

Your colleagues have been promoted

It's often said that all employees in an organisation are important ambassadors. The major impact of social media in recent years, however, has brought matters to head. Via the internet, your colleagues are just one click away from the surrounding world – and the number of spokespersons within your company with uncertain status and agendas has thus grown exponentially.

According to Wikipedia (a social medium per se), a general definition of social media is: "Internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

The degree to which a medium is "social" is determined by the level of interactivity it offers users. Facebook is currently the best known example, but corporate websites – such as IKEA's, with internet-based customer service "Anna" – are also a part of social behaviour on the internet. In fact, much of the content that we encounter on the internet each day can be described as "social" to some degree or another. The term "social media" will most likely become obsolete in the near future – for the same reason that we seldom refer to colour televisions or stereo radios. The internet has become nearly synonymous with social media.

How to find one's way in the social media jungle?

This theory was corroborated by a survey of 100 Nordic communication directors conducted by JKL in December 2009. They were asked the question: "How important is social media for your company?" Responses were evenly distributed around "important", with relatively few respondents answering "very important" or "unimportant". This can be interpreted as corroboration of the theory that social media is now part of the total media mix, neither more nor less important than traditional media channels. A more cynical interpretation is that Sweden, like the rest of the world, fumbles when trying to define ways in which companies can use social media in their customer communication in a more structured and sustained manner.

The digital paradox

According to *The Economist* (30/1/2010), the recent accelerating trend towards social media can be explained by the fact that various network sites currently



satisfy most concerns about privacy issues. The trend has demonstrated that we only really share information on the internet once we feel confident that we can control what is accessible to whom.

Facebook is reported to have 2.9 million users in Sweden alone, and the volume and character of the information shared by users is rapidly changing. The internet is becoming an increasingly integral part of the way we interact with each other – both privately and professionally.

When users feel confident about sharing information about themselves, the line dividing physical and virtual identity is erased. We Swedes, who have always jealously guarded our privacy and been restrained about sharing details of our private lives, paradoxically loosen the floodgates when we write on Facebook. Successful dates, stupid bosses, onerous back taxes – these things are no longer kept secret.

Everyone's a spokesperson on the internet

The blurred line between private and public also applies to the professional side of life. This comes as no surprise in our 24/7-connected lives – the problem is that when employees comment on things that go on at work, the situation becomes problematic for many employers. Fifteen years ago, no employee (except a union representative) would have considered sending a letter to the editor of a local paper offering his or her own version of an ongoing change process. But today it's much less obvious what employees can share with the surrounding world in a Facebook comment.

The media have not been far behind in using the internet in their search for news and new "spokespersons". Through an unfortunate status update on Facebook, a researcher in the pharmaceutical industry can have just as great a media impact as the company's CEO. Through Twitter, a receptionist can reach the entire world with her version of the ongoing restructuring. And so on.

Today, employees are not only ambassadors. Companies and organisations must adapt to this new world by regarding their employees as the spokespersons they are already equipped to become. But the question arises as to whether these employees represent an opportunity, or a potential threat. Which company will be the first to succeed in harnessing and utilising the power inherent in the fact that all employees have the world at their fingertips?

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