwards and will examine all relevant available sources of data. Environmental scanning may be defined as the "managerial activity of learning about events and trends in the organization's environment" (Hambrick, 1981, p. 299). An environmental scan "focuses on the identification of emerging issues, situations, and potential pitfalls that may affect an organization's future" (Albright, 2004, p. 40). It is considered to be "one of the critical ingredients in the strategic formulation process" (Abebe, Angriawan & Tran, 2010, p. 30).

Content analysis

The data of interest to a communicator developing a social media strategy will include corporate documents, realist interviews and participant observation. These should be collected and analyzed with reference to the principles of qualitative content analysis. Although, both qualitative and quantitative analysis are important to thoroughly understand a situation or issue. Qualitative, as opposed to quantitative analysis, allows practitioners to focus on the quality, context and meaning of data, rather than the frequency with which certain words, themes, or actions occur. Qualitative research provides an opportunity "to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1) and it essentially includes three forms (participant observation, interviews and document analysis) with many possible approaches (Cassell & Symon, 2005). Qualitative data may be analyzed through qualitative content analysis. Context and sentiment are essential in analyzing collected data for the purpose of communications strategy development.

Collecting data

The environmental scan, or data collection process, may be classified in two parts, determined by the area of investigation: an internal audit and an external audit. These methods have been used as a best practice for communications research individually, but the value of presenting them in this practical paper is to provide a template for communications professionals to devise an agile approach to communications planning, developed by the authors and colleagues in their professional role as communications consultants. Table 1 provides a visualization of the research process and an evaluation of each element involved. This is then followed by a more detailed description of each phase.

Internal audit

The internal audit consists of an analysis of historical documents as well as realist interviews. In addition to presenting how to approach a particular area and the level of change to which each area of research is exposed (i.e. what level of reexamination will be required), each method listed below examines who will be researched, what is being examined, why it is being examined and where to gather the data.

Table 1: Visualization of the Research and Analysis phase including level of reexamination required

Stage	Method	Tactic	Resources	Value	Level of Reexamination
Data Collection	Internal Audit	Historical Analysis of Comany Documents	- Policies *(media relations, customer service, digital communications, privacy)* - Governance structures - Annual reports - Internal and external communications materials *(newsletters, brochures)* - Documents outlining industry best practices - Website analytics - Media monitoring reports - Call centre productivity reports - Customer service reviews	Identify change required and areas for increased efficiencies	Low
		Realist Interviews	- Key staff - Volunteers - Board members - Customers	Uncover risks, benefits and opportunities	Moderate
	External Audit	Analysis of Conversations	- Online search *(Google/ search engine or paid tools like Radian6, Sysomos, Spundge)* - Blogs - Forums - Advocacy groups	Uncover public sentiment, evaluations of the organization as well as identify misinformation	High
		Competitor Analysis	- Websites - Social media accounts - Communication materials *(newsletters, brochures, advertisements)* - News mentions	Uncover best practices, lessons learned and areas of improvement	High

Historical analysis of company documents

Company documents can provide valuable insight into the culture of an organization, gaps in policy and the level of work required to prepare the organization for success in the social media era. Although an invaluable resource, "historical analysis of company documents is rarely pursued as a research strategy by organizational researchers" (Rowlinson, 2004, p. 301). Documents such as policies surrounding media relations, use of electronic communications, privacy frameworks, governance structures and documents outlining industry best practices will set the framework to consider which documents must be adapted to the new social media environment. Specific sections requiring modification within each of these documents should be identified in a table to ensure policies and procedures are not conflicting in various areas. Additional information from website analytics, media monitoring reports, call centre productivity reports, customer service reviews, or other company reports, may be useful in this research. Often these documents can be found in communications and human resource departments or an organization's intranet. Of the three types of data sets within this research approach, it is the least likely to have drastic changes occur while a social media strategy is being developed. In addition, many of these documents are static and would require low, if any, reexamination in later stages.

Realist interviews

The qualitative research interview may be defined as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the describe phenomena" (Kvale, 1983, p. 174). While there are different kinds of qualitative interviews, realist interviews whereby "accounts are treated as providing insight into their psychological and organizational lives outside of the interview situation" (King, 2004, p. 12) are the most effective in developing a social media strategy.

