Twitter as a Public Relations Tool

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Using in-depth interviews with executive-level public relations professionals, this study explores the uses of Twitter in communications campaigns. Findings suggest that public relations practitioners consider microblogging to be a valuable asset to a campaign's social media strategy. They believe that Twitter offers a form of communication not offered by other social media applications, and they believe microblogging will continue to be an essential part of an integrated communications campaign.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With a *New York Times* journalist admitting to plagiarizing prominent blogger John Marshall in the spring of 2009 and President Obama boasting more than 6 million supporters on Facebook during the 2008 election, digital media are now a major element of mainstream communication. Blogs, once the newcomers to the digital media scene, are now a staple in contemporary communications campaigns (Porter, Trammell, Chung & Kim, 2006). Social networking Web sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn are integral parts of groundbreaking public relations plans such as the viral strategy President Obama used during his 2008 campaign (Williams & Gulati, 2008).

Companies and organizations have followed President Obama's lead, with recognizable names such as Ernst and Young, the National Institute of Health and the World Bank using social networking Web sites to reach their target audiences. Even the mainstream media used quotes and story leads from bloggers during the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Gillmor, 2004). Yet, despite the fact that blogs and social networking Web sites have clearly proved to be successful components of communications campaign designs, some traditional media professionals label these innovative communication tools as fads with no lasting value (Hill, 2005; Wind & Todi, 2008). Like its blog and social networking predecessors, the microblog has found its way into the mainstream (Wilson, 2008). In April 2007, 94,000 microbloggers logged on everyday (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). Today, more than two million people routinely use the most popular microblog, Twitter (Thompson, 2008). *Time* magazine reported in June 2009 that the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to delay a scheduled update to its Web site to allow Iranians to tweet about their presidential election (Grossman, 2009). Twitter and other social media outlets became the only way for Iranian citizens to voice their opinions about the election and their support of opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Twitter allowed a large population of people a voice internationally in a circumstance in which they otherwise would have remained silent. The voices heard on Twitter every day raise certain questions. Will this innovative application become a part of the contemporary communications campaign like its social media predecessors? This research explores this question.

This study is for communications practitioners and audiences interested in current communications campaign trends. Through in-depth interviews with communications executives, I hope to provide a picture of how industry experts view the newest social media application. The responses are specific to the public relations industry and provide insider insight to the current use and future of Twitter in communications campaigns. By interviewing communication experts, this study aims to discover current strategies for using Twitter in a communications plan. Leaders in the industry experience the campaign development process numerous times. With those experiences comes the ability to project the value of a new tool and predict the possible limitations for emerging applications. The respondents' opinions offer insight for other communication professionals regarding the current trends of Twitter as a public relations tool, and the current plans to use that tool in the future.

Digital Public Relations Media

The Internet has created the ultimate "global village," and completely changed news distribution to the world, allowing people to access information at any time and stay updated minute-by-minute (Hiebert, 2004). While newspapers and television once dominated as medium choices for information flow, the Internet now offers equal access for all interested in disseminating information. With equal access and the free flow of information, the Internet supports a true democracy unlike any other medium before it. Hiebert (2004) argued that people around the world have used cell phones and the Internet to organize rallies and protests. He stated that the Internet offers a forum for debate, as witnessed by the numerous opinions and political views that buzzed on the blogosphere during the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Finally, Heibert (2004) stated that the Internet forces companies, organizations and government administrations to approach the information flow with a new sense of transparency.

The global reach of online media makes it particularly useful for public relations practitioners. According to Kirat (2007), "Online is a major medium that PR practitioners should use efficiently and rationally for effective public relations" (p. 170). Kirat (2007) conducted a Web site analysis to assess online public relations tools and distributed a questionnaire to 24 public relations department managers to study how public relations departments in the UAE use the Internet to communicate directly with target publics and the media. Kirat (2007) argued that the proper use of online applications provides unprecedented access, but her findings showed that public relations practitioners in the UAE do not utilize the Internet in such a way that allows target publics to connect directly with their organization. Kirat (2007) proposed that the integration of Internet tools into contemporary public relations practices is necessary for success.

