



SURVIVING THE POST-SOCIAL MEDIA APOCALYPSE

How PR can prepare for the end of social media influence



THE END IS NIGH...

Few industries are truly prepared for radical change when it happens. Even so, it is fair to say that the recent history of PR is not exactly distinguished. The effects of this struggle to adapt to major change can be seen all around us – in the SEO, content marketing and digital specialists that now litter the marketing and comms landscape. And of course that is to say nothing of the most disruptive force in recent history.

Ten years ago, we as PR professionals were all perfectly comfortable with the established conduits of print media, TV and radio. We had no idea of the radical shift that social media and digital technology would bring to the profession. The idea that print journalism would suddenly start to fall off a cliff was unthinkable.

That lack of foresight has dogged the PR industry ever since. Defining our value in the social media age and staking out our ground within the marketing mix has been a laborious process. Now though, just as we have clawed back the ground that was lost, PR professionals potentially find themselves on another precipice.



THE END IS NIGH...



While the idea that social media could go out of fashion or that many of the most popular sites could suddenly disappear may seem unthinkable, it is possible to discern the beginnings of another radical change bubbling under the surface.

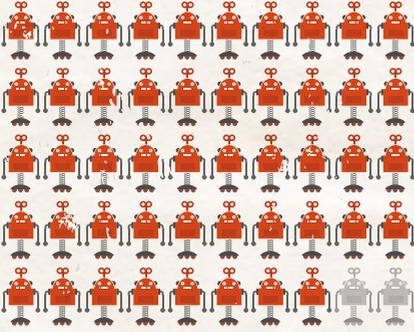
Data from the Pew Research Centre shows that social media user growth is plateauing among almost every age group; Twitter's active users actually declined in the US in 2017; teenagers are either leaving Facebook in droves or are becoming 'Facebook-nevers'; Snapchat's most recent earnings report was described as a "blood bath" by TechCrunch as the company struggles to live up to the hype of its IPO.

Could these struggles chip away at the apparent permanence of the social media giants and raise the prospect of a 'post-social media' age? Indeed, at the niche end of the market new social media sites appear and disappear almost every day – how long is it until the reaper comes knocking for the big boys?

The question then is: how can PR professionals prepare themselves for this apocalyptic future? What happens to all the goodwill, relationships and 'influence' that businesses have built on these platforms if they were to suddenly disappear?

It's time to start thinking about how we can ready ourselves for the social media end times...

THE SOCIAL MEDIA APOCALYPSE



48 MILLION

Bots and spam accounts currently active on Twitter



330,000

People are expected to leave Twitter each month



OF CONSUMERS DON'T WANT A RELATIONSHIP WITH BRANDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA



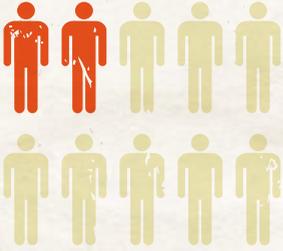
100,000

people search 'how to delete Facebook' each month

45

The number of popular social networking sites that have shut down

THE SOCIAL MEDIA APOCALYPSE



20%

of Brits think social media makes them unhappy

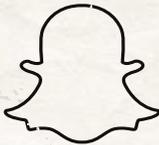


OF B2B BUYERS DON'T USE SOCIAL MEDIA



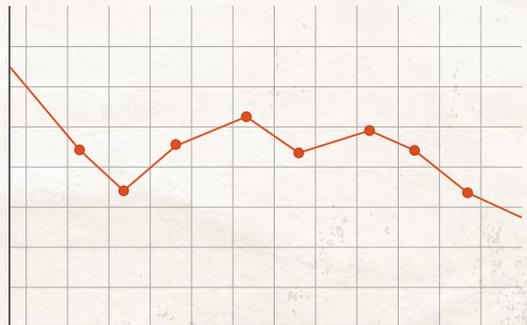
90%

OF GOOGLE+ USERS HAVE NEVER POSTED



\$443 MILLION

The money Snapchat lost in a single quarter last year



3.4%

Average decline in young Facebook users



FOUR STEPS TO PREPARE FOR THE SOCIAL MEDIA APOCALYPSE



1. PREPARE FOR THE UNTHINKABLE

Let's face it, rightly or wrongly, PR lost the social media war.

As a form of public communication, it might have been assumed that social media would have naturally fallen within the orbit of PR departments when the major platforms first hit the mainstream. These platforms were, after all, a way to build two-way relationships with various stakeholders – from investors to employees and customers.

However, for the most part, PR departments were too slow off the mark to stake out their claims for ownership of these channels.

Marketing departments were quick to adopt social media platforms as another channel to push out sales collateral. Early social media measurement also lent itself to marketers as they were able to rapidly show 'ROI' via impressions and engagement figures (regardless of how

much of an oversimplification that seems in hindsight). As a result, social monitoring and management quickly became seen as a natural part of marketers' day-to-day roles – with PR's claim of 'owning relationships' quickly falling by the wayside.

Whether PR professionals would have taken social media down a different, more strategic, path is a moot point at this stage. However, the social media experience should be taken as an object lesson by PRs.

New communication platforms and technologies will emerge in the post-social media age and PR people need to be constantly alert, monitoring the latest trends and seeking out tools that will add value to their existing skills and capabilities. Whatever comes next, PRs cannot afford to be marginalised as they have been in the social media age.

