

SOCIAL MEDIA'S EFFECT ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION AND INNOVATION

by
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ABSTRACT

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With the increased speed and technological implications of the Internet, this study aimed to determine American consumers' perceptions toward organizations using social media. This study also examined social media's effect on an organization regarding reputation and innovation. To test consumer perceptions, the researcher conducted a nonrandom, self-selection online survey. The researcher also conducted an experimental design using a content analysis and interviews to compare two companies in the airline industry and their social media use. The researcher also led an eight-person focus group to probe American consumers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors toward social media and the two airlines. Through data analysis and percentages, the researcher found that the majority of American consumers want organizations to interact with them through social media. The study also shows that the majority of consumers consider organizations using social media as innovative and that the use of social media can improve an organization's reputation.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background

MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Del.icio.us, Second Life, Digg, Web logs, feeds—all recognizable words when you hear them, but today take on new meanings, and sometimes even new spellings. The evolution of social media through social networking sites, blogs, photo and video sharing, wikis and podcasting produced users who no longer just consume information—they create it. The Internet allows experts and everyday people to publish their views to anyone who will listen. And many of these publishers greatly influence what consumers think, feel and do.

By March 2008, 184 million people worldwide had started a blog and 77 percent of active Internet users read blogs. And, as of August 2008, social networking sites MySpace and Facebook reached 75.1 million and 41.0 million users, respectively (Technorati, 2008). YouTube receives new video posts almost every second and online video searching became more popular than text searches. Politicians, marketers and individuals now embrace new forms of social networking and other forms of content sharing at unprecedented levels (Paine, 2007).

Social media emerged into such a hot topic that traditional media sources, including CNN, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, publish stories describing new trends or even tips on how businesses can use social media tools. Some traditional media have even incorporated social media into their own practices. In fact, 95

percent of the top 100 U.S. newspapers maintain reporter blogs (Technorati, 2008). *The Wall Street Journal* recently added discussion features to its revamped Web site and *The New York Times* now allows online readers to recommend articles to other users (Stelter, 2008).

With consumers and the media generating their own content, evaluating brands and influencing public opinion, organizations need to engage in public discussion to promote the right messages. A longitudinal study by Barnes and Mattson (2008) found that social media has penetrated parts of the business world at a tremendous speed. Over one year, Inc. 500 companies who blog increased by 20 percent. In 2008, 77 percent of Inc. 500 companies reported using at least one social media tool, including message/bulletin boards, social networking, online video, blogging, wikis or podcasting. Forty-four percent of respondents believe social media is very important to their business and marketing strategy, up from 26 percent only a year prior.

Organizations can also contact social media influencers to carry their messages and promote their products. Twenty percent of 16 to 25 year-old broadband users worldwide already engage in some form of brand-initiated, user-generated content and another 30 percent say they plan to in the future. If they participate, consumers want to find out what's in it for them. Businesses must be perceived as giving much more than they are receiving (McClellan, 2008). Large corporations like Wal-mart target mommy bloggers to review products and blog about their experiences. Wal-mart did not pay the bloggers for their input, but merely asked for their honest opinions (Neff, 2008).

As described above, organizations are desperately trying to understand and embrace social media so they can create more conversations with their audiences and

react quickly to online discussions about their brands. Steve Outing (2007), an online-media pioneer from the Enthusiast Group, says, “The Internet is a dominant force in our culture today because it enables people to find and talk to others—existing friends and new ones who share their interests—and talk to brands that they care about.” He also explains that now consumers who like or dislike your product can amplify their opinions on blogs, online forums, product review Web sites, e-mails and social networking sites for all to read. This widespread, uncontrollable online grapevine creates a huge problem for public relations professionals, especially since these online sources establish themselves as experts on various topics and create a trusting relationship with the reader, thus influencing public opinion.

Organizations must research ways to establish themselves as experts on important topics, create trusting relationships with consumers and influence public opinion in this new online forum.

Problem Statement

A whole new medium to target audiences arrived overnight. The user-generated content and social network phenomenon stands at the forefront of integrated marketing communications and media discussions. Organizations today contemplate the need for social media research and implementation, as well as hiring Internet specialists. But, if organizations adapt to this new medium, will consumers value this change and think more highly of the organization? Will the use of social media help organizations’ triple bottom line?

This researcher will investigate if consumers perceive organizations that use social media as more reputable than those who don’t. In addition, the researcher will

study whether consumers consider innovation as a key component to the organization's reputation.

Delimitations

This researcher will not study each organization's presence throughout the Internet formed by user-generated content or online media coverage. When evaluating the social media tools used on each organization's Web site, this researcher will not determine the likeliness of a consumer using the tool. This researcher will also not study the effects of organizations using mobile marketing to target customers. This study is confined to one specific industry and therefore the researcher cannot project the results to every organization across the board.

Purpose

This study intends to determine the effectiveness of organizations investing in social media tools to impress their customers and increase their triple bottom line. This study also aims to examine the importance of reputation and the need for innovation in an organization. Ultimately, this study will conclude if social media help organizations differentiate themselves as the most modern businesses in their industries.

The results of this study will greatly impact integrated marketing communication plans and all industries. If this study finds that customers favor businesses that use social media tools, organizations will need to hire social media specialists. This will directly affect college curricula, workshops, public relations, advertising and marketing agencies, and internal public relations, advertising and marketing departments. Social media will become a new channel to disseminate messages to segmented audiences and public

relations practitioners will need to become expert on how to harness the power of social media.

Based on the above explanation, the researcher suggests the following hypotheses based on the evidence below:

H1 – It is expected that customers value organizations that use social media on their Web sites.

The 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study found that of the 60 percent of Americans who use social media, 93 percent believe companies should have a presence in social media (Cone, 2008).. Furthermore, 85 percent believe a company should not only be present but also interact with its consumers via social media and 56 percent of users feel both a stronger connection with and better served by companies when they can interact with them in a social media environment.

According to Heinze and Hu (2006) and the theory of impression management, individuals can form impressions of organizations based on interactions with organizations' Web sites. The presentation of these sites can influence user impressions and influence the viewers' attitudes toward purchasing from the Web site. Heinze and Hu also found that interactivity—the degree to which Web site users have control over pace, sequence, media, objects and other variables—can greatly increase user satisfaction and the effectiveness of information delivery. At the end of their research, Heinze and Hu concluded that as the Internet increases and people become more sophisticated with their Web use, customers expect a certain level of information, interactivity and service from corporate Web sites. To stay competitive today, organizations must leverage every opportunity, especially an up-to-date and state-of-the-art Web presence.

H2 – It is expected that customers will view organizations that use social media on their Web sites as more reputable and innovative than organizations that do not use social media on their Web sites.

While examining customers' attitudes toward company Web sites, Heinze and Hu evaluated the importance of competition and said that a company must maintain pace with its industry. It should incorporate features and technology that consumers deem important. Managers should focus on using the features that have the greatest effects on customer perceptions.

Research conducted by WPP Group's Mediaedge:cia found that more than half of the respondents said they would feel much more positive or slightly more positive about a brand that invited them to participate in the three primary forms of user-generated content: voting or rating, sharing thoughts or opinions, and making content (McClellan, 2008).

When Steve Outing (2007) advises organizations on how to use social media tools, he pushes the benefits of two-way communication. Outing explains that "when companies listen to what the audience is saying—and build online venues that encourage consumers to express themselves—they can innovate faster and more intelligently."

Procedure

The procedure for this study will include:

1. An online survey sent to nationwide consumers to determine their attitudes toward any organization using social media tools;
2. A content analysis of two competing organizations' Web sites for the use of social media tools;

3. In-depth interviews with the organizations' human resources and/or public relations departments to determine if the companies' identities match their images, and;
4. A focus group experiment with consumers to determine their perceptions of the two competing organizations' Web sites and their use of social media tools.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher hopes to determine consumers' attitudes and behavior towards the social media trend and companies with social media Web sites. A comparison experiment looking at a company Web site with social media tools and one without will determine if focus group participants prefer one to the other.

Summary

The researcher will determine consumers' perceptions of organizations that use social media tools on their Web sites and whether these tools help organizations appear more reputable and more innovative than their competitors. With a society vastly converting to social media and user-generated content, this study will greatly benefit organizations seeking to engage consumers, influence public opinion and increase their triple bottom line through a new channel. Also, with a struggling economy, this study will verify if organizations should start or continue spending money on social media research and implementation.

The next chapter will examine current research on consumer behavior, online consumer behavior, social media tools and information about social media users. This

literature review will lead to a better understanding of consumers' perceptions toward social media.

Terminology

Avatar – Graphical representation of an Internet user and created for interactions in three-dimensional Web universes, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Blog – Also Web log. A journal-style Web site on which an individual or group enters text, called “posts,” resulting in a running conversation displayed in reverse-chronological order. Derivative: flog – fake blog created for sales purposes and often misleading, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Consumer-Generated Content – Also user-generated media (UGM) or user-generated content (UGC). Digital content produced by self-publishers and sometimes picked up and reprinted or referenced by professional media, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Digital News Hub – Also online pressroom, Web newsroom, media center. A robust source of news and media content designed to provide on-demand access to news releases, contacts, background information, and digital media assets including photos, graphics, audio, video, and multimedia content. Often incorporated into an organization's Web site. Branded product- and service-specific hubs (stand-alone Web properties) are effective elements of online visibility and search-positioning programs, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Grassroots Media – Aka citizen media, people media. A term for any media form where the people who consume the media also produce content for it. It generally signifies that “professional” status as a journalist or writer is not necessary for publication. “We are the media” best sums up the meaning of “grassroots media.” Grassroots media operations

may have professional editors reviewing submitted content, and/or augmenting it, (Outing, 2007).

Innovation – Responses to environmental changes or means of bringing about change in an organization, (Damanpour and Evan, 1984).

Micro-Blogging – Users of micro-blogging platforms, such as Twitter, update by way of short blog posts, usually in 140 characters or less. Also called “status updates,” these blog posts typically consist of a summary update, short comment or thought expressed by the micro-blogger. These updates can be viewed on the micro-blogging platform itself or on a mobile device, (Davis, 2008).

Podcast – Audio recording, hosted on a Web page and accessible for individual downloads by using “pull” technology, such as RSS feeds and MP3 players, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Reputation – Overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general, (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

RSS – Acronym for Really Simple Syndication. Plug-and-play technology, typically called a “reader,” which allows nontechnical Web users to easily “feed out” or “pull in” (by way of subscription) select Web content to or from a proprietary Web property, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) – Act of editing or altering Web site content, including text, graphics and interactive assets, to improve a Web site’s natural visibility and rank or prominence in the results listing for top search engines, such as Yahoo!, Google, MSN and AOL, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Self-Publisher – Also citizen journalist. Content creator whose content development and delivery are not affiliated with professional media or communications, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Social Media – The use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in more efficient ways, (Kumar et al., 2009).

Social Networking Site – Also social network. Web site featuring focused, often user-generated, content that exists at the center of an active, engaged network, or community, of site visitors who openly converse about a common interest. Includes personal profiles, blogs, discussion groups, photos, music and videos, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Viral Marketing – Also buzz, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. The sharing of information, especially recommendations or endorsements, in an informal, person-to-person manner rather than by mass media or traditional marketing. Includes verbal communication but also expanded Web dialogue, such as blogs, message boards and e-mail, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Vodcast – Video recording, hosted on a Web page, accessible for individual downloads using “pull” technology such as RSS feeds and video-capable MP3 players, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Virtual World – Also metaverse. Computer-based, simulated environment. Prospective inhabitants access a downloadable program that lets users interact with one other via avatars, two- or three-dimensional graphical representations of real-world life forms, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Web 2.0 – A term coined to loosely describe Web-based services such as wiki sites and social networks that emphasize online collaboration and content-sharing among users, (Fleishman-Hillard).