Once public relations practitioners embrace the power of the Internet, it changes the way practitioners do their jobs. Gregory (2004) stated that, "The advent of the Internet and electronic communication has transformed public relations, just as it has transformed many areas of organizational and business life" (p. 245). Organizations conduct business almost entirely online in some cases, and rely on the ability to

communicate instantly to meet their goals. Gregory (2004) created a framework for the public relations process in which the Internet exists as an important component when implementing a communications campaign. Gregory (2004) reviewed XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language), a language that allows computer hardware and software to communicate regardless of the type. She focused on XPRL (the public relations specific version of XML) and how it might benefit the industry and to support her ideas that successful public relations follow a specific process, the author developed a schematic that showed the communication campaign process. Among the implementation techniques, online is considered an integral component.

After integrating Internet tools into the communications campaign, industry professionals need to evaluate how instant and directed communication affects the message. The Internet allows messages to travel much faster, and while the ability to disperse information quickly offers public relations professionals faster communication avenues, the ever-changing information stream requires constant monitoring and response. Gregory and Hallahan (2004) argued that public relations professionals need to coordinate with information technology professionals to protect information and supervise the organization's online presence. The authors explained the many threats to client information such as hackers obtaining privileged information when public relations firms store that information on computers and Internet software applications. Critics or attackers have an open forum on the Internet to voice their negative opinions and are protected under the First Amendment. Public relations practitioners and their information technology counterparts must protect that information and the relationship between the firm and the client. The relationship between a firm and its client is very important, and the relationship between that client and its target publics is paramount. The Web has changed the way organizations build relationships with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Public relations is no longer a one-way conversation, it is a constant dialogue between an organization and its audience. Even in the late 1990s, this article predicted that the Internet would improve relationships between an organization and its target publics. The authors stated that the Internet does not affect relationships one way or the other, but how practitioners use the Internet to create a dialogue affect important relationships.

With all of its benefits, the Internet has created some interesting challenges for communication professionals. As discussed above, target publics are easier to reach through the Internet, but "due to fragmentation, complexity, time constraint and interactivity of computer communication, corporations may be unable to carefully package their message and make it consistent across all media channels" (Ihator, 2001, p 200).   Maintaining the original message structure across the Internet is difficult with numerous application choices and a fragmented audience. Public relations practitioners lose the ability to target messages to a specific audience when the audience shifts and evolves based on the daily online community. Communication professionals must produce creative, innovative and consistent digital messages that successfully represent the brand regardless of the intended audience.

Social Networking Web sites

Social networking Web sites are another innovative digital tool. Web sites such as Facebook, Myspace and LinkedIn are a common way people stay connected. In 2007, one-third of the top 15 Web sites were social networking Web sites (Joinson, 2008). As Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini noted, Web sites are "the root motivation in communication and maintaining relationships" (2007, p. 1). Since public relations is the practice of managing relationships, social networking Web sites are an excellent way to manage numerous relationships at once and communicate with the public. Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini (2007) surveyed 69 Facebook users and 48 Myspace users to ascertain their beliefs about online privacy and trust. The authors found that respondents required more trust when they were face-to-face with someone than they did in their online relationship. In addition, Facebook users feel safer than Myspace users. The discussion applies further by defining trust between the users on these Web sites. The authors discussed that an online relationship strengthens after the use of other communication methods such as in person or over the telephone. The results showed that despite the lack of trust and guarantee of privacy, social networking Web site users actively cultivate online relationships. The trust level between two people in the virtual world is less rigid than in a real world relationship. This raises an interesting concern for public relations firms. Do target publics trust a relationship that is built online, or do they require face time? Social networking Web site users do not always trust the information they get from other users, however they are willing to build online relationships with these users in the face of that distrust.

Social networking Web sites also provide numerous options for targeting specific individuals (Chester & Montgomery, 2008). As social networks begin to hyper target consumers for advertising firms by providing a comprehensive profile of each user, public relations professionals may choose to access this information and target campaigns to specific demographics. Not only do social networks help organizations focus only on their target audience, but they also provide a powerful tool – word of mouth. The messages from a person's social network are more effective than a message directly from an organization.

Blogs

Some scholars question why people blog. Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with 23 bloggers in California and New York. After a minimum of two sessions with each interviewee, the researchers found that people usually blog with one of five main motivations: to document life, as a form of catharsis, as a muse, as a community forum or as a commentary. Regardless of the motivation, the interviews exposed that bloggers have little difficulty posting a simple diary-like entry one day and expressing a profound opinion the next. Bloggers admitted that the lack of structure is what they liked the most about posting a blog entry. Surprisingly, bloggers confessed their motivation for posting a blog was not selfish, but a form of personal expression that required the author to be sensitive to his or her readers.