Social credibility is dead

According to recent research by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 33% of global consumers say they don't trust online news, while less than a quarter believe that social media does a good job of separating fact from fiction.

In an era defined by fake news, the reality is that much of the PR benefit originally attributed to social media has now disappeared. The third-party credibility and 'social proof' once offered by having people share stories with their networks no longer cements trust in brands. Instead, Reuters suggests that many consumers are now turning back to print and a handful of established news sites to develop their views. Could this signal the end of 'Digital PR' and a return to more traditional media relations?

2. LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

While it's important that PR professionals are alert to what might come next, they also need to be cautious not to jump on every bandwagon that rolls into town.

Over the last five years we've seen PRs and marketers jump on Pinterest, Google+, Vine, Twitch, Boomerang and more – and as that list shows there are far more social networks that have fallen by the wayside than have achieved meaningful and long-lasting scale. Looking at the data on active users, there are barely 10 platforms that have defined the social media age – and several of those are now considered defunct.

In the post-social media age, it is likely that the same rules will apply – new technologies will arrive and only a few will win out as genuinely important tools for PR professionals.

It will be increasingly important to tread carefully, to trial, and to only commit to the tools that will work best for your audience and your brand. Being an early-adopter will be crucial, but going all in on every new platform for the sake of being first on the scene will only harm the authority and credibility of PR practitioners, and limit the genuinely valuable work that they can do elsewhere.



3. NOBODY WANTS A BBQ WITH A BRAND



Even now with current social media platforms we are seeing people increasingly shy away from brands and the public posting that made the platforms so valuable for PRs and marketers in the first place.

Research has shown that while nearly 60% of people are willing to like or follow a brand on social media, 61% of people will unfollow brands because “the content is no longer relevant”, they “no longer purchase from the brand” or because “the connection was tenuous to begin with”.

Instead people are turning inwards and adopting more private means of communication. They’re creating private WhatsApp groups and increasing their privacy settings on Facebook. Indeed, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger now rank third and fourth out of the social platforms in terms of active users.

Increasingly, people are treating their feeds less like an open house and more like a close-knit family gathering. They don’t want to go to a family BBQ and have people show up and try to sell to them.

This doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. If anything, it’s an opportunity for PR in the post-social media world.

Rather than relying on social recommendations from strangers, people are now returning to recommendations from direct friends and family. And as people reconnect with the value of third party endorsements and truly personal connections, PR professionals should be perfectly placed to take ownership of this shift.

4. DON'T TRUST THE DATA

Facebook has previously described data as the “new oil”, a vital resource that keeps the economy stimulated and that most businesses simply can't survive without.

And they're not wrong. Customer data is a vital asset for any brand, particularly when it comes to marketing and PR.

Of course, the social media age has massively increased the availability of that data for businesses and brands. But we are already starting to see signs that the data generated by communications platforms should be treated with more caution than it currently is.

One of the biggest changes to the social media landscape over the last five years has been a switch from “lifelogging” – reporting an accurate portrayal of day-to-day life – towards “aspirational posting”.

Where once Facebook and Twitter encouraged people to share every aspect of their lives unedited, the new trend is to portray an idealised version. Indeed, newer platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram have built their entire business model on this idea.

As a data source for intentions and aspirational marketing of course this is still vital. On the other hand, when it comes to building genuine customer profiles it is clear to see that this inconsistency in the data could be problematic.

The importance of data analytics will not diminish in the post-social media age, but PRs will need to be prepared to delve deeper into the data to glean the understanding they will require.

Profiling beyond profiles

In recent years, PR people have grown obsessed with social media metrics. From using social data to build audience profiles, through to monitoring the reach of individual pieces of coverage, as PR people, it's hard to remember that accurate measurement still exists outside the realms of social media.

Through advancements in machine-learning-based survey platforms, to eye-tracking and ‘Experience analytics’, there are hundreds of valuable data-driven metrics that PR people should be using to inform their decisions. In the social media age however, these more complex measurement criteria are often ignored in favour of cheaper and more readily-available social media data.

In a post-social media age, brands must look to more unique and interesting sources for customer insights – even if those sources involve much more manual analysis and applied intelligence than simply searching for a hashtag.

CONCLUSION



With social media in a state of flux, and consumer trust online at an all-time low, it leaves us to wonder what the next evolution in communication will be, and how PR professionals can maintain a dialogue with customers in such an unstable period.

Already, radical changes in the technology landscape are starting to affect the role of PR and pose a number of difficult questions for the industry.

How will the growth of automation and chatbots affect the ability of brands to communicate with their customers? Does a renewed focus on privacy make data-driven marketing an inappropriate activity for marketers and PR professionals? Does the rise of fake news mean less trust in media

coverage, or simply a move away from bloggers and low-quality sites and towards an overall higher standard of media relations?

These are the types of questions that PR people must ask themselves in the years ahead. In order to do so however, they must first be aware of the technologies and trends that are – or even could – impact both their roles and the roles of their clients. Only by taking a future-gazing approach, and combining PR with insights from multiple other industries can we prepare for the rapid changes that technology will bring. Whether those changes mean the death of social media or the birth of something entirely new, it is down to us to be informed and prepared, and to ensure that our clients are always one step ahead of the competition.



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