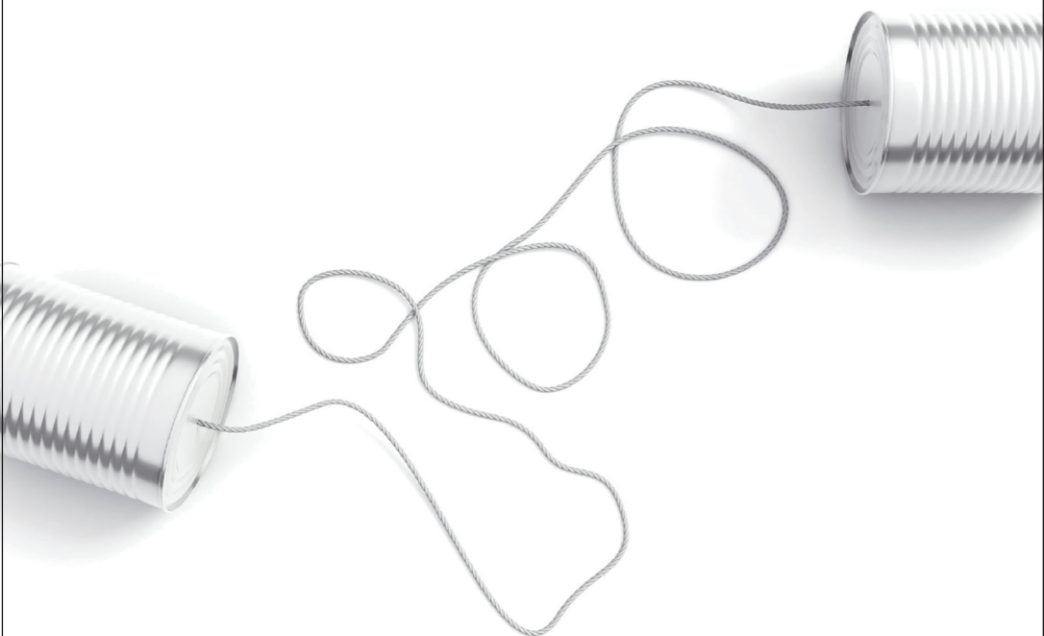


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MEET THE PEOPLE

Why businesses must engage public opinion to
manage and enhance their reputations



James Frayne

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MEET THE PEOPLE

WHY BUSINESSES MUST ENGAGE WITH
PUBLIC OPINION TO MANAGE AND
ENHANCE THEIR REPUTATIONS

JAMES FRAYNE



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CONTENTS

About the Author	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Author's note	ix
Introduction: Meet The People	xi
Chapter One: The Rise of People Power	1
Chapter Two: How Business Resembles Politics	11
Chapter Three: Testing and Targeting	21
Chapter Four: Messages that Move People	51
Chapter Five: Generating Endorsements	77
Chapter Six: Taking the Right Decisions	93
Chapter Seven: Creating Effective Strategy	113
Chapter Eight: Shaping Reputation Online	133
Chapter Nine: Shaping Reputation in the Media	151
Chapter Ten: Shaping Reputation in a Crisis	163
Conclusion: Integrated Communications	175
Appendix: An Advanced Course in Communications	181
References	187
Index	195

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAMES FRAYNE HAS worked at the highest levels of corporate, political, and government communications. He was Director of Communications for a British government department between 2011 and 2012, having previously worked for some of the biggest brands in the world in communications agencies in London and for a number of high-profile political campaigns.

James began his career working for Business for Sterling, the successful campaign against British membership of the European single currency, and he managed the No campaign against the proposed North East Regional Assembly in the 2004 referendum, which won an upset landslide against the government-backed Yes campaign.

He also worked for the think tank Reform – helping launch the Doctors for Reform campaign to change the NHS – and has been campaign director of the TaxPayers’ Alliance. In 2011 the political editor of the *Guardian* described him as being “one of the best Tory-leaning media strategists”.

