



Short communication

PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology

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ABSTRACT

As social media moves from “buzz word” status to strategic tool, more practitioners are developing skills related to this online communication technology. This study surveyed working public relations practitioners about their adoption of 18 social media tools and their perception on the growth of social media trends in public relations practice. Results provide an overview of the adoption of social media, as a whole, in the industry.

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1. Introduction

While once labeled “laggards” in regard to adoption of communication technology, recent research suggests public relations professionals are now more on par with adoption of online tools. According to a 2007 PRSA Wired for Change Survey, the majority of public relations professionals state that the use of communication technology has made their job easier by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences. Social media not only allows public relations practitioners to reach out to and engage their publics in conversation, but also provides an avenue to strengthen media relations.

While numerous tools with varying level of audience participation exist, academically, much research to date has focused on a single social media tool (e.g., blog). To fill this void, the current study conducted an online survey of practitioners asking professionals about their use and perceived ubiquity within the industry related to social media.

2. Methods

Using an online survey, this study sought to provide an academic baseline for adoption of social media as a whole (beyond blogs), opinion about these tools in the industry, and power. To do so, the researchers focused on a major metropolitan area with a large population of public relations practitioners, ranging from international public relations firms or international corporations with large public relations departments to nonprofits and boutique public relations firms. The city has chapters for both International Association of Business Communicators and Public Relations Society of America, for which the latter prides itself as being one of the largest chapters in the nation.

Prospective respondents were identified from the member lists of the IABC and PRSA chapters in this city and each was sent an individual e-mail message invitation to participate in an online, multi-page survey. This recruitment method

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allowed the researchers the ability to track whether a respondent had completed the survey, opted out, or not yet responded. A total of 924 e-mail invitations were sent to working e-mail addresses (222 from the chapter e-mail lists were returned as undeliverable, out of office, or moved). The response rate was 33.22% ($n = 283$), much higher than that found in other public relations industry online surveys.

Respondents indicated both use and perception of industry-wide adoption for each tool. Social media tools investigated here were: blogs, intranets, podcasts, video sharing (e.g., YouTube), photo sharing (e.g., Shutterbug, Flickr), social networks, wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), gaming, virtual worlds (i.e., Second Life), micro-blogging/presence applications (e.g., Twitter, Pownce, Plurk), text messaging, videoconferencing, PDAs, instant message chat, social event/calendar systems (e.g., Upcoming, Eventful), social bookmarking (e.g., Delicious), news aggregation/RSS, and e-mail.

3. Results

A total of 283 practitioners completed the survey. Of those who reported gender ($n = 231$), there were far more females ($n = 170$, 73.59%) than males ($n = 61$; 26.41%). Of those who provided their age (76.67%; $n = 217$), respondents were on average 38.95 (S.D. = 10.43). Respondents who indicated how many years they have been practicing PR (79.5%; $n = 225$) have been practicing an average of 13.05 years (S.D. = 8.93). The demographics of the respondents here were consistent overall with public relations professionals.

3.1. RQ1: Which social media tools do public relations practitioners use?

Overall, respondents on average used 5.97 of the 18 tools listed (S.D. = 3.04). The most popular tool was used was e-mail ($n = 272$; 96.1%), followed by intranet ($n = 188$; 68.2%), blogs ($n = 118$; 41.7%), videoconferencing ($n = 111$; 39.1%), podcast ($n = 100$; 35.2%), video sharing ($n = 85$; 30%), and PDAs ($n = 85$; 30%). Lesser used tools were: instant message ($n = 84$; 29.6%), events ($n = 77$; 27.2%), social networking ($n = 68$; 24%), text messaging ($n = 67$; 23.6%), photo sharing ($n = 54$; 19%), and wikis ($n = 51$; 18%). Rarely used tools were: virtual worlds ($n = 19$; 6.7%), social bookmarking ($n = 16$; 5.6%), gaming ($n = 9$; 3.1%), mirco-blogging/presence applications ($n = 5$; 1.7%), and news aggregation ($n = 0$).

