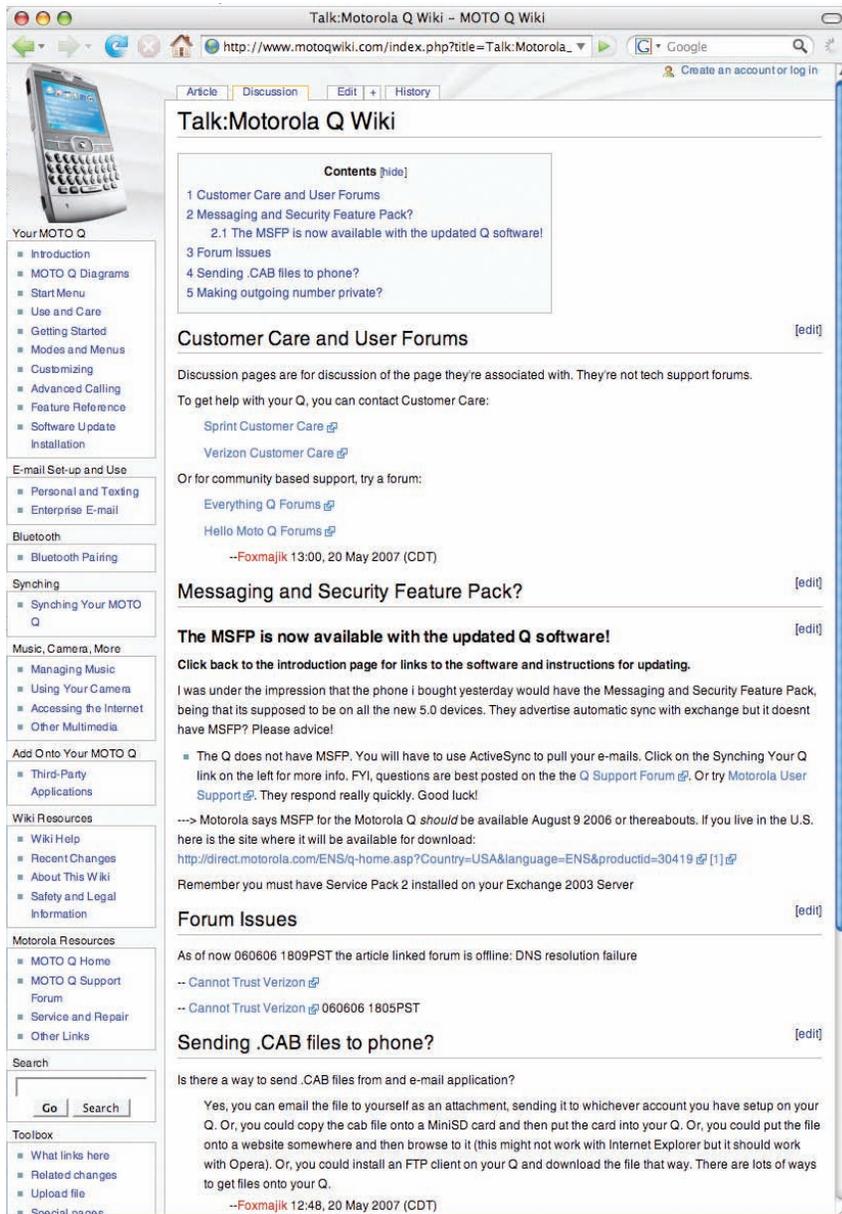


Moving into the



Four vehicles can help you start integrating social media into your internal communication efforts

by Marc Wright

Falling for social media is a bit like falling in love with the boy or girl from the wrong side of town. You've had the first date, you've fallen in love, and now you want to introduce your new passion to the people back home.

But guess what? They're not impressed.

As you present your proposals for blogging and employee forums to your bosses, you imagine the tumbling of communication hierarchies. They, however, see management anarchy. You envision an interconnected workforce; they see an in-house dating agency. It's like introducing a pole dancer to your maiden aunt.

