

# SOCIAL MEDIA TAKE SHAPE IN INDIA

A young, tech-savvy workforce is just one factor in the country's drive toward new media

by Anisu K. Verghese

## bringing social media into the mix

What can communicators do to help their organizations manage the evolving social media trend? Here are a few recommendations.

- 1. Understand** your employees' social media aspirations and strengths. In Ernst and Young's 2009 Global Talent Management Survey, 31 percent of respondents said either that their companies lacked accurate employee information or that they themselves knew nothing about corporate employee data programs.
- 2. Demonstrate** value and impact. Put a number on participation and each social media contribution made within the organization. Weigh it against the backdrop of investment and output.
- 3. Gauge** your organization's social media readiness. Leadership and IT decision makers may want to implement social media solutions without considering the organization's culture and comfort levels of employees.

—A.K.V.

Social media are gathering strength in India. According to Nielsen, social media use in the country is growing at a robust 100 percent annually, and by 2012, an estimated 45 million people in India will be users of social media. Already, Indians spend more time using social networking sites than personal email, and in 2010 Facebook overtook Orkut as the country's most popular social networking site.

However, with organizations in India struggling to cope with social media's rising popularity, higher expectations for connectivity and their inability to restrict young staffers' demands, a number of opportunities exist for internal communicators, specifically by using social media to help improve employee engagement and collaboration.

## Tapping social media's power

Social media adoption in India has been slowed somewhat due to the fact that English, the primary language used on most social networking sites, competes with 21 other official languages in the country. What's



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India's young workforce—half the population is younger than 25—is among the drivers helping to propel social media into the mainstream.

more, Internet penetration is as low as 8 percent in some areas, compared with a world average of 30 percent, 65 percent in Europe and 78 percent in North America. Lack of connectivity and infrastructure also stifle Internet usage—only 40 million of India's mobile subscriber base of 791 million can access the Internet via their devices.

Yet India has the world's youngest workforce—half the population is younger than 25. That means that Indian companies need to relate to that young talent in order to drive their organizations forward. Research from Ma Foi Randstad

Workmonitor indicates that Indian employees now review an organization's work culture on social networks before considering job offers. And according to a recent *Economic Times-Synovate* survey, 73 percent of respondents felt their company could perform better if it had younger leaders. As a result, many organizations are beginning to use new media tools internally and externally to cope with stakeholders' expectations of transparency and speedy response time.

Deploying effective social media strategies carries numerous challenges and opportuni-

## At Sapient, inclusive strategies drive adoption

As a global business, marketing and technology services company with 35 offices and 9,500 employees, Sapient leverages social media for some of the world's best-known brands. Internally, the company has embraced social media as a way to foster communication and community across teams, time zones and locations. In fact, the winner of "Innovation Everywhere," a companywide initiative to surface great work its employees do for clients, was a creative team that leveraged an online service called Kluster to transform the product development and creative process for distributed teams. The innovation enabled teams across locations to collaborate more efficiently. (Sapient now uses Vox, a collaboration and social business platform, which uses social media tools.)

**Tapping employees' collective energy:** At Sapient, co-creation of content is a successful strategy. When Sapient turned 20 last year, a monthlong celebration culminated in a companywide, rolling celebration of parties and crowd-sourced content. The initiative

improved engagement and connected all employees with Sapient's purpose and vision. Recently, Sapient in India invited people to co-create a representation of its dress code through a crowd-sourced video. The video initiated a dialogue and generated interest both internally as well as externally, when it was posted on the Sapient India Facebook page.

**Making people central to communication:** Another approach Sapient practices is making employees the voice of its communication. In one example, the company conducted a reality show-like internal talent hunt in which employees could vote using social media to choose the face of internal communication in India, improving reach and providing greater credibility to messages.

**Engagement is everyone's responsibility:** By decentralizing budgets and allowing ownership at the office level, Sapient has driven accountability for employee engagement. A unique Office Lead (a respected local leader selected democratically) model ensures that employees leverage local networks and com-

munities to build a groundswell of connection and commitment. Events ranging from wellness initiatives to charity efforts are crafted and run locally by a pool of volunteers drawn from various teams, leveraging the internal portal as well as the internal Vox social business platform to share updates and garner interest. Tapping the internal social network, which extends to employees' families, serves to manage expectations, get real-time feedback and keep people energized.

**Leadership models the way:** To encourage social media participation and dialogue, company leaders have begun blogging on everyday topics that employees can relate to. Hosted on the internal business networking platform, Vox, these blogs receive a large number of comments and views. People are invited to enroll for special interest groups, leverage social media champions within the organization and help shape conversations.

