



## **Social Media + Marketing: How Changing Boundaries Are Leading To New Forms Of Collaboration Within And Across Organizational Structures**

*As social media permeates all parts of modern work culture, corporate communications and marketing are merging in new ways. Rather than being treated as an isolated mélange, the blending happening here carries important lessons for every part of the organization.*

Boundaries in the business world used to mean bright lines between corporate functions and clear channels of communication across divisions. Then, seemingly overnight, everyone “got social” in their work. Not only was information flowing in new ways internally, but external customers began to expect new levels of integration between groups.

They also expected the businesses and vendors they supported to have more of an active personality. Companies had to be known, liked, and trusted to make sales, showing up as a social media friend and being present in new ways. But, as marketing departments adapted to their new status as more of a social presence in customers’ lives, corporate communications groups found themselves more and more involved in sales messaging and positioning for the firm.

The result was a codependent relationship that, in many organizations, obliterated old delineations between groups and required new structures for information flow. Here, these new collaboration and organization structures will be examined, with an emphasis on the lessons useful to the whole organization.

### **A new partnership, albeit an uneasy one**

Many marketing managers never expected to spend so much time being social. Corporate communication was something they thought they’d outsource – and very few business schools have traditionally emphasized the power good corporate communications have on sales.

Mostly what makes headlines are the gaffes, like the way United Airlines had to backtrack their responses to their overbooking and removal of a passenger this past spring. The initial response came across as cold and cruel, a mad dash to hide behind corporate speak and rules rather than owning the issue and responding in accordance with the persona United had designed for its corporate image. Overnight, marketing had a crisis on their hands as thousands of customers cancelled bookings and the stock price plummeted. In short order, the CEO was on all the major news networks, attempting to placate a raging social media army that wasn’t willing to cut the firm any additional slack.

And yet, when done correctly, corporate communications and marketing can use social media channels to not only enhance the corporate image but also boost the bottom line by attracting more of the right attention and even using social tools to close sales. Key winners in this area include Southwest Airlines, Chobani, and Whole Foods. Southwest consistently maintains one of the highest levels of user satisfaction thanks to their responsive communications, Chobani has been able to leverage interactive social media postings to create an outsize presence on a limited budget, and



Whole Foods has juggled more than 525 social media accounts to create a positive social activist image in conjunction with their core grocery offerings.

### What's working now... and why?

How are the most successful companies, like those mentioned above, making it work? According to a report by *Fast Company*, there are several key principles that separate winning marketing and corporate communications blends from their less successful counterparts.

First, companies where marketing and corporate communications are working well together are firms that are hiring experienced, senior level staff to handle communications roles. Rather than one division being superior to the other, the alignment is built as a true partnership with shared seats in C-level planning meetings.

Next, shared principles of transparency and openness make for success. One factor that has surprised many firms using social media is the sheer speed at which messaging can move and impact sales levels. To keep up, firms need to maximize their own internal social tools, such as Yammer, WhatsApp, or Slack. Firms who do find their teams are 20 to 25% more productive and make far fewer errors, according to research by McKinsey, since they are more informed and less often surprised by emerging conversations about company products, sales campaigns, and customer reactions.

Finally, the most successful firms see senior leadership on board with collaborative social tools. They willingly relinquish old top-down, command-and-control models in favor of open doors and principle-driven practices that can be initiated by any member of the firm at any level. With good modeling of "social done right" in place, there are fewer damaging gaffes and more buy-in from all sides to the company's core messages on both the ethical and sales fronts.

### Key takeaways for the whole organization

Watching these shifts in the marketing and corporate communications space being driven by social media, what can the rest of the organization learn about collaboration and integration?

Other divisions can learn from the professionalism that surrounds the most successful social collaborations. They may be called "social media" and "social tools" but in a business engagement framework, that doesn't translate to "casual" even when the tone seems relaxed and informal. Organizations that are leaders in this area make it very clear that social collaboration tools aren't for idle chit-chat or gossip – they're for solving business problems and passing on business messages.

For example, British Gas brought their engineer teams into the mix by encouraging them to post photos of ongoing maintenance work on social media channels. Not only did these shared "fix it" posts attract high levels of internal collaboration from engineers around the company, but it also earned the firm an industry-wide reputation as a proactive problem solver and innovator. This has helped them attract top talent and make inroads with key clients who have a higher opinion of the firm's capabilities, whereas in the past, letting outside eyes view internal challenges would not have been a part of the organizational structure.



The biggest lesson is to explore what's possible from a professional standpoint when sharing becomes more public and open to outside inputs. While marketing and corporate communications continue their priorities of growing the firm and managing reputation, the rest of the enterprise can work to collaborate more creatively and let down old boundaries in favor of new transparency, less hierarchy, and more autonomy.