Wiki – From the Hawaiian word wikiwiki, meaning “fast.” A Web environment that allows visitors to quickly and easily support, refute, add to or otherwise openly edit the content. Collaborative content development and publishing. See Wikipedia, (Fleishman-Hillard).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This researcher intends to discover consumers' perceptions towards organizations that use social media on their Web sites. In addition, the researcher will test to see if an organization's reputation relies on innovation.

Before conducting this study, the researcher prepared a literature review to compile prior consumer behavior, online consumer behavior, and social media and their users research. Because the social media phenomenon is relatively new, few longitudinal studies on its effects exist. The researcher examined psychology and mass media journals, online newspaper articles, case studies and company research reports.

Consumer Behavior

When deciding with whom to talk, what to do, where to go, when to do it, why this is important and how to act, people undergo a series of internal judgments. Values, concepts of desirable ways to behave, can form important parts of a person's self-concept and contribute to a person's sense of identity (Verplanken and Holland, 2002). Sometimes culturally shared, values can form the basis of group, professional, political or cultural identities. Individuals differ in how they rank the importance of specific values and many are motivated by constructs, such as reaching a specific, highly abstract goal. For example, honesty, helpfulness and loyalty are three values that fulfill the goal of benevolence. Verplanken and Holland consider values as cognitions that define a situation, create goals and guide action.

According to Homer and Kahle (1988), values and cognitions explain and influence human behavior, as well as guide individuals about what situations to enter and how to handle them. Verplanken and Holland also found that the perceived likelihood of an attractive outcome—most likely influenced by values—greatly impacts the decision making process. They also explain that central values make an individual define and interpret a situation, address value-related information, highlight such information and motivate action. Social adaptation theory states that values help people adapt to their environment. These notions explain the importance of relationships between values, attitudes and behaviors.

In a study to determine consumer behavior in the natural food industry, Homer and Kahle found two types of values: internal and external. People who place more importance on internal values tend to want as much control as possible over all aspects of their lives, such as what food they eat and where they shop. In the study, these people were very concerned about nutrition and food additives. They took every effort to shop at natural food stores for healthy alternatives. They were also less likely to allow anyone to convince them to buy less nutritious foods. Profiling a person's value system and predicting how they will behave can appeal to and benefit businesses that use this information correctly.

Another study (Verplanken and Holland, 2002) designed to answer why values do or do not enter a decision-making process identified two important conditions for values to influence choices and behaviors. It found that a value must be cognitively activated and central to an individual's self-concept. This means that values do not influence

behavior by default. The researchers concluded that while people maintain elaborate value systems, they don't "always live up to them."

Customer-Company Identification

Ahearne and Bhattacharya (2005) define organizational identification as the sense of connection between an individual and an organization. This type of research attracts marketers highly interested in customer and/or brand loyalty and customer advocacy. Many customers form judgments on both economic factors and corporate dimensions when they make purchase decisions.

In their research, Ahearne and Bhattacharya found that "customers do indeed identify with companies and that such identification has strong, positive consequences both in terms of product utilization and word-of-mouth behaviors." Organizations and their salespeople help satisfy individuals' self-definitional needs. People can also identify with a company when they need to conform or be accepted into a group. They will talk or buy more if other people do it.

Brand Management

The effectiveness of a brand not only relies on the quality of the product, but also the consumers' values, commitments and sense of community (Arvidsson, 2005). Brands help enable people's abilities to create trust, shared meanings and a common bond.

Brand management infiltrates everyday life through all forms of advertising, product placements in films, video games, corporate sponsorships and more. Generally, the way people look, feel, act, fantasize or become fascinated with can be attributed to a particular brand. Consumers form the basis of value by associating meaning with the brand. According to Arvidsson, brand value "represents the present value of predictable

future earnings generated by the brand.” For a brand to earn profits, the company must measure its “brand equity,” or the public’s perception, meaning and social affiliations with the brand. To build brand equity, the company must associate as many experiences, emotions, attitudes, lifestyles or loyalties to the brand as possible.

Arvidsson states that companies can measure brand value in two ways: “premium price” and “brand valuations.” Premium price represents what consumers are willing to pay for the product. For example, a teenager may want to purchase a pair of Nike sneakers because they hold high-status in a high school peer culture. This consumer might be willing to pay more to achieve that status. Companies measure brand valuations in terms of brand awareness, how many people know the brand, brand associations, the number of positive associations the brand receives and brand loyalty—if consumers choose that brand over its competitor. Companies attempt to measure the standing of a brand in a consumer’s life.

From a managerial perspective, brand value represents the monetary value of what a brand can mean to consumers. Companies build and stimulate their brand through advertising, marketing, product placements and product integration, staged events and more. Companies have always known that the public perception of an object establishes the market price, supply and demand. But, managers cannot assume that today’s consumer will passively accept the brand’s message. Now, consumers actively engage in the value of consumer goods and help drive capitalist development.

Today, companies sell less of the product and more of the experience or the lifestyle associated with using the product. Planned brand management helps consumers produce shared meaning and social relations to apply to their own life. Through

consumption of these brands and ideas, consumers find commonalities and link shared identities to create communities that add to the product's value. Importantly, while management creates these brand images and lifestyles for consumers, they must also allow flexibility room for consumers to interpret the image and lifestyle themselves. However, management must control this flexibility and keep it within the boundaries of the brand identity. In other words, Arvidsson says that "this necessity to balance between innovation and conservation means that brand management contains two sets of techniques: those that aim at the selective appropriation of consumer innovation, and those that aim to make consumers' use of brand goods serve to reproduce the forms of life that the brand embodies." Brand management recognizes the autonomy of consumers today, but enables consumers to evolve in particular directions. Through links in media culture, brand management helps consumers discover what the brand can mean to them.

For example, in the late 1980s, Nintendo created T-shirts, watches, cereal, sleeping bags, magazines, cartoons, wallpaper and snacks around its two core products, SuperMario Bros. and Zelda. The company expanded the brand from its original product. BMW creates its own lifestyle through James Bond action movie sponsorships. People who identify with that character or who want his lifestyle will then associate it with the BMW brand. In this case, the brand tries to resist more common uses and only invite a different, higher type of clientele.

Brand management uses several attributes to create these consumer lifestyles including physical space, involvement of consumers, environment and trained employees. Physical space deals with the specific architecture and design where consumers buy the brand. Involvement of consumers refers to interactivity, such as clearing trays and filling

drinks at McDonald's or trying out products on the indoor track and basketball court at Niketown. Environment examines the atmosphere and overall effect of the brand, such as the McDonald's colorful nature for a wholesome family fun experience with clowns and a Happy Meal toy. And finally, trained employees means not only experienced, but also of the same background, such as the Starbucks baristas and their Zen-like attitudes.

Companies encourage consumers to interact with the brand and create a particular relationship with it. Many brand owners have even invested in creating branded communities where consumers come together for a common purpose, interest or event. Harley Davidson and Jeep organize individual "brandfests" where users can come together, improve their skills at using the product and create community ties. Built on trust and authenticity, some of these communities have even moved to the Internet. eBay created a sense of trust by allowing users who feel part of the community to use a rating system. Users feel involved in the social standing and peer appreciation process. Amazon.com asks users to review books and participate in discussions. To strengthen consumers' associations with a brand, the brand should create environments for them to collectively share an experience, add a dimension of trust to a service, associate a specific lifestyle or dimension of the brand with the person's life or leave a lasting memory in the consumer's mind. Experiences, shared emotions and a sense of community with the brand will strengthen the position that the brand occupies in a consumer's life. It's the brand's responsibility to anticipate how consumers will use the goods and in what ways they'll relate to it. By trend spotting and conducting market research, a brand can watch market influences and see what the consumer wants. The brand can also try different

marketing campaigns to create new brand communities or introduce a brand into a preexisting community (Arvidsson, 2005).

Online Consumer Behavior

With the invention of the Internet and the advancement of technology, organizations moved their branding, commerce and customer relations online. This shift required great research and expertise into Web site design, new online consumer behavior and the effects of consumers' perceptions of online organizations. The Internet allows for much more consumer interactivity and participation.

According to Jones et al. (2008), a company Web site's unique characteristics—vividness, interactivity, challenge, interaction speed, machine memory and allowable social interactions—can create consumers' positive or negative emotions toward the site, brand and its employees. Liu et al. (2003) researched that 62 percent of online shoppers gave up at least once while looking for products and 42 percent turned to traditional channels to make their purchases. They attributed this “lost-in-hyperspace” to engineering problems with the actual Web site, such as the site's poor design. These emotions can become attached to the brand. Brand managers must ensure that a consumer's Web experience yields positive associations for the company.

Lie et al. also studied the psychological problems users experience with new technology. They adopted Davis's Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to provide a research foundation on why users accept or reject information technology and how to increase user acceptance through design features. TAM greatly evaluates the effects of cognitive beliefs and attitudes in respect to decision making and consumer behavior. When consumers evaluate a technological system, they examine two aspects: perceived

usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness describes the degree to which a person believes a particular information system will enhance job performance by providing timely, needed information or reducing the time to complete a task. The perceived ease of use represents a person's belief that using a particular system or technology will not take too much effort. Perceived ease of use has a causal effect on perceived usefulness.

While organizations must monitor their overall online effectiveness, they must also manage their reputation, which can be even more critical in an online environment than a traditional retail one. Companies strive to maintain a positive attitude because, once damaged, it will take a long time to restore. Fuller et al. (2007) found that a favorable reputation can reduce consumer concerns regarding a purchase, increase consumer trust and commitment toward the company and encourage online purchasing.

Consumers tend to seek third-party information from friends, trade publications, Web sites and review sites to establish initial trust with the company. Social proof theory predicts that people look to others for cues. For newcomers, trust increases as they see more people performing the action. Also, as one obtains information from an authoritative source, the credibility of the information increases. With a high credibility level, the viewer will accept the information more easily.

While a third party endorsement greatly influences online behavior, it does not define opinion. Fuller et al. found that even if a review gave a negative response, readers would generally change their minds and form new opinions after visiting the company's Web site. Direct experience had a large impact on perceptions. To increase consumer trust, companies must provide correct information and ensure a positive online

experience to dispel any bad perceptions. A positive direct experience can override a negative review.

The information above describes how users interact with online organizations. This section will look at their specific behavior. The Internet stands apart from other media in enabling its users to interact. Facilitated by countless blogs, forums, chat rooms and social networking sites, people now live in a 24-hour rolling media world where satisfaction to interact and feel a part of events lies at almost everyone's fingertips. Everyday consumers wield greater control over their media habits and their role in the commercial marketplace (Riegner, 2007).

According to Cate Riegner, Piper Jaffray coined the term "Communitainment" in reference to a new form of entertainment that combines communication, community and entertainment online. This acts as a new way to engage audiences and has profound commercial implications. Companies should identify the "passionates" of their product who will most likely create buzz about the company. In Riegner's research, she found that in July 2006, the average broadband user spent 27 percent of his or her time online doing communication activities—comparable to the time they spent on leisure and entertainment and more than the time they spent on gathering news and information, personal productivity or shopping. Newer forms of Internet communication facilitated by blogs, forums and social sites provide a channel for one person to reach many, often anonymously and about a specific topic.

While e-mail remains the dominant form of online conversation for all age groups, four out of 10 broadband users regularly instant message (IM) or chat. Communities form, allowing people to connect personally, professionally and culturally with others.

User-generated content (UGC) plays an even more significant role as consumers race online to write their own product reviews, share photos, create their own videos and more.

Riegner found that in terms of online purchasing, UGC greatly influences research and buying behavior. Online purchases tend to undergo greater scrutiny on the Web, increasing the likelihood that buyers will seek consumer input on UGC sites. Second only to word of mouth as a driving force for all Web shoppers, online comments and reviews posted by the enthusiasts rank far more influential than official reviews posted by a Web site or magazine, or information posted online by a manufacturer (Loechner, 2008c). Half of all recent purchases among broadband users were influenced by at least one online source. Products purchased online are almost twice as likely to be influenced by UGC as products purchased offline. Even though consumers research online and form opinions, it doesn't necessarily mean they purchase online. Most, about two-thirds, purchase offline.