Digital public relations media such as blogs allow public relations professionals to connect with their publics in an unprecedented way. "Blogs can provide an entrée for organizations into previously private realms" directly connected to targeted publics (Kent, 2008, p. 35). Kent's (2008) analysis of blogs showed their value in research and issue framing. With research as an essential component in public relations, blogs offer an opportunity for information collection from a targeted demographic or like-minded audience. Public relations professionals use blogs' dialogic structure to sway the opinions of targeted demographic groups toward their client. They can take advantage of the blogosphere's reaction to a certain message prior to that message reaching the mainstream media and use that as an opportunity to re-frame a concept if needed. Blogs also work well to create an open-book persona for large corporations. They "afford organizations another route for sharing their positions in a somewhat controlled fashion and many mainstream organizations have taken advantage of the medium" (p. 36), but they are also open discussions with little regulation (2008). One comment on a blog post may or may not be the opinion of the public, and should not be trusted as a general population view.

Just as blogs offered a new communication method for organizations, tools that followed such as Facebook and RSS expanded communication abilities. Godwin-Jones (2003) described different Web generations. First generation Web consisted of email, text-based chat and chat rooms. Second generation Web consists of RSS, wiki and blogs. Just as one generation built on another, recent applications continue to build on their predecessors. This paper attempts to discover whether Twitter will build on tools such as email and blogs.

Microblogging

The newest way to stay in touch is microblogging (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). Java et al. (2007) stated that, "Microblogging is a new form of communication in which users describe their current status in short posts distributed by instant messages, mobile phones, email or the Web" (p. 118). While other microblogging applications exist, Twitter is the most popular, with more than two million users (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008). Twitter allows users to post short messages, up to 140 characters, called tweets, which provide quick updates, opinions or information. The process allows real-time communication between members. Longer forms of communication such as blogs and social networking pages require more time and effort. Microblogs allow for rapid communication with little time commitment for a single post.

As McFedries (2007) noted, "the goal of all this twittering seems to be to enhance one's cyberspace presence, an elusive concept that seems to refer to being "out there" (wherever "there" is) as much as possible (p. 84)." Twitter users often maintain an Internet presence on numerous social networking sites with the goal of being ultimately connected. Currently, applications across the Internet offer the option to synch social networking sites to optimize connectivity.

Although scholarly research regarding Twitter is scant, the mainstream media are taking notice. Steven Johnson (2009) of *Time* magazine stated that, "The one thing you can say for certain about Twitter is that it makes a terrible first impression." McFedries (2007) points out that the general public does not understand why one would need to know what a friend had for dinner. However, Hobsbawm (2009) argued that people turn to Twitter for firsthand accounts of breaking news, reviews and opinions. The author noted that Google searches are no longer the way to pick a restaurant or a movie. Users now search Twitter for that information. Reisner (2009) pointed out that Twitter is a tool with minimal overhead that offers the option to provide frequent updates, offers a place for companies to sell discounted products through tweets and local businesses to inform consumers of deals and theme nights.

From social networking Web sites to blogs to microblogs, social media is an important component of any integrated communications campaign. These tools provide valuable communication methods that previously did not exist for communication professionals. This literature review shows that academic research specifically relating to Twitter is scant. However, social media research is abundant. Studies in this review argue that social media is an integral part of communication campaigns and a necessary tool for public relations practitioners. Publics use social media to obtain information, communicate with one another and disseminate information to friends, family, co-workers and their global network. With this in mind, the literature indicates that public relations practitioners can use social media to reach their target audience and create a virtual dialogue with their publics.

Based on existing literature, I developed the following research question to further understand the role Twitter in public relations campaigns

RQ1: What do public relations executives think about the current use of Twitter?

RQ2: How are public relations executives using Twitter in contemporary public relations campaigns, and what are the costs associated with the application?

RQ3: What do public relations executives see as the future of Twitter in public relations in these campaigns?

METHOD

This study employed in-depth interviews with a sample of executive-level public relations practitioners to discover:
1) how public relations professionals currently use Twitter in communications campaigns, and what cost is associated with the tool;
2) how public relations professionals plan to use Twitter in communications campaigns in the future; and
3) what public relations professionals think of Twitter as a communications tool.

