

Virtual Worlds: The Next Step for Social Media Collaboration

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Abstract

As social media and online collaboration continues to proliferate, organizations explore their commercial possibilities. In recent years, there has been an explosion of social media marketing efforts as corporations attempt to harness some the benefits of the social networks popularity. The current use of social media in organizations is focused on increasing sales, customer awareness of products and services and improving customer perception of the organization and its products or services. These efforts have not addressed the collaboration potential social media technologies provide. This paper attempts to provide organizations with a new perspective for using social media, in particular virtual worlds, to harness collaboration.

Introduction

During the last decades as Information and Telecommunications technologies (ICT) advanced so did the number of online communication alternatives available. Online communications have moved well beyond the use of electronic mail, discussion boards and chat rooms to include a wide variety of tools commonly referred to as social media. The term social media, has been coined to refer to the vast gamma of online communication forums that supports formal and/or informal communications. Besides including the more “traditional” online communication devices previously mentioned, some of the additional tools considered a part of social media are blogs, video blogs (v-blogs), sharing sites, product and service rating sites and forums, social networks and virtual worlds.

The widespread use of small, mobile and powerful information and telecommunications technology devices coupled with the proliferation of social media applications have caused an extraordinary explosion in the use of the latter. Therefore emerging a range of user (consumer) controlled sites and forums used to rate products, services, organizations and voice their opinion basically about anything they want. The popularity of social media immediately caught the attention of organizations realizing the potential of these tools. Businesses have created discussions boards, blogs and social networks profiles to take advantage of their marketing potential.

Looking at the current use of social media it can be appreciated that although users rapidly exploited the collaborative opportunities these tools provide (American Cancer Society, 2011) (Blodgett & Tapia, 2011) (Castronova, 2005) (David, 2007) (Livingstone & Kemp, 2006) this has not been the case with business organizations, where the efforts have been highly concentrated in using social media, especially social networks, as an additional marketing strategy. (Harris & Rae, 2009) (Hemp, 2006) (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) (Tikkanen, Hietanen, Henttonen, & Rokka, 2009)

All varieties of social media are conducive for collaboration, facilitating the flow of information and communications among the users. The success of social media for collaboration can be seen in various efforts, like the successful Relay for Life in Second Life events that have taken place since 2007 (American Cancer Society, 2013) and the Red Cross use of Facebook pages to increase fundraising for emergency relief efforts (see Red Cross Facebook page for 2011 Japan Earthquake Relief Fund). One social media outlet that is especially

favorable for collaboration is known as Virtual Worlds. The reason for this is that not only do they support real time communications and facilitate interaction in communications with multiple parties but they provide a higher sense of presence among the participants that positively impacts the result of the collaborative effort.

The purpose of this working paper is to highlight the potential of social media, especially Virtual Worlds, for collaborative efforts in organizations and to suggest future research in this area.

Social Media

The roots of social media come from the Usenet discussion board system created in 1979 by Tom Tuscott and Jim Ellis, which offered a public virtual space to post public messages by users from around the world. As the number of Internet users kept growing and computer hardware and infrastructure capabilities, and software applications continued its soaring development other forms of social media emerged. Including social networks like Facebook and virtual worlds like World of Warcraft and Second Life. Being social networking sites generally considered the de facto definition of social media.

Even though social media has become a popular theme within news outlets, business organizations and researchers there is a prolific view of what it encompasses. As a result it is important to start the discussion of social media with a clarification of the term. Blackshaw and Nazarro (2004) define social media as the term that “describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated, and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (Blackshaw & Nazarro, 2004, p. 2). Whereas Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defines it as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content”

(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). To better understand the subtle difference in these definitions it is necessary to describe the main elements of Kaplan and Haenlein's definition, that is the terms Web 2.0 and user generated content.

The first component, considered the foundation of social media, Web 2.0 refers to the trend of available web resources that are characterized by content and applications produced and disseminated by the users, like blogs and wikis. The second element of the definition, user generated content, is intertwined with the first and is at the heart of social media just as Web 2.0. User generated content allude to the "various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) As described by Kaplan & Haelein (2010) these elements impose three requirements that must be met in order to classify an outlet as social media. The three elements are: publicly available resources, content must have at least a minimum degree of creative element, and it must be developed by end-users not as part of a professional endeavor (OECD, 2007). By identifying Web 2.0 and user generated content as the foundation of social media technologies and efforts Kaplan and Haelein created a more restrictive definition of what should be classified as social media. Excluding that way content created or disseminated by private communication mediums like e-mail and instant messaging, and content created for commercial purposes. Table 1 provides a list of social media examples.

