

Ensure new tools hit the mark by understanding employees' needs

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RESEARCH EMPLOYEES' READINESS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Some communicators who've already launched new media tools on their intranets are disappointed with their uptake among employees. Angela Sinickas offers suggestions for anticipating how the tools might be used so that your own launches go smoothly and meet the expectations you set with your leadership team.

Only 9 percent of internet users read blogs frequently, and 66 percent never do, according to a 2007 Gallup poll. So why be disappointed if less than 34 percent of your employees have ever visited your CEO's blog on your intranet?

Of course, many of those who do visit a blog will be talking with employees who don't, so the influence of the blog could reach a much larger number of employees than your usage statistics might suggest.

Even those employees who frequently visit public blogs and discussion forums might not be tempted to visit your in-house versions of these communication vehicles, for a variety of reasons including:

- Less discretionary time is available at work than at home.
- Supervisors may pressure employees to be productive and not "waste time" using new media.
- Lack of anonymity may discourage employees from making comments online.
- Lack of candor from leaders featured in social media makes their blogs or other commentary as lackluster as their column in the employee publication probably was.
- Executives often aren't committed to keeping their blogs updated, or responding to comments.
- Humor and controversy are not often found – or valued – in organizational

communications, so there isn't as much entertainment value to new media at work as there might be in employees' personal lives.

Setting realistic expectations

So, given all the reasons employees might not be ready to jump into social media at work, what level of participation could you expect? The answer is likely to vary quite a bit by company, so you'll need to do your own research.

The first thing to be careful of is not to just lump all social media into one category when you do your research. Various tools have different potentials in a work environment, and different levels of familiarity for your employees. Be sure to ask questions about each different type of medium you're considering. For example, employees might be far more likely to use a wiki as part of a team project they're working on than they might be to randomly browse executives' blogs.

Depending on where you are in your introduction of social media in the workplace, here are some good questions to ask about each type of new medium you're considering:

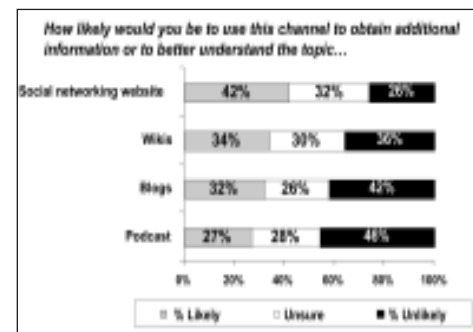
- How familiar are employees with each

medium? You can have them identify themselves on a range from "experienced" to "beginner," or say that they've never used a particular tool before. This type of information will help you plan the launch of a particular social medium so you know just how much pre-education or technical support you'll need to provide to make sure employees know the basics of how to use a tool before they're expected to start using it.

- How often do they use each new medium in their personal lives? This will help you set expectations for the highest possible levels of participation you might expect in your own social media.
- How likely are they to use a social media tool you haven't launched yet? (See Figure One.) You can also analyze your results by subgroup to see where you might want to try a pilot launch among groups who are the most ready.
- For those who don't use newly available tools, ask why not? In some cases, employees might not be aware of the tools' existence. In others, they can't see what's in it for them. Yet others may be having technical difficulties.

Asking the right questions before you introduce new tools is likely to make them far more successful – just as advance research can boost the success of any other communication approach.

Figure One: One client's survey on likelihood of using new social media channels.



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