In-depth interviews provide a unique research opportunity unlike other qualitative methods. Interviews allow respondents to openly discuss their opinions, choices and motivations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For this study, in-depth interviews provided the opportunity for public relations executives to express their opinion on the current state of Twitter in communication campaigns and offer their predictions of the application for the future. Also, this method provided the opportunity to uncover the uses for Twitter that previously were not obvious to the public relations industry. The in-depth and open structure offered respondents the opportunity to expand on each question and discuss emerging trends.

Participants and Procedure

I conducted 12 interviews with executive-level public relations practitioners at the level of managing director or above from the top 50 public relations firms as identified by O'Dwyers (See Appendix A). I collected contact information for the executives through Internet searches, contact information provided on firm Web sites and personal contacts. I sent the initial email inquiry to approximately 200 public relations practitioners. After initial contact, I scheduled interviews at the public relations executive's convenience and forwarded the electronic consent form for approval. Each interviewee had the option to interview via phone or email. Each phone interview took approximately 25 minutes and was recorded with the permission of the interviewee. All respondents interviewed by phone gave their permission to be recorded. When respondents replied by e-mail, I printed and saved the email interviews in a locked drawer to assure anonymity.

I sent interview questions in advance if requested by the interviewee. The questions focused on whether top public relations executives use Twitter for their campaigns and whether they think it is a valid component of a successful public relations campaign. The questions also explored how companies and organizations use Twitter in contemporary communications campaigns, and how they plan to use the tool in the future.

Interview Process

Four participants chose to participate by phone for the interview, and were called between September 11, 2009, and February 25, 2010. The remaining eight respondents completed the interview questionnaire by email between September 1, 2009, and March 8, 2010. If requested, respondents were given the nine-question interview guide by email, but occasionally chose not to answer all the questions or stated that a specific question did not apply to their public relations firm. Upon completion of the phone interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on any of the information that arose during the interview process. The emailed interview guide included an opening statement that asked respondents to elaborate as they saw fit. After reading the electronic consent form, some respondents agreed to the terms of general attribution; however, some respondents requested that they be quoted directly. Nine of the

respondents asked for a copy of the final thesis project to obtain the opinions of other industry leaders.

After I completed the interviews, I transcribed the phone interviews and printed the email responses and read over them several times to discover any trends and patterns regarding the respondents' uses of Twitter, opinions about the application's present state, and predictions for Twitter use in the future. I grouped specific answers by theme words such as real-time, instant, media, time and by similar responses. Occasionally, a respondent offered significant insight that fell outside of the theme categories, but the researcher included the information based on importance and relevance to the research question.

RESULTS

RQ1: What Do Public Relations Executives Think About the Current Use of Twitter?

Results revealed that industry leaders in public relations view Twitter as a valuable asset to their daily practice. Although some practitioners believe the popularity of Twitter itself may diminish, they agree that microblogging will continue as a significant communications campaign component. Twitter allows practitioners to micro-target communications to specific communities and opens a one-on-one line of communication with members of the media. Words such as "real-time" and "instant" produced a theme describing the value of immediate communication for public relations practitioners. Themes concerning the negative aspects of Twitter centered on issues such as time and reputation management

Valuable Tool, Not A Passing Fad

Respondents agreed that Twitter is not a passing fad; however their opinions varied regarding the value of Twitter. Tim Wheatcroft, general manager at Allison & Partners, thinks that Twitter's popularity will change over time:

I think that Twitter's popularity in the mainstream will tail off a little as time passes and hype wanes; however, it will continue to be a useful PR and communications tool. I expect it to broadly follow Second Life: huge uptake of public use to see what it's all about and then when the mainstream public gets bored of it, the buzz will diminish but uses of it will become more distinct. Likewise with Second Life, there are many organizations using it for real world applications these days, although the rate of sign-ups had diminished from its heyday.

Lynne Doll, president of The Rogers Group, put Twitter into the larger social media context:

Social networking and instant, brief communications opportunities are very valuable communications tools. I was in a bakery the other day and overheard the owner wondering out loud if he should start twittering. After I told him the word was tweeting, I

asked him if he had loyal customers. He does and I told him he could use Twitter to keep his bakery top of mind, with sweet tweets about new products, fun facts, etc.

