Strategic Communication and Social Media: An MBA Course From a Business Communication Perspective

Michael J. Meredith[1]

Abstract

Social media offers an exciting new area for our discipline to produce research and pedagogy that is in high demand by students, industry constituents, and other disciplines. This article discusses why business communication scholars should focus on social media as an important stream of study and outlines an MBA course in social media strategy currently in development from a business communication perspective. The author challenges the discipline to create social media content from an integrated communication approach.

The explosive popularity of social media platforms presents an attractive opportunity for businesses—millions of people use these online services daily. Social media offer intriguing new communication channels for organizational members to share information and talk to various stakeholders. Importantly, the rise of social media offers the prospect for our discipline to engage in research and pedagogy in an area that is in high demand by students, industry constituents, and colleagues in other disciplines.

At the Kenan-Flagler Business School, I am currently developing a course in social media for MBA students. The course, "Strategic Communication and Social Media,"

[1]University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Corresponding Author:
Michael J. Meredith, Kenan-Flagler Business School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
CB 3490, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA
Email: michael_meredith@kenan-flagler.unc.edu

will be taught from a management and corporate communication perspective. While the course remains in development, my hope is that this article will convince other business communication scholars of the merits of developing topics, courses, and research involving social media. Therefore, prior to discussing the course and its two primary assignments, I will propose why I believe business communication scholars need to vigorously pursue the development of pedagogy and research in social media.

Salient Background and Rationale for Business Communication to Embrace Social Media

The rapid success of social media has left corporations "in the dust" as they seek to promote their products on these platforms, develop strategies and policies, and fill newly created social media-related positions with qualified individuals (Kelly, 2010, p. 30). Companies are scrambling to hire and/or develop the newly created positions of social media directors (and similar positions) while simultaneously trying to figure out how best to use social media in the organization (Gillette, 2010).

Although by no means comprehensive, the following list offers observations supporting the need for developing pedagogy in social media:

- The use of social media is booming.
- Companies are devoting increased resources to tracking and developing involvement in social media.
- Leaders are increasingly understanding the need to use social media but are not sure how they fit into their organization.
- Social media are so new that companies are seeking leadership to drive strategy.
- The demand for thoughtful leadership in social media is being met by so-called experts who are providing companies with the equivalent of social media snake oil (Baker, 2009), necessitating the development of legitimate training and intellectual capital.
- Social media campaigns must be implemented as a part of a larger, well-defined organizational communication channel strategy.
- Companies are actively seeking candidates to fill social media leadership positions.
- The demand for candidates with a sophisticated understanding of social media is greater than the supply (Gillette, 2010)

Given these observations, business communication can—and I believe must—offer needed assistance to managers who are still trying to figure out how companies can best use social media in their respective organizations. Scholars have been advocating social media's potential to add impact to our discipline's research (e.g., Meredith, 2009, 2010) and pedagogy (e.g., D'Angelo, 2010; Meredith, 2009, 2010). I am confident that business communication scholars are in a unique position to build

our status as pioneers in the development of social media scholarship and curricula. But we must act quickly to stake our claim.

The discipline of marketing has been aggressively addressing the need for content relating to social media. For example, the American Marketing Association has offered many excellent virtual events and webcasts on social media topics. A colleague at the Kenan-Flagler Business School is developing a series of courses tackling social media from a marketing perspective. She is finding that her marketing students are increasingly asked to work on social media projects in the workplace.

While the marketing discipline is doing an admirable job steering the marketer's use of social media to speak to customers, we have the opportunity to approach social media from an integrated, management and corporate communication perspective. As previously mentioned, organizational leaders must consider social media as part of a larger, well-defined organizational communication channel strategy. Social media have value as communication tools for building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Thus, we can help managers leverage social media's potential for reaching internal and external constituents, such as employees, the media, government, shareholders, as well as customers. In turn, my course will examine the promise, pitfalls, and best practices of social media as a new channels for communicating with various audiences.

A Snapshot of the Course "Strategic Communication and Social Media"

This course will explore social media as a communication tools for an integrated corporate communication strategy. Doorley and Garcia (2007) define corporate communication as the centralized management of communication on behalf of the organization's reputation—and thereby its competitiveness, productivity, and financial success. This definition provides useful grounding for a course. "Strategic Communication and Social Media" will examine how managers can/are using social media for shaping an organization's reputation.

Some of the top-of-mind questions students will consider include the following:

- How can/are managers using social media to speak to various stakeholders?
- How and when should social media be used for communicating in organizations?
- How are companies planning and managing social media platforms?
- What are managerial considerations associated with the transparency and openness that social media creates?

More specifically, class discussion topics will include the rise of social media, a primer on reputation management from an integrated communication perspective, mapping communication channels, balancing social media usage and organizational transparency, developing strong and consistent messages, creating an authentic voice,

using social media in times of crisis, and employee-to-employee communication using social media.

Pedagogical Approach

As Barker and Stowers (2005) note, MBA professors must prepare to learn from, as well as teach, their students. The high-caliber students in our MBA programs are often engaged in real-world applications of the topics we are teaching. Thus, students can offer validation and insight into our course materials and discussions.

In the case of social media, our students' savvy is a real advantage. We have the chance to be facilitators; in turn, they have the opportunity to engage and share their own knowledge and experiences with social media. As a result, our expertise in communication drives the course, while, in many cases, their advanced understanding of a specific technology and/or platform can benefit everyone's learning outcomes.