Additionally, social media "is about engaging others in open and active conversations" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 66). Drawing form the previous definitions and discussions about what constitutes social media it can be established that it is characterized by the use of multiple technologies and platforms with the ability for worldwide reach that enable instantaneous and real-time communications using a variety of formats (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Other characteristics include the facilitation of user participation in the creation and dissemination of content allowing the users to portray themselves,

engaging design and uses, and provide some level of social presence to the users. This last characteristic is the most relevant for this paper. Before delving into what is social presence, how it relates to different social media outlets and how it can harness collaboration, it is important to discuss briefly the current use of social media by organizations.

Use of Social Media by organizations

Organizations have realized that social media has “become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behavior, and post-purchase communications and evaluations” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 358). Resulting in a series of coordinated and company controlled social media efforts. Examples of these efforts include hosting virtual communities of users within the organization’s website. This strategy is used by many of the major business organizations in the world, some examples include Amazon and Procter and Gamble. These virtual communities provide a space for people with common interests to share information about products and/or services, and experiences, and foster the development of a sense of belonging, a sense of social presence and consumer loyalty. Usually companies monitor the activity in these communities and sometimes participate to learn about the needs and desires of consumers in order to improve their offering. Another objective of close monitoring of these activities is to attempt to minimize the negative impact to the organization that sometime these activities can have on the organization.

Blogs are another commonly used social media strategy implemented by many organizations to communicate with its customers. Companies use blogs to inform clients of future offerings, products in development, company events, and special offers, to name a few. Even though blogs allow for consumer participation they are normally company controlled forums, limiting therefor the “self-disclosure” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) component of the social media tool.

Nowadays the most common social media projects held by organizations involve the use of social networking sites. Organizations are creating a social network profile to increase awareness of their products and services, as well as the organization. The use of social networks is directly related to the creation of a brand community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). By navigating Facebook, the most popular social network today, one can appreciate that major business organizations, brands and products as well as small and medium size businesses have a strong presence. And the vast majority, if not all, of these efforts are part of the organizations' marketing campaign to foster a brand community, providing information about the company, its events, products, promotions, and a few incorporate a link that facilitates the completion of a sale through the company's e-commerce application.

Engagement, Presence and Social Presence

It is commonly accepted among business scholars that in today's business environment, generally called the information age, the key to success lies in having access to the relevant body of information and knowledge on a timely manner. To accomplish this, knowledge sharing is a must, and sharing requires collaboration. Therefore it can be established that success in the information age requires effective collaborative endeavors. Throughout time it has been observed that collaborating is not an easy task to achieve. By analyzing our collaborative experiences and recalling all the challenges we've successfully faced in some instances and unsuccessfully in others we all understand the complexity of achieving successful collaboration.

As a result researchers from various areas, especially those from the education and management arenas, have dedicated an enormous amount of time and effort researching the challenges posed by collaborative efforts in both academic and organizational settings. These efforts attempt to identify the factors that should be addressed when undertaking these types of efforts and in turn increase the chances of success. The literature identifies various factors that support collaboration. Trust among the parties and a sense of presence, specifically social presence, are two of the most

commonly factors identified as essential for a smooth and successful collaboration. (Quinn, 2005) These two factors are highly intertwined since a higher sense of presence engenders trust.

The concepts of engagement and presence have a close relationship, where the first supports the emergence of the later. “The term engagement refers to the situation in which an individual’s attention is completely focused on a particular task”. (Franceschi, Lee, & Hinds, 2008) Engagement is related to the state of flow of the user, this is when an individual’s psychological state of enjoyment and satisfaction, and sense of control is completely absorbed by the activity at hand (Franceschi, Lee, & Hinds, 2008). A high level of engagement is generally associated with the state of flow (Salen & Zimmerman, 2005).