As a campaign spokesman and analyst, James has appeared widely in broadcast media, including BBC One’s *Breakfast News*, the BBC News Channel, Sky News, Radio 4’s *Today Programme* and *PM Programme*, BBC Radio 5 Live, and on numerous local BBC TV and radio stations and international TV stations.

He has written for *The Spectator*, *Daily Telegraph*, *City A.M.*, the BBC News website, *The Business* magazine, *PR Week*, *CorpComms* magazine, and various blogs, including Conservative Home. The editor of Conservative Home named James’ blog – Campaign War Room – Blog of the Year in 2010.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS BOOK WAS only possible because of the career I have enjoyed so far in communications and that was dependent on help and inspiration I received from friends and colleagues along the way. Some people deserve a particular mention.

Dominic Cummings, now a government adviser, combines a razor sharp intellect with exceptional operational ability, and introduced me to many of the ideas in this book. Nick Herbert MP and George Eustice MP were superb early bosses in the campaign world and Michael Gove MP showed me up close how politicians operate at the highest levels consistently. James Bethell of Westbourne and Tim Allan of Portland brought me into the corporate communications world and provided extremely useful guidance and support. Terry Nelson of FP1 Strategies and Republican consultant Chris LaCivita have provided inspiration from across the pond.

I received a great deal of help in the production of this book. Dr Jamie MacIntosh of the University College London-based Institute for Security & Resilience Studies and Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London provided insightful comments on drafts, as did Piotr Brzezinski. A number of top consultants in the UK and elsewhere were also kind enough to explain their views and approach to issues raised in this book. Myles Hunt and Craig Pearce of Harriman House have been very encouraging and helpful throughout this process.

Finally, I owe more than I can say to my brilliant wife Rachel Wolf – on this project and on everything else – and this book is for her.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I HAVE BEEN working in the worlds of business, politics and government for 15 years, often dealing with confidential and sensitive information. Furthermore, many of the issues I worked on are still live and colleagues are still in place.

For these reasons, I have only explicitly referenced past campaigns and projects where they are officially over, or where my work or my organisation's work are already in the public domain. I have been necessarily obscure or vague about some other work.

The chances are that readers are working in the world of communications themselves and will no doubt understand this and forgive me for it. My first responsibility is to my current and past clients and colleagues.

INTRODUCTION

MEET THE PEOPLE

THE EXPLOSION OF PUBLIC OPINION

THIS IS A book about *people*. Like it or not, a revolution has taken place in communications and democracy has finally arrived. Ordinary people now determine what the world thinks about even the biggest businesses.

The explosive growth of the web, and above all social media, means every minute of the day across the world, people share opinions on what they have bought, the actions of businesses in the public eye, and what they think about issues that concern modern firms, such as taxes and regulation. Out of nowhere, these opinions are dragging businesses into major public conversations that trample on their carefully-constructed brand images.

Sites like Facebook (www.facebook.com) and Twitter (www.twitter.com) are the tip of the iceberg – there is a panoply of other social media channels. Sites like Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk) allow people to rate and review an array of consumer goods, Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) allows people to rate old and new books, and TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com) does the same for hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions.

In the UK, Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com) gives mothers the chance to discuss products and services for their children, Auto Trader

(www.autotrader.co.uk) provides a platform for customer reviews of cars and Beer in the Evening (www.beerinthevening.com) is a site where people rate pubs and bars. Specialist site Money Saving Expert (www.moneysavingexpert.com) provides advice on personal finance, while Honest John (www.honestjohn.co.uk) gives guidance on used cars; both encourage public discussion.

In the US, Angie's List (www.angieslist.com) acts as a clearing house for reviews on businesses providing local services, people discuss their lecturers at Rate My Professors (blog.ratemyprofessors.com) and Cinemascore (www.cinemascore.com) provides data on the public's reaction to film releases that were previously only available to major studios. These sites – and many others – are replacing the established media as the first place people turn to for guidance on where to go and what to buy.

The public now has mass publishing power on an extraordinary scale. Fifteen years ago, when the web started to take off meaningfully, the online world was dominated by early adopters and existing elites. People went on the web to read the news, to view information, and buy goods and services. Now they increasingly use the web to *talk*.