In terms of products, UGC mostly influences complex, higher-priced and highly-coveted items, such as technology and consumer electronics. It is less likely to influence low-involvement products, such as personal or confidential items, those primarily purchased in stores, and products people want to see, feel and try-on. To prove these notions, Riegner divided products into pricey tech-electronics, high touch retail, household staples and no touch services. Riegner found that the more expensive and valuable an item, the more consumers research it. The most influential sources for purchasing pricey tech-electronics include search engines, UGC sites, manufacturer or brand Web sites and physically browsing in retail stores. With high touch retail, such as

clothing, appliances and furniture, the Internet influences over half of the purchases, but UGC only influences eight percent. Consumers tend to want to see and touch these items physically rather than make a mental judgment. Riegner says that these percentages may increase in the future when retail Web sites offer more participatory features and younger Broadband users gain more disposable income. Like high touch retail, household staples, such as beverages or pet supplies, are minimally influenced by UGC—only five percent. For these items, shopping Web sites influence 17 percent of consumers, online coupons affect seven percent and another seven percent rely on search engines. These percentages may also increase in the future with more Web site interactivity. And finally, no touch services, such as travel and financial service, rely heavily on search engines and word-of-mouth recommendations. Currently not a big factor, UGC may play a role in the future.

After classifying different types of consumer goods, Riegner also segmented and identified five types of online users. Active communicators online, “social clickers” spend over half of their online time communicating and participating in community-oriented activities. This group will stand and communicate for the products they greatly care about. “Online insiders” spend as much time on communication activities as “social clickers,” if not more, and generally assume a “voice” or persona to express themselves online. This group dominates most content creation activities. “Online insiders” frequently share their opinions via product ratings and reviews, and are the first to adopt new products and vocalize their opinions. This group is almost twice as likely to be influenced by UGC as other users, mostly because they are such heavy users to begin with. The next group, “content kings,” tend to be young males addicted to online entertainment. They also spend the least amount of time communicating online, aside

from activities that support their interest in entertainment. When “content kings” communicate, they want to achieve their ultimate goal of finding more ways to have fun on the Web. Primarily participating in online shopping, “everyday pros” rate and review products, but rarely publish their own page or blog. They tend to be more practical and focused and deal heavily with online banking and investing. And finally, “fast trackers” use the Internet to meet their immediate needs, such as checking the news, weather or sports. They don’t spend much time communicating or participating with others. They primarily receive information, not create it.

In addition to these five types of online participants, it is necessary to note and explain the phenomenon of the online lurker. According to Nonnecke et al. (2006), many online communities contain less posters and more lurkers, or people who do not publicly participate in online communities. Lurkers consider themselves as part of the community and feel that their needs are generally met just by reading. When people join online communities, they don’t intend to be lurkers from the outset—only 13.2 percent said they did intend to lurk. Many of these lurkers have the potential to participate and joined these communities because they wanted to tell stories, participate in discussions and offer their expertise. The majority of both lurkers and posters said they joined social communities to get a general understanding and to answer their questions. Nonnecke et al. suggest companies create community spaces where people can seek information and just browse without having to publicly participate to improve user satisfaction.

The Internet has brought a participatory quality to any and every online pursuit. Users can communicate their ideas and opinions to many people easily. The most

influential consumers on the Web today—24 to 44 year olds—embrace the Internet, not just as a tool, but as a way of life.

Social Media Users

Defined by Kumar et al. (2009), social media describes the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in more efficient ways. These tools can include blogs, message boards, podcasts, wiki sites and vodcasts. Users can deliver messages via text, images, audio and video.

Various organizations and research firms have studied and profiled social media users looking to predict their attitudes and behaviors. Independent technology and market research firm Forrester found that 75 percent of Internet users participate in some form of social media in 2008—up from 56 percent in 2007 (Morrissey, 2008). The number of blog spectators—blog readers instead of contributors—jumped from 48 percent to 69 percent over one year. People who consider themselves online critics increased from 25 percent to 37 percent. The average Broadband user performs 2.4 content creation activities regularly and approximately one-third rate or review products online (Riegner, 2007). But not all social media tools have seen quite a growth. The number of people who use Real Simple Syndication or RSS feeds and tag Internet content has increased from only 12 percent in 2007 to 19 percent in 2008 (Morrissey, 2008). Forrester also found that the age gap between social media users is closing. More and more people assimilate to the trend.

In terms of online video use, according to a May 2008 report by The Nielsen Company, nearly 119 million unique viewers watched 7.5 billion video streams in that

month alone. The average viewer spent two hours and 19 minutes streaming video online. While watching online videos only accounts for 10 percent of the overall Internet usage, 73 percent of Internet users viewed video online that month—this includes TV, consumer-generated videos and news.

While the rates of social media users continually increase, the number of content contributors remains relatively low. According to Rubicon Consulting, of about 80 percent of user-generated content on the Internet including comments and questions, only about nine percent of users—the most frequent contributors—post information (Loechner, 2008c). About 65 percent of Web users fall into the category of passive readers who only occasionally contribute content. Another nine percent of Web users represent pure lurkers. They never contribute content. In addition, 17 percent categorize themselves as community abstainers who believe they never visit any online community-related sites.

In contrast to the lurker, Rubicon Consulting describes the frequent contributor as ethnically diverse and technically skilled. Frequent contributors are more likely to be single, work in technology, entertainment or communication companies and identify with the Democratic Party. Younger than typical Web users, half of the Web's most frequent contributors are under age 22.

As discussed earlier, the age gap between social media users is closing, however each user differs by demographics. Adults and teens use their social networks differently (Loechner, 2008c). Most adults will approve someone as a friend on a social network site only if they already know them. Many teens will approve someone as a friend as long as

they have a vague idea of who they are. To adults, the friend list confirms relationships that already exist. To teens, the friend list is an entry point for a relationship.

More specifically, Nielsen Online found that Power Moms, online women ages 25-54 with at least one child, are nearly twice as likely as the average Web user to provide frequent advice about parenting and family, non-food household products and beauty and cosmetics (Loechner, 2008b). These women use e-mail, online forums and social networking sites as ways to find information and build relationships. They want tips and support. This group is nearly 25 percent more likely than average users to author a blog.

In more detail, a survey conducted by *Parenting Magazine* (2008) to discover the online behavior differences of Generation X moms versus Generation Y moms found that Generation Y moms tend to use more interactive tools like blogs, social networking sites and video sharing to connect with other moms. Generation Y moms like these forms of content-creation, communication and self-expression. Younger Generation Y moms also like connecting with other moms who face the same or similar situations and can help them through parenthood. Generation X moms engage in more task-oriented activities, such as online shopping, organizing photos, and researching and reviewing products.

When profiling college students, a study comparing social network usage found that nearly twice as many students use social networks every day in 2008 than in 2006 (eMarketer.com, 2008). The percentage of students who said they never use social networks fell from 25 percent in 2006 to 11 percent in 2008. Social networks provide ways to check in with friends, play games, plan events and serve as an outlet for self-expression and sharing. Also, college age females are more likely than males to have

updated their profile in the past month, as well as to share photos or add applications to their profile page.

In addition, OTX and The Intelligence Group studied teens' online behavior (Loechner, 2008a). Teens spend an average of 11.5 hours per week online instant messaging, visiting social networking sites, shopping and listening to music. Only 24 percent of teens spend more than 15 hours a week online. Teens generally prefer reality to virtual reality—91 percent prefer their real friends to online friends, 87 percent prefer to date someone from school than someone online and 82 percent would rather shop in a store than shop online. However, 54 percent of teens would rather IM a friend than call them.

Teens heavily use simultaneous media. This means they like to instant message and search the Web at the same time. The average teen has signed up for more than four social networking sites and currently belongs to two. Through these social networking sites, teens say they've learned about music, other Web sites, movies, TV shows and new trends. Teens who keep their primary computer in their bedrooms—36 percent—are more likely to be heavy Internet users (15 or more hours per week) and spend money online. In respect to online spending, 58 percent of teens have made a purchase online and spend an average of \$46 per month. They primarily shop online for clothes and music, but also purchase books, electronics and DVDs (Loechner, 2008a).

In the next chapter, this researcher will discuss the different procedures used to discover if consumers perceive organizations that use social media tools as more reputable or innovative than those who don't. Through qualitative and quantitative

methods, the researcher will conduct a content analysis, interviews, a focus group and online surveys to collect her data.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This researcher will conduct both quantitative and qualitative research to determine American consumer perceptions towards organizations that use social media. The researcher will use an experimental design to see if two organizations' identities match their images and if consumers prefer one organization to the other. By the study's conclusion, this research will help organizations determine if they should start a social media campaign and if their consumers will react positively to it.

Data Sources

To discover the attitudes of American consumers, the researcher will administer an online survey to American consumers. The researcher will also choose two organizations in the same industry to compare in an experimental design. Once selected, the researcher will contact the respective public relations or human resources representatives to conduct interviews regarding the organizations' current and future social media campaigns. The researcher will then conduct a content analysis using the organizations' Web sites. Information gathered from the content analysis, interviews and surveys will influence questions asked in a focus group comprised of American consumers.

Research Methodology

As briefly described above, the researcher will conduct an online survey, a content analysis, two company interviews and a focus group. The selection of the two organizations to study will be chosen through a nonrandom, convenience sampling.

Sample Selection

Online survey. The researcher will conduct a snowball survey. The researcher will e-mail the survey to people she knows. She will ask the recipients to take the survey, forward it to people they know and ask those people to do the same—take the survey, pass it along and ask others to complete it. This will result in a nonrandom, convenience, self-selected sample.

Content Analysis. The researcher will conduct a content analysis to compare the Web sites of two airline companies—Southwest Airlines and United Airlines. The analysis includes all Web pages and links attached to the Southwest Airlines and United Airlines home pages.

Interviews. The researcher will interview the professionals responsible for the two organizations' Web sites and social media campaigns.

Focus group. The researcher will use a nonrandom, convenience sampling to seat participants in a focus group. Participants will, however, represent the general characteristics of the American consumer: age, gender, ethnicity, education and income.

Data Collection Method

Online survey. The researcher will use SurveyMonkey.com to create and post the online survey. The snowball survey will dictate the number of completed

surveys by the number of people who pass along the survey link. The survey link will be available from April 15 to April 30, 2009. The survey instrument itself will include 16 dichotomous, open-ended, Likert Scale and multiple choice questions. The instrument will probe consumers' social media behavior, opinions toward social media and how they want organizations to interact with them. A copy of the survey instrument can be found in Appendix A. Surveymonkey.com will compile and e-mail the results to the researcher.

Content Analysis. This content analysis will examine the Southwest Airlines and United Airlines Web sites and their use of social media tools. The researcher will design a content analysis grid (Appendix B) to code the two Web sites and establish criteria to assess the sites. The researcher and an additional coder will look at the airline Web sites for specific social media tools and popular social media hosting sites. The coding sheet will reflect each category, as well as specific words each coder should look for. A tally mark will be noted when the site exhibits the criteria. The researcher will properly train an additional coder to note each social media reference in the appropriate categories to ensure intercoder reliability. Both coders will analyze the Web sites on the same day—in this instance, March 24, 2009—to avoid any corporate updates or edits that might skew the research.

Interviews. Depending on the availability and location of the professionals, the researcher will conduct in-person, phone or e-mail interviews. With the interviewee's permission, the researcher will tape record any in-person or phone interviews to be transcribed later. In this study, the researcher contacted

Paula Berg, manager of emerging media at Southwest Airlines, on March 20, 2009, to discuss Southwest's social media campaign. A copy of that interview can be found in Appendix C. The researcher will also try to contact representatives from United Airlines.

