

# communiqué



**tech talk** by angelo fernando

## Social media change the rules

Say farewell to top-down and hello to consumer-led communication

Social media offer phenomenal opportunities to marketers—with a few caveats.

While most companies are still getting the hang of online media, along comes something called social media to muddy the waters. The term *social media* is a catchall phrase for everything that the old media is not, and it is where consumer-generated content rules. The audience, whether or not it is made up of “consumers,” takes charge of the content and defines the rules of engagement. It may sound a lot like allowing the inmates to run the asylum, but it also offers

phenomenal opportunities to marketers—with a few caveats.

In August 2006, a crude, albeit funny, animated video of former U.S. Vice President Al Gore started getting a lot of play on YouTube, the social media portal and clearinghouse for amateur and professional video clips. It was a short caricature of Gore lecturing penguins about global warming. Indeed, such fare is commonplace on YouTube, where some 70 million videos are watched every day. But this two-minute clip was of a different pedigree. It poked fun at Gore’s documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and was supposedly the work of a 29-year-old from California. It soon came to light that it was the work of a public relations agency, one of whose clients happened to be ExxonMobil—the kind of company that the movie blamed for global warming. The PR agency got a public shaming, illustrating that this new consumer medium is not for the faint of heart.

Then there is podcasting, another social medium that has truly matured within the past six months. It has shed its

early model (ranting in an MP3 format) to become a business communication strategy that’s conversational, collaborative and highly credible—the 3C format, if you will. It involves opinion makers, journalists, seasoned practitioners and, of course, audiences that interact with one another on a regular basis. That’s right—the audience is very much a part of this new media conversation.

In podcasting, the word *conversation* isn’t used lightly. Unlike blogs, where authors and readers “converse” via comments and TrackBacks (a protocol for communicating between blogs), podcasting gives the audience a true voice. Shel Holtz, ABC, and Neville Hobson, ABC, co-host a twice-weekly conversational PR podcast called “For Immediate Release: The Hobson and Holtz Report” ([www.forimmediaterelease.biz](http://www.forimmediaterelease.biz)) that is so popular that it pulls in listeners from several continents, through a slew of technologies. Holtz and Hobson have a voice line in Europe and the U.S. for listeners to leave comments and suggestions, and another number for voice mail via Skype, the free PC-to-PC phone service. The hosts also encourage listen-



A parody of Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth* made its way to YouTube—but its creators, a PR agency, got a public shaming.

## youtube viewers speak loud and clear

Last year, an ad agency called Agency.com pitched for the Subway sandwich chain account. Because there was a lot of buzz around the value of social media, the agency decided to upload a video to YouTube—a video featuring the making of a client pitch. It was a thinly veiled attempt to impress their prospective client with their knowledge of emerging media, but it backfired. It provoked viewers to chastise the agency in this very public space. Within a few weeks, the agency pulled out of the client pitch.

—A.F.

## about the author

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ers to use an audio comment service that allows someone to send them voice mail directly from the podcast web site or record and e-mail a 5-megabyte audio file from his or her PC. The podcast is recorded by Hobson in the U.K. and Holtz in the U.S.—a feat in itself. It engages listeners in a way that National Public Radio or the BBC has still not come close to.

To say that the audience has a tremendous influence on the content is almost an understatement. On another popular marketing podcast called Jaffe Juice ([www.jaffejuice.com](http://www.jaffejuice.com)) hosted by Joseph Jaffe, the audience tells him exactly what they like and dislike about his show. A former ad agency person who scorns the 30-second TV spot for being disrespectful of its audience, Jaffe is often known to tell his guests that they aren't as important as his listeners. He takes his show on the road when he travels, podcasting from anywhere, whether it's a shopping mall food court or a plane at 30,000 feet.

## Communities communicate!

While all this social media space is being carved out by individuals, corporations have been taking notes. You can tell social networks are going to be the next frontier of marketing by a few bits of recent news. In June 2006, the Interpublic Group, a holding company with several advertising and communication companies in its stable, struck a deal with Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), a popular social networking site with more than 7.5 million members.

## Networks grow social

YouTube, MySpace and Facebook are hogging the social media space. Prior to this, there were social networks such as LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)) and Plaxo ([www.plaxo.com](http://www.plaxo.com)) that paved the way for people to network at a peer-to-peer level, without the help of an enterprise. Today social media refers to an intersection of software, marketing, media, information and entertainment. You could call Flickr (<http://flickr.com>), the photo-sharing site, a social medium. So is Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), the online encyclopedia written and policed by end users.

—A.F.

Facebook happens to be the second most popular social networking site, after YouTube. It is also one of the top 10 most trafficked sites on the Net. Then in July, the WPP Group, another network of agencies, PR companies and interactive marketers, made a sizable investment (US\$2.1 billion) in LiveWorld, which calls itself a “full customer community solution.”

LiveWorld counts MTV, eBay, Intel and Coca-Cola among the clients for which it designs custom community portals and helps manage their community tools such as message boards, blogs, photo albums, webcasts and mobile alerts. To advertising agencies, this kind of involvement is invigorating. “All communities form a culture, even if left to themselves,” LiveWorld explains. “The best of them develop cultures proactively guided to engage [their] members.”

## Beyond content

For communicators, there has never been a greater need to produce much more than content—to set up and nurture communities. It's a new discipline that takes a different branch of creativity and a lot of risk taking. There's always

a new technology to get a handle on for different experiences and different constituencies. Take a simple chat room. If you've ever hung out in one of these virtual spaces, you know that there's etiquette to follow and that some degree of moderation exists amid the creative anarchy. Often there's a live person making sure nothing gets out of hand. If you were to venture into the BMW customer chat room, for instance (<http://bmwboard.com>), people might be discussing water pump leaks and issues unflattering to the brand. But should they be shut out? In the old brand world, such comments would have been heresy, because brand managers controlled the information flow. In the new brand world of social networking, marketers know that allowing customers to initiate conversation is what keeps brands alive.

Can you afford not to keep up? The need to interact with customers and audiences in a truly social way is where much of our communication is headed. But this time, there are no brand guidelines; there is no handbook from the corporate office. Exciting, isn't it? •