The growth of visible public opinion online is important for the corporate world for three reasons. Firstly, the scale of these online, public conversations is huge. Major public-facing businesses are being discussed constantly by enormous numbers of people. Anyone with a passing interest in a business will come across strong opinions on that business regularly. Those that take the time to do a specific search for views on a business or its sector will be left in no doubt about what people think.

Secondly, the conversations taking place on some businesses are the *only* conversations taking place about them. After all, most firms do not appear daily or even weekly in the mainstream media and most do not run constant, major advertising campaigns. The only influential views on some businesses people may see come from these conversations.

Thirdly – and it is crucial businesses accept this point – contrary to what some in the media believe, people take the views of other people they know, or that appear to be similar to them, seriously. On many issues, people actually *prefer* to hear the views of ordinary consumers rather than those of the established commentators the media themselves believe are insightful.

The democratic forces shaping the image of the corporate world are turning reputation management upside down. Public opinion has not only replaced news as being the most important external force in shaping the ongoing image and reputation of a business, but its power is now so strong that it more than rivals business' own marketing and advertising campaigns in determining how they are perceived.

THE END OF ELITE COMMUNICATIONS

Until very recently, an airline that wanted to shape its reputation might show journalists a fine time in the hope of a positive write up that stressed how good the food was and how nice the staff were. Now, that same airline is dealing with people complaining on Twitter about the nightmare of checking in, that their bags got lost, and that their rivals are better. Dealing with the latter challenge demands a completely different way of operating.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this change. Since its inception in a recognisable form in the 1920s, corporate communications has been a top-down, elite affair. Powerful elites not only owned the platforms of communications – newspapers, radio stations, cinema studios, publishing houses, and, later, TV studios – they generated the content they also marketed. This was a constant period of elite transmission – with the public expected to sit and read, watch, or listen to material created for them.

Writing in *Propaganda*, the classic work of 1928, Edward Bernays, known as the *father of public relations*, was clear about the potential modern mass communications offered:

“The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities... It has been found possible so to mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction... Whatever of social importance is done today, whether in politics, finance, manufacture, agriculture, charity, education, or other fields, must be done with the help of propaganda. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible Government.”¹

Bernays’ was the prevalent view in the decades that followed. Read the seminal works of the post-war corporate communications world – books like David Ogilvy’s *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1963), Tony Schwartz’s *The Responsive Chord* (1974), or Lester Wunderman’s *Being Direct* (1996) – and, brilliant as they are, you will see few references to the public being a competing force in shaping corporate reputation.

In this old world, businesses could reasonably expect the scale of their advertising and marketing to create the image they designed, while competent media relations would protect it. The views of the general public were almost completely hidden. Businesses have always been aware of the ultimate public judgements on their operations through sales figures, but unless they commissioned ongoing opinion research they would have no real sense of what the public thought about them day-to-day.

That is not to say the corporate communications world necessarily looked down on the public, but instead that the views of the public on businesses were irrelevant. No up-and-coming consultant would look to secure favourable comments from their boss by raising questions about what the views of a business’ brand might be in provincial England.

This elite stranglehold over the communications industry began to break down in the 1990s. The growth of competing news outlets (like BSkyB in Britain, for example) was undoubtedly a factor in fracturing the dominance of traditional elites. .

But the real growth in public power came with the development of the web, and above all social media. Since the latter years of the first decade of this century, all of the old assumptions around corporate communications have been swept away.

AN OPINION ISSUE, NOT A WEB ISSUE

What is it that businesses are dealing with here?

In my experience, too many businesses view the explosion of opinion online as being a simple *web issue*. They look at what is being said about them on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the web generally, and instinctively look first to improve their own capabilities on these platforms.

But businesses do not have a simple web issue; they have a *public opinion* issue that manifests itself primarily online. While it would be an exaggeration to say businesses should disregard the fact public conversation happens to take place on the web, they should be thinking *people* first, *technology* second.

