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.

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 layed 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 focused 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:
Nonprofits & Twitter

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Information

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Community

These 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.

Action

These 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.

References