Many respondents claimed that Twitter's ability to provide information in a quick, succinct and directed manner makes the application valuable. A vice president put it plainly by stating, "Twitter is a valuable tool because it allows for instant communication to a wide audience." A director agreed with this and said, "Twitter is incredibly valuable for public relations professionals for the real-time insights they provide and the direct interactions they enable with consumers, media and anyone who wants to participate in the conversation." Another vice president expanded on the idea by saying, "It is a key channel to create social connections, listen to conversations and engage where relevant. It provides a real-time temperature check on what topics are resonating at that moment in time."

Direct Connection To The Media

Numerous respondents discussed the relationship-building and connection opportunities Twitter offers to public relations practitioners and the media. A vice president pointed out this idea when asked how her firm uses microblogging. "It has helped us identify and create relationships with key influencers both on the client and media side." She also mentioned that members of the media were the first to use Twitter as a mainstream tool.

Laura Baldwin, senior director at Qorvis Communications, stated that the media responds almost instantaneously to a tweet while they ignore other contact attempts.

It is interesting, following some reporters who you might not get to respond to an email or phone call, but then you'll see, you know on Twitter, that they are looking for sources to talk about "x" or 'I am writing a story about "x"' and it gives you that in to reach out to them and engage them. It is more relationship building.

Matthew LeVeque, senior vice president of The Rogers Group, also held this opinion regarding targeted groups and their response rates on Twitter. "Media has definitely been important, both traditional media and people from the blogosphere have been an important channel."

Melissa Zandman, manager from Text 100 stated that her firm searches for members of the media on Twitter.

The people that respond the most are the media. One, because that is our goal. Those are the people we are really trying to go after. Also, because they are the ones that are putting out the articles. They are putting out things saying hey I'm working on this article, who has a reference for me? If the media is [sic] linking to more of a sensationalist, more negative article, then they will receive more of a response from my team because we want to set the record straight. The biggest rate of response is when the media posts a question. It is about getting included in their story.

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Negative Aspects Of Twitter

Opinions were split among respondents on whether Twitter possesses any negative qualities. Two respondents pointed out that Twitter poses a time management issue in their personal lives but not in the business arena. A vice president provided a clear viewpoint, "I think the challenge today is sifting out the conversations that are relevant across any channel. The creation of lists has allowed for a more sophisticated approach." Laura Baldwin of Qorvis added:

Twitter is a huge time suck especially as you follow more and more people. There is such a deluge of information, it's so easy to get pulled into what's going on in the Buffalo Bills locker room as opposed to what Apple's new announcement really means, and how we should react to it.

Three respondents commented on the destructive outcomes of Twitter when the tool is not utilized properly, and an organization chooses not to engage in the conversation. Lynne Doll of The Rogers Group stated:

If companies don't actively listen to online conversations about their audiences, then there is a huge opportunity for problems. Also, companies that use language or a tone that is too corporate come across as fake. Like in any medium, you need to adapt your content, tone and style to be relevant to your audience.

Similarly, Tim Wheatcroft of Allison & Partners pointed out:

It can be a negative if a company abuses Twitter (either on a corporate level, or through a rogue employee), and also, reputations can be damage by third parties talking about an organization in a negative light. However, in the instances where this does happen, it's essential for organizations to be on the front foot and be a part of the conversation. The ostrich approach never succeeds.

A vice president added that simple mistakes damage the effectiveness of Twitter. "I do know that the worst thing anyone can do is to put up a Twitter feed and then ignore it, not customize the page, etc."

Finally, a senior vice president offered an opinion on how her firm has avoided negative outcomes:

We have not encountered a time when Twitter has negatively impacted communication with the intended audience but it is important that we spend a lot of time with our clients before launching Twitter campaigns to strategically think through the goals of using Twitter, the messages that will be communicated and our collective expectations.

RQ2: How Are Public Relations Executives Using Twitter In Contemporary Public Relations Campaigns, And What Are The Costs Related To The application?

Many respondents agree that Twitter is a relatively new, but valuable component in a balanced communications campaign. Numerous respondents used the word "integrated" to describe the necessity for a well-rounded social media strategy, and the word "time" to describe the cost of Twitter for a public relations firm. Respondents noted that the time spent researching and cultivating conversations on Twitter is an expense as it relates to the salaries of the individual practitioners performing the duties and the time necessary to build a successful campaign. Thus, a common theme that emerged from the interviews was the tensions between the cost and benefit of Twitter in contemporary public relations campaigns.