By targeting key staff or volunteer roles within the organization, this approach can help give rich information about the interviewees' perspectives on the organization—regardless of their familiarity with social media—by giving insight into their role within the structure of the organization. With that depth of information, a researcher can identify the areas where increased communications would benefit their position, department or organization.

The realist interview involves four steps: define the research question, create an interview guide, recruit participants and carry out the interviews (King, 2005, p. 14).

Define the research question. The focus of the interview should be to uncover the interviewees' assessment of the risks and benefits of increased communication with their public—or publics—of interest. While some interviewees may have limited exposure to social media, they will bring varied organizational experiences to the plan, which combined can provide rich insight.

Create an interview guide. An interview guide is a list of topics with accompanying questions that should be covered in the interview (King, 2005, p. 15). Essentially, "there are three sources for topics to be included in an interview guide: the research literature, the interviewer's own personal knowledge and experience of the area, and informal preliminary work such as discussions with people who have personal experience of the research area" (King, 2004, p. 15). The interviewer should be flexible and willing to deviate from this guide.

Recruit the participants. Because interviews can be time consuming, typically in social science research, a minimum of six interviews (Morse, 1994, pp. 220-35 as cited in Mason, 2010) of candidates representing various areas of an organization should provide good cross section of representation. Candidates should not be selected based on their knowledge of social media, the aim should be to select candidates who have a role in communicating with the public, allocating resources, or ensuring organizational goals are met. By providing interviewees with as much detail as possible in advance of the interview, the interviewer can help ease apprehensions about being able to provide something of value.

Carry out the interviews. Generally face-to-face interviews ensure the highest level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Other methods for conducting interviews include via telephone or online video conference through services such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Interviewers should be cautioned that the use of technology to conduct the interview might create a barrier to participation because of lack of accessibility to the tools or lacking the technical skill set. Interviews may be recorded, with consent of the interviewee. Additional notes taken during the interview and a transcription once the interview has been completed will assist in content analysis later (King, 2005, p. 17).

Meticulous data collection is important for analysis and qualitative content analysis can uncover key themes in participants' responses. The themes should be mutually exclusive (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 4) and directly related to the research question.

This type of data collection has a moderate level of possibility for sudden change. While the stakeholders are typically associated with the organization being researched since anyone can have access to various platforms, employees may already be engaged personally and professionally in online conversations including those about the organization. The outcome of the interview stage will direct the development of the social media strategy.

External audit

The external audit consists of an analysis of mentions of the organization as well as what competing or comparable organizations are doing online. The following section outlines the type of analysis as well as tools and resources required for conducting such an analysis.

Analysis of conversations

An analysis of conversations about an organization may be conceived of as participant observation. Participants considered for the external audit should include individuals discussing the organization or issues related to the organization's interests online and in the media. This analysis should include an audit of online conversations that mention the organization and issues or topics relevant to that organization. There are a number of tools and software applications available to assist in this process and these are mentioned in Table 4.

Qualitative content analysis of these conversations can assist in understanding public sentiment toward the organization and its actions, products, or policies. Communicators should note where these relevant conversations are occurring and whether there are key players to be identified. Blogs, Twitter accounts, online forums, websites, advocacy groups and associations should be noted and investigated. This area of research is also highly subjected to change. Once the search tools have been established, they need to be maintained indefinitely and modified as required when new tools are introduced.

Competitive analysis

A scan of competing or comparative organizations can provide context, identify risks and areas of improvement as well as highlight best practices. Communicators should look to the websites and existing social media accounts of their competitors to gauge how a specific industry has embraced social media. Most organizations have key organizations that they look to as leaders within their industry. These may be uncovered in the realist interviews being conducted, but the search should not be limited to those organizations. A regulatory body for example in health could look to another regulatory body like an ombudsman's office to see how they interact on social media. Similar to the realist interviews, six organizations should be targeted for this type of observation.

Change is highly likely within this type of observation and should be reflected as the social media strategy is being developed. Once the six organizations are chosen, they should be constantly consulted by subscribing to their content through means such as RSS feeds or email newsletters.