This might seem an obvious point, but businesses have to remember that while the culture of the web and social media encourages a certain style and tone from those that engage online, sites like Twitter and Facebook are merely platforms for people to air their opinions – platforms that are not only extremely quick and convenient to use but which almost guarantee people will be heard. The opinions that people make known are exactly the same as those they express to family members at home or their friends on a night out; the web is merely the vehicle.

A business that became skilled on Facebook might make its site look attractive using pictures and video, and find ways of monitoring commentary effectively and updating their page remotely. However, if the general content is weak and the arguments used unpersuasive, this expertise will be wasted.

Above all, businesses need to become experts in public opinion. They must understand what moves people and how different types of people are affected by public debate. They need to understand what affects people's opinions on their business specifically and their area of operation. And they need to remember they are not interacting with rational machines, but with people who are probably sitting on their sofas in a small town somewhere in the middle of the country.

WHY POLITICS PROVIDES THE ANSWERS

In this book, I argue businesses must look to political campaigns for lessons on how to meet the challenges of this new democratic world. As I will explain, great campaigns are expert in shifting public opinion – the fundamental challenge that businesses now face. We are used to hearing that politicians must learn from corporate leaders. In this case, the opposite is true.

Using my own experience working at the top of British politics, together with case studies of past campaigns and interviews with some of the best political consultants in Britain and the United States, I reveal the fundamental skills consultants really focus on when they put together high-profile campaigns.

A huge amount has been written over the last few decades about political campaigns. Of this, much has been behind-the-scenes accounts of famous political battles. Interesting and insightful as many of these accounts have been, the lessons for those interested in replicating the success have been at best implied. Of the minority of books that have looked at campaigning as an art, most have covered campaigning skills quite briefly.

I have gone into detail on the fundamental skills that enable campaigns to move public opinion. These are a mix of pure communications skills designed to affect what people think and do, and operational skills that enable campaigns to reach the public in the first place.

Campaigns are, after all, about action – success depends, in part, on being heard.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

HOW THIS BOOK IS STRUCTURED

In chapters one and two I explain how communications has changed, and why lessons from political campaigns will enable businesses to navigate the new world of emotional, often aggressive, public opinion.

In chapters three through seven I describe the fundamentals of successful campaigns, and how businesses can apply them. Those fundamentals are:

- 1.** The scientific approach to developing and disseminating messages.
- 2.** How cognitive and social sciences have taught us how to make messages appeal on an emotional level.
- 3.** Why endorsements and third parties matter.
- 4.** The importance of strategy.
- 5.** Decision-taking and organisational design.

Chapters eight, nine and ten look at how businesses can turn an understanding of these key principles of campaigning into effective action in the real world, so as to shape their reputations. They look at how businesses should shape their reputations online and in the changing media, as well how to manage regular crises.

In the conclusion I explain what this all means in practice for businesses and how they should reform their communications operations to deal with the challenges they face.

Finally, in the appendix, I set out a sketch curriculum for an Advanced Course in Communications. One of the contentions in this book is

that the communications industry as a whole – and this includes political campaigns as well as those that operate in the corporate world – does not take learning and development sufficiently seriously and largely leaves staff to learn on the job. The growth of the web and social media – and the exposure to the public this brings – demands a more serious approach to communications.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Books that highlight challenges thrown up by change can emphasise threats everywhere at the expense of opportunities. This is not my intention. I happen to believe the growth of the web and the greater role for the public in shaping the reputation of businesses is a good thing.

In my career, I have successfully helped many businesses exploit the opportunities created by the explosion of opinion and their exposure to it. I have helped businesses completely redefine issues surrounding their activities by mobilising ordinary people on their behalf and showing the outside world the public is on their side. There is a strong opportunity for the corporate world here, because businesses that elites in government and the media could once ignore or demonise now have the tools to more than fight back. The web gives them the ability to recruit and mobilise public supporters behind their corporate goals.

