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How Blogs, Web 2.0 and Mobile applications are heating up Marketing Communications

Dis-intermediation - A Powerful Strategy?

With Web 2.0 and proliferation of mobiles, media dynamics have been completely transformed. From a scenario where companies communicated with their markets, clients and users through several layers of intermediaries, with these new tools – blogs, user communities, social networking, RSS etc – they can now communicate directly and much more powerfully than ever before with these groups.

How can these tools help your business? How do you use them optimally? This thought paper, created specifically for the Connect P2P session at the NASSCOM India Leadership 2008, addresses some of these questions.

"Look at how the world found out I was leaving Microsoft for a Silicon valley start –up …I told 15 people at a videoblogging conference – not A listers either, just everyday videobloggers. I asked them not to tell anyone until Tuesday – this was actually on a Saturday afternoon and I still hadn't told my boss. Well, of course, someone leaked that information. But it didn't pop up in the New York Times. It wasn't discussed on CNN. No, it was a blogger I had never even heard of, who posted the information first. Within hours it was on hundreds of other blogs. Within two days it was in the Wall Street Journal, in the New York Times, on the front page of the BBC website, in Business Week, Economist, in more than 140 newspapers around the world …Waggener Edstrom, Microsoft's PR agency, was keeping track and said that about 50 million media impressions occurred on my name in the first week. All due to 15 conversations."

Robert Scoble, Scobleizer.com, an early blogger, now considered a "guru" of the medium who, when he was at Microsoft, wrote (and continues to write) an influential blog at scobleizer.com. This extract is from his introduction to the book "The New Rules of Marketing & PR" by David Meerman Scott[1].

The central threads of Web 2.0 - blogs, wikis, user generated content, bookmarking, social networking groups – are not just providing the wiring for the social web – they are beginning to make their presence felt within the business web too, with some good results. Taking a leaf from their social brethren, some companies are infusing new life into marketing plans, intranets and corporate websites with these Web 2.0 tools. The use of these tools is increasingly relevant for IT businesses given that they are so knowledge centric.

While traditional media relies on specialist Intermediaries – PR firms/PR departments, customer relationship departments, corporate communication teams – to spread the message (you may still need them to create the message), in the Web 2.0 world disintermediation is itself a powerful strategy. Why?

- Employees feel good when they can tap into the thinking of their leaders through a CEO blog, and even possibly respond, by commenting on it
- Consumers like the immediacy of instant contact with a person rather than a faceless, impersonal "info@ ABCcorporation.com e-mail ID
- On-line user communities are a power knowledge sharing tool, and can effectively complement and eventually replace newsletters
- Mobile messaging is far more personalized – simply because a mobile phone is probably the most personal tech gadget most of us carry around
- A user generated website or a wiki is likely to be far better updated than a centralized intranet

Note: Mobility is listed as a Web 2.0 tool by design, not accident. With more phones running full feature web browsers and mobile networks faster than before, Web 2.0 applications and elements translate quickly and effectively into this new medium

Commit and Sustain ….if you want the Results

The important thing about a Web 2.0 strategy is that it needs to be seen as an approach rather than as individual elements. While a press release is a self contained universe – it tells you about the announcement, what the CEO has to say plus it often has a brief corporate profile – a Web 2.0 element or "webot" is different. A webot – which may be a blog post, a user group discussion thread, customer forum – individually does not communicate much. To a user who is not part of the user community/forum, the context may seem less complete. To make an impact and deliver on the promise of the medium, companies need to set in place
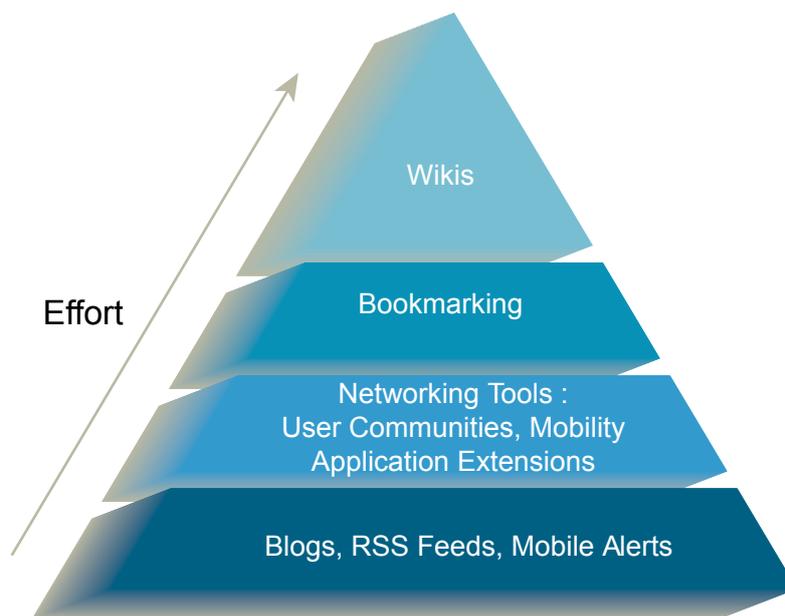
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[1]The New Rules of Marketing and PR by David Meerman Scott, John Wiley & Sons, 2007

