

Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies

By Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff

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A Book Review by

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Web 2.0, often referred to as social media, uses World Wide Web technology and web design to promote information sharing and collaboration among users. Where it differs from traditional communication products, including typical corporate web sites and online services, is that the content is to a large degree shaped by the users.

Both the private sector and governments are grappling with how to effectively use these new communication technologies. For governments, the challenge is to squeeze Web 2.0 technology into policy and legislative frameworks that were created for a different era, to manage the paradox between existing reasonable and necessary policy and legislative mandates and the reasonable and growing pressure for the use of social media. For the private sector the challenge is, on the one hand, to ensure that these new technologies are used effectively to attract customers and improve profits. On the other hand, they need to ensure that social networks do not become tools that are used to drive away customers.

Web 2.0 technologies challenge the management of organizational communication in two ways. First, from a management decision-making perspective, they require organizations to put in place new communication decision-making frameworks that run counter to the hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational ones. Second, from a strategic corporate communication perspective, they force organizations to take the emphasis away from typical push-technology communication vehicles and to consider the new interactive tools such as social media blogs and Wikis.

Groundswell, Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies (2008) is a how-to book, the goal of which is to provide private sector companies with the knowledge and tools to manage and benefit from Web 2.0 technologies. Although the book does not specifically address the two issues identified, indirectly it is instructive regarding corporate communication strategies and communication management decision-making.

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff define the groundswell as a “social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations” (2008: 9). Along with the growth in Internet commerce through advertising and sales, they argue that social media create a potent communication force that companies must either master or risk falling victim to.

Regarding the management of communication decision-making, typically large bureaucratic organizations, both public and private, want to control or manage information and communication. Decisions in these organizations can be divided into two types: routine operating decisions and “unstructured” “strategic” ones. The authors propose what is effectively a third category of decision-making: unstructured yet operational, arguing that rigid company hierarchical decision-making processes and structures will not work with social media because they are too cumbersome and slow. The challenge for companies is to create an environment where individual decision-making can occur within the parameters of corporate goal attainment and decision-making.

The authors also suggest that a new approach to strategic corporate communication is required if companies are to benefit from the “groundswell”. They argue that companies need to see potential and existing clients as communities to be built and nurtured rather than just customers who are potential purchasers of goods and services. They maintain that while Web 2.0 media collectively can be considered interactive communication vehicles, corporate communicators must learn to distinguish the components of various social media, each of which has unique strengths. For example, a social network can be used to enhance staffing: Ernst & Young uses Facebook to recruit college graduates. Blogs can be used to stimulate discussions among buyers and online communities.

Specific tried and true communication approaches are still important. For example, the authors argue that because of the complexity of social media and the inherent needs of companies to balance individual and organizational decision-making, strategic communication planning is required before embracing Web 2.0 technologies. Companies need to build a communication strategy based upon the nature of the relationship they want to have with their customers and an understanding of the various applications of the “groundswell.” Reflecting upon the unique and fast-moving aspects of social media, they remind companies that revisions to the plan will be needed frequently.

While the authors do not explore the impact of new social media on government, many of their lessons are applicable. For governments, social media offer the opportunity to build community among employees. The authors note that that Web 2.0 can support an internal communication application in order to help employees “feel empowered, connected and more committed on a day-to-day basis” (216), although they note that it is an objective that is especially difficult to achieve in large organizations. The Government of Canada is a large enterprise employing over 250,000 employees. To encourage collaboration, a corporate Wiki called GCPedia, accessible only to employees of the federal public service, has been built. Constructed as a so-called “skunk-works” project, it has gained considerable legitimacy even though it has raised a number of concerns. A Wiki, of course, provides a forum for the posting of information and the engaging of discussion on common interests. There have been concerns that employee postings will not have gone through the typical hierarchical decision-making process, thus increasing risk in the political environment that surrounds public servants. Similarly, there remain significant policy issues around the management of information, the guarding of privacy, the ensuring of security and the maintenance of Official Language use. Are the existing policy and legislative frameworks that were developed for another time without social media still appropriate?

Groundswell is not an academic treatise. The authors are vice-presidents of a company called Forrester Research and draw heavily from that company’s social marketing research. The work is written in layman’s language and uses multiple case studies to support its arguments. In

general, the book offers useful advice and lessons to practitioners in both the public and private sectors regarding how organizations can re-engineer strategic communication planning and address corporate decision-making processes in order to maximize the potential and unique nature of social media.

About the Reviewer

Toby Fyfe is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa, Canada and an international consultant on public sector communication and governance. He is Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Government Executive* magazine. He has worked as a senior federal public servant with the Government of Canada and as a radio and television producer and director with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. His teaching experience concentrate on the functioning of corporate communications in evolving Westminster public sector organizations, crisis communication management, and video production. Fyfe's writings appear in the *International Journal of Administrative Sciences*, *Canadian Public Administration*, among others.

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