Focus group. The researcher will conduct a focus group in a Rowan University computer lab. Eight participants of varying ages, genders, ethnicities and educational levels will use computers to view the companies' Web sites, as well as receive other important information from the facilitator through a PowerPoint presentation. The participants will fill out three short surveys throughout the focus group to determine knowledge, attitudes and behavior. The researcher will question participants about their opinions toward the airline companies, knowledge of social media, opinions of social media and how they want organizations to interact with them as consumers. A copy of the focus group protocol, PowerPoint presentation and surveys can be found in Appendix D. A recorder will note the verbal responses and nonverbal cues of each participant and the researcher will tape record the entire study. All notes, tapes and surveys will be collected for later analysis.

Data Analysis Method

Online survey. The researcher will analyze the results tabulated from Surveymonkey.com and determine frequencies and percentages. The researcher will then crosstabulate certain questions to draw further conclusions.

Content Analysis. Using tally marks, the researcher will mark on the coder sheet when the site exhibits the criteria. To avoid researcher bias, an additional coder will

examine the same sites using the same criteria to ensure reliability. The researcher and the coder must agree 95 percent of the time for a reliable content analysis. After both coders agree, the researcher will analyze the tallies, note frequencies and draw conclusions based on the information.

Interviews. The researcher will determine what the organizations think about their social media campaign and their images among consumers. The researcher will use the results from the content analysis and the focus group to conclude if the organizations' identities match their images.

Focus group. The researcher will compile frequencies, percentages and qualitative data from the tape recording and the recorder's notes. The researcher will then draw conclusions to determine the focus group participants' knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

Summary

The findings from the online survey, content analysis, interviews and focus group will work together to help organizations determine American consumer attitudes and behaviors. This research will also determine if consumers want organizations to use social media to communicate with them and what social media can say about an organization's image. The results from this four-part research methodology can be found in the following chapter with conclusions and recommendations based upon this information presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The researcher conducted four research techniques to test two hypotheses. The first method, a nonscientific, nonrandom online survey, used a snowball technique in which the researcher asked people to take a 16-question survey and forward it to more people and ask them to do the same. Using the snowball approach, the researcher collected 559 completed online surveys from American consumers nationwide.

The second method, a content analysis, quantified the use of social media tools and hosting sites on two airline company Web sites—in this case, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines. The researcher specifically chose these two airlines because of their polar opposite reputations in regards to social media. The selection of these two companies led to the third research method, interviews with each company's communication or social media representative. Interview questions asked each company about their social media campaign, how they thought social media affect a company and what they thought their consumers felt about social media. The researcher completed a phone interview with Paula Berg, manager of emerging media at Southwest Airlines, but was unable to contact any United Airlines representatives after multiple attempts.

Results from the first three research techniques led to the design of the fourth method, a focus group comprised of eight New Jersey consumers from different genders, ethnicities, ages and educational backgrounds. The focus group, facilitated by the researcher, used a PowerPoint presentation to probe the participants' attitudes toward the

two airlines and their Web sites. The focus group also questioned consumers' knowledge on social media, behavior when interacting online and with organizations in general, and opinions toward social media and when organizations use them to interact with consumers.

The researcher will now present each hypothesis and its findings, as well as general findings from each research technique.

H1 – It is expected that customers value organizations that use social media on their Web sites.

Online Survey Results

In an online survey completed by 559 American consumers, 68.9 percent of the respondents say that they think companies or organizations should use social media. Specifically, the majority of respondents (54.2 percent) say that companies should use a blog to interact with consumers. Only 16.1 percent of all respondents say companies should not use any form of social media to interact with them. When asked how important certain characteristics are when dealing with an organization's Web site, 87.7 percent of all respondents say online interaction is important or very important to them.

Interview Results

When asked if she thinks customers value the use of social media in general, Paula Berg, manager of emerging media at Southwest Airlines, agrees. The realm of social media is growing within consumers' personal lives and corporate settings. Berg says consumers like knowing that organizations use social media to communicate and consumers expect organizations to provide them the option to comment.

Focus Group Results

Focus group participants generally support the idea of organizations using social media to interact with consumers, but they are very specific and persistent about organizations that invade consumers' personal space and constantly bombard them with information. One participant feels that social media provide a more personal interaction, direct answers and information, and further explanations on how products work. Two participants mentioned that they like company blogs when they promote honesty and company/product pride. These two participants cited that they would specifically like organizations to use blogs to interact with them as consumers. Three participants mentioned using YouTube at work, while teaching and at home for educational and personal reasons. One participant specifically said that organizations should use YouTube or other video-sharing sites to interact with him.

H1 – Supported

Results from all three research techniques clearly support Hypothesis 1. The majority of online survey respondents think organizations should use social media. Focus group participants say they expect organizations to maintain an up-to-date Web site with special features such as social media tools. Focus group participants say they expect to find these tools, but they don't necessarily want to use them or interact that way. Paula Berg from Southwest Airlines also supports the focus group participants' views. She says consumers like knowing that the option to communicate through social media is there.

H2 – It is expected that customers will view organizations that use social media on their Web sites as more reputable and innovative than organizations that do not use social media on their Web sites.

Online Survey Results

When asked the importance of certain attributes when dealing with an organization's Web site, 92.2 percent of respondents say that reputation is important or very important and 80.1 percent say that innovation is important or very important. When asked how reputable a company is that uses social media, 45 percent of respondents said "reputable" or "very reputable." The majority, 50.3 percent, answered "neutral" to that question. However, when asked the same question in regard to innovation, 71.7 percent of respondents say that a company that uses social media is "innovative" or "very innovative."

Focus Group Results

Half of focus group participants say they would choose a company based on reputation and innovation.

Focus group participants agree that organizations not embracing social media miss out. Consumers expect organizations to maintain and update Web sites, as well as remain on the cutting edge of technology and communication. One participant commented that the Internet competes globally. Organizations need to keep up and reach out to more people to get their message across. Another participant mentioned that organizations should embrace different ways to get their products and information out to the public.

The focus group participants are a little torn on the reputation issue. In general, they feel that social media can greatly improve an organization's reputation. One participant mentioned that social media provide a new form of promotion which can then enhance branding. Another said that social media enable more word-of-mouth promotion and create a more personable relationship with the organization. While the participants believe social media can help an organization's reputation, they also say that it can greatly damage it. Constantly sending company updates through all social media channels can irritate consumers. Lying or providing false information through social media channels can damage the company's reputation. Also, the speed and enormity of the Internet can spread rumors, mistakes and cover ups to more people more quickly, thus greatly damaging the company's reputation.

H2 – Supported

The researcher asked specific questions in the online survey and focus group to support Hypothesis 2. Respondents in both research techniques clearly identify organizations using social media as more innovative. While social media's effect on reputation depends on different circumstances, respondents agree that, if used properly, a social media campaign can improve a company's reputation.

General Findings

Online Survey Results

The online survey asked participants to describe their online behavior. Participants categorized themselves as "creator," "critic," "collector," "open," "spectator" or "none of the above." They could select more than one. The majority of respondents,

57.4 percent consider themselves “spectators”—meaning they read, listen and watch, but do not interact. The results to this question can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Participants’ Online Involvement

Online Involvement Description	Percentage of Total Respondents
I’m a creator (publish Web pages, blogs, podcasts, upload videos and photos to photo/video sharing sites)	29.9
I’m a critic (comment on blogs and others’ published items, post ratings, post reviews)	21.3
I’m a collector (use RSS or feed readers, tag Web elements like photos, videos, pages and anything tag-able)	17.5
I’m open (I not only publish, but allow others to rate, comment, tag and share)	21.5
I’m a spectator (I read, listen and watch, but do not interact)	57.4
None of the above describes me. I do not participate (read, publish and/or rate) in blogs, polls, product/service reviews, social networking sites, video/picturing sharing, etc.	8.2

The researcher also asked the online survey participants to mark all the social media programs they use. Almost 75 percent of respondents have Facebook accounts and

nearly seven out of 10 respondents use YouTube. The least used social media sites include Del.icio.us at less than four percent, Technorati at less than three percent and Second Life at less than two percent. For the complete list of results, see Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of Respondents Who Use Specific Social Media Programs

Social Media Programs	Percentage of Total Respondents
Facebook	74.6
MySpace	31.3
Second Life	1.4
YouTube	66.2
LinkedIn	37.6
Twitter	24.7
Personal blog	12.7
Del.icio.us	3.6
Digg	6.1
Hulu	20
RSS feed	11.8
FlickrR	12.7
SnapFish	18.1
Technorati	2.7
Wikis	20.8
Share with a friend	16.6
Polls	18.6
Review a product/service	18.1

N/A	7.5
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Online survey participants were also asked to identify how important they feel having an account with a blogging service, photo sharing site, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter. The plurality of respondents say having accounts with photo sharing sites, YouTube and LinkedIn are “unimportant” or “very unimportant.” The majority of respondents say having accounts with a blogging service, MySpace and Twitter are “unimportant” or “very unimportant.” However, with a slightly even spread between “important,” “neutral” and “unimportant,” the plurality of respondents say having an account with Facebook is “important” or “very important.”

When dealing with an organization, the majority of respondents say they feel Web site navigation, organization/consumer online interaction, reputation, innovativeness and industry leader are all attributes that they consider “important” or “very important.” Specifically, the majority of respondents say Web site navigation, organization/consumer online interaction and reputation are very important attributes.

The majority of respondents (68.9 percent) think organizations should use social media and then commented on what types of social media organizations should use to interact with them. The majority of respondents say they prefer a company blog. The other responses aren’t as strong. Table 3 shows the list of results.

Table 3. Social Media Tools That Organizations Should Use to Interact With Consumers

Social Media Tool	Percentage of Total Respondents
Company blog	54.2
Photo sharing	31.1
Video sharing	34.0
Podcasting	29.5
Facebook	36.5
MySpace	7.7
Twitter	20.6
Polls	32.0
Share with a friend	17.2
Review a product/service	46.3
No social media	16.1

In an open-ended question, the researcher asked online survey participants to identify a company or organization that they believe manages a great social media campaign. Multiple respondents listed the Obama campaign, Apple, McDonald's, CNN, Starbucks and Coca-Cola. For a complete list of responses, see Appendix E.

Demographically, the online survey yielded two-thirds females to one-third males with the majority (87.5 percent) of Caucasian decent. The plurality age group ranged between 25 and 49 with the majority of respondents holding a bachelor's or advanced

degree. The online survey attracted responses from 36 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. Additional demographic information is available in Table 4.

Table 4. Online Survey Demographics

Demographics	Percentage
Age	
9-17	0.9
18-24	28.6
25-49	41.3
50-64	24.0
65+	5.2
Gender	
Male	34.2
Female	65.8
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	87.5
African American	1.3
Asian	2.7
Hispanic	4.3
No response	4.3
Education Level	
Elementary – high school student	1.3
High school graduate	3.2
Some college	14

College graduate	44.4
Advanced degree	37.2
Annual household income	
\$0-25,999	12.3
\$26,000-75,999	31.1
\$76,000-150,000	36
Over \$150,000	10.9
N/A	9.7

Content Analysis Results

Within the airline industry, the researcher chose Southwest Airlines and United Airlines because of their polar opposite social media campaigns. Southwest Airlines manages an extensive, well-known campaign, while United Airlines uses few social media tools. After conducting a content analysis on March 24, 2009, the researcher verified these observations. The researcher found 27 instances of social media tools on the Southwest Web site and found no social media tools on United's Web site. These social media tools include blogs, social networks, discussion forums, podcasts and polls. Southwest also provides 14 "Share with a friend" links. In terms of social media hosting sites, the researcher found 19 instances for Southwest and five for United. Southwest provides links to its Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Flickr pages. Southwest also provides 14 separate RSS feed options. United provides a link to its Twitter page started March 18, 2009 with over 4,500 followers. United also provides five separate RSS

feed options. In general, both sites use RSS feeds for their investor relations pages. Table 5 lists the content analysis results by frequency.

