

How Organizations Use Social Media: Engaging the Public

The research I've done on organizations' use of social media suggests there are three main types of messages that organizations send on social media: informational, community-building, and "action" (promotional & mobilizational) messages.

Each type constitutes a different way of engaging with the intended audience:

- *Informational* messages serve to inform – about the organization's activities or anything of interest to the organization's audience. One-way communication from organization to public. The audience is in the role of learner.
- *Community-building* messages serve to build a relationship with the audience through engaging in dialogue or making a network connection. Two-way communication. Audience is in the role of discussant or connector.
- *Promotional & mobilizational* messages serve to ask the audience to do something for the organization – attend an event, make a donation, engage in a protest, volunteer, or serve as an advocate, etc. One-way mobilizational communication. Audience is in the role of actor.

[bibshow file=I-C-A.bib, format=apa template=av-bibtex-modified]

This framework originated in a small "Cybermetrics" graduate seminar I taught several years ago that involved inductive analyses of nonprofit organizations' messages on Twitter

(working with one PhD student, Kristen Lovejoy), and Facebook (working with another PhD student, I-hsuan Chiu). This collaborative work resulted in two publications that laid out the basic framework (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, Chiu, & Feng, 2011).[bibcite key=Lovejoy2012][bibcite key=Saxton2011b]

Why was this framework innovative or important? Public relations theory had a “relational turn” in the late 1990s, where the focus shifted from an emphasis on strategic one-way communications to building relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).[bibcite key=Broom1997][bibcite key=Hon1999][bibcite key=Kent1998][bibcite key=Kent2002][bibcite key=Ledingham2003][bibcite key=Ledingham1998] These studies were highly influential and helped re-shape the field of public relations to this date. Around the same time they were published, new media began to take off. The effect was that public relations and communication scholars began to focus on ways organizations were employing relationship-building and dialogic strategies in their new media efforts, contrasting these co-creational and dialogic efforts with one-way “informational” communication. In brief, by the time I started this research there was a substantial body of work on the informational and community-building efforts of organizations on new media.

Yet two key things were missing. One, scholars had yet to examine and code the key tool used by organizations on social media – the actual messages, the tweets and Facebook statuses they organizations were sending. Prior social media studies had looked at static profiles and the like. Two, in focusing on informational vs. dialogic communication, scholars had not recognized the considerable *mobilizational* element of organizations’ social media messages. Our study helped build on prior research and fill in both of these gaps. Our

inductive study zeroed in on the messages and revealed the substantial use of tweets as a “call to action” for the organizations’ constituents, whether this was a call for volunteers, for donations, for social action, for retweeting a message, for attending an event or, indeed, for anything where the organization asked its constituents to “do something” for the organization. We labeled these tweets “promotional and mobilizational” messages or, for short, *action* messages.

I think this “I-C-A” (information-community-action) framework is a useful way of examining organizations’ messages, and have continued to use it in my research on nonprofit organizations, including studies of advocacy organizations (Guo & Saxton, 2014),[bibcite key=Guo2014] of the determinants of social media use (Nah & Saxton, 2013),[bibcite key=Nah2013] and of the effectiveness of organizational messages (Waters & Saxton, 2014).[bibcite key=Saxton2014b]

I am also honored that the framework is also finding itself useful by scholars working in other fields, including those working in the health field (Thackeray, Neiger, Burton, & Thackeray, 2013)[bibcite key=Thackeray2013] and political communication (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014).[bibcite key=Xu2014]

If you’re a social media manager and are wondering about the practical significance of this research, it is important to understand the differences between these different messages, and to have an appropriate mix of each type. Informational, mobilizational, and community-building messages each have a different intended audience orientation that should be tailored to the needs of both the audience and the organization. Don’t rely only on the ‘megaphone’ (informational messages), and don’t ‘mobilize’ (action messages) too often. Most effective will be organizations that actively seek to build relationships with their target audience members. Ultimately, the appropriate mix will depend heavily on the organization’s social media strategy – and if

you don't have one, you should.

I've created an [infographic that shows the differences](#):

References

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