

Social media is not a viable PR strategy

 By [Samantha Hogg](#)

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A teenager receives a note from the back of the class. Do you like me? Tick the box: Yes or No. A sign of intent, to be sure.



Source: www.unsplash.com

It's fanciful to believe that a simple "like" creates a relationship of substance. Yet worldwide, businesses are investing millions of dollars in social media, considering it the ultimate form of brand promotion. Followed only by the elusive word-of-mouth it purports to offer. That sort of 'talkability' generates value that money can't buy.

Except that money is buying it. And, inherent in that transactional relationship is the misnomer that all opinions are equal. They're not. An editor's opinion is revered because it can never be bought. Any opinion worth listening to is not an opinion that can be scripted. Ideas and opinions worth consideration are those that are measured against all information.



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It is a mistake to believe that our social media audiences operate in naïve networks. In a world where nine-year-old children are referencing logos in their virtual experiences, the average connected human is discerning enough to recognise an inauthentic message. The consumer of the future will no longer digest the inedible. The impetus for real is... well, real. Very real. And equally urgent.

Familiarity and saturation are not sound communication strategies. Just because everyone has a social media account it does not mean that they are comprehensively engaged. A legacy example of overwhelming media scale with poor messaging would be heavily censored state-controlled media. Consensus does not a purchase make. Be wary of the allure of the high number, low substance social media value equation.

Strong brands know their value and context, and PR's job is to curate the contextual landscape carefully. It is an invisible art form which sets the stage for a message to be heard, not just said. Being heard is about resonance and editorial context and integrity build that resonance.



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Social media lacks the positive exclusion and gatekeeping function of traditional editorial media platforms and channels. We have gone from a world of one nominated town crier and several soapboxes to an inexhaustive number of soapboxes with millions of town criers. Too many active voices and inputs can swiftly divert your targeted message or campaign on a social media channel, something which is nearly impossible to rebalance due to open comment and sharing policies. And any effort to curtail the runaway train only fuels the fire.

Great PR is about initiating and shaping conversations. Not embellishing them. Many brands adapt to the fallacy that a post or campaign, with significant sharing stats – the notion of going ‘viral’ – has delivered successful outcomes. But viral social media outcomes, are often negative events with notable shock value and very poor brand association. Or posts and campaigns, that are trivially vain in their tone and presentation, with the risk of undoing entrenched brand values.



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Demographics are destiny and this is particularly evident in social media. Any campaign or constructed brand message has a target audience, with age perhaps the most important marker. Social media audiences are skewed toward youth. If you are tasked with delivering a message or campaign that targets more mature demographics, unscrutinised social media assets become wasted time and resources.

Purpose-driven communication is based on deep democratic principles. But safe, open communication relies on the right to respect a differing opinion. The broad social media environment cannot yet withstand the rigour of intellectual debate. The average contributor is more concerned with being right. The toxic word warfare begins. Even with the best intentions, it is too easy to accidentally trip into a narrative that quickly spins out of control. Sophisticated PR skillfully avoids placing the brand message in any form of high-risk environment. And, with stealth efficiency can extract a brand from any such conversation.

What remains an achievable aspiration is to control the intended message and manage any potential misinterpretation thereof. This is markedly different from controlling the conversation. And infinitely more impactful. Social media works on frequency and scale and often lacks the clarity of messaging. It is a constituent part of a communications strategy. Not a viable strategy itself.

As any teenager will tell you. Just because you receive a note doesn't mean you must tick the yes box back, regardless of how flattering such an invite may be. Popularity is not purpose.

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