

Can You See the Writing on My Wall?

A Content Analysis of the Fortune 50's Facebook Social Networking Sites

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Introduction

According to the Facebook website (as of March 9), there were more than 175 million active users. More than half of Facebook users are outside of college. The fastest growing demographic is 30 years and older. More than 3 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (worldwide). More than 18 million users update their status at least once each day. More than 4 million users become fans of pages each day. Weber Shandwick and KRC research (2007) surveyed Fortune 2000 companies and found 69 percent currently used social networking sites, while 37 percent planned to use more of them over the next five years. Similarly, social media, such as Facebook, are not only becoming commonplace in large corporations and nonprofits, but are also frequently utilized by journalists, thereby demonstrating its importance in public relations (Melcrum, 2007; Nursing Standard, 2007; Poytner Institute, 2008).

Methodology

A content analysis was conducted between February 21, 2009 and March 7, 2009. The Facebook pages (N=55) of the 2008 Fortune 50 were coded. Disclaimer: Some companies have died (Lehman Bros.) and others have been bought out by other companies (Wachovia by Wells Fargo). A criterion for inclusion was the member page and/or fan page had to have at least 100 members or fans. Regardless if the site was for members or fans, the one with the most was coded.

The following Fortune 50 companies did not qualify: ConocoPhillips (#5), Berkshire Hathaway (#11), American International Group (#13), Valero Energy (#16), Cardinal Health (#19), CVS Caremark (#24), AmeriSource Bergen (#28), Wellpoint (#33), Wachovia (#38), Dow Chemical (#43). While all these sites had groups, they were typically internship, or "conversation on" groups, etc. In addition, some sites linked to the brands within the company such as CVS Caremark rather than the corporation itself. Fifty-two (94.5%) out of 55 sites were positive. Twenty-seven sites were member sites and 28 were fans sites.

Top six sites in terms of members/fans:

1. Target (#31): 191,071
2. Verizon (#17): 154,420
3. Microsoft (#44): 68,408
4. Ford (#7): 25,106
5. Dell (#34): 24,757

6. Costco (#29): 19,459

Only one site, Procter & Gamble, had a disclaimer about the content on the site. The majority of the sites did not have any recent news posted (80%) or a minifeed (76%), indicating a lack of activity on the site.

Wall Posts

A wall post is a blurb that can be posted by anyone visiting the site and may be posted by a current employee, a former employee, a fan, a potential job applicant, a consumer having an issue with a product, a headhunter for the competition, or someone seeking more information, such as a journalist. The wall post can be publicly viewed by anyone visiting the site and the administrator of the site can remove the wall post. Regarding wall posts, Verizon had the most (1,620) followed by IBM (469). The last 40 wall posts were also coded for positive, negative, and neutral tone. Ford had the highest number of positive wall posts (40), followed closely by General Electric (39), and Chevron (38).

Discussion boards

Similar to a traditional web discussion board, member and fan pages also have discussion boards where anyone can post and reply. Microsoft dominated the other companies with 1,097 discussion board topics, followed by Target (206) and Verizon (158). Discussion board topics may also be deleted, but unlike wall posts, leaves a “discussion board item deleted” note in the empty space.

Social Responsibility

Only 21 percent of sites, whether in the wall or minifeed, had a discussion or mention of any area of corporate social responsibility, indicating corporations are not taking advantage of Facebook as a medium for CSR message dissemination.

Conclusion

Overall, most companies in the Fortune 50 are taking advantage of the opportunities of Facebook, but not utilizing this medium to its fullest extent. Some sites have a strong fan base such as Ford, and others such as Dell and Microsoft respond to customer issues and offer product deals on their Facebook page. But, these companies are more exceptions to the rule. In fact, in many cases, when customers had product complaints, there was a lack of response on the sites. While some corporations posted news releases and mission statements, most sites are not using the site to disseminate news and information about the organization, especially in terms of corporate social responsibility. AT&T did have a “work with me” section with job postings for potential employees. Companies should also spend more time developing and maintaining employee sites on Facebook. Also, few organizations had links to YouTube or videos posted on the site. Finally, there needs to be more in terms of engagement and giving reasons for members or fans to go back and revisit the site.