Integrated Communications Campaigns

Almost all the respondents pointed out that Twitter is only successful when it is a part of a larger communications strategy. A vice president stated simply, "Twitter has to be part of an integrated communications campaign."   A president also held this view, noting,   "Twitter is merely a tactic in an overall communications effort." Another president agreed: "We use blogging and microblogging as parts of our communications campaigns." Matthew LeVeque of The Rogers Group elaborated on this idea:

First of all, any of these social media/Web 2.0 applications are always approached from a very strategic communication perspective. But, if it is something where it's going to work and it's going to be strategic and it's going to drive the client's organizational goals and the communication goals then we will recommend that they incorporate it into a campaign or include it as part of our new planning activities for them. We utilize Twitter as part of a broader integrated approach. It complements and works in harmony and synergy with other activities whether those are promotional, media, relationship building or grassroots activities. It all works together.

One director expanded the idea even further:

Twitter should be integrated in any communications initiative that wishes to connect with audiences in a highly targeted, authentic and personal way. PR professionals should view Twitter not as a component of a campaign, but as a powerful, new way to build relationships that extends beyond defined time periods or promotion.

Melissa Zandman of Text 100 summed it up by saying, "Twitter alone isn't what we are striving to do with our clients, but along with other social media elements it supports a larger thing we are doing."

Communicating To A Target Audience

Respondents agreed that Twitter offers a new way to communicate with target audiences. A senior vice president pointed out that, "Twitter gives you the ability to react to and promote news and developments in real-time to a targeted group of people." A director agreed, "Twitter should be integrated in any communications initiative that wishes to connect with audiences in a highly targeted, authentic and personal way." A director added that using Twitter will "enable hyper-targeting engagement," and a president continued, "Twitter and other social networking platforms allow you to micro-target communications to communities of interest."

Monetary Cost In Communications Campaigns

Firms differ widely on how they choose to charge clients for Twitter as a component of a campaign. A senior director pointed out that her firm charges monthly for a complete strategy:

We don't do billable hours and we don't really do a la carte pricing either, really how we do it with most client relationships is, here is a problem you are looking to solve through communications, here's what we recommend doing and how much we think you should pay us a month, so social media can be included in there.

A vice president uses a similar pricing structure for her firm, "We bill our clients, so the cost of using Twitter is built into our client contracts. This is an agreed-upon service." A director pointed out that the cost for a client varies depending on the intensity of the campaign. "Costs for client projects involving Twitter vary based on the level of real-time engagement, monitoring and conversation pursued on any given day."

A few respondents commented on the cost of Twitter in relationship to staff time and effort. They described the actual time needed to create a successful Twitter campaign, and how that translated into practitioners' salaries. A manager stated, "For managers and below, people probably spend at least 15 minutes using Twitter a day. In North America, we probably have 100 people. It is a good amount of people really spending some time on it." A senior director added:

It takes a lot of time really. If you are looking at promoting a brand, company or a client, you need to be constantly tracking people, making sure you're covering the right bloggers, reporters, the right influences (analysts or whatever) and then hope that they follow you back.

A senior vice president commented, "Many times we will tweet as an act of goodwill toward a current or prospective client, so the cost incurred is that of our time." A director added, "Twitter and other social media require and investment in research, in learning, in training and in time to manage a client's online presence." Firms are still trying to figure out how to charge for Twitter as a component of a campaign. Whether it

is based on billable hours, monthly fees or an overall campaign fee, Twitter requires a significant amount of practitioner time. A manager pointed out, "A client's budget limits the amount of time we can spend on one platform." A senior vice president closed, "It's almost a full-time job to keep up with everything as a professional communicator."

   RQ3: What Do Public Relations Executives See As The Future of Twitter In These Campaigns?