Communication and evaluation

Developing a strategy

After data has been collected and analyzed, communicators should return to the research phase for additional investigation. If satisfied with the level of insight achieved from the environmental scan, a social strategy may be developed and executed. Social media strategies are unique to an organization; however, best practices applicable to all are the guiding principles of transparency and authenticity. Because social strategies are unique to organizations, discussion of their development in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Through their work as communications consultants, the authors have devised a framework for organizing a social media strategy that involves considering the following elements:

Where is the audience? One of the most important elements of a social strategy is the creation of an owned social space, a digital home for the organization's official voice. Wherever the audience is communicating, they should be aware that an active official voice is ready to contribute to the discussion and respond. The environmental scan will assist in deciding where an organization's time and money will be best spent. It is important to remember that a company should choose the platforms most relevant to their public or publics, and execute a sound strategy where it will have the most effect. However, as social strategies must always be in beta, communicators must continue to monitor where relevant conversations are occurring and move with their public to stay relevant.

What are the short-term and long-term actions? A communicator should identify the short-term as well as long-term areas that will require organizational change. Additionally, communicators may wish to update their corporate website and invest in media monitoring software to start listening to relevant conversations online.

What resources are available? A communicator will need to assess the human resources and financial capital required to implement a social strategy. Depending on the size of the organization, communicators may need to account for an update to corporate policy or an amendment to employee restrictions to social sites at work. Training will also be required for both existing and new employees.

Is now the right time? Executing a social program will not help an organization if it is not prepared. Simply conducting an environmental scan and learning about social media resources available cannot prepare an organization for the increased transparency required on social media. Many organizations will move forward with a social strategy without being fully prepared. The development of a crisis escalation procedure is essential for an organization to have and a social strategy should not be implemented in the absence of one.

Evaluation: Assessing results

The creation of formal objectives with measurable goals should guide the development and execution of any communications strategy. According to one study, "The number of organizations with formal objectives has increased from 2009 to 2011 (31 per cent vs. 26 per cent), and the number of organizations with no objectives has declined substantially (31 per cent in 2009 vs. 17 per cent in 2011)" (Leger Marketing, 2011, p. 19). Because goals will be unique to each organization, discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. There are, however, many useful resources available to PR practitioners and other communications professionals. The following table provides a brief list of authors and institutions that publish regularly on new social media tools, resources and best practices.

Table 2: Recommended sources for new media research

Author / Organization	Resources	Topics
Mary Meeker	*www.kpcb.com/partner/mary-meeker*	Internet trends
comScore Canadian online data	Canada Digital Future in Focus *www.comscore.com*	Internet trends
Gini Dietrich & Geoff Livingston	*www.geofflivingston.com* Marketing in the Round (book) *www.spinsucks.com/marketing/marketing-in-the-round*	Marketing and digital communications for organizations
Andrew Laing	*www.cormex.com/medialab* Applications of media content analysis research to social and political issues in Canada.	Measurement
Katie Paine	*www.kdpaine.com*	Measurement
Angela Jeffrey	*www.measurementmatch.com*	Measurement
Institute for Public Relations	*www.instituteforpr.org/topic/measurement-and-evaluation*	Producing content to build audience online
Ann Handley & C.C. Chapman	Content Rules (book) *www.contentrulesbook.com*	Social listening & measurement
Sysomos	*www.sysomos.com/social-media/reports/*	Social listening & measurement
Salesforce	*www.salesforcemarketingcloud.com/resources/ebooks/*	Social listening & measurement
Deirdre Breakenridge	Books including Putting the public back in Public Relations and PR 2.0: New Media, New Tools, New Audiences *www.deirdrebreakenridge.com/my-books*	Social media & marketing for public relations professionals
Brian Solis	Books including Putting the Public Back in Public Relations and Engage! *www.briansolis.com/books*	Social media & marketing for public relations professionals
Chris Brogan & Julien Smith	*www.chrisbrogan.com/where-to-buy-trust-agents/* Books including Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust and Impact Equation *www.humanbusinessworks.com/ie*	Using the web to build trust through transparency

Listening is one of the most important elements of a modern communications strategy and is important at each stage in the development of a social strategy. It is a part of research, analysis and communication, but comes to the fore in evaluation. In the social era, news, tips and information are created and consumed at a rapid pace and organizations must be able to tune out the noise and listen to what matters to their organization and their brand. Elements useful for developing a strategy for listening, or media monitoring, will have been developed by an organization during the environmental scan. The main steps have been derived from the authors' experience as a best practice for most effective use of social listening tools.

