



# Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media

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**Abstract** Traditionally, consumers used the Internet to simply expend content: they read it, they watched it, and they used it to buy products and services. Increasingly, however, consumers are utilizing platforms—such as content sharing sites, blogs, social networking, and wikis—to create, modify, share, and discuss Internet content. This represents the social media phenomenon, which can now significantly impact a firm's reputation, sales, and even survival. Yet, many executives eschew or ignore this form of media because they don't understand what it is, the various forms it can take, and how to engage with it and learn. In response, we present a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. As different social media activities are defined by the extent to which they focus on some or all of these blocks, we explain the implications that each block can have for how firms should engage with social media. To conclude, we present a number of recommendations regarding how firms should develop strategies for monitoring, understanding, and responding to different social media activities.

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## 1. Welcome to the jungle: The social media ecology

Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-

create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. Given the tremendous exposure of social media in the popular press today, it would seem that we are in the midst of an altogether new communication landscape. *The New York Times* recently hired a social media editor (Nolan, 2009); the *Catholic Press Association* (2010) offers a webinar on how the church can use social media; and the Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is on Twitter with 1.8 million followers. Even Northwest Organic Valley brand milk cartons now display 'find, friend, and follow us' slogans. But unknown to many, this

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landscape of social media sites and services started forming more than a dozen years ago. For instance, in 1997, the social network site Sixdegrees allowed users to create profiles, list their friends, and add friends-of-friends to their own lists (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Sound familiar?

There currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which vary in terms of their scope and functionality. Some sites are for the general masses, like Friendster, Hi5, and—of course—Facebook, which opened only 4 years after Sixdegrees closed its doors. Other sites, like LinkedIn, are more focused professional networks; in fact, Facebook started out as a niche private network for Harvard University students. Media sharing sites, such as MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr, concentrate on shared videos and photos. And after a slow start in the late 1990s, weblogs (blogs) have become very popular, because they are easy to create and to maintain. Their authors range from everyday people to professional writers and celebrities. Today, the resulting ‘blogosphere’ of more than 100 million blogs and their interconnections has become an important source of public opinion. There are even search engines, like Technorati, that are dedicated to searching blogs. Similarly, with the help of social news and bookmarking sites like Reddit, Digg, and Delicious (formerly known as Del.icio.us), users can rank sites by voting on the value of content. Most recently, the phenomenon of micro-blogging focuses on offering real-time updates. Twitter has been driving this development since it was founded in 2006. Today, more than 145 million users send on average 90 million ‘tweets’ per day, each consisting of 140 characters or less (Madway, 2010). These are mostly short status updates of what users are doing, where they are, how they are feeling, or links to other sites. In turn, Foursquare ties these real-time updates into location specific information by rewarding users for ‘checking in’ to real sites at any location worldwide, and for leaving their comments for others to view.

With this rise in social media, it appears that corporate communication has been democratized. The power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, Facebook entries, movies, pictures, and so forth. Communication about brands happens, with or without permission of the firms in question. It is now up to firms to decide if they want to get serious about social media and participate in this communication, or continue to ignore it. Both have a tremendous impact.

For instance, when United Airlines broke Dave Carroll’s guitar in 2008, it likely was not the first

time a musical instrument had been broken during the course of a flight. It was, however, probably the first time that the owner of the instrument recorded a music video about the experience and posted it on YouTube. The video, portraying United in a very unfavorable light, went ‘viral’ and has been viewed almost 9.5 million times (Carroll, 2009). Amongst other highlights, United Breaks Guitars was cited by Time.com as one of YouTube’s best videos, and even discussed by Wolf Blitzer on television’s CNN Situation Room. Such attention led to a brand and public relations crisis for United, as the story was cheered on by a global community of passengers who understood all too well the frustrations of dealing with airline service failures. United did not respond and, to this day, an Internet search of the term ‘United’ returns Carroll’s damaging YouTube video link at the top of the results list. This high profile example illustrates how ill-prepared firms can be in dealing with social media conversations about them. As BBC Business Editor Tim Weber (2010) explains: “These days, one witty tweet, one clever blog post, one devastating video—forwarded to hundreds of friends at the click of a mouse—can snowball and kill a product or damage a company’s share price.”

Although it is clear that—for better or for worse—social media is very powerful, many executives are reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively with social media. Consequently, firms regularly ignore or mismanage the opportunities and threats presented by creative consumers (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, & Kates, 2007). One reason behind this ineptitude is a lack of understanding regarding what social media are, and the various forms they can take (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). To help address this gap in knowledge, we herein present and illustrate a honeycomb framework of seven social media building blocks. Utilized individually and together, these blocks can help managers make sense of the social media ecology, and to understand their audience and their engagement needs. In true social media fashion, the origins of this framework can be attributed to a number of bloggers: principally, Gene Smith (2007) of the Atomiq.org, who developed and combined ideas discussed by Matt Webb (2004) of interconnect.org; Stewart Butterfield (2003) of sylloge.com; and Peter Morville (2004) of semanticstudios.com. We have taken their ideas and advanced them in four ways, each of which forms a part of our article.

In Section 2, we explain how executives would use the framework to understand the functional traits of different social media activities, and discuss and illustrate the fundamental implications that each block presents to firms as they seek to fathom the engagement needs of their social media

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