Table 5. Airline Content Analysis

Airline	Social Media Tools									
	Blog	Social Network	Review a product	Discussion forum	Podcast	Video Sharing	Photo sharing	E-mail a friend	Poll	Wikis
Southwest Airlines	1	2	2	1	1	2	3	14	1	
United Airlines										

Airline	Social Media Hosting Sites								
	Facebook	Twitter	RSS	YouTube	Digg	Del.icio.us	LinkedIn	Technorati	Flickr
Southwest Airlines	1	1	14	1			1		1
United Airlines		1	4						

Airline	Other
Southwest Airlines	Vlog, add comments
United Airlines	

Interview Results

Southwest Airlines includes its social media campaign in its overall communication plan. With 37 years of history, Southwest prides itself on communicating actively and proactively with customers. It considers a personal touch as the primary focus of its business model. Social media fit perfectly with the corporate culture and communication style.

In April 2006, Southwest Airlines started its social media campaign with a blog when blogs first became popular. From there, the company initiated more social media tools as they were needed. When customers wanted to see videos, Southwest turned to YouTube. When customers started sending in photos from their seats, Southwest posted them on a photo-sharing site. Southwest now manages a corporate blog, a Flickr account filled with consumers' photos, a Facebook page with over 65,000 fans, a LinkedIn account where its CEO posts questions and a Twitter account that started in July 2007 and now has over 27,000 followers. Southwest also posts a video a week to YouTube and hosts two forums.

When asked what she hopes people will think of Southwest Airlines when they look at the Web site, Paula Berg says she hopes consumers will see Southwest as a fun company with a strong culture that takes care of its people both internally and externally.

Southwest uses its social media campaign to communicate with customers, break and/or make news, tell stories, resolve conflicts and interact with passionate customers. It also conducts virtual focus groups within the social media networks to test ideas,

messages and new products or services. Additionally, Southwest uses social media as the strategy to remain on the cutting edge of online expectations.

Focus Group Results

To connect the results from the content analysis and interview, the researcher asked the focus group participants to analyze the two airline Web sites. None of the participants are frequent flyers of either Southwest Airlines or United Airlines. In terms of the company itself, the participants feel Southwest has good, competitive prices, easy booking and a relaxed atmosphere. Two participants mentioned that they do not like Southwest's open seating and one mentioned that the open seating feels "rushed and like herding cattle." When asked about United, participants said that the flights are always late, the lines are longer and you don't get as much for your money. One participant thinks that United's planes crash a lot. Another said she has no opinion—that United is just another airline.

The researcher then asked the focus group participants to comment on each airline's Web site. Two participants mentioned that Southwest's Web site is very user friendly and two others said that they like the pictures, colors and quotes. The youngest focus group participant, a male between the ages of seven and 17, said the site is easy to navigate. One participant commented on the several rate options Southwest offers and another mentioned the many package ideas, different deals and how Southwest will e-mail you specific destination rates. When asked about United, the participants agreed that its Web site is complicated, unhelpful, boring and confusing to navigate. One participant said that it is straightforward with no frills. Another participant showed annoyance with United's constant push to become a member.

When asked for the impression they got from each company, focus group participants described Southwest as family oriented, more efficient, friendlier, colorful, more for the people and more “with it.” The participants then described United as straightforward, cold and distant. They unanimously said, given the choice, they would pick Southwest Airlines over United Airlines.

Before introducing any notion of social media, the researcher asked focus group participants to say how they prefer companies to interact with them. Table 6 breaks down their responses by age.

Table 6. How Participants Like Companies to Interact With Them—Sorted by Age

Age	Responses
7-17	TV commercials
18-24	E-mail, posters, fliers
25-49	Direct mail, e-mail
50-65	Brochures, fliers, postcards, direct mail, e-mail

Participants indicated that they do not want organizations to contact them by phone. One participant mentioned that he thinks “telemarketer” when companies call and automatically stops listening to what they’re saying or selling.

Only half of the participants have ever heard the term “social media” before and, collectively, no one could define the term. They only provided social media examples such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Second Life, online forums, blogs and video blogs. When shown a slide with the social media examples on it (Figure 1), five of the eight

participants identify themselves as a contributor to one or more of the social media tools, while seven of eight participants identify themselves as spectators of one or more tools.

Figure 1. Examples of Social Media Slide



The researcher also showed the participants a series of slides that contained a social media term. The participants wrote down whatever word or phrase came to mind when they saw the term. Participants could leave the space blank if they did not know a term or nothing came to mind. The participants' responses are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. Word or Phrase That Comes to Mind When Consumers Think of Social Media Tools

Social Media Term	Responses
Blogs	Opinions; weighted down; commentary on events; perezhilton.com, personal blogs; Facebook; information on a particular subject in a forum; chatting

YouTube	Access; videos of outrageous stuff; very useful for films and songs in performance; funny videos, videos “media” doesn’t want you to see; entertainment, reality; music videos; video information, some are fun while others are for knowledge; videos
Facebook	MySpace upgrade; being able to see people’s faces and information about them specifically; not interested in being a part; friends, college, old (run its course); messaging friends, not instant messaging; interaction with friends and family, sharing and talking; contacting people
MySpace	Friends; possessive; not a participant; friends, spam, people trying to hook up, Tila Tequila; to meet people, share things, make friends; pictures and projecting your personality; interaction with peers; videos and chatting
LinkedIn	Connected; business interaction, adult version of Facebook and MySpace
Twitter	Politicians; latest technology; curious to see how it works; new, haven’t done it yet, everyone’s on it; get important information; social common interests; contacting people
Wikis	Very useful for quick reference; Wikipedia, definitions; information
Photo sharing	Fun; I guess a good thing; good idea, but annoying when friends over do it; photos/images; share photos only; Facebook; sharing pictures with several people; sharing photos
RSS	Never used it on purpose, never sought it out

Focus group participants were also asked about their social media behavior. The results to these questions are listed in Table 8. Each response is listed as a percentage of eight participants.

Table 8. Social Media Behavior

Behavior	Percentage
Write own blog	0
Read a blog	62.5
Have a Twitter account	0
Post videos on YouTube or another video-sharing service	12.5
Watch videos on YouTube or another video-sharing service	100
Post photos on a photo-sharing site	50
Look at photos on a photo-sharing site	62.5
Post or edit wikis	0
Read wikis	75
Have a Facebook account	37.5
Have a MySpace account	12.5
Have a LinkedIn account	25
Subscribe to RSS feeds	0

When discussing social media in general and their personal uses, some of the focus group participants said that the use of social media is not the best way to communicate, but can be very useful. One participant said social media make it easier to get in touch and find people. Another said he uses the Internet to keep in touch with his grandparents in China. And another said she likes social media because they provide a convenient way to talk to her friends in Arizona and remain close even with the long distance. Three participants mentioned YouTube positively affecting their lives. One, a college foreign language professor, uses YouTube in the classroom to share music videos, video clips and films with her classes. Another uses YouTube at his firehouse as a learning tool to watch what other firefighters have done right or wrong. The youngest focus group participant uses YouTube for educational and recreational purposes. He looks to YouTube for video game tips and likes to watch videos after reading about certain topics, such as tsunamis.

When asked what types of organizations should use social media to contact consumers, participants named movie companies, sports organizations, concerts and interest groups favorably. But they quickly added that these organizations should provide the option for consumers to subscribe to social media updates and alerts. These companies should not invade their private space first. When asked what types of organizations should not use social media to contact consumers, participants mentioned bill companies, such as utility companies and credit cards.

And when asked to choose between two companies in the same industry, one that uses social media and one that doesn't, the participants said it doesn't matter. Half of the

participants said that their purchase or interaction depends on the quality of the product or service they are looking at, not the channel on which they receive a message.

Demographically, the focus group was comprised of three females and five males all from New Jersey. The group consisted of five Caucasians, two African Americans and one Asian. Additional demographic information is available in Table 9.

Table 9. Focus Group Demographics

Demographics	Percentage
Age	
7-17	12.5
18-24	25
25-49	37.5
50-64	25
65+	0
Gender	
Male	62.5
Female	37.5
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	62.5
African American	25
Asian	12.5
Hispanic	0
Education level	
Elementary – high school student	12.5

High school graduate	12.5
Some college	37.5
College graduate	25
Advanced degree	12.5
Annual household income	
\$0-25,999	12.5
\$26,000-75,999	25
\$76,000-150,000	12.5
Over \$150,000	25
N/A	25

Summary

Results from the four research techniques—online survey, content analysis, interviews and focus group—support the researcher’s two hypotheses. Consumers do value organizations that use social media. Consumers also believe social media can enhance a company’s reputation, as well as contribute to a company’s image of innovation.

The next chapter will provide further discussion on the research results presented in this chapter. Chapter 5 will also explain recommendations for the field and suggestions for further studies to build upon this research.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

This study intended to determine consumers' perceptions toward organizations that use social media. The researcher wanted to know if consumers expect organizations to participate in social media and if consumers consider organizations that do as more reputable and innovative than organizations that do not use social media. Ultimately, this research will help organizations decide if they should engage in a social media campaign.

To determine consumer knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, the researcher conducted a four-tier research study that included an online survey, content analysis, interview and focus group. The online survey asked American consumers to identify their social media preferences and behaviors, as well as opinions toward organizations that use social media. The content analysis quantified social media references on the Southwest Airlines and United Airlines Web sites, while the interview with Paula Berg, Southwest Airlines' manager of emerging media, presented an organization's explanation of a social media campaign. Finally, the focus group, with eight New Jersey consumers of varying ages, genders and ethnicities, discussed results from the first three research techniques, as well as their preferences regarding organization/consumer interaction both on and offline.

The researcher designed these four research techniques expecting the results to support the hypotheses that consumers want organizations to interact with them through social media. The results were also expected to support the idea that social media affect an organization's reputation and consumers' perceptions of innovation.

Conclusions

Hypotheses

H1 – It is expected that customers value organizations that use social media on their Web sites.

Results from the online survey and focus group support the idea that organizations should communicate and interact with consumers via social media. Southwest Airlines' Paula Berg agrees with this statement as well and says that consumers expect organizations to remain on the cutting edge of technology and communication. While these results are conclusive, the researcher is not suggesting that every company run out and start a social media campaign. But she is saying that organizations should greatly consider one and conduct research with current consumers. Social media provide a personal, cost-effective way to communicate with customers, but organizations must realize what they will need to maintain a successful social media campaign. Organizations will need to define the purpose behind their social media involvement and establish goals of what they'd like to accomplish. They will also have to invest a significant amount of time and energy formatting, editing and updating each social media tool. Berg explained in an interview that Southwest's social media campaign controlled her life for the first two years because of the amount of work needed to maintain the corporate blog, a busy Twitter account and the other tools they use. She says updating their social media is like second nature now, but the start up took time and development. While consumers want organizations to engage in social media, don't just start a campaign because it's the new trend. Creating a corporate blog just because other

organizations in the industry have one doesn't mean it will be efficacious. Organizations should start a social media campaign because research shows that's what customers want.

H2 – It is expected that customers will view organizations that use social media on their Web sites as more reputable and innovative than organizations that do not use social media on their Web sites.

Based on the online survey and focus group findings, consumers believe the use of social media does make an organization seem more innovative. If innovation is an important characteristic to an organization's business plan, a social media campaign seems like the next logical step. As one focus group participant said, organizations not using social media are missing out on this opportunity to send their messages through additional channels. But remember, don't use social media because everyone else is. Use it because customers are there to readily receive messages.

As noted earlier, online survey and focus group participants had a hard time responding to social media contributing to an organization's reputation. While the researcher addressed this specifically in the focus group, participants discussed how social media can help or hurt an organization. The Internet and social media force constant, up-to-date communication. If an organization doesn't respond quickly enough to a situation, any blogger or consumer can post an opinion online that can spread so rapidly that the organization's "small problem" grew into a catastrophe.