a strategy and reflect that in a sustained program to get results. So, one blog a quarter, a customer forum that's updated only every few months, just won't work. If your marketing communication is going to be sporadic, a traditional approach may work much better.

Webot Effort Pyramid

The pyramid is designed to chart out complexity levels for various kinds of webots. At the base are Blogs/RSS feeds which can be plugged into your marketing programe using ready-made, off-the-shelf tools or with minimal programming. At further stages, tools get progressively more complex, requiring use of third-party software or building your own.

Effort

Wikis

Bookmarking

Networking Tools :
User Communities, Mobility
Application Extensions

Blogs, RSS Feeds, Mobile Alerts

Blogs

Managing your Reputation

If you thought that blogs were not yet relevant in the Indian context, think again. While writing this paper, we did a blog search on around six to seven Indian firms – top tier, middle rung, emerging – and every one of them was tagged on a blog. While many mentions pertained to PR put out by these companies themselves, several were investors tracking these companies; a couple of hits came through employees posting notes on their companies.

But the eye-opener was a blog devoted to discussing the suicide of an employee, a girl undergoing induction training at the training campus at one of India's best known and respected software companies. Reading the blog – the last post dated a week ago when a second suicide was attempted- was a revelation of the issues confronting IT

Key lesson #1 – Keeping track of blogs is important to track your company's perception, reputation in the world.

companies as they scramble to "work-ready" new employees. What other employees, peers (geeks at other companies) think of this was also revelatory – while plenty -"ranted"- about the company, its tough culture, there were others who believed that the girl should have been tougher. Issues that the company's HR ought to address since employees were obviously talking about this (in spite of a "gag" order issued at the training center). At the very least, if the facts were incorrect or wholly false, a formal rejoinder should have been posted so that readers could get the full picture.

Thought Leadership

Blogs are equally influential in the reverse: be it the CEO, CTO, or any executive in a leadership role, blogs are the means to broadcast your vision to the world. Unlike a press release which is linked to a discrete event, blogs are incremental: if you have a Eureka moment or an insight, it does not have to wait until there is a news anchor meaty enough to merit a press release.

As an external tool that plugs into a corporate marketing website, it is an excellent tool for thought leadership positioning. The Infosys telecom blog "Livewire" is a case in point- it has a nice blend of fresh takes on technology application, some analysis, some technology future gazing, all delivered in a personal style which is the essence of a blog.

Blogs are important for building thought leadership. And much easier than writing a whitepaper or a speech. So even if your tech head is a shy geek, you may want to urge him/her to start/contribute to an on-line technical forum. Commenting on blogs - especially ones that attract active participation from others in the business – is a good way to sustain corporate visibility, and if your have a specific viewpoint, a way to claim mindshare of an idea/concept.

Key Takeaway # 2: Blogs are important for building thought leadership. And much easier than writing a whitepaper or a speech.

Even when it comes to distributing content like press releases, blogs are an alternate medium, easier than, and sometimes just as effective as, reaching out to specialized journalists at a mass media organization. Industry specific news can be effectively disseminated to on-line news feeds, sector-specific trackers run by trade outfits or even analysts/commentators or any other influencer who is speaking on-line. This is particularly important when the release is not deemed to be broadcast worthy by a mass media news organization.

Blogs can also look inward – when a CEO writes a blog, it tells employees what the woman in the corner room is thinking. When you are the CEO of a high growth company spending more time with customers in far flung corners of the world than with your employees in a Navi Mumbai high-rise, you may want to discuss your vision for the company, or your ideas for creating an ideal enterprise, so that they stay on for the long run.

Many Indian IT firms don't run their own blogs. Over 70% of the companies surveyed in a recent Prayag Research Report on Website Best Practices of Indian IT firms did not run their own blog.