Numerous respondents admit to being unsure of the path Twitter will take, but many agree that short, instant communications such as microblogging are here to stay. Lynne Doll of The Rogers Group states, "Whether Twitter will continue to be the preferred platform remains to be seen, but the concept is here to stay." A vice president adds, "As long as audiences continue to respond, we'll continue to use it." A director seemed sure that Twitter will endure:

Twitter continues to add layers of features that give individuals and companies new, creative ways to connect with each other. From location-aware functionality that will enable hyper-targeted engagement to enhance video publishing and sharing features, creative marketers will find ways to incorporate the latest evolutions of Twitter if it's relevant to their audience.

A senior vice president agreed, "Twitter will continue to be a tool that we use for our firm for marketing purposes as well as something we recommend to clients as part of an overall social media strategy." Need some sort of transition here to the net quotation.

A president wanted to monitor social media in the future.

We'll continue to evaluate it and use it when it is on-strategy for our clients. We'll also continue to monitor Twitter and other social media as a part of our ongoing reputation management and tracking for our clients.

Three respondents discussed the future of Twitter specifically for their communication campaigns. A director stated, "I think Twitter and other digital platforms have to be imbedded much earlier in the corporate communication/marketing conversation." A senior vice president added:

I think we'll encourage clients to participate and run tweetchats and tweetups. Many of our clients are not consumer-based so we use Twitter as a way to promote them and establish them as thought leaders in a particular industry.

 Tim Wheatcroft of Allison & Partners added:

It's likely that Twitter will become a feature in the majority of our campaigns. It's not a "one size fits all" solution and there are some companies for whom it may not be as relevant, but any organization with a consumer face will likely adopt it.

A Director closed the interview by raising an interesting concept regarding the future of Twitter. "It's more about how people communicate. The theory behind communication and socializing is more important. He also specified that Twitter would be used for "Offers, feedback solicitations, customer service and news snippets."

Finally, Matthew LeVeque of The Rogers Group summed up Twitter by saying, "It's like walking into the world's largest cocktail party," and just like a party, Twitter may not allow you to make a connection with everyone, but it is an opportunity to see and be seen.

Twitter Today And Tomorrow

As Chester and Montgomery (2008) discovered, social networking tools allow public relations professionals to target specific audiences. Respondents agreed that Twitter offers a new kind of micro-targeting in Twitter's searchable environment that other existing tools do not offer. Respondents agree that Twitter is not the only social media tool that allows public relations practitioners to reach their audiences, but the short, instant structure is new and useful. The real-time, one-on-one conversation is unprecedented in social media. The opportunity to instantly connect with an audience and often receive a rapid response offers a new way to communicate.

The nature of Twitter communications provides public relations practitioners with the ability to create a conversation and a relationship with their audience in real-time. Botan and Taylor (2004) discussed the basic definition of public relations as relationship building. While industry professionals use this method to communicate directly with their target audiences as respondents discussed, an unexpected relationship-building opportunity with the media has grown out of the Twitter environment. This connection to the media provides an entrée into the journalism community that public relations professionals lacked in the past. Twitter provides the ability to respond directly to media requests and offer suggestions for articles that put their client's names into the public's eye. As two respondents pointed out, the media community tweets to connect directly with public relations practitioners in a way that email and telephone calls left a gap. Members of the media often ignored cold calls from public relations professionals, or did not seek out their input for stories. Twitter offers an opportunity for the media to reach out directly to public relations practitioners for story ideas and gives practitioners the opportunity to strategically place their clients in articles. At this point, Twitter seems to be the only social media outlet that offers this benefit to the public relations industry.

The ability to communicate one-on-one with groups such as media professionals creates a necessity for companies and organizations to connect in an authentic and transparent manner. Heibert (2004) discussed the need for transparency when communicating with the online community, and respondents provided further insight into how the lack of authenticity on a microblog will damage a reputation. Respondents highlighted the effect of trite, corporate-like speak in the social media arena, and the negative impression it creates for the audience. Respondents concluded that if

organizations or companies choose to utilize Twitter in a communications campaign, transparency and authenticity are paramount.

Maintaining a transparent online image takes time. Respondents pointed out that while Twitter is a free social media tool, it requires constant monitoring and upkeep on the part of the public relations practitioner. Firms often charge clients based on personnel hours needed to create a successful microblog. Whether a client chooses to rely on the firm for the Twitter feed, or chooses to co-tweet with a practitioner, both the client and practitioner must devote a considerable amount of time and thought to make a microblog successful. One respondent strongly urged fellow public relations practitioners not to start a Twitter page for a client unless both could commit to maintain the feed and monitor the conversation. Such a mistake could damage the client's reputation and effect the long-term impression for the audience.