Pennell and Miles (2009) advocate problem-based learning (PBL) for business communication courses, a pedagogy where students learn by tackling real, complex problems. As a former student of a PBL MBA program, I can attest to the benefits PBL and experiential learning played in helping my future career as a manager and consultant. Therefore, for this course, I plan to use these techniques in a group project with an actual client, although I believe a scenario approach can also be effective in reaching similar learning outcomes around social media implementation. The group project assignment is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Student Learning Outcomes, Assignments, and Deliverables

Students will develop strategic plans for the use of social media as a communication channel, examine the best practices of businesses using social media, and create strategic recommendations for an *actual client* implementing social media into an organizational communication strategy. This course will have five primary learning activities and outcomes:

1. Examining and learning from best practices of companies using social media to speak with various audiences
2. Developing effective strategies for adding and developing social media within an organization
3. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of various social media platforms as communicative tools within an organizational multichannel communication strategy
4. Tracking, evaluating, and responding to company messages found on various social media platforms
5. Designing consistent, authentic, clear, and effective messaging to a given audience

Table 1. Student Assignment Types and Examples of Deliverables

Assignment Type	Examples
Readings	Social media articles; *Open Leadership* by Charlene Li; case studies
Preparatory homework assignments	Connect with me via Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter; contribute to a course Wiki acting as a social media manual; develop client questions
Quizzes	Five-question quiz over assigned reading
Individual project: Company analysis	A two-part project
Team project: Client engagement	A written social media plan for an actual client

At the Kenan-Flagler Business School, our MBA students operate in 8-week modules. For this course, students will keep up with reading assignments, work on individual projects, and engage in a group project with an actual client, simultaneously: This course will be intense. Table 1 outlines the five types of student assignments, with examples, I will use for this course. I will discuss the two primary projects in more detail below.

For the individual project, students will function in the role of a newly hired social media director for a self-selected Fortune 500 company. For Part 1 of the project, students must design a case study analyzing the company's use of social media. This case study will include a discussion by the student of any initiatives under way by the company in social media and completion of a company competitor analysis. Students must also develop a communication channel map, a visual representation of the company's use of communication channels to reach various stakeholders.

In Part 2 of the individual project, students must follow, analyze, and respond to messages generated daily about the company on social media platforms over a 3-week period. Using free social media–monitoring tools, such as Social Mention, students will follow and identify company message trends. After they compile 3 weeks of data, they will develop recommendations to improve the company's social media efforts, including digging deeper into existing platforms and/or suggesting movement into new platforms.

In the second major project, students will work in teams as consultants for an actual client, a large company in personal care products already aggressively using social media for product offers. Students will recommend new campaigns and ways of expanding the use of social media as communication tools, and they will develop and deliver a plan book intended to shape the future of the company's communication strategy for using social media.

Conclusion

Social media offer an exciting way for business communication to align itself with a cutting-edge business trend. Social media platforms provide a means of relationship

building through communication. With so many businesses currently trying to understand how to best leverage social media platforms, business communication scholars have the opportunity to contribute to social media research, training, and pedagogy.

I believe business communication can offer a unique perspective on social media. Since businesses are using social media and related digital technologies for a wide variety of corporate communication functions, including marketing, media relations, internal communications, investor relations, corporate social responsibility, public affairs, and crisis communication (Argenti & Barnes, 2009), I believe our discipline can provide a needed integrated communication approach to social media.

We must be mindful of developing impact through our journals. In addition to continuing to share our successes and failures in the classroom, we also must develop traditional research projects relating to cutting-edge business trends (e.g., social media), collaborate with each other and across disciplines on research, and develop strong streams of inquiry that include following up our colleagues' studies and calls for additional research. We should also consider publishing more case studies on relevant business trends that speak to our target audiences: business communication colleagues, researchers from other fields, practitioners, and students. Social media offer our discipline a research and pedagogical area with high-impact potential.

I hope this article serves as a call for research in social media from a business communication perspective, inspires the development of new courses relating to social media, and encourages business communication scholars to add content involving social media to their existing courses. I am confident these media offer a highly relevant business trend worth pursuing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Argenti, P. A., & Barnes, C. M. (2009). *Digital strategies for powerful corporate communications*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Baker, S. (2009, December 3). Beware social media snake oil. *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 48-51.

Barker, R. T., & Stowers, R. H. (2005). Learning from our students: Teaching strategies from MBA professors. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *68*, 481-487.

D'Angelo, B. J. (2010). Social media community management: Implications for business communication curriculum. In *Proceedings of the 75th annual convention of the Association for Business Communication*. Retrieved from http://businesscommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/ABC-2010-13.pdf

Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. (2007). Reputation management: The key to successful public relations and corporate communication. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gillette, F. (2010, June 15). Twitter, twitter, little stars. *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 64-67.

Kelly, S. (2010, April). Herding social media. *Treasury & Risk*, 30-32.

Meredith, M. J. (2009, October). *In search of academic mutualism: Advocating the pursuit of shared benefit between the study of business communication and personal selling*. Paper presented at the 74th annual convention of the Association for Business Communication, Norfolk, VA.

Meredith, M. J. (2010, October). *Developing research in business communication: Building impact through research with Thomas Kuhn's* "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." Paper presented at the 75th annual convention of the Association for Business Communication, Chicago, IL.

Pennell, M., & Miles, L. (2009). "It actually made me think": Problem-based learning in the business communications classroom. *Business Communication Quarterly, 72*, 377-394.

Bio

Michael J. Meredith is an assistant professor of management and corporate communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to teaching in the BSBA and MBA programs, he is an active consultant, executive coach, and speaker in the areas of social media and corporate communication.