An independent samples t-test showed that men adopted a greater number of social media tools ($M = 6.52$; S.D. = 3.40) than women ($M = 6.12$; S.D. = 2.83), $t = 4.012$, $p = .046$.

An ANOVA compared the social media tool adoption index among the various organizational affiliations, ($F(6, 223) = 10.74$, $p = .001$). Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed there was a statistically significant difference between agency affiliation and all others. Agency practitioners adopted 8.44 of the 18 social media tools on average. Agency adoption was 2.16 tools higher than corporate, 3.26 higher than education, 3.92 higher than nonprofit, 3.94 higher than government, and 4.14 higher than sole-practitioner ($p \leq .01$ or better). Additionally, corporate was significantly higher than sole practitioner (mean difference = 1.98, $p = .001$).

3.2. RQ2: How prevalent do practitioners see social media in the industry?

In addition to basic use of the 18 tools examined here, respondents were asked to rate his/her perception of industry-wide adoption on a 5-point Likert scale (range "never" = 1, "all the time" = 5).

Mean scores ranging from 1 to 5 show that respondents feel e-mail is the most widely adopted tool (4.85), followed by intranets (4.07), videoconferencing (3.64), podcasting (3.51), blogs ($M = 3.46$), PDAs (3.43), video sharing (3.36), events (3.24), news aggregation (3.12), text messaging (3.10), and social networks (3.05). The least tools with the perception of the lowest adoption were gaming (2.11), virtual worlds (2.30), and micro-blogging/presence applications (2.42), social bookmarking (2.65), wikis (2.87), instant message (2.84), and photo sharing (2.98).

An additive sum index of these 18 items, similar to the adoption index, showed the overall perception that social media was being used in the industry some of the time ($M = 56.75$, S.D. = 11.21).

3.3. RQ3: Are personal adoption and perceived adoption in the industry related?

A correlation was run on the perceived industry adoption index and the actual adoption index. The indices positively correlated, though weakly ($r = .217$, $p < .005$). Next, the 18 individual tools were examined for specific tool correlation between use and perceived adoption. There were significant correlations between use and perceived adoption for all but four tools (all at .05 level or stronger): social event/calendar systems ($r = .455$), instant message chat ($r = .440$), PDAs ($r = .449$), social networks ($r = .398$), photo sharing ($r = .369$), intranets ($r = .361$), text messaging ($r = .343$), blogs ($r = .316$), wikis ($r = .301$), podcasting ($r = .251$), video conferencing ($r = .237$), social bookmarks ($r = .233$), video sharing ($r = .222$), and virtual worlds ($r = .142$).

4. Discussion

As one of the first academic studies to provide data on overall social media adoption, this research in brief provides a quick snapshot of adoption trends in the industry. Overall, practitioners have adopted nearly six different social media tools

professionally. Practitioners have clearly adopted the more established and institutional tools (e-mail, Intranet), yet they also seem very comfortable with blogs and podcasts. They are slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools that cater to a niche audience (e.g., text messaging, social networks, virtual worlds).

Juxtaposing actual use to perceived adoption across the industry, the most interesting findings occur among the tools that have received some (but not wide) adoption. Certainly, the most frequently adopted tools rank among those practitioners think are the most prevalent. For the most part, there are similar patterns for “fringe” tools (gaming, virtual worlds). In the middle, however, we see that there is a perception that tools such as photo sharing and text messaging are only used by a quarter of practitioners but they feel these tools are used more often in the practice. Such is likely the case because of the heightened degree of attention social media has received in professional development offered via professional organizations’ newsletters. Related to this, these “middle ground” tools such as social networking and text messaging have the strongest correlations between use and perceived adoption, suggesting that more advanced users of social media (i.e., those using more specialized tools) have a greater feeling that social media has been integrated widely into the industry than those who are using the more common tools.

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