But it would be naïve to pretend every business welcomes the changes that have come about as a result of the web and social media. In my experience, they do not. Businesses like to stay in control and minimise surprises; direct exposure to public opinion, even where it offers theoretical opportunities, worries them. For these reasons, I spend time dwelling on the challenges businesses face in this new world, but focus overall on the principles of how businesses should seek to affect public opinion in their favour.

This is not intended to be a simple *how-to* guide on dealing with challenges from social media. While I give specific suggestions for

action online and elsewhere in latter chapters, the bulk of this book focuses on campaign fundamentals. This is because, the more organisations I work with in this new world where public opinion is *all*, the more I believe it is these fundamentals that really matter. Frankly, I believe anyone can learn the specific tactical skills required to navigate the web relatively easily, while the art of public persuasion is another matter entirely.

Some of the principles explained in this book – and therefore the implied lessons – are very simple. That does not make them easy. People that think developing and applying an approach that focuses on public opinion requires minimal change – or that these skills are widespread in corporate communications – are mistaken. Anyone taking a meaningful look at the way most corporate communications teams are structured and the way they engage with the public will see that they are failing to cope with the fresh challenges arising in this new world.

Those businesses that act upon the lessons in this book will have a radically different – and much more successful – approach than those who do not.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RISE OF PEOPLE POWER

HOW THE WEB CHANGED COMMUNICATIONS

IN JANUARY 2013 Matt Corby, an Australian customer of sandwich chain SUBWAY, bought a classic “footlong” sandwich. Suspicious, he decided to measure it. After discovering the sandwich was only eleven inches in length Corby posted the photographic evidence on Facebook. SUBWAY was catapulted into a major brand crisis.

Initially, SUBWAY stood its ground, reasonably arguing “footlong” was a brand name rather than a description of length. It did not work and the issue continued to gather attention and momentum. The *New York Post* sent people out to buy seven footlong sandwiches and four came in undersized.² Inevitably, perhaps, two disgruntled customers threatened legal action because of SUBWAY’s alleged deception. The restaurant finally managed to close the story down when they stripped away all the nuance, expressed regret and gave a firm commitment to meet the footlong standard across the world.³

The crisis developed with a single customer’s negative opinion. His Facebook post was passed on and snowballed until the mainstream media picked it up. Within days SUBWAY had a serious problem on their hands. Ten years ago, the worst case scenario would have been an angry letter from Mr Corby appearing in a small Australian newspaper.

In February 2013, Bill Samuels Jr., the son of the founder of Maker's Mark, announced the firm was going to water down its bourbon to meet a worldwide increase in demand. (Drinks like bourbon cannot just be made to order in the short term – bourbon has to mature.) Samuels announced Maker's Mark was going to reduce the alcohol by volume from 45% to 42%, to make supplies go further. The business assured customers they would not notice the difference.

The response on social media – particularly on Maker's Mark's own Facebook page – was extremely negative. Accusations poured in – the business was no longer committed to quality and did not care about its customers. Within days the leadership decided to reverse their decision, apologising to customers.

What would have happened 15, or even ten, years ago? Some Maker's Mark enthusiasts may have written to the firm to express opposition, but the need to write a letter or pick up the phone means fewer people would have registered their concerns – and those concerns would have taken weeks to filter through.

Even more importantly, only the firm would have seen the complaints. Social media made commenting quick and easy, and made it *public*. That encouraged other, less fanatical, customers to pitch in. Opposition noise came louder and faster than it otherwise would have done and the firm probably had no real option but to back down.⁴

In 2012, when New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg supported a ban on certain sugar-sweetened drinks over 16 ounces, the immediate reaction of many in the soft drinks trade was to form an online campaign to recruit corporate and public support and to shape opinion in their favour. This included a website giving people information about the issue, a Twitter stream and a Facebook page to publicise their case.

By the middle of 2013, with a legal battle over the status of the ban underway, New Yorkers for Beverage Choices claimed over half a million supporters and over 3,700 coalition members. While the campaign has had a presence in the mainstream media, which is clearly

still significant in a city like New York where newspapers and TV really matter, the campaign was able to demonstrate greater visibility and authenticity by publicly mobilising businesses and people online.

THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION ON MODERN BUSINESSES

The stories I include above are just three examples of wider trends taking place in corporate communications. All day, every day, ordinary people take to the web to air their opinions on modern businesses and the issues that affect them – and to share those opinions with the rest of the world. These conversations are so large in scale they are coming to dominate the public’s view of businesses.

At the time of writing it is spring 2013 and I type “Shell Oil” into Twitter. I see the following: comments from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) about Shell’s decision not to drill in the Arctic; unclear but negative comments relating to their tax affairs; references to the Iraq War being about oil; and the odd comment pointing to mainstream media coverage about the company. Those comments are collectively visible to millions.

I type in “British Airways” and see the following: a positive comment about the quality of BA’s food; criticism over delays; a few references to apparently missing baggage; some positive comments about BA’s interaction on Twitter; and some non-specific negative comments about their customer service. It is a mixed bag, with a number of positive comments mixed in with criticism. BA’s own Twitter feed engages with people directly and is polite, lively and helpful.

Next, to Facebook. Here I find a number of groups hostile to Shell. There are a number of groups against their fracking operations, the size of these ranging from a small number of supporters to many hundreds. British Airways generally comes out well on Facebook. Its own Facebook page is attractive and engaging, and people take a positive approach to the airline. There are other Facebook pages that criticise them – one criticises their cabin crew while another criticises them over strikes – although these have small numbers of followers.

Shell and British Airways were chosen at random. They are in very different businesses with their own challenges and the extent of their exposure to consumers also differs. Shell has an extensive network of petrol stations while BA exists purely to serve its vast number of customers. But, despite their differences, both still find themselves being defined by the public.

Similar searches on restaurant chains, banks, transport firms, healthcare providers, hotel chains, travel firms and operators in a wide variety of other sectors reveal businesses being discussed by the public in similar ways. Some businesses are more exposed than others, but an ever-increasing number of firms are talked about regardless of their formal links to consumers.

It is the public – ordinary people from every walk of life – taking part in these conversations. While some conversations are instigated by NGOs and campaigns, they do not account for the bulk of public commentary. As in everyday life, some people have particularly loud or dominant voices in debate, but the type of people involved as participants is wide-ranging.

For many businesses, the challenges arising from the growth of the web are intensified by specific public-facing websites that deal with their area of operation. Businesses that work in the hospitality sector find their products and services discussed in extreme detail on sites like TripAdvisor or Yelp. While they used to rely on a favourable review in a mainstream media outlet, they now find themselves reviewed weekly or daily by demanding members of the public and then ranked based upon their ratings. A restaurant can no longer rely on a decades-long reputation. It has to be good today – or its customers pass public judgement.

Contrast this with how these businesses are reported in the mainstream media – where respect and objectivity are virtually guaranteed. Journalists almost always provide context, even for difficult stories, and the statements businesses provide are given reasonable prominence within the story. Again, while some businesses

do better than others, there is usually an attempt by the media to be reasonable and balanced.

THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC VOICE

We have become used to a world where the web and social media are integral parts of people's daily lives. The fact that ordinary people are taking to Twitter and Facebook and making their opinions heard is no surprise to us. It is amazing how quickly we all become emotionally accustomed to change, getting used to revolution as being the new reality very quickly. But this familiarity should not blind us to the extraordinary change this has on the worlds of reputation management and corporate communications.

The world of corporate communications has been completely changed. In just a few years, we have moved from a position where the public voice was completely unheard, to one where it is now crucial in shaping what the world thinks about businesses. Businesses that have worked for decades under the assumption that advertising and marketing set their image – and media relations and public affairs shaped it – are finding that ordinary people across the world are becoming increasingly important.

