

Social media require 'Community Relations 2.0'

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The rise of social media and real-time advocacy have re-written the community outreach rules companies followed for decades. But many American firms are dragging their feet as they approach "Community Relations 2.0," Boston College researchers report in the November issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

Gone are the days when controversial projects were rolled out strictly along the corporate timeline. A worker's blog rant unveiled major problems with a multi-billion dollar Kaiser Permanente IT initiative, putting the company in the spotlight and on the defensive.

Today, a disgruntled customer can take the world stage, as did a frustrated cable subscriber who videotaped a Comcast repairman snoozing on the couch and broadcast the now infamous nap across the world via the Internet.

[Social media](#) such as Facebook, MySpace, [Twitter](#) and YouTube, as well as tens of thousands of blogs and wikis have exponentially increased the speed of formation of these communities and magnified their impact and reach, report Carroll School of Management professors Gerald C. Kane, Robert G. Fichman and John Gallagher and co-author John Glaser, the CIO of Partners HealthCare.

"These new social media tools let people organize extremely quickly around any issue or event that inspires them," said co-author Kane, an assistant professor of information systems at BC. "Within hours, these

virtual communities can grow to hundreds of thousands, potentially reaching millions more in short order. Companies and organizations caught unprepared can find themselves in a media firestorm, just ask companies like Domino's Pizza, Amazon.com, Comcast, and many others have."

These online communities form quickly, according to the researchers, and can disperse just as fast. Their leadership can change often. Yet mobile platforms - from cell phones to PDAs to laptops - keep members on the alert, ready to push the agenda or spring into action. These communities vary widely in purpose, membership and tone - from friendly and collaborative to openly hostile. The same tools have also played central roles in recent international events, such as the 2008 Mumbai Terror Attacks and the 2009 Iranian election protests.

But for companies in this brave new Community Relations 2.0 world, executives must know that these real-time communities differ from their online predecessors - such as listservs and message boards - in critical ways, namely:

- Deep relationships form quickly online and information can be dispersed without delay.
- Rapid organization allows these communities to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in a few hours.
- Knowledge creation and synthesis take place in a far more deliberate fashion.
- Information filtering tools like search, ratings and keywords allow people to identify information that is important to them and then act accordingly.

Companies need to understand these new social media - their benefits as well as their risks - and devote strategic resources to engage these communities in genuine discussions. For example, many physicians from

Partners HealthCare are active on Sermo, an independently operated network for physicians, and more than 3,500 employees have joined an informal and unofficial Partners community on Facebook. Many patients belong to the social network PatientsLikeMe. For Partners, these online communities represent strategic opportunities to interact with stakeholders on issues of common interest.

"Whether or not managers, leaders, or politicians even know the difference between Wikipedia, Facebook, or Twitter, they need to begin learning how to monitor and respond quickly to trends in these social media communities," Kane said. "Doing so, they may not only prevent the spread of damaging information, but they may also find valuable partners in their organization's mission. Companies like Dell, Starbucks and Kaiser-Permanente have moved beyond purely reactive strategies to proactively reach out to customers as an important resource for customer service, marketing, and new product development."

Source: Boston College ([news](#) : [web](#))

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