The trouble is that social media just looks too much like fun for it to be a serious business application. Sure, we want conversations in the company, but only if they are on-brand and aligned to the business mission. Yes, we want collaboration, but not on Facebook. The sad truth is that internal communication is the last bastion of feudalism in 21st-century life. Today we can laugh in the face of politicians, ignore the strictures of bureaucrats, and create and destroy celebrities with a single text message, but we are still supposed to kowtow to our employers like serfs at the annual hiring fair.

At a conference on social media in London last June, organized by simply-communicate.com and Ragan Communications, I asked the audience to name the top 10 barriers to introducing social media into their organizations (see "Anti-Social Media," opposite page). Top of

Motorola's MotoQ wiki is designed as a "user guide" written largely by users of the MOTO Q mobile phone—"a place to capture and share the knowledge of the greater community of MOTO Q users," according to the site. Users can, for example, post instructions or suggestions about new applications for the device.

mainstream

the list was the lack of a demonstrable business case. Three-quarters of the audience felt that they could not justify the cost of implementing these new tools. Now, where have we heard that before? Oh, yes, back in the '70s, when a few brave souls had the temerity to propose that PCs should be placed on every desk, with a small printer around the corner.

PCs and printers then represented serious investments in corporate cash. With the relatively low cost of social media today, the barriers to entry have shrunk to barely ankle-high. Internal communication will fall to the pressures of Web 2.0, and social media will become the mainstream inside companies just as it is on the outside.

But it won't be an easy ride. The feudal barons of Compliance, Security and Legality are not going to loosen their grip too easily. But there's hope: I believe there are four gateways to integrating social media into your organization without causing the "anarchy" that management might expect.

Staff directories

Every company has them—those lists of employees in small type, grudgingly revealing each person's title, location, and a telephone number and e-mail address at least a year out of date. But when each of us was originally recruited, we came brandishing a résumé with full details of the mountains we've climbed, the books that changed our lives, the languages we've learned, the awards we've won. All that color and sense of brio lie locked away in the HR archives, and we are now just Brian Smith, Mgr Claims, SB/Unit39. The bald directory on the company intranet reduces us to the level of Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner*, forever objecting "I am not a number, I am a free man!"

Yet hop across the Web fence to Facebook to see us in our full, colorful personalities, telling the world our innermost thoughts and trumpet-

Anti-social media

At the simply-communicate/Ragan Communications conference on social media in London last June, communication managers were asked what they saw to be the top 10 barriers to social media adoption. Their answers were:

The lack of a demonstrable business case	72%
A fear of loss of control/a real loss of control	44%
A fear of transparency (among senior management)	37%
A resistance to change (management and staff)	34%
Not a sufficiently high priority	34%
A fear of misuse	34%
A lack of employee access (language, infrastructure, etc.)	28%
Lack of clarity over implementation (process and technology)	28%
No clear measurement for success	28%
Compliance and regulation	12%

ing our tastes to all from the towers of Web 2.0.

Imagine that you want to set up a virtual team to work on a project, or you are looking for a mentor to help you in your new job, or you want to interview someone about your company's operations in Prague. You can stick a pin in the directory or you can harness the richness of information about people's personalities that social media trumpets on a thousand profile pages.

And the wonderful thing about social media directories is that they are as near to free as you can get in corporate communication. The coding has all been written for a thousand networks before yours, and, of course, it's always up-to-date because users care more about their own profile than any of the other deteriorating information sitting inside your corporation. When the forward-thinking, ever-flexible chaps in IT demur, just point out that 3,000 of the company's employees are already on Facebook and if the IT department doesn't revamp the directory, it will only be a matter of time before the rest of the workforce joins them on sites such as LinkedIn, Ecademy or—heaven forbid—even MySpace.

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of virtual meetings
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are becoming the only
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ambiguity and change.

User group forums

Here's a second idea that will appeal to the sales and marketing functions. Good companies love to listen to their customers. In fact, they welcome criticism for what it truly is: free consultancy. When those customers are other large companies, they really listen—just think about how much BP spends on airlines or Accenture spends on hotels. User groups are really important to companies because they provide feedback on what is going right and what is going wrong with a company's services and products.

The trouble is that running user groups involves arranging a conference and wining and dining your clients only to hear their whinges and complaints. You can imagine how popular these events are with your senior executives. Who wants to be lambasted about problems they don't know about in a forum where those problems cannot be fixed until you get back to the office?