The scale of the conversation online is extraordinary and it continues to grow at pace. According to the most recent figures available from UK telecoms regulator Ofcom, three-quarters of British people have broadband internet, half of all British adults use social networking sites at home, and around 40% of people use their mobile phones to access the internet.⁵

In the United States, Pew Research found that 85% of Americans use the internet⁶ and 67% of internet users access social media sites.⁷ Pew also found that 78% of internet users look for online information about a product or service (2010 data) and 37% would themselves rate a product or service using an online rating system (2011 data).⁸

It is clear the actual and potential audiences for all of this opinion are massive and the numbers of people who will actively post their own opinions regularly are extremely significant. The scale of the public conversations around businesses is therefore vast and this cannot but have a major effect on their reputation. While specific websites and social media platforms may come and go, the interaction that comes from the web is now embedded within people's daily lives and this trend towards public commentary on businesses will intensify.

It is important to understand the difference between those that contribute actively to the online conversation and those that watch it. For many, the web is about watching and learning rather than taking part. Businesses must therefore not take false comfort from seeing only small numbers of negative statements about them online or get depressed about the small number of positive comments. They need to remember the numbers of people who will actually see those comments and have their view affected.

It can be tempting for some to think of personal opinions that appear online as being less relevant or credible than those that appear in the mainstream media. After all, many of the opinions aired are eccentric in the extreme or visibly very one-sided and many are made by people with only small numbers of followers.

The reality is, regardless of what some executives might hope, these opinions emphatically do matter. While a single tweet from one person to their 50 followers is insignificant, very significant numbers of people tweeting to their 50 followers is a different matter – with social media, the cumulative effect of public activity is important. A series of tweets from people with small numbers of followers with an amusing or interesting hashtag can see an issue or a business trend on Twitter within an hour, dragging far more people into the conversation.

Also, while some opinions lack credibility, it is wrong to assume the opinions of ordinary people are taken less seriously than those of established journalists. A 2012 survey of global internet users by consumer research specialists Nielsen showed that 70% trust

consumer opinions posted online, compared to 58% that trust editorial content such as newspaper articles. Ads on TV and in magazines were trusted by less than half.⁹ People trust other people like them, and those not seen as self-interested or biased.

OPINION IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

The explosion of opinion on the web, posted there by ordinary people, is game changing for modern businesses. This has been exacerbated by simultaneous changes in the media, which is becoming increasingly opinionated. These changes are occurring in three ways: online news stories now often resemble blogs; reporters themselves are becoming players in the world they used simply to report on; and a very obvious feedback loop now operates between ordinary people and the media via social media and the web.

Newspapers are massively expanding the amount of copy they are putting online and their websites are updated multiple times a day. Many of these stories will never make it to the hard copy of the newspaper and were never intended to. These stories are often lighter on facts, and heavier on opinion, even if that opinion is mostly *implied* opinion from the direction of the story.

For example, a classic online story now is the *sparked fury* story; it seems to be written multiple times a day. In it, a journalist will pick up on a vaguely controversial comment by a politician, senior corporate executive or celebrity and then call around individuals or groups who can give a representative response quote to generate a row. The reporter can then write up a few hundred words on how the well-known person's comments "sparked fury", and then hopefully a few hundred more if the well-known person clarifies their views.

Often, well-known people *will* say remarkable things that should and do spark fury, but often journalists seem to manufacture rows on the most trivial of issues. These are not objective reports but amount to opinionated blog pieces. At the same time, a large number of news

reporters, including those at respected outlets, have used their own Twitter feeds and blogs to air their personal opinions on developing stories.

While such Twitter feeds usually have the disclaimer “Tweets are made in a personal capacity,” this is a complete irrelevance. The journalists are not read because of their innate wisdom, but because they work for well-known publications. Their tweeting clearly blurs the line between objective news and personal opinion, particularly when reporters tweet views on a story online, while narrating it *factually* in print. Some journalists increasingly find themselves in the questionable position of being players in a game they should be objectively reporting on.

Finally, stories increasingly pick up on opinions and comments aired online by ordinary people – turning them into news simply by writing about them. There are regularly news stories on issues like chaos at airports and train stations, almost exclusively based on comments picked up from social media platforms. Twitter comments are regularly fed into news stories online that provide instant reaction to events.

