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MEASURING THE IMPACT OF NEW-MEDIA TOOLS

After the initial stage of implementing new-media tools such as blogs and RSS at an organization, the next step is to measure the impact these new tools have had on employee and customer engagement, and of course, the return on investment. Here, Angela Sinickas shares her ideas on how to get around this seemingly abstract task, and advises shifting the focus of measurement from activity to outcomes.

Measuring the effectiveness of newer electronic media, such as blogs and RSS feeds, offers many of the same opportunities and pitfalls as measuring the more traditional information channels. Unfortunately, most of the measures typically conducted focus on activity and not on outcomes.

Measures of activities

A number of firms offer services or software that reports how often your company name appears in blogs, discussion threads and chat rooms. Some even categorize the mentions as positive or negative. Some of the content analysis of the posts is done by automated software; other services use people to judge whether the mentions are positive or negative for your organization. The former method is less expensive, but the latter tends to be more accurate.

Other measures for blogs include counting the number of people commenting on a blog as an indication of engagement with the blog, the blogger, the topic of the blog or the organization hosting the blog.

Just as you can measure how many visitors you have to specific pages of your website, you can also quantify how many people are subscribing to RSS feeds for your site. You could also count how many people link through directly to various pages on your website by following links embedded in the RSS feed, and compare

this with the number of people getting to those interior pages from your homepage or from common search engines.

Measures of outcomes

Measuring activity surrounding the use of new media should be the starting point. For example, which is more important to know: the total number of people who visited a particular blog, or finding out that just one of those readers was a reporter who ended up writing a major article affecting your organization, based on information first learned through the blog?

To make more meaningful measurements of new technology, we need to research the impact of the original blog postings or comments on desirable behaviors benefiting your organization. External outcomes of blogs might be more people buying your product or applying for jobs at your company, or fewer people organizing protest demonstrations in front of your headquarters. Desirable outcomes of internal blogs could be greater sharing of best practices that reduce company expenses or increase revenue.

You could identify if employees' use of

RSS feeds has reduced the amount of time they spend scanning multiple external websites. Then, compare the value of the saved time in terms of payroll, with the cost of setting up the feeds. Also, check if any of the information they read on the RSS feeds has helped them to provide financial advantage to your organization, such as out-selling a competitor.

How to track outcomes

When measuring the impact of new technologies, start with some type of desirable business result, and identify the stakeholder behaviors that will lead to that result. Then, you can apply different techniques to connect the communication method to the results. For example:

- Once some people change their behavior, ask them to what extent different types of communication influenced their behavior change. This will help you to see what role the newer electronic media played in comparison to more traditional information sources.
- Use a pilot/control group approach where you promote the new technologies more heavily in some locations than others. Then measure the difference in behavior change and business outcomes between the control groups and the pilot groups.
- On a broader change management survey, ask additional questions about exposure to, and usage of, various communication channels. Using the answers to these questions, you can see if people who frequently visited a blog had more favorable answers to the other survey questions than those who didn't.

Once you quantify the percentage impact a particular communication approach has had on behavior change, you can calculate the return on investment. The survey questions, or differential outcomes of the pilot study, will tell you what percentage credit the new electronic media can take for the financial value of the behavior change. Then just compare that value against the cost of providing the electronic channels.



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