From an organization standpoint, look at ghost blogging. Organization employees pretending to be enthused consumers praising an organization's products on a blog can do much damage when real consumers find out this isn't true. Deception greatly hurts a company's reputation. Again, organizations need to define why they should start a social

media campaign and what they will do in certain problem situations. Transparency is another major trend today. Will these organizations use social media to tell the truth even when it may hurt their images? Organizations must consider many factors when dealing with social media.

Focus group participants repeatedly discussed organizations that communicate too intrusively. They, as consumers, like the options of update alerts, but they don't want organizations to bombard them with information. They don't want corporate communication to interfere with their daily lives and everyday work. Keep that in mind when communicating—don't over communicate. And create opportunities for consumers to interact with the company—don't force them to interact. Provide sign up for e-mail alert options. List, as links, the social media programs used, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, on the side of the company home page. Consumers can then decide to become a fan, join a group or follow updates. Make it fun and easy. A constructive communication experience can lead to a consumer's positive perception of an organization.

General findings

The researcher specifically chose the experimental design comparison between Southwest Airlines and United Airlines to determine if the companies' identities match how consumers see them (image). Results from the content analysis, interviews and focus group provided great insight into the effect of Web site interaction. When asked what she hopes people think of Southwest Airlines when they visit the Web site, Paula Berg said a "fun company with a strong culture that takes care of its people." When asked to evaluate the Web site and Southwest Airlines as a whole, focus group participants said that

Southwest feels family oriented, more efficient, friendlier, for the people, more “with it” and fun. The focus group see exactly what Berg and Southwest Airlines want them to see. In public relations, this is called synergy and represents a successful communication model when an organization and a consumer share the same meaning.

The researcher tried this same experimental design with United Airlines, but was never able to contact a public relations or communications representative for an interview. The researcher started on United’s Web site and could not find a corporate communication phone number. The Web site provided only an e-mail address for media inquiries. Working with customer service, the researcher tried to have them contact the corporate communications office, but the customer service representative said he couldn’t find a direct phone number for that office. The researcher then called the Meeting/Convention Planning office—a field slightly related to public relations with a listed phone number on the Web site—and talked to a representative who could neither understand how the researcher got this phone number, nor did she know how to contact the corporate communications office. This representative forwarded the researcher to the main switchboard where the researcher remained for 10 minutes without any operators answering. When asked to evaluate the Web site and United Airlines as a whole, focus group participants said that United feels cold and distant. Those adjectives definitely describe the researcher’s experience. They also describe United’s relationship with the media if they only allow contact through e-mail. Whether they know it or not, United Airlines portrays a negative, unfriendly persona that prevents successful consumer relationships.

In conjunction with those findings, the researcher also asked online survey participants to rate the importance of different aspects when dealing with an organization. The majority of respondents said they consider Web site navigation and organization/consumer online interaction as “very important.” This means that public relations professionals not only have to write persuasive messages, but they also have to control the effect of the overall Web site. The ease of navigation, color and graphic choice and use of advanced technology all send messages to the viewer. These nonlanguage aspects could influence a consumer’s desire to click further through a Web site or create an attitude—positive or negative—toward the organization. Visuals matter. As proven by Southwest Airlines, visuals, navigation and innovation, as well as key messages, all promote the overall corporate culture.

The online survey and focus group also found that the majority of consumers consider themselves spectators—meaning they read, listen to and watch online information, but do not interact. These statistics provide a golden opportunity for organizations. Consumers sit, waiting for information to be fed to them. Organizations should take advantage of this situation by providing good, entertaining information to the channels consumers are reading, listening to or watching. Organizations must provide accurate, trustworthy information to combat false information and unregulated opinions floating around the Internet.

Organizations should also note that just because most consumers use a certain type of social media doesn’t mean that they want organizations to interact with them there. The majority of online survey participants have a Facebook account, but only 36.5 percent want organizations to interact with them through Facebook.

Further Research

For the purpose of this study, this research design worked effectively. The researcher highly recommends future studies using scientific sampling to extrapolate the results to the population. A scientific approach to this research study would provide rich, concrete data that organizations can use to support their quests for social media campaigns and social media experts.

While this researcher chose to compare two competing companies within the airline industry, further research should consider studying other industries. Consumers' requests for organizations to join the social media sphere may not span all industries, services and products. A study comparing the use of social media across different industries could greatly benefit the body of knowledge. This researcher chose to compare only two companies within in one industry. Future research may consider analyzing the entire industry.

Results from the online survey showed that the majority of respondents want organizations to maintain a company blog. Future research should investigate consumers' attitudes and perceptions toward individual social media tools and how organizations can capitalize on these tools.

While this research supports the hypothesis that consumers value organizations that use social media, it did not examine the relationship built between consumers and organizations through social media. Organizations will benefit from research that explains how to build relationships with consumers through social media, what consumers look for in those relationships and which social media tools facilitate and maintain these relationships. The ability to create personal, long-lasting relationships with

consumers, whether online or in a different way, will be of great use to public relations practitioners.

This study specifically investigated social media's effect on an organization's reputation. Responses from the online survey, focus group and interview all mentioned that many factors make up an organization's reputation. Since public relations professionals monitor reputation management, this researcher strongly suggests further investigation into what factors comprise an organization's reputation and how consumers rank those factors.

Conclusion

With today's Internet speed and advancements in technology, public relations professionals must work harder to create and maintain relationships with busy consumers. The new social media trend created a great opportunity to build interactive relationships with consumers. But should companies engage in social media and are they right for everyone?

Research shows that consumers expect organizations to interact through social media and that the use of social media keeps organizations on the cutting edge of technology. Social media can also greatly improve an organization's reputation—or, if used incorrectly or carelessly, can severely damage a reputation.

With that support, organizations should consider a social media campaign, but only after they conduct research to determine if their specific customers want to interact through social media. If social media won't improve communication between the organization and its customers, then organizations shouldn't waste their time, money or

efforts. Organizations should start social media campaigns to benefit both themselves and their consumers—not because it's a growing market trend.

As the popularity of social media increases, future research will explain the effects of different social media tools, how they benefit organizations and consumers, and how to measure their success.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Online Survey Instrument

APPENDIX A: Online Survey Instrument

1. How involved are you online? (Please check all that apply)

*The following descriptions are adapted from Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Devices and Access Online Survey. Some items have been updated.

- ☐ *I'm a creator (publish web pages, blogs, podcasts, upload videos and photos to photo/video sharing sites)*
- ☐ *I'm a critic (comment on blogs and others' published items, post rating, post reviews)*
- ☐ *I'm a collector (use RSS or feed readers, tag Web elements like photos, videos, pages and anything tag-able)*
- ☐ *I'm open (I not only publish, but allow others to rate, comment, tag and share)*
- ☐ *I'm a spectator (I read, listen and watch, but do not interact)*
- ☐ *None of the above describes me. I do not participate (read, publish and/or rate) in blogs, polls, product/service reviews, social networking sites, video/picturing sharing, etc.*

2. Do you use any of the following social media programs: (Please check all that apply)

- ☐ *Facebook*
- ☐ *MySpace*
- ☐ *Second Life*
- ☐ *YouTube*
- ☐ *LinkedIn*
- ☐ *Twitter*
- ☐ *Personal blog*
- ☐ *Del.icio.us*
- ☐ *Digg*
- ☐ *Hulu*
- ☐ *RSS feed*
- ☐ *Flickr*
- ☐ *SnapFish*

- ☐ *Technorati*
- ☐ *Wikis*
- ☐ *Share with a friend*
- ☐ *Polls*
- ☐ *Review a product/service*
- ☐ *N/A*

Other (please specify)

3. How important do you think it is, 1 being very important and 5 being very unimportant, to have an account with one of the following social media tools:

	1	2	3	4	5
Blog	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photo sharing site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
YouTube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MySpace	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LinkedIn	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twitter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. In your opinion, how important are the following attributes when dealing with a company or organization?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very unimportant
Web site navigation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organization/consumer online interaction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reputation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Innovativeness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Industry leader	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Do you think companies or organizations should use social media?

- ☐ *Yes*
- ☐ *No*
- ☐ *I don't know*

6. What social media tools should companies or organizations use to interact with you? (Please check all that apply)

- ☐ *Company blog*
- ☐ *Photo sharing*
- ☐ *Video sharing*
- ☐ *Podcasting*
- ☐ *Facebook*
- ☐ *MySpace*
- ☐ *Twitter*
- ☐ *Polls*
- ☐ *Share with a friend*
- ☐ *Review a product/service*
- ☐ *No social media*

Other (please specify)

7. In your opinion, how reputable is a company that uses social media?

- ☐ *Very reputable*
- ☐ *Reputable*
- ☐ *Neutral*
- ☐ *Not reputable*
- ☐ *Not very reputable*

8. In your opinion, how innovative is a company that uses social media?

- ☐ *Very innovative*
- ☐ *Innovative*
- ☐ *Neutral*
- ☐ *Not innovative*
- ☐ *Not very innovative*

9. Name a company or organization that you believe manages a great social media campaign.

10. Gender:

- ☐ *Male*
- ☐ *Female*
- ☐ *Other*

11. Age:

- ☐ *9-17*
- ☐ *18-24*
- ☐ *25-49*
- ☐ *50-64*
- ☐ *65+*

12. Ethnicity:

- ☐ *Caucasian*
- ☐ *African*
- ☐ *Asian*
- ☐ *Hispanic*
- ☐ *No response*

Other (please specify)

13. Please select your educational level:

- ☐ *Elementary - high school student*
- ☐ *High school graduate*
- ☐ *Some college*
- ☐ *College graduate*
- ☐ *Advanced degree*

14. Please select your annual household income:

- ☐ *\$0-25,999*
- ☐ *\$26,000-75,999*
- ☐ *\$76,000-150,000*
- ☐ *Over \$150,000*
- ☐ *N/A*

15. Location:

State:

Downloaded from <http://ajph.org/> on November 10, 2015

16. Please indicate anything else you'd like the researcher to know about your opinions on organizations' uses of social media.

[illegible]

APPENDIX B

Content Analysis Grid

Airlines Social Media/Web site Content Analysis Coding Sheet

[illegible]

[illegible]

APPENDIX C

Interview with Paula Berg, Manager of Emerging Media at Southwest Airlines

APPENDIX C: Interview with Paula Berg, Manager of Emerging Media at Southwest
Airlines

Rosie Braude: Who's in charge of your Web site? Who decides what goes on there?

Paula Berg: We have an Emerging Media team that consists of about six people that we just created in August. Each person owns a channel, so one person is responsible for Twitter, one person is responsible for the video, one person is responsible for the podcasts. Then my colleague, Brian Lusk, is responsible for the daily loading of content onto the blog. But the editorial calendar is determined by us as a team in conjunction with goings on and happenings in the world and the company. And then, in terms of how we decided to get a site in the first place, sort of goes back a few years. Did you ever see the TV show called "Airline" on A&E? It was a reality show back then that aired on A&E that followed behind the scenes of our employees and customers in the airport and, a lot of people don't know this, but we had no editorial control of that show. And, as you can tell, there were some moments that were definitely cringe worthy for us. But two things had happened. One, we realized that we were able to reach a completely new demographic that we weren't reaching with our traditional advertising. And, also, the show would air on Monday night, I believe it was, and every Tuesday morning after the show would air our job applications would sky rocket. We joke that there were some people that thought they were just applying to be on a reality show. But there was a good portion of those people who watched the show, saw the good/bad and saw us with our

warts and all, and thought “That’s the kind of place I want to work.” That show aired three or four seasons and when it went off the air we sort of felt this void. Now what do we do to replace that? And that was right around the time that the blogosphere was really percolating. So I think a lot of companies were maybe a little scared or wary of it, not really knowing what it was all about. We really dove in head first and really had a champion in our vice president of communication, Linda Rutherford.

RB: Do you feel that using social media makes an organization appear reputable?

