

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Embrace the groundswell—or else

Stagnant, buttoned-down intranets are driving employees to communicate using social networks—and disorienting traditional communicators in the process

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about the author

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Did you hear about “Janet,” the person who created an ExxonMobil micro-blog account through the Twitter site, branded it with logos and started communicating about the company—without being sanctioned by the corporate communicators? How many times have you come across a story about a company banning Facebook?

Turns out the rogue ExxonMobil “communicator” (who was found not to be an ExxonMobil employee after all) was only trying to do in the digital space what most employees do in the analog world: tell others about their company. It’s also true that the stagnant, buttoned-down intranets at many organizations are driving employees to Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites. Here they connect and collaborate freely without someone moderating. It’s this bottom-up movement, completely disorienting to traditional communicators, that Forrester analysts Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li (who has since left the company) describe in

Groundswell (Harvard Business School Press, 2008).

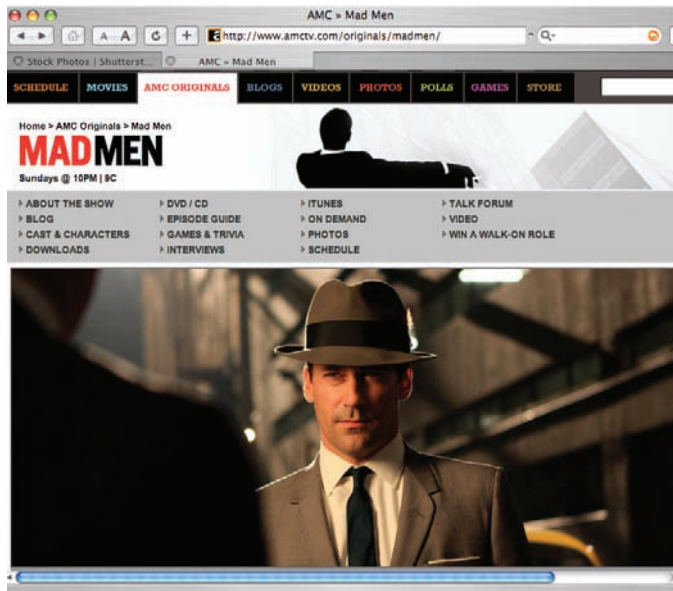
This imbalance of power and the power of networking are something not to be feared but channeled, Bernoff explained when I spoke to him about the purpose of yet another book about social media. “People’s desire to connect has not changed one bit. They used to do it over the back fence. Web 2.0 combined with broadband access means a critical mass can do it now,” he said. In other words, we need to adopt a groundswell mind-set to encourage, listen to and connect with those who use social media tools to create videos that go viral, who spend time answering customers’ questions, and who become the antennae of the organization without any corporate incentive. If we don’t, it’s going to happen anyway. ExxonMobil was blindsided precisely because it did not listen to the groundswell: “We’re happy to provide our positions via our web sites,” the company spokesperson said, suggesting employees could use orthodox—that is, corporate-sanctioned—means

to communicate with the outside world. Meanwhile, it had Twitter take “Janet’s” account out of commission.

In late August, a similar “groundswell crisis” took place, but it did not involve employees. Nine screen characters from the U.S. TV series *Mad Men* started Twittering, but it was not a marketing ploy as you might expect. AMC, the series’ producer, was surprised by fans who had decided to take on this marketing role. They too were silenced by the network. Oh, the irony! Punishing a handful of people for “advertising” a TV series about advertising. That’s the typical knee-jerk reaction taken by many organizations when faced with the groundswell.

Psychic income

But let’s get one thing clear. The groundswell is not all about blog chatter and YouTube videos. The Internet appears to have activated a participation gene in some people. How else to explain why someone going by the name of Judas Rabbi spent time answering more than a



Twittering fans of the AMC original series *Mad Men*—a drama about the glory days of the advertising business—were initially silenced by the cable channel, but AMC later embraced their efforts.

hundred thousand questions in a little over a year on Yahoo Answers? Or why an unpaid “Lego Ambassador” worked so diligently that Lego added US\$300,000 in sales? These examples of altruism are driven by what Bernoff and Li call the need for “psychic income”—something people earn in “love, not money.”

Suddenly, social media tools begin to look less like a fad and more like an economic driver; the simple idea of people helping people translates into customer service dollars, customer loyalty, word-of-mouth marketing and community building on a scale that dwarfs anything a company could

engineer, let alone manage.

To help us understand the dynamics of the groundswell, the authors classify the movement as being made up of six types: Creators, Critics, Collectors, Joiners, Spectators and Inactives. At this moment, Spectators (who merely consume content produced by others) are more than twice the number of Creators. Inactives are the second-largest group, but that number will surely change as Internet and broadband access become more ubiquitous.

Symmetrical participation

What should organizations do to meet this shift in communi-

cation? For a start, companies need an attitude adjustment to recognize “symmetrical participation,” or the capacity for the receiver to also become a sender of information, as Clay Shirky puts it in his book *Here Comes Everybody* (Penguin Press, 2008). In the old media era, information was asymmetrical—from sender to receiver. Given the social media tools available, symmetrical participation means the company should get out of the way.

Groundswell is packed with 25 case studies and lays the groundwork for anyone who plans to leverage this force. Sure, there are the usual obstacles—organizational bottlenecks, low budgets, the need for quick returns, etc. There are many examples of people who didn’t have ideal conditions when they set out to tap into social media. As Bernoff emphasizes, it’s not about the technologies but the people.

In case you’re wondering about the outcome of AMC silencing its fans, there is a happy ending. Its web marketing company, Deep Focus, which had created “fictional content” for other clients, lobbied successfully to have the *Mad Men* Twitter accounts reinstated. AMC’s management may not have factored in such a social media contribution from the groundswell, but they were not afraid to dive in. “Better to embrace the community than negate their efforts,” they said. •

groundswell defined

Book authors Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li define *groundswell* as “a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other instead of from companies.”

forrester’s social technographics® ladder

It classifies people according to how they use technologies. Taken together, the Creators, Critics, Collectors, Joiners, Spectators and Inactives form an ecosystem that creates the groundswell.

groundswell blog

<http://blogs.forrester.com/jgroundswell>