



Press Release - 14 March 2007

European survey identifies social software as disruptive communication innovation

Experts see lack of qualified personnel and skills in public relations / Looking for feedback and authenticity

The second pan-European survey to investigate the use of weblogs in professional communication reveals a maturing but also a demanding new communication specialisation. The survey asked practitioners to give their impression on the influence of social software such as blogs or wikis on public relations and communication management. The survey was conducted online in November/December and drew 409 completed responses from 24 countries. The results will be presented at the International EuroBlog Research Symposium 2007 in Ghent, Belgium, by lead researchers Philip Young (University of Sunderland, UK), Swaran Sandhu (University of Lucerne, Switzerland) and Ansgar Zerfass (University of Leipzig, Germany). Results are available for download at www.euroblog2007.org

„We did not expect the field to mature so quickly“, Swaran Sandhu said. “Four out of five participants of the survey read Weblogs regularly, two out of five daily. A year ago Weblogs were spoken about, but they were not integrated into the daily media consumption of communication professionals. Today they seem to be indispensable.”

This finding goes hand in hand with a general agreement among participants that Weblogs and Social Software are revolutionizing the way we communicate (85% agreement). Almost all participants believe the new communication platforms such as Weblogs and Wikis are becoming accepted communications platform in the same way as website (89%). One fifth however see Weblogs as overhyped and not very relevant for their daily operations.

Factors limiting the use of Weblogs or Social Software can be summarized in a lack of demonstrated return on investment, linked to the absence of robust measurement methods, as well as a lack of personnel capacity to handle the new communication challenges.

Ansgar Zerfass said: “Organizations are in a double bind right now. Firstly, they are unsure of the proven bottom line benefits in terms of monetary outcome and clearly measurable results that can legitimate budgets and programmes. Secondly they lack employees with the necessary skills to handle the new communication challenges posed by Social Software. Put bluntly, the key question for organizations is: ‘Where is the beef and who can deliver it to me?’ This is the strongest and most powerful factor holding back the use of Weblogs in organizations.”

But Social Media also offers a tremendous opportunity for a new generation of PR professionals who are savvy with the application of the new communication tools and can also provide convincing arguments that legitimise the usage of this technology. Over the last few months there has been a steady growth in agencies or corporations buying in knowledge, often by recruiting active bloggers with a communication background.

"These trends bring a particular challenge for those who teach communications", says Philip Young, a Euprera board member. "We need to build and strengthen the skills of our graduates in these sought-after fields. We need to find ways of developing hands-on skills and also encourage the reflexive capability needed to recognise trends and act on them."

Weblogs offer three clearly marked opportunities: Organisations engage in environmental scanning, receive feedback from their audience and have the chance to create authentic, personal communicative relationships with their stakeholders, which in turn can lead to faster reaction time to issues in crisis. Half of the participants are using modern technologies like RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to monitor relevant websites and to engage in dialogue. A third does not monitor, usually for budget or technology reasons. The websites attracting the most interest are primarily relevant thematic sites that of course change from organization to organization. Almost half of the participants are engaged in collecting competitive intelligence by monitoring the communication platforms of their competitors, followed by grassroots projects like the free encyclopaedia Wikipedia or citizen journalism.

The study revealed that incorporating Weblogs into the communication strategy is still an unresolved problem for most practitioners (88%). Half of the sample feel it is a challenge to stay in line with corporate guidelines when creating blog content. The survey asked specifically for strategies to engage the blogosphere. Besides monitoring existing sites, communication professionals are interested in building relationships with bloggers (43%). This means that bloggers are partly recognized as "uneven" peers to journalists in their importance.

EuroBlog2007 at a glance

Online survey Nov 5, 2006 - Dec 31, 2006
Participants 409 communication experts from 24 countries
Results www.euroblog2007.org
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