While respondents disagree on whether or not Twitter will remain the chosen platform for microblogging, they agree that microblogging is here to stay. Numerous respondents foresee their firms incorporating Twitter into communications campaigns in the future if they have not already, and respondents who currently incorporate Twitter into a social media strategy foresee Twitter claiming a more significant role in the future.

Relevance of the Current Findings

This study is one of the first to inquire about the public relations applications of Twitter. Insights from public relations professionals offer an in-depth look at the current and future uses of Twitter within the industry. Results from this study provide public relations professionals information regarding how the industry utilizes Twitter in an integrated social media strategy and how those efforts will further develop over time.

Previous research provided a predictive framework that showed the evolution of social media and its mainstreaming into communication campaigns. Public relations executives agree that Twitter, like its predecessors, is a valuable tool if used correctly and integrated into a well-rounded communications strategy.

Limitations

This study was limited by the likelihood that respondents adjusted their responses to protect their firm's reputation or best practices. Some respondents pointed out that they were offering advice based on their opinion of how Twitter functions successfully and not how their firms currently employ the tool. Another significant limitation was the interview recruiting method. Only public relations practitioners who currently use Twitter were invited to respond to my request for respondents. Other public relations professionals may not have responded because they do not use Twitter for their campaigns. This created a sample that does not reflect practices as a whole. Additionally, the small sample size and interpretive nature of in-depth interview research prohibited any reliability testing or generalization. Finally, because the respondents were in executive level positions, many of them admitted that lower level practitioners

utilize Twitter more often than they do. While they encourage the use of microblogs in a communications campaign, they do not usually manage the day-to-day activities. Opinions from lower level professionals might provide a more in-depth understanding of Twitter's uses and how it supports a communications strategy. With more hands-on experience, lower level practitioners may offer a clearer explanation of the value of microblogs in the day-to-day public relations function.

Future Research

This study suggests that Twitter is a valuable tool for public relations professionals, but industry executives point out that they lack measurement tools to prove its success. One respondent mentioned that until someone develops a way to measure Twitter's return on investment, it will be difficult to quantify its value. Future research should expand on this study by developing a way to measure useful information such as the number of times a link is posted or a tweet is re-tweeted. Also, as Twitter itself works to discover a revenue option for the application, researchers may have the option to define success based on revenue.

An experimental study in which three public relations firms publicize the same event or product using Twitter, another social media application such as Facebook, and no social media might provide interesting results on the costs and benefits of using Twitter as opposed to other social media tools.

In addition, future research could replicate this study with lower level public relations practitioners to gain the day-to-day perspective of Twitter. Finally, a study that combines communication theory with the communication methods of social media will help public relations practitioners to understand how these tools define how people communicate and the best way to reach audiences in their own language.

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Appendix A

O'Dwyers Top 50 Public Relations Firms
As of September 1, 2009

1. Edelman
2. Waggener Edstrom
3. APCO Worldwide
4. Ruder Finn Group
5. Text 100
6. Qorvis Communications
7. Schwartz Communications
8. ICR
9. Dan Klores Communications
10. Taylor
11. Gibbs & Soell
12. WeissComm Partners
13. Padilla Speer Beardsley
14. Peppercorn
15. Allison & Partners
16. Capstrat
17. French/West/Vaughan
18. Shift Communications
19. RF/Binder Partners
20. CRT/tanaka
21. 5W Public Relations
22. Coyne PR
23. M Booth & Associates
24. Zeno Group
25. Makovsky & Co.
26. Davies
27. Cooney/Waters Group
28. Kaplow Communications
29. The Hoffman Agency
30. KCSA Strategic Communications
31. Hunter PR
32. S&S PR
33. Widmeyer Communications
34. Cubitt Jacobs & Prosek
35. Bender/Helper Impact
36. Crosby Marketing Communications
37. The Horn Group
38. Lewis Public Relations
39. Raskey Baerlein
40. Gregory FCA Communications
41. Bader RutterPi
42. McNeelly Pigott & Fox
43. Atomic PR
44. Airfoil PR, Inc.
45. Imre Communications
46. Lou Hammond & Associates
47. Linden Alschuler & Kaplan
48. Spark PR
49. Rogers Group
50. Vollmer