PB: Not necessarily. I think it can make you the exact opposite of that if you’re not. You can do social media really poorly which can do more damage to your reputation. There are some corporations that have done things that weren’t exactly on the up and up. There are some unwritten rules of the blogosphere. It’s uncharted territory and everyone is ferrying it out as they’re going. People expect you to be authentic and honest about who you are to represent yourself honestly. You have the ability to really build your reputation by following those guidelines, but I think it’s possible to do damage as well.

RB: If you do everything the right way and you do follow these unwritten rules, do you think you can be more reputable because of it or do you think you have to do other things besides social media to get that better reputation?

PB: I guess I’d say yes and yes. No one’s going to do it perfectly. I mean I can’t say no one, but I think it would be really hard because ultimately it’s a very human and very raw interaction. It would be hard to hit a homerun at every step, but I think by being out there and giving an honest, good faith effort to be a part of the conversation with the people that are passionate about your brand or your industry or topics that are of importance to

you and your customers, I think that can be very helpful. But if you're not a reputable company to start with, participating in these things would certainly only highlight that.

RB: Do you feel that organizations that use social media are considered more innovative than those organizations that don't?

PB: It can appear more innovative. It would depend on how a company uses it. There's definitely an edginess factor, as of right now. I think a lot of companies get a lot of credit for being active in the social media space right now simply because it is novel and it is new and it is brave by some measurements. But I think there's a window. There's going to come a time when it's so pervasive that it might not always be the case. I think right now, early stages, companies that are participating actively in social media are blazing a trail to some extent. And so, yea, I think that can contribute to an air of innovation.

RB: Do you have a social media campaign? What does it say? How many parts do you manage and how many areas do you target?

PB: I don't know if we have a social media campaign. I would say that social media is a part of every communication initiative at Southwest Airlines. I'm sure that we have a general strategy. It's constantly evolving and emerging, hence the sort of theme of our team. Our strategy really started out as a replacement for the TV show which was allowing people to peek behind the curtain and get a behind the scenes look at our company and connect with our employees. But as we've grown, it's really become a lot more than that. Now it's a virtual focus group or a place for us to break or make news. It is a place for us to tell the rest of a story when our friends in the media don't have the time or the space to get all the facts in. It is a place for us to connect with our customers that are passionate about aviation and travel. It's a place for us to resolve conflicts,

although that's not necessarily a primary focus for us because we have many other sophisticated channels for customer resolution. Our strategy is to remain on the cutting edge of online communication in a way that meets the needs of our company and the expectations of our customers. So it's pretty broad in that regard. And then we, on a case by case basis, look at every communication initiative and decide what's the best fit, what in the tools we have to use can support each initiative.

RB: Why did you choose to launch a social media campaign? You already said it was to fill the void of the A&E TV show. Were there any other reasons?

PB: Well, yea. We have a 37-year history of communicating very actively and proactively with our customers. When you call us on the phone, you're going to get an employee that's probably less than one state away from you. If you write to us, you'll get a personal, researched response. That personal touch with our customers has always been a primary focus for our business model. We're always trying to stay on top of that and social media is a perfect fit for us in terms of communication and our culture. We have a very open culture and a very fun culture. Social media was an easy avenue for us to jump into I think because of that.

RB: What social media tools do you use?

PB: We started with our corporate blog, "Nuts about Southwest." That launched in April 2006. We just recently gave it a facelift in May 2008. We also have a consumer-generated Flickr feed that populates our blog site. We are pretty active on YouTube. Without any specific kinds of goals, we've probably created one video a week for the last year and a half or two years. We have a Facebook page. We have about 65,000 fans. Of course, Twitter is a big focus right now. We've been on Twitter since about July 2007—I

think before a lot of people knew it existed. We were in there for a long time with like 13 followers. It was really small and it was mostly just a group of us trying to figure out what that thing was all about. And then it just sort of exploded. Right now I think we're averaging about 1,000 new followers per week or like 137 a day. And then on LinkedIn, we have some stuff there. When our CEO has posted some questions, he's gotten some really great answers. So those are the main ones and then of course we try to be active participants on sites and forums that are really close to home—things like “FlyerTalk” and “Airliners.net,” things that are really aviation and travel focused.

RB: Why did you pick those specific social media tools?

PB: Well that's a good question. A blog was really sort of, as I said, really percolating at the time when we were wanting to get into social media and it was sort of an obvious first step for us. And we've just been tied to follow and use tools that really fitted our needs. For example, the blog started as a very simple, bare bones blog and then slowly we wanted to incorporate more video. YouTube was the easiest way for us to do that. And then we started seeing that a lot of customers were—you can even see this in our *Spirit Magazine*, our onboard magazine—people were always sending in photos of their view from their seat or fun photos from online. So we started seeing a lot of that activity on Flickr and that's when we brought that feed into our site. It's been a mix between trying to find tools that we can manage and also being in tools where we know our customers are already communicating with us or about us.

RB: Who are you trying to reach with your social media tools? Who are you specific audiences?

PB: Everyone. The whole world, right? Well, it's a mix. Obviously customers—anyone who has a passion for Southwest Airlines, that has a passion for travel or a passion for aviation. Some of our primary audiences are people... you know, we kind of call ourselves “airline dorks” or “airline geeks,” those of us who just live and breathe airlines. There's sort of a niche market out there for that. Traditional media is also a good audience. They are looking to the online world for their own direction. Our peers. We even communicate with our peers at some of our competitors. We link to Delta's blog from our site. We're playful with our friends from JetBlue on Twitter. On our blog roll, if you look at blogsouthwest.com, we link to tons of popular airline and travel blogs. You hear people talk a lot about, “How do I connect with key influentials?” And a lot of these folks have really become our friends because, like I said, they're aviation geeks, we're aviation geeks. They're bloggers, we're bloggers. It's sort of a small circle, but it's been a lot of fun.

RB: In terms of breaking down the customers, do you think you're trying to attract prospective customers or retain the fans that you mostly have?

PB: I think at the root of it, it's engaging with the people that are passionate about travel, passionate about Southwest, passionate about aviation. But one of the things—a search—really affects the audiences that you're trying to appeal to. If there's a hot topic out there surrounding Southwest, people are searching. For example, when other airlines started charging baggage fees, people were Googling or searching “Southwest and baggage,” “airlines and fees.” We were able to front load our blog with really thoughtful, substantial, accurate content explaining, these are our policies, this is why we're doing what we're doing. We don't charge you fees. So anyone who was searching those things

was able to find our content. We want to provide information that people are looking for, but also to show our culture and our personality to anyone that might be considering traveling with us.

RB: What do you hope people will think about your company based on your Web site?

PB: When people come to our Web site, I would think—I'm looking at the site right now—that they would look at us and say this is a fun company that has a strong culture that focuses on its people. It takes care of its employees and trusts them to represent the company and is a fun, happy place to work.

RB: What sets your Web site apart from your competitors' Web sites?

PB: Well, not a lot of our competitors have a blog site. Our friends at Delta do. I think that might actually be it at this point. So the one differentiator, the primary one is that we have one and our competitors don't. We spent about nine months in the development of our site. We had to decide who was going to write and what are we going to talk about and what's it going to look like and how are people going to interact? We spent a lot of time trying to make sure that what we built was an accurate reflection of who we are. And I think we really succeed in that.

RB: Do you feel your customers value the use of social media in general?

PB: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'd say I know they do, at least a population of them and it's growing. You know, if you go to our site, you'll see there's some content that doesn't have that much activity and others that has tons of commenting. I think our customers like knowing it's there. And as someone myself who's now three years very active in the blogosphere, I know that if I read something online and I want to comment on it and

there's no commenting functionality, that drives me crazy. I think our customers like knowing that it's here for them to comment and participate when they so desire.

RB: Among your industry, what organization besides your own do you feel is the most reputable/innovative? Why?

PB: Our friends at JetBlue are having a lot of fun with Twitter and they've made a good faith effort at social media tools. Like I said, Delta. Delta has a very nice site that has been up at least a year and a half or longer. Those would be my two primary examples. There's a lot of, not competitors per say, but like *USA Today* has a very popular and active travel blog. And then there are a lot of smaller sites that are really gaining popularity like "The Cranky Flyer" and "Runway Girl." These are individuals who have started travel and aviation blogs. They're really smart people who understand the industry and have gained a lot of credibility as a voice in the space. Also, the forums like "Flyer Talk" and "Airliners.net" have done a really good job of that as well.

RB: Do you have any final comments that you want to say about social media and Southwest Airlines?

PB: I would say that I love it. I love this. Three and half years ago I never would have guessed that this is what I'd be doing fulltime. But we put a lot of hours into it while we were doing our other jobs to try to get it to where it is today. It's been a wild ride. We've had to really take some chances, push the envelope a little bit. It makes coming to work everyday so fun and I have to applaud Southwest for giving us the freedom to sort of dabble and figure everything out. They've given us a lot of leeway. We don't have a lot of legal involvement. We don't have a long line of approval processes and bureaucracy

that we have to go to. They trust us and they've empowered us to try to leverage these tools in the best way for our customers and company. And it's been a lot of fun.

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Materials:

Protocol, PowerPoint Presentation and Surveys

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Materials

Protocol

1. SLIDE 1: Welcome (mini survey)

- If participants arrive early, I will instruct them to start browsing the Southwest Airlines and United Airlines Web sites that will already be loaded on their computers.
- Food will be available.
- Demographics survey – when participants arrive, they will fill out the survey.
- SLIDE 2: Welcome, appreciation and explanation of rules
 - All answers are anonymous. Members will be referred to as “Participant 1,” etc. in the report.
 - Be as honest as possible. I need to hear your true opinions.
 - Answer how you feel and how you think people in your same demographics would answer.
 - Be courteous to others and allow everyone the opportunity to speak.

2. SLIDE 3: Discuss opinions on airline Web sites (mini survey)

- If they haven’t looked at them already, give participants about five minutes to look over the Southwest Airlines and United Airlines Web sites.

- Administer mini survey on airline Web site analysis.
- Group questions:
 - Raise your hand: How many people are frequent flyers of Southwest Airlines? United Airlines?
 - What do you like about them?
 - What's your opinion of the Southwest Airlines Web site? United Airlines?
 - What impression do you get from each company?
 - Are you swayed to fly their airline based on your experience with their Web site?

3. SLIDE 4: How participants like companies to interact with them

- How do you prefer companies to reach you as a consumer and interact with you?
 - Prompt – direct mail, special events, e-mails, etc.

4. SLIDE 5: How they define social media

- Raise your hand if you've heard the term "social media."
- Social media is a hot term in today's culture. How do you define it?
- SLIDE 6: Show slide that lists different types of social media (include polls, review a product, share with a friend, social networking sites, blogs, Wikipedia, etc.)
 - Ask participants to raise their hand if they are a contributor to any of these tools.

- Ask participants to raise their hand if they are a spectator of any of these tools.

5. What word or phrase comes to mind when they see... (mini survey)

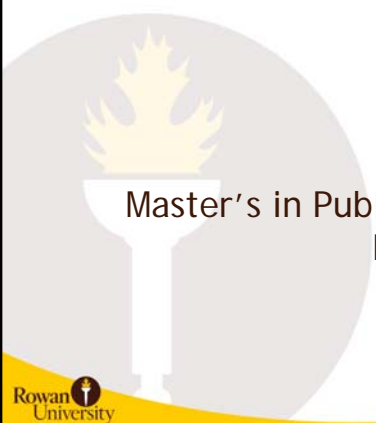
- Distribute mini survey and use PowerPoint to show the word/phrase.
- Directions: if you haven't heard one of these, just say so.
- Using survey sheet, list each word/phrase:
 - SLIDE 7: 1) Blogs
 - SLIDE 8: 2) YouTube
 - SLIDE 9: 3) Facebook
 - SLIDE 10: 4) MySpace
 - SLIDE 11: 5) LinkedIn
 - SLIDE 12: 6) Twitter
 - SLIDE 13: 7) Wikis
 - SLIDE 14: 8) Photo sharing
 - SLIDE 15: 9) RSS feeds
- SLIDE 16: Raise your hand if you write your own blog. Read a blog. Have a Twitter account.
- Raise your hand if you post videos to YouTube or another video sharing service.
- Raise your hand if you watch YouTube videos or videos on other sites.
- Raise your hand if you post photos on photo sharing sites such as SnapFish, Flickr, etc.
- Raise your hand if you look at photos on a photo sharing site.