Presence refers to the psychological sense of “being there” that envelops an individual (Slater, Usoh, & Chrysanthou, 1995). “In the case of virtual environments presence is defined as the user’s psychological state of being in the virtual environment rather than in a real world location”. (Franceschi, Lee, & Hinds, 2008) Presence is a very complex concept incorporating automatic, environmental and subjective aspects. For a detailed discussion these aspects see Franceschi (2009), Franceschi and Lee (2008), Franceschi, Lee and Hinds (2008), Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis and Hinds (2009), Lombard, et al. (2000), Slater, Usoh and Chrysanthou (1995), and Witmer and Singer (1998).

For its complexity the concept is normally divided in three categories: physical, environment and social (Heeter, 1992). As it relates to virtual environments social presence refers to the user’s perception of the environment’s suitability for social networking. The level of immediacy and intimacy supported by the environment and its elements highly influence the user’s sense of social presence (Franceschi & Lee, 2008) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Virtual environments that incorporate social factors in their design are better suited to support collaborative efforts. To enhance social presence a virtual environment needs to incorporate mechanisms that make the users feel acknowledged by the other

participants in the environment as well as by the environment (Heeter, 1992), (Huang & Alessi, 1999), (Lombard, et al., 2000), (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006).

Collaboration requires that individuals feel committed with the task as well as with the group. They need to feel part of the group. Many social media outlets are excellent in fostering individual participation but not so good at engendering collaboration. The main reason for this is that their designs are focused on supporting individual creation and dissemination of content rather than collaborative creation. There is one popular social media instrument that incorporates many of the social factors needed to engender presence and better support collaboration. This instrument is known as virtual worlds and is discussed in the next section.

Virtual Worlds

Another popular social media tool is known as virtual worlds. “A virtual world is a set of computer rendered images that comprise a simulated environment in which users interact through the use of avatars.” (Franceschi, Lee, & Hinds, 2008) These worlds are one the most popular social media outlets and are characterized by the support of simultaneous interactions among multiple participants, their persistent nature and social networking capabilities (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009)

These are created with the explicit purpose of providing a “real-life” simulated environment that supports user engagement through the use of personalized interactions that foster the emergence of trust among the parties (MacKenzie, Buckby, & Irvine, 2013). The use of tri-dimensional (3D) representations of places, objects and persons (avatars) are some of the factors needed to support a high sense of social presence. Research in e-learning settings supports that the use of 3D virtual worlds for collaborative tasks engenders a higher sense of engagement and social presence, which in turn results in better performance through a collaborative task (Franceschi, 2009), (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009).

The fast grow of these worlds and their business applications have caused many organizations to enter this realm. Organizations use virtual worlds to promote real-life products and services, increase company awareness among potential clients and generate some traffic to their e-commerce web sites.

Virtual worlds have been described as “a virtual revolution that might one day be considered as important as the industrial revolution” (Keegan, 2010, p. 2). Others call it the main source of future wealth creation and employment opportunities”. (Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, & Li, 2008) Whether one agrees completely with the previous assertions or not it can’t be refuted that virtual worlds are an important element of social media and that there are numerous possibilities for business and research as exemplified by the findings of Daden Limited (2010), Gartner Research (2010), Bourlakis, Papagiannidis and Li (2009), Corley and Gioia (2011) and MacKenzie, Buckby and Irvine (2013).

Organizations like Dell and Nike swiftly established their presence in virtual worlds by developing their virtual spaces in the social virtual world Second Life®. Through their efforts in this virtual world the organizations were able to present their plans, future products and even provide information services to the users. It is contended that a good virtual world experience will positively impact the user’s opinion towards the organization and the likelihood to do business with the real-life organization. Others have opted to develop their own private virtual worlds, which allow more control by the company, to support real-life marketing efforts or the needs of real-life clients (Keegan, 2010).

Closing Remarks

Social media in organizations is a hot topic in academic research, with a plethora of opportunities. The organizational use of social media and virtual worlds for collaborative efforts has not been properly addressed by either academics or organizations. By definition social media supports collaboration, since they are participatory and sharing platforms, but their characteristics make some more conducive for collaboration than others.

As noted earlier collaboration is key for organizational success and the nature of virtual worlds make them ideal for collaborative efforts. It is the goal of this paper to encourage organizations and researchers alike to explore the collaborative harnessing potential of virtual worlds to support organizational activities and goals, and incorporate virtual worlds as part of social media efforts.

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