Communities and Forums

User Communities

Moving up the ladder we come to networking tools. Extremely successful in drawing in users, it is one webot that is pretty ubiquitous in India. (Case in Point : among the largest nationalities on Orkut are Indians). The concept of networking groups can be tapped in two ways. The first and possibly the most rewarding is the creation of user communities for customers – this, of course, is particularly relevant for product companies. A moderated community that can actually share product usage experience and data is a self sustaining marketing idea. Plus it's a great platform to promote new product releases, for organizing user trainings and even for getting advance feedback for under-construction features.

Key Takeaway # 3: A moderated community that can actually share product usage experience and data is a self sustaining marketing idea

One of the most effective use of communities comes from German software giant SAP[2]. Users who sign up for SAP. com get access to a range of communities where users can post queries and get help on several topics. Called the SAP Communities of Innovation, the forum themes cover the gamut of technical topics to broader enterprise issues (such as dealing with change management) to discussions on interoperability and SAP.

[2]http://www.sap.com/ecosystem/communities/index.epx

Content within the forums is rich. For example, a member of the Business Process Expert community gets access to

- A technical library of articles, white papers, and documentation
- Software downloads and code samples
- An e-learning catalog
- Active, moderated forums and Web logs

The discussion threads are active and tie together users, customers and representatives of SAP implementation partners across the world. A quick look shows that the communities are very active – a great way to keep in touch with real customer issues. According to the SAP website, the Business Process Expert community is the largest business process community in the world – with over 200,000 members covering 15 industries.

For a product software company whose platform is widely implemented and maintained by multiple implementation partners, these communities are a great mechanism to bring customers together, pool knowledge and ideas.

Communities for Employees/Alumni

Another interesting way of using networking is to create official alumni online groups – provided, of course, the bulk of the alumni left on fairly good terms! These networks are great for posting vacancies, getting references or even to stay in touch with employees you may want to re-hire. Companies have the choice of building custom platforms (but this takes time, effort and in the end, may not be best in class because building networking sites may not be your core competency) or using existing online tools. A good example of the latter is the NASSCOM LinkedIn community which uses the LinkedIn platform to run a network for users who are first validated to see if they are NASSCOM members. The utility is called "LinkedIn for Groups[3]" and it is available free on the LinkedIn site for any group to use.

Tapping into Social Networking and Bookmarking

If the organization is sufficiently large, it may be worthwhile to look at communities inspired by social networking sites like Facebook or Orkut. Far more fun than boring text-only Intranet listings!

One company that has also worked out how to get employees to benefit – in a business sense – through networking is IBM and the tool they use is bookmarking. Given the acres of web real estate that most of us trawl through in the course of work – for research, reading or service delivery – business bookmarking was an idea waiting to happen.

Key Takeway # 4: Bookmarking used along with an internal wiki or intranet is a great knowledge management tool that runs itself.

IBM describes the "Dogear" social bookmarking service as the first social bookmarking tool designed to support organizations and large corporations. It works just as social bookmarking sites do. Users can tag/bookmark useful links using Dogear while putting in a few sentences on what/why they found (it) useful. There were two key differences from the social tool. One was that users had to provide their real corporate identities – this was important to tie this up with corporate email which could extend and complement the use of Dogear. For instance, colleagues at different locations with similar interests or work challenges could, having identified the other through Dogear, now correspond through mail.

The second was that Dogear was designed to work behind corporate firewalls – this meant that a whole bunch of internal resources – knowledge management systems, employee intranets could all be bookmarked and shared. This is very relevant for multi-location organizations – employees across the spectrum could access useful bookmarks such as–how to requisition common resources/how to fill in assessment forms or even how to fill leave forms! Such tools have great potential as intuitive training and knowledge management plug–ins[4].

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[3]http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=groups_info
[4]Read this article about Dogear in Queue Magazine: http://acmqueue.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=344&page=1

Moving up a level: Virtualization

The virtual reality world in Second Life, it seems, is as real to its citizens, as this world is to us. The truth of this statement is reflected in thousands of companies and entities that have scrambled to plant their (virtual) flags on Second Life. Enterprises are beginning to use Second Life as a business tool, though effectiveness has not been fully measured.

Here is another example from IBM. An article that appeared in the Wall Street Journal earlier this year talked about how IBM uses Second Life for orienting new employees located in China and Brazil. A HR avatar can give a talk and then respond to text questions from the new employees. Since many of the international employees preferred writing down the questions, the virtual meetings actually improved interaction.

Closer home, a more recent example is from Wipro which has set up an Innovation Isle on "Second Life". Built to target the Web 2.0 generation, Phase One of an anticipated multi-phase presence includes Wipro's Offshore Development Center (ODC) model campus with facilities like Client Engagement Center, Learning Center, Amphitheater, Basketball and Volleyball courts, Admin, Data center and Library. It will be regularly staffed by Wipro's own avatars. Wipro plans to use the Isle for recruitment and prospective candidates will be able to submit their resume at Wipro's virtual campus[5].