- Raise your hand if you post or edit wikis. Raise your hand if you read wikis.
 - Raise your hand if you have a Facebook account. MySpace account. LinkedIn account.
 - Raise your hand if you subscribe to RSS feeds.
 - What other social media tools do you use that I missed?
6. How do you feel about organizations using social media to communicate with you?
- Should every organization use blogs Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. to interact with you?
 - What social media tools should organizations use to interact with you?
 - What are some examples of organizations that should use social media to reach you?
 - What are some examples of organizations that shouldn't use social media to reach you?
7. SLIDE 17: Can social media improve a company's reputation?
- Provide definition of reputation on the slide.
 - Can social media improve a company's reputation?
 - How can it improve it?
 - How can it damage it?
8. SLIDE 18: Is a company more innovative if it uses social media?
- Provide definition of innovation.
 - Is a company more innovative if it uses social media? Why or why not?

- Would you choose a company that uses social media over a company in the same industry that doesn't? Why? Is this because of reputation or innovation?

9. Closing

- SLIDE 19: Do you have any last comments about social media or interacting with organizations?
- SLIDE 20: Appreciation and ask if they'd like a copy of my results.



Master's in Public Relations
Focus Group

*Presented by
Rosie Braude*

Rowan University

1

Welcome!

Rowan University

2



**SOUTHWEST
AIRLINES**



UNITED

Rowan University

3

Rowan University

4

Social Media

Rowan University

5

Blogs

Share with a friend

Polls

RSS feeds

Social Media

Micro-blogging

Video sharing

Social networking

Podcasting

Review a product

Photo sharing

Rowan University

6

Blogs

You Tube

facebook

myspace.com
a place for friends

Linked in™

twitter

Wikis

Photo sharing



Reputation

- Overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general

Innovation

- Responses to environmental changes or means of bringing about change in an organization.

Additional comments?

Thank you!

Participant 1

Demographics
(Please circle)

1. Age:

9-17 18-24 25-49 50-64 65+

2. Gender:

Male Female Other

3. Ethnicity:

Caucasian African Asian Hispanic
Other: _____

4. Please select your educational level:

Elementary – High school student
High school graduate
Some college
College graduate
Advanced degree

5. Please select your annual household income:

\$0-25,999 \$26,000-75,999
\$76,000-150,000 Over 150,000
N/A

6. State:

NJ PA DE NY Other: _____

Participant 1

Web site Analysis Survey

1. Have you interacted with Southwest Airlines before? Yes No

a. If yes, in what capacity (booked flight, telephoned, Web search, etc.)?

b. If yes, what did you like/dislike about it?

2. Have you interacted with United Airlines before? Yes No

a. If yes, in what capacity (booked flight, telephoned, Web search, etc.)?

b. If yes, what did you like/dislike about it?

3. Of the entire airline industry, which airline do you like best?

Why?

Participant 1

Word or Phrase Survey

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

APPENDIX E

Online Survey Open-Ended Responses:

Companies/Organizations Managing Great Social Media Campaigns

Name a company or organization that you believe manages a great social media campaign.
Open-Ended Response
A number of pharmaceutical brands are employing social media to support their marketing efforts, but the jury is still out as to the success.
amazon
Amazon
amazon.com
American Cancer Society
American Cancer Society
American Cancer Society
Any major film studio - they all are very involved in social media/viral campaigns
Apple
apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
Apple
apple computers
Apple is the only one I can think of
Appple, Amazon, Nytimes, IMDB
ASPCA
Atlantic Cape Community College
barack obama campaign
Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign
Barack Obama's Campaign
Barack Obama's Presidential Campaign
Barack Obama's presidential campaign
Because I stay away from social media sites, I'm not too familiar with a particular campaign.
Berroco Yarns
Best Buy
Bethel Baptist Church
Billie's Pain Page for Sharing and Understanding
Black Berry and Apple
Bonobos--in fact, you should talk to them...their website is bonobos.com. They make men's trousers, and blog about it, but I found them on Facebook.
Boragta
brady gun control
Budweiser
Burger King
Campaign for President Obama
Cannot name one
can't think of one
Can't think of one off the top of my head right now...sorry.
Can't think of one.
Can't think of one.
Car Manufacturers

Career builder
CIGNA
Cisco
CNet.com
CNN
CNN
CNN
Coca Cola
Coca Cola; Doritos.
Coca-Cola, Frito-Lay
Coka-Cola
Comcast SportsNet
Comcast, Google, Apple, Microsoft
Comcast, Zappos
Dell
Dell, Zappos, Reverb
Deloitte
Democratic Party
Disney
Disney
Disney World
Dominos
don't know
Don't know of any
DON'T KNOW OF ANY
don't know off hand
Don't know-I do not use social web-sites
Dr. Pepper
Drexel University Temple University
Dye Paintball
ebay
Edelman
Edelman Public Relations
Edelman, Walmart, Gollin Harris, The White House
Entertainment Weekly
Entertainment Weekly magazine
Ernst & Young
ESPN
ESPN -- they have their own community, groups, blog network. It's like a facebook for sports
ESPN.COM
Facebook
Facebook
facebook
facebook
Facebook
Facebook, Constant Contact
Feministing.com
Ford
Ford Feista
Ford has a great campaign - so does Coca cola
Ford Motor Company Mayo Clinic
Forever Broadcasting, Kentucky/Tennessee, ABC, Warner Brothers Productions

Fox News
Free and accepted Masons
Gatorade
GE
Geico- Car Insurance Commercials. They are everywhere and probably the most advertising that I see in one day.
general electric-good web site, marriott (blog and Youtube)
General Motors
gilt.com
GlaxoSmithKline
GM
GM
GM
Godiva-- for brand testing, promotions to select chocolate lovers, keeping a finger on their target audience
Example of a poor social networking- Amazon Amazon missed the opportunity to avoid a social networking crisis by not monitoring its brand on the weekend. When a hacker took down all books related to gays, the social networking sites included information about the anti-gay Amazon.com. It took Amazon, a large consumer company, several days to realize the problem, which had already received a bit of attention on social networks. If they monitored social networking sites on the weekend, they would have noticed the problem sooner and saved the company the bad press. PR has truly become a 24/7 job, especially in the consumer sector.
Google
Google
Google
Google
google
google, linkedIn,
GSA
Harrahs - The Pool, etc
Hollywood tans
Hotstovers organization
Howard Yermish Online Strategy and Marketing, LLC
Hulu
hulu
I actually use it to get info out to students on my projects.
I believe any company that uses the social media to gather or use information before offering employment "manages" the "social media"
I can't think of any specific company involved in social media, I feel that those companies who are involved in social media are intrusive in my social online relations.
I can't think of any, fairly new to this area.
I can't think of any.
I can't think of one right now.
I do not have first hand experience
I don't know
I don't know of any "great" ones off-hand, but I do know I don't like to be "bothered" by companies via e-mail, etc. If I want to find info on them, I'll reach out myself.
I don't know of any.
I don't know.
I have no idea.
I think Ashton Kutcher's & Blah Girls doing a great job using all kinds of social media, some I had never heard of. Also Zappos.
I think it's still a guess, how to strategically create social media for organizational goals purposes.

I think they should use it, but I don't actually bother with it. So, I really don't know which organizations are doing a good job.
I think your question #7 is not valid and should be removed from the survey. Social media does not have a correlation with reputation at ALL. (Re: Dominoes vs. Obama campaign).
IBM
IBM
IBM - they have not only embraced social media from a top executive level, they have filtered it down to all staff through an open and welcoming social media policy for employees.
IE Business School
Innosight
International Network of Golf
ipod
Johnson & Johnson
Johnson & Johnson
Johnson and Johnson
Journal of Commerce magazine - Trade & transportation industry publication -- The company has facebook and twitter, updates its site daily and has blogs.
KYW Radio
Loreal
Macy's; Tiffany & Co
Major Record labels such as Def Jam - Universal records
March of Dimes
Marriott, United Airlines
marvel comics
Match.com
McDonalds
McDonalds
McDonalds
McDonalds?
Media Bistro
Microsoft
Microsoft
Microsoft
Monster Energy
Most Hospitals now have great interactive web sites and social networking
Motorola, Ritas
MSNBC
My school. Millersville University.
mymedicalreports.com
Myspace because it doesn't only allow cahitting, it lets you create, share, play games, look at music, and what's going on with your friends.
Myspace music Cartoon Network or COMEDY CENTRAL
N/A
N/A
N/A
n/a
National Public Radio
Netflix, Rotten Tomatoes
New Tv Stations
News outlets, CNN, MSNBC, NPR etc. Obama campaign
Newspapers & magazines
Nine Inch Nails

no clue
No response
NONE
None
None come to mind
none come to mind.
None.
Not really sure. It's obviously not my strong suit.
Not sufficiently familiar with it you respond.
Not sure
NPR
Obama campaign
obama campaign
Obama campaign Rob Andrews email updates
Obama campaign.
obama for president
Obama Presidential Campaign
Old Navy
Old Navy
P and G
Pampers
people magazine
People Magazine
Pepsi.
Petfinder
Philadelphia City Paper MSNBC
Philadelphia Eagles
Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc.
philly.com
Postsecret or Facebook, though Facebook is becoming more commercial and less intuitive.
President Obama
President Obama, breast cancer, Coca-Cola, Dijourno Pizza, there are tons more
PRSA
Red Bull
RedBull
Rita's Franchise Company (and I say that because I am the Social Networking Coordinator spearheading their social media efforts...so you might say I am biased) :)
Rock for Life
Rowan Univ.
Siemens
Skittles did a great job with their social media initiative (when they replaced their homepage with a Twitter feed of everyone using the words "skittles", later replaced with a Facebook feed)
Skittles, Target
Sony
Southern Living At Home
Southwest Airlines
sports teams, Lincoln Financial
Sprint Nextel
Staples
Starbucks
Starbucks
Starbucks

Starbucks
Starbucks
Starbucks
Starbucks
Still too new at this to judge.
Stop & Shop, Zappos, Red Bull, Burger King
Subaru
T. Boone Pickens' "Pickens Plan" for alternative energy
Target
target
The Democratic party
The Health related organizations - breast cancer, AHA, stroke
The Lance Armstrong Foundation
The New York Times
The New York Times is very active on Twitter, with about 30 different accounts for specific sections and topics.
Wired Magazine also has a great presence on social media sites.
The Obama Campaign
The Obama campaign/the White House
The Onion Newspaper
The organization doesn't sell anything but I think he had a great social media campaign, Obama.
The political candidates did this well in 2008.
The president
ThinkGeek.com
Tide (Proctor and Gamble)
Time Magazine (time.com)
Toms
Toyota
Travel Channel, ABC (Disney),
Travel related sites
Trent Reznor - Nine Inch Nails Google
Truth
twitter
Unigo, LLC Cosmopolitan
unknown
Urban Decay Cosmetics www.urbandecay.com
Vanguard CertaPro Painters, Ltd.
Verizon
Viacom
Victoria's Secret
WalMart
WebMD
Weight Watchers
White House Barack Obama
Woot.com
WPVI-TV
www.youtube.com/user/thedevcamexperience
Yahoo
yahoo, google, facebook, youtube, myspace
You Tube
Your Timeless Photos
YouTube - Presidential campaign of 2008
Zappos

Zappos, Dell Computers, Coca-Cola, the Obama administration, Blendtec
ZipCar