Social media and the mainstream media now operate in a constant feedback loop. In a newsworthy time like a major international product launch, the media will pick up on comments by ordinary people on the product and put them in their stories. More ordinary people see these stories and add their own opinions to them, creating a feedback loop with the potential to cause serious reputational damage to businesses.

The mainstream media is on a journey from news to opinion. New online entrants are joining the established media scene and consciously blur the lines between news and comment – for example, Politico and the Daily Beast. As newspaper budgets shrink, forcing some to close or go online completely, cheap and fast comment will start replacing news that is time-consuming and expensive to generate and report. Opinion will become ever more dominant.

WHAT THE EXPLOSION OF OPINION MEANS IN PRACTICE

The growth of the web and social media is rapidly changing the way corporate communications teams operate. Jon Steinberg, former deputy director of communications for Democrat Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and part of John Kerry's 2004 Presidential campaign, now works as a senior corporate communications consultant. He told me he sees three obvious changes from the growth of the web and social media for businesses:

“First, it's changed where stories come from. For a consumer business, the ability of a Twitter user to initiate a round of stories or a Facebook protest to create negative headlines means that the communications team has much less control over the news flow on their brands.

“Second, it has created new channels for communicating directly to consumers without the filter of the media. A kind of third way between paid and earned media means that brands are able to get messages directly to their consumers and through data analytics, understand much better than ever before what messages will be most effective in driving consumer behaviour. Businesses can communicate without ever dealing with the media.

“Finally, it has accelerated the news cycle to being perpetual. A story can develop from anywhere at anytime. Media handlers have to be equally adept at spotting stories, responding to inquiries and pushing out narratives. At the same time, brands also have to be a bit more thick skinned in understanding that in the social media space, there is less control over brand perception and anyone can be a critic. Developing the judgment to understand what must be responded to and what should be left to lie low is as, if not more, important than writing a snappy sound bite.”¹⁰

Mark Wallace was previously head of media relations at the Institute of Directors, which represents tens of thousands of British businesses, and is now executive editor of the Conservative Home website, one of the most important UK political sites. He agrees the changes have been immense:

“The growth of digital and social media has utterly changed the game for corporate communicators. On every issue, public involvement is now faster, more direct, more intense and better informed.

“This is a liberating experience for communicators, because the power of middle-men in traditional media has been diluted, providing a huge opportunity to speak to audiences directly. But it also ramps up the risks involved – negative news is now guaranteed to get out, and reaction to it can become a firestorm in the space of minutes. The good news is that the old approach of spin, command and control PR and nepotism is dead and buried. The bad news is that PR is now more like juggling cigarette lighters in a fireworks factory. It requires a fundamental change in approach, mentality and skills.”¹¹

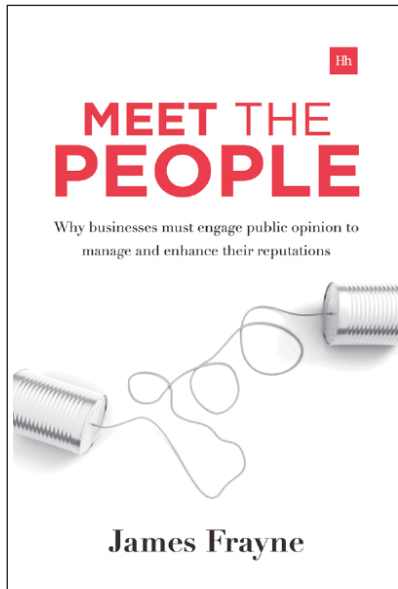
The explosion of opinion online has therefore undoubtedly made life more difficult on a day-to-day basis for corporate communications professionals. It has increased uncertainty and exposed them more regularly to real chaos. However, more insightful professionals recognise that the web opens up new opportunities for businesses to define themselves positively by speaking directly to the public and mobilising them.

The challenge for businesses is therefore in trying to manage uncertainty as far as possible and trying to exploit these new opportunities. They should be looking to political campaigns for inspiration on how best to achieve this.

Meet the People

Why businesses must engage with public opinion to manage and enhance their reputations

James Frayne



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