—A.K.V.

ties, and some executives and IT decision makers are seeking ways to manage this growing phenomenon. A 2011 study by *Data Quest*, a leading Indian technology publication, found that only three out of 18 CIOs in India have specific social media policies in place at their organizations. While a majority are in favor of selective social media use for internal communications, few understand the complete benefits and nuances. Among the challenges hampering the adoption of social media are lack of a clear strategy, little awareness of potential benefits, concerns about productivity, fears of information security breaches and the

inability to decode cultural behavior.

To create a collaborative work environment and a sense of ownership, organizations that have made strides in integrating social media with internal communication have been adept at spotting trends in social networking, collaboration and mobile texting. Bharti Airtel, for example, a leading Indian telecom provider, in 2009 moved its 20,000-plus employees to a short message service (SMS)-based intranet. In doing so, the company hoped to increase communication and engagement among employees. Since deploying the system, Bharti Airtel reports that the

number of emails sent declined and productivity increased substantially. It also contributed in a "green" way by decreasing the amount of paper used.

Cognizant, which provides IT, consulting and business process outsourcing services, with 70 percent of its employees in India, has a corporate version of Facebook called C2 (Cognizant 2.0) that includes Twitter feeds, employee-written blogs and chat. Building the intra-social networking platform led to a 15 percent improvement in project productivity and a 70 percent reduction in defects. It also enhanced the employee satisfaction levels of those who were on the

### about the author

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channel vis-à-vis those who weren't on it.

## Communicators as coaches

In a 2008 IABC study on generational communication differences around the globe, younger staff in India said they preferred electronic messages and channels over face-to-face interactions. They also said they were more likely to trust their employers. Such insights can help internal communicators lead the way in integrating social media throughout the organization. Combined with their proximity as partners of change and shapers of culture, communicators are well positioned to influence outcomes. However, they need to be seen as leaders who can interpret trends and understand not just social media's talking points but also the underlying attitudes around the tools. Their role as coaches and facilitators of change is vital to building robust social media practices, empowering employees and bridging the gap between leaders and staff.

To better integrate social media in internal communication, organizations need to get familiar with cultural nuances, have leaders participate actively, involve employees in decision making and demonstrate value. Organizations should select strategies that take into account their company's culture, technical requirements and needs. •

# WHEN NUMBERS AREN'T ENOUGH

Japan's tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster offer critical lessons for crisis communicators

by Gil Chavez

U ntil 11 March, most people in Japan had never heard of a sievert, let alone knew that it was a measure of radiation exposure. Many had never given much thought to all the automation that makes the country, particularly Tokyo, run: the escalators and elevators, the trains and subways and their brightly lit stations, the countless air-conditioning units and vending machines. All that changed at 2:46 p.m., when a 9.0 magnitude earthquake triggered a tsunami that reached as high as 40 meters along the northeastern coast of Japan, crippling the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power complex, and leading to a massive release of radiation and the meltdown of three reactor cores there.

As the crisis unfolded, it became evident that Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), the plant operator, was struggling with logistically and technically complex problems that were beyond its resources. It also became clear that its communication team was struggling to explain the issues and how TEPCO planned to

address them. TEPCO merely provided information and let the facts speak for themselves. This resulted in long, meandering press conferences in which reporters struggled to make sense of the data and find a cohesive narrative.

"TEPCO, like many Japanese companies, is conservative," says Kaz Amemiya, president of Crossmedia Communications, in Tokyo. "It was not proactive in preparing its crisis communications."

TEPCO relied on industry terms and numbers to explain the situation, but this left audiences bewildered and confused. Crises force corporations to speak directly to audiences that have little understanding of their business, and TEPCO was clearly speaking a language few outside the nuclear power industry understood. Technology-focused, engineering-driven organizations rarely have to explain how they operate to audiences outside their industry. TEPCO's opaque explanations were compounded by a dizzying number of experts who paraded across television screens throughout Japan, shedding little light on the crisis.

"Not only TEPCO, but also experts on TV programs used too much technical jargon," says Amemiya. "Sometimes they seemed intoxicated with such words, and this fanned fear."

Although crisis communication and investor relations both involve messaging and numbers, crisis communication tends to focus on messages at the expense of numbers. This is a common mistake that weakens the entire effort. Investor relations have, at least, common rules and regulations regarding how numbers are developed. Audiences, too, have a shared knowledge of the process. In crisis communication, numbers have a wider scope of interpretation and have to be understood by audiences with little technical background or interest in the business. Retaining credibility and control over these numbers is crucial to the crisis communication effort.

TEPCO's reluctance to put information within an understandable context and narrative undermined its credibility and led many to question whether it was trying to obscure the situa-