Table 3: Major steps in social media strategy development

Action	Description
Develop an audience profile	This will include demographic and geographic information as well as interests and sites these particular individuals frequent.
Choose keywords and search terms	A list of keywords and search terms relevant to the brand or organization will be useful in pulling relevant content and online mentions into a pool of data.
Choose a tool	There are a number of paid and free tools available for digital media monitoring listed in Table 4.
Analyze and report	Volume of mentions will assist in determining the frequency of reporting and devotion of human resources.

There are a number of tools and resources available to assist organizations in social listening and online media monitoring. The following table is not exhaustive, but lists some of the better known and widely available tools and resources that may be incorporated in the implementation of a social media strategy.

Table 4: List of tools useful for online monitoring including description and availability

Tool	Description	Availability
Sysomos	Two offerings: Media Analysis Platform (MAP) to conduct an analysis of a specified search term retroactively and Heartbeat for cumulative social listening.	Paid
Salesforce Marketing Cloud (Radian6)	Social monitoring tools and engagement software	Paid
Sprout Social	Social media management tool	Paid
Brandwatch	Social listening and monitoring tool	Paid
Social Mention	Social monitoring tool	Free
Topsy	Social conversations search tool	Free
TweetDeck	Social management and monitoring tool	Free
Mention	Social monitoring tool	Free and paid versions available
Spundge	Collaborative content management platform	Free and paid versions available
Hootsuite	Social management and monitoring tool	Free and paid versions available

Data collected through listening may indicate the need for additional research and analysis as well as amendments to outreach strategies or positioning. Furthermore, listening also provides organizations with a great advantage: in times of crisis, these tools are essential in ensuring an organization can quickly and effectively respond to issues in real time and correct any misinformation that may be damaging to the company.

Conclusion

The era of one-way communications is over. Communicators must adapt to the current environment characterized by two-way communications where the public play a role in framing the debate. Traditional models of communication will not suffice in this new environment and communicators must move from away from a linear process of communications planning to a model that is always in beta. Especially in times of crisis, an agile social media strategy can assist communicators in developing a better understanding of public opinion while also allowing communicators to reach a relevant audience where they choose to communicate: online.

What does success look like? Each organization will answer this question differently. Surely, understanding more about public perception of an organization is a success, as is communicating more effectively with an audience of interest. However, it is important to develop goals for the social program that are meaningful for the entire organization. Social strategies can—and should—assist in reaching an organization's offline goals. During each step of the process—during research, analysis, communication and evaluation—communicators should look to the overarching goals of the organization and gauge the success of the strategy in that way. Some achievements may have an indirect effect on the organization's bottom line, and these successes should not be discounted. However, they may also, in some cases, be quantified: addressing a customer's concern on Twitter can reduce volume in a call centre, driving traffic to the company website can increase sales, and listening to—and participating in—online conversations can help to mitigate a crisis in its infancy.

Success in social media requires a sound strategy and establishing an authentic presence online is essential. In an age where each citizen has the power to publish and frame an issue, organizations with a sound social media strategy—one that allows for effective research, analysis, communication and evaluation—can respond to issues in real time.

In the case of Constable Powers, a powerful public voice was able to change the conversation and media coverage of the issue. Other organizations can apply the type of social media strategy discussed here to flag issues early on and remain agile in their approach to communicating with the public. It is essential that public relations practitioners today understand that effective online communications require constant reexamination and evaluation. The process described in this practical paper can help to ensure communicators are receiving feedback in real time allowing communications strategies to be amended into their most effective form.

An effective communications strategy will always remain in beta. A modern communicator's work is never done. The linear application of the RACE formula is no longer sufficient for effective communications planning. Rather than evaluating this new era as overwhelming, we hope that communicators will embrace this new reality and see it as an opportunity to better deliver valuable information to the public, mitigate crisis and more effectively deliver results both on and offline.

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