

## Is social media the real deal?

By David Bowen

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The king was running his country efficiently, using old-fashioned magic, when the wizards came to him and said they had something quite new and revolutionary. You need Magic 2.0, sire, they said. Magic 1.0 is rubbish. Though he didn't quite understand it, he handed them some gold to do what they wanted. He was a trusting sort of king, so when they came back two years later and said that no one was talking about Magic 2.0, the most important thing in the world was Social Magic, he handed over the keys to his chest again.

Was he right to? We don't know the ending yet. Maybe the wizards will be back with something even shinier in due course; maybe not. What I do know is that there is more nonsense talked about social media than pretty much anything else at the moment. And kings, for which read bosses, need to understand that.

There is indeed something magic about the word 'social' these days – sprinkle it into the conversation and little stars of excitement fly around the room. I watched a short video discussion recently where they managed to include social media, social business, social strategy, social data, social advertisements, and even plain old social. The main protagonist was of course a wizard – sorry, a social media guru.

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So, bosses, what should you know about social media and all its cousins?

1) Social media doesn't mean anything. Or rather it does but it is applied far too broad a spectrum of concepts. What do we think of as social media? Ask the average guru and you will be told about Facebook, YouTube, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, perhaps site such as Digg, and the new boys such as Foursquare. Of these, only social networks (Facebook etc) and certain sorts of blogs are social in the (Oxford English Dictionary) sense of living or disposed to live in companies or communities. YouTube is a place to post videos, blogs are low effort publishing media, Twitter is a very low effort publishing medium. They have certain things in common – they all allow we the masses to publish as we never have been able to before, they all have great visual power – but they have little to do with community. As an example, I have just looked at a list of the '10 best corporate blogs' and found that only two made any significant use of comment or conversation – you really could not call the other eight social to any degree.

2) Think of what we call social media instead as a set of tools, all of which have different jobs. You do not need to know what the jobs are in detail, but when you are told 'you must have some social media' (either by the gurus or by another boss at a dinner party), be suspicious. To use the metaphor in its literal sense, if a carpenter said 'We need more tools', you would ask what sort of tools, knowing that drills, saws and screwdrivers have quite different uses – and there are many different types of each of these, all best for specific tasks. Using my '10 best corporate blogs' example, I found I had to divide them into four categories to make sense of them (and the most 'social' was not a blog in the accepted sense, but an old-fashioned online community from Caterpillar).

3) There is a dangerous tendency to separate social media tools from websites, email and other 'old' new media. They are all part of online communication – indeed they are all part of communication. A recent survey showed that US companies see the big job this year as integrating social media with corporate websites – but at the same time many of them have set up separate social media departments and appointed social media managers. A complete 'social' industry has sprung up, at a speed that only the West Coast of the United States can achieve. Sometimes it is better to be a little slower – the laggards, who have preferred to wait and watch and will now run all their online comms from one department, will have the advantage.

4) Linked to this, the web has already blurred the distinction between marketing and corporate communications. When you have only one company web presence, it has to serve all audiences and all internal departments. The problem has become more acute with the establishment of social media as something separate – in many companies it is run by marketing, while the website is run by comms. This is a nonsense – the two must be perfectly integrated. Even if it means a fundamental rethink of established divisions and demarcations.

I'm worried that poor understanding of social media could damage some extraordinarily important developments. I don't see too many parallels with the dotcom bubble of the late 90s, but there is one: a gulf between what is going on and senior management (and also investor) understanding of it. If there is a backlash against the hype – caused for example by a high-profile failure – executives will not see the subtleties, simply that the promises they were sold turned to be fairy dust. That was what happened in 2000, when the bursting bubble did not just kill the dotcoms, it killed almost all boardroom interest in the internet for two or three years. I remember it all too well, and I seriously don't want it to happen again. So listen to your wizards, but make sure you ask difficult questions before handing over the gold.

David Bowen is senior consultant for Bowen Craggs & Co, a web effectiveness consultancy. [dbowen@bowencraggs.com](mailto:dbowen@bowencraggs.com). [www.bowencraggs.com](http://www.bowencraggs.com).

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