

Navigating a digital ecosystem

Sharing responsibility for a brand's digital comms brings an agency closer to its clients

With new roles such as community manager and director of social media on the job boards, respect and recognition for digital PR expertise is growing in client organisations. But type into Google 'Who owns social media?' and you get 401,000 results. That is much too much attention and energy wasted on a question phrased as a meta bun fight. I am more excited by the new ways we share information and collaboratively grow expertise.

Clients have always looked to agencies for creativity. Now we are also their technology scouts and beta testers. When I map the skills needed for social, I visualise a team that backs up the user-facing community managers (CMs). Of course, there's a leader of the overall brand strategy. Plus, you need people on the lookout for innovations in technology and social platforms with a passion for trying new applications.

And, in the wings, full-service teams will have trained people and put crisis scenario plans in place should there be an issue in the real world that starts to bubble up online. At H&K, we perform all these roles for clients. We also help them staff those roles themselves. It is our own brand of interoperability.

I run workshops and training programmes for clients who want to get hands-on with social or need to fast-track their digital confidence. It's a fun way to transfer knowledge and geek out together. Given the new skill sets needed, H&K has been creating bespoke programmes for community managers on the brand side.

Smart clients appoint CMs who naturally match the values and personality of the brand they will represent. Our job is to infuse them with our tips and best practice examples. Sharing, collaborating, linking — these web 2.0 buzz words are social characteristics that also apply to real life relationships.



Our agency is organised by sectors. Like our clients, we map industry trends and track competitor brands. People like me, who work more broadly across the sectors, cross-pollinate what we learn from talking directly with the technology platform owners. Being a digital bumblebee for our clients is a vital part of the ecosystem, but is a role that does not exist in a more traditional PR agency. And those skills help when clients need us to navigate across internal departments with them as digital programmes erode old silos.

Recently a major brand was rocked by unprecedented levels of negative consumer reaction to a new product launch in the US. Angry consumers took their complaints public on blogs, microblogs, Facebook and forums. H&K was called in by the EMEA client who knew this issue would travel due to the borderless nature of digital communication. Our London office managed an Issue Tracking & Analysis programme in 15 countries using a combination of online listening applications to uncover the real problem consumers were experiencing.

We then worked shoulder to shoulder with the PR department, the marketing department and customer service to address and solve the issue. We didn't just do message crafting and media and blogger relations. We advised on packaging, new product launch strategies and call centre scripts. Our success was assured by defining what the heart of brand stood for and then making sure all of the team members and all of the action steps aligned with those beliefs.

Taking the brands we represent personally is in our DNA at H&K. Our CEO, COO and head of sustainability all came from senior positions on the brand side. This has never been more relevant as it is now in the age of social communication.

Candace Kuss is the director of planning and interactive strategy at Hill & Knowlton

Views in brief

What's the best brand PR campaign you've seen on Facebook?

My vote for the best Facebook campaign is a toss-up between Burger King Sacrifice and IKEA Facebook Showroom. These ideas worked so well because they incorporated the ways people actually interact on the platform.

How can in-house PR people encourage people from all departments to get involved with a company's digital strategy?

Recognition and rewards are key to encouraging any kind of good behaviour, so top management must publicly value staff involvement. I'd advise in-house PROs to go on a scouting expedition to uncover which people in the different departments are already fans of web 2 platforms.