But one irresistible benefit of social media is that you can create an online forum for your company's user groups. Vodafone has created just such a group for its large corporate customers in the U.K. It's a place where customers can share opinions with the company and other customers. If it's an unjustified complaint, then other users will tell them so—in a way that is far more effective than anything you could say. The customer isn't always right, but it might take another customer to tell him so.

Moreover, if there is a buzz growing around a faulty product or poor service, you can identify it earlier and act more quickly. That way the problem can be acknowledged and sorted and your brand improved before the next user group meeting. The technology is simple—it's just a forum. And if you don't start using these tools, there are plenty of unofficial pressure groups that will fill the vacuum and set one up instead.

Video library

This one really is a no-brainer. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of video programs knocking around the average Fortune 500 company. Some are best left buried, but many explain issues or can inform debate, if only people knew where to find them. VHS tapes have long been confined to the rubbish skip of history

while CD-ROMs and DVDs, thanks to their very slimness, have long since disappeared behind drawers or been turned into coasters.

But video compression and the Net were made for each other, and now any video can be digitized and flashed into cyberspace. Which means they can always be found (provided you tag them correctly), and it won't be long before the videos themselves will become searchable, thanks to products such as www.intra.tv. Not only is distribution cheap, but the cost of video production has plummeted, and the number of recording devices available in the average company means that there is usually a lens to catch that significant moment, such as when a target is broken or a customer gives praise.

So look at archiving all the videos on your company server, or find a reputable supplier that will do it for you. Remember that anything on video about your company is capable of ending up on YouTube anyway, so it's better to manage your media assets than let them languish. I predict a time when internal communication departments will run their own company web TV channels. Who knows? They might even run their own daily soaps to keep employees informed through entertainment, the same way that the British radio soap *The Archers* was created to keep farmers up-to-date with best practices.

Project wikis

Thanks to Wikipedia, just about everyone knows what a wiki is, but do you know just how useful wiki software can be for your company?

A wiki is simply a web page that anyone can edit. You can limit it to particular groups or teams, who have to log on using a password to make changes. Wikipedia now has restrictions about who can and cannot update its pages, but this has not stopped it from becoming the most powerful encyclopedia in the world.

Wikis make even more sense inside companies. Here users are far less likely to abuse a wiki by deliberately inserting inaccurate or misleading information. You trust your staff with your company's resources, brand and customers, so why should you treat them as a lunatic fringe just because they are dealing with you online? Wikis allow colleagues to collabo-

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rate in the most efficient manner known to man. You always have access to the very latest version of a document. If you spot errors, you can correct them immediately, and changes can be tracked to individuals so you know who wrote what.

In these days of virtual meetings with video- and teleconferencing and instant messaging, wikis are becoming the only anchor in a sea of ambiguity and change. They are cheap to set up, and no one needs training to use one. The only challenge is to encourage people to use them. This requires you to remove all other forms of written communication—a drastic move for some, but a wiki will only really benefit your organization if everyone who should use it *does* use it. For an external example of this, look at the Motorola Q Wiki (www.motoqwiki.com), an online manual for a mobile phone that is updated by users.

For an example closer to home, I am using a wiki to assemble the next edition of the *Gower Handbook of Internal Communication*. All contributors to the handbook post their contributions to the wiki, where they can be reviewed and edited by their peers. Yet I constantly get e-mails from contributors with attached Word documents of their chapter, or requests to know what someone else has written. I point them politely toward the wiki and encourage them to serve themselves. Gradually, more and more are doing just that.

Return on investment

Staff directories, user group forums, video libraries and wikis are the four easiest ways to integrate social media into your organization. Employee forums, better internal search engines, instant messaging, video-enabled VoIP (voice over Internet protocol), folksonomies (taxonomy systems created by users), RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds and Web-enabled widgets will all follow in time. As people experience the benefits of social media in their lives outside the organization, the more they will demand the same features inside.

As for making the business case, don't be

too concerned. It's all just code and data, and it's getting cheaper every day. Forget about making cases for the return on investment—wait a couple of months and the investment will be negligible, if not zero, while the benefits are only just starting to be measured. •

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