Collaborating through Wikis

With bookmarking, collaboration kicks in and wikis are the next logical step. While it requires an application to house and manage the wiki, once this is set up, organizations will find that wikis are self sustaining without the overhead of separate teams that intranets normally entail.

Key Takeaway # 5: Unlike Intranets, wikis don't need separate management teams and hence are more likely to succeed.

That's exactly what a leading software product MNC in the spend management space found out when they launched a collaborative wiki one and a half years ago. The wiki is used for knowledge management, project information sharing, news and updates – users have rights for specific sections that they periodically update and each group maintains its own area. The wiki has since cannibalized some of the functions of the intranet and the knowledge management systems since it is always better updated. Since the system is directly updated by users and not collated by a another team, updates tend to get in faster. By taking away the need for a separate intranet team, a wiki is a good cost-effective tool for small to mid size businesses.

Toolkit

RSS

RSS or Really Simple Syndication is an easy way to pollinate your blog/information feeds into the reading lists of your target audience. It's easy to set up an RSS feed with minimal code.

One way to use RSS is to hook it up to dynamic sections of a corporate website – such as jobs/press releases to good effect. A more holistic approach is to use RSS to set up information feeds – comprising two to three items per feed update – which is an useful way to package many different kinds of communication – press releases, case studies, financial results, data sheets, whitepapers, media reports, blog posts, profile updates etc. Such a feed basically pushes out a comprehensive update consisting of many traditional PR elements as well as webots to subscribers.

[5]Wipro Second Life flat rendition: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Wipro%20Innovation%20Isle/128/128/0/

SEO

If your URL is your on-line address, then SEO is about getting into the best part of town. After all, what is the point in moving into a new town, if you don't get noticed? Given that search engines are portals for most online users knocking on your door, it is important to "own" the right keywords. Appropriate tagging, using sitemaps, the impact of dynamic elements and flash are all issues that affect SEO and the hence the probability of a company's name appearing right up there in a search engine page[6].

Building SEO optimized sites with Web 2.0 content platforms

The conventional way to build sites is to get them built grassroots up using in-house or external resources. A newer approach, which treats a website like an expanded blog, is now available. WordPress, a blogging platform provider, supplies tools that enable you to build your entire website on their software – it will, of course, be hosted on your webserver with your domain.

Sites built with WordPress qualify as a blogs, which means that these websites show up more prominently in blog searches and feed search engines. But the real benefit is in the SEO optimization that this brings – because the website is now a blog, each and every piece of content – press release, case study, whitepaper – is treated as a separate post tagged with appropriate keywords. This multiplies the number of pages, and hence tags, thereby offering much more material for search engine crawlers. Such granular tagging can also be used to create feeds that appear in contextually appropriate places within the website. The resultant pages look very much like standard webpages. Here are a few samples built with WordPress.

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[6]To read more about SEO and elements that impact a ranking read the Prayag research report on website best practices of Indian IT companies. Download from http://www.prayag.com/report.html

Mobility

With mobile subscriber numbers reaching critical mass, this is a community that one cannot ignore. Organizations can tap into mobility in a number of ways. At a simple level, straight forward alert services can be set up to connect with media intermediaries – journalists, PR agencies about new content/releases on your site.

Given the increasing number of business users owning phones that come with competent web browser capabilities, it may be important to set up a mobile website with succinct pertinent company information – Profiles, Location Information, Contact Information and Recruitment.

As an IT company, you may also want to allow customers to post feedback, comments, raise support required flags, request support call-backs via SMS.

Prayag Takeaway

In conclusion, clearly the number of webots available is many. While the sections above discuss how a company could benefit from each of these, a more lateral benefit is intimately understanding the consumer Web 2.0 experience so that you can actually replicate it in your software. This is the big leap that many believe that enterprise applications are now about to make. Going forward, business software is going to have to be more collaborative and intelligent in that it can incorporate and build on past learnings – an approach where users build on a software platform, rather than just using it. The new collaborative approach takes its inspiration from user content generation, a build as you go along approach, and incremental dissemination that are cornerstones of Web 2.0.

While this approach to development is relatively new and is yet to be embraced on any significant scale by large enterprises, experimentation has begun and early results indicate that, this time at least, performance may outpace hype. So, embracing the new web and its numerous webot progeny may not just be nice-to-have, but crucial preparation for taking your core business to the next level!

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