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Survey: Tennessee Communicators Agree on Social Media's Importance, But Significant Gaps Exist between Potential and Current Benefits

Knoxville, Tenn. – According to a new survey of communications professionals from across Tennessee, social media has solidified its place as an important communications tool for businesses and organizations – but at the same time, significant gaps exist between social media's potential and how well Tennessee businesses and organizations actually are utilizing it to achieve results now.

Interactive Springboard – a joint venture between Tennessee-based Blue Media Boutique, LLC, and Mary Beth West Consulting, LLC – collaborated with Bryant Research this summer to field a survey of Tennessee communications professionals to quantify social media's perceived relevance and benefits to companies and other organizations in the state.

The survey results show that the vast majority of Tennessee communicators (83 percent) believe social media is here to stay, and 90 percent of respondents agree that social media is an important part of any communications plan, with 57 percent expressing a very strong level of agreement.

In addition, 96 percent said social media is changing how organizations communicate with their customers, and 79 percent said it is changing how organizations communicate with their employees.

The vast majority of respondents – also 96 percent – characterized social media as an integral part of crisis communications planning.

In contrast to this high level of general agreement about social media's relevance to organizational communications, however, 68 percent of respondents expressed that "it's hard to know what combination of social media and traditional media to use," and 66 percent expressed difficulty measuring social media results. Fifty-two percent either agreed with or were unsure about how social media can contribute to the bottom line.

"The uncertainty factor about social media is pretty global and should not be perceived as just a 'Tennessee thing,'" said Tori Rose of interactive firm Blue Media Boutique. "For example, a study released in August 2010 of IBM Business Partners – a sophisticated group technology-wise – reported that 'three-quarters say they are uncertain how to apply (social media) as an effective sales tool'."

"Whether a company is large or small or based in Germany or Germantown, integrating social media effectively demands a well-researched, planned and executed approach – which means you need to know your audiences' needs, then sustain a real strategy and action plan," Rose said. "We've observed that for most organizations, getting their arms around that process is the toughest part of the nut to crack."

The survey data also produced a “gap analysis” measuring the difference between what respondents said social media’s importance is toward accomplishing specific results and, in comparison, how well the respondents’ own organizations are using social media to achieve those results themselves.

The gap analysis reflected a negative gap score for every item queried – meaning that Tennessee communications professionals reported that their own organizations are underutilizing or underperforming with social media compared to the importance of using social media for particular needs.

For example, respondents were asked to rank their opinion on a scale of 1 to 7, “How important is using social media for crisis communications?” with 1 meaning “not at all important” and 7 meaning “very important.”

“Respondents rated social media’s importance for crisis communications a 6.2 on the 1 to 7 scale – meaning it’s quite important,” said Rebecca Bryant of Bryant Research, which managed the study’s implementation. “But, when we asked them, ‘How well is your organization using social media for crisis communications?’ with 1 meaning “not well at all” and 7 meaning “very well,” their ratings averaged 4.1.”

“The difference between these two rounded metrics – 6.2 and then 4.1 – resulted in a negative 2.2 gap between the two scores when rounded off – clearly showing there is a lot of room for improvement for Tennessee organizations to use social media effectively in crisis communications,” Bryant said.

According to the survey’s gap scores on other query points, significant performance gaps also exist for incorporating social media into employee training initiatives, using social media to test new product ideas and using social media as a tool for building a strong internal culture.

“Across the board, this study reflects that a significant portion of Tennessee’s professional communicators believe social media holds strong potential for their organizations, but there are hurdles to be overcome with the actual mechanics of managing it,” said Mary Beth West of public relations firm Mary Beth West Consulting, LLC.

“While many companies view social media simply as a conduit for customer-building, there are many other applications of social media to be explored, such as crisis planning, employee team-building and product research, to name some,” West said. “We urge organizations to take a holistic approach and consider the many unconventional ways that social media can help them build relationships with many more audiences than just their own customers.”

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About the Survey Methodology

This census survey of PRSA members from across the state of Tennessee was conducted online from June 16 to Aug. 6, 2010. Members from the following chapters participated in the study: Nashville, Knoxville/Volunteer, Chattanooga/Lookout, Memphis and the Tri-Cities. In addition to the core questions highlighted in this release, each chapter had the option of appending proprietary questions of specific interest to the local membership. The survey achieved an overall response rate of 24 percent and provides unique insight into the opinions of those whose day-to-day responsibilities include managing all manner of media, including social media.

About Interactive Springboard

Interactive Springboard is a joint venture between women-owned firms Blue Media Boutique and Mary Beth West Consulting, LLC, providing an integrated, research-based approach to social media that supports client marketing communications and business objectives. www.interactivespringboard.com

About Blue Media Boutique, LLC

Based in Knoxville, Tenn., Blue Media Boutique provides creative, technology and marketing services, including design, development, animation, video, illustration, branding, print, e-commerce, database, CMS, search optimization, copywriting, promotions, events and campaigns. www.bluediaboutique.com

About Mary Beth West Consulting, LLC

Based in Maryville, Tenn., Mary Beth West Consulting, LLC advances clients' communications, relationships and reputations to meet business and organizational objectives. The firm's services include research strategy, integrated marketing communications campaigns; media, community and employee relations programs; interactive media strategy and program management; crisis preparedness; and special events. www.marybethwest.com

About Bryant Research

Based in Knoxville, Tenn., Bryant Research provides custom, proprietary research to clients across a number of industries. Bryant Research has produced award-winning market research counsel, employing a custom blend of quantitative and qualitative methods to inform clients' marketing communications programs and to facilitate the best business decisions. www.bryant-research.com