

White Paper

Why Social Media Users Interact with Organizations

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Executive Summary

Social networking sites (SNSs) have changed how organizations and the public interact. While communication scholars have explored many aspects of social media, no published research asks SNS users why they direct message organizations, tag organizations, or post on their public profiles. This paper shares the results of an exploratory survey examining how four previously-studied motivations influence SNS users when they initiate interaction with organizations. These motivations include:

1. socializing
2. entertainment
3. self-status seeking
4. information seeking

Findings show that information seeking is the most powerful factor of the four. Results also show the intensity of these motivations can differ based on method of interaction. These findings can help inform organizations' social media procedures. They also represent a step forward for academic study of SNSs.

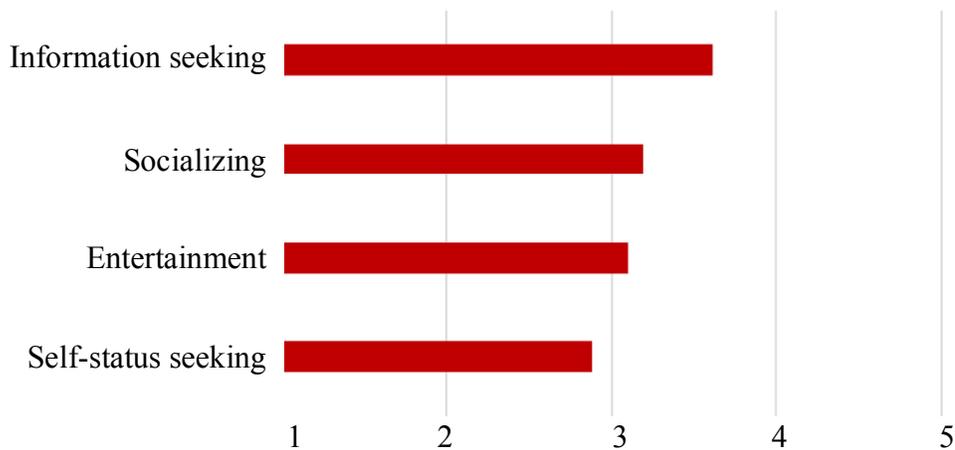
Background

According to Pew (2017), 69 percent of all U.S. adults use at least one SNS. As people increasingly use SNSs to connect, share news, and express themselves, organizational use of these platforms for self-promotion, market research, relationship management, and delivery of services has also grown (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Facebook alone reports 70 million businesses on the platform (Facebook, 2018). Research has shown that businesses' social media messaging can positively impact brand perceptions and customer acquisition (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2017). Because of these opportunities, "a strong presence in social media has become an integral part of [many organizations'] communication

strategy” (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyukcan-Tetik, & Buekeboom, 2015, p. 633). While several studies have examined organizational-public interaction on SNSs, none have specifically looked at what factors are motivating people to tag organizations’ accounts, post on their profiles, or send direct messages. This paper shares the results of a survey designed to fill this gap.

Survey Results

The survey included 196 people who have used an SNS account to direct message an organization’s account, tag an organization’s account, or post on its profile. A majority of respondents had used all three methods. The social media users ranked their level of agreement with a series of statements about what motivated them to post, tag, or direct message. As an example: “I direct message an organization to get useful information about products/services.” The statements came from prior studies investigating motivations behind why Facebook users like corporate accounts (Liu, North, & Li, 2017). Averages of all the responses show information seeking is the strongest motivation for initiating interaction with organizations, followed by socializing, entertainment, and self-status seeking.



1 = Strong Disagreement, 5 = Strong Agreement

Further statistical tests revealed that responses differed by method of interaction. In other words, how someone is reaching out to an organization might indicate what gratification they are looking for.

Direct Messaging

SNS users who direct message an organization are more likely to be seeking information than those who tag or post on a profile.

Tagging

SNS users who tag organizations are more likely to be acting on a desire for increasing self-status than those who direct message or post on profiles.

Posting on a Profile

SNS users who post on public profiles are more likely to be interested in socializing than those who send direct messages. (No significant difference in socializing was found with SNS users who tag organizations.)

Finally, the study looked at whether participants' motivations differed by preferred social media platforms. Only one statistically significant result was found: the information seeking motivation did not significantly vary based on preferred SNSs. People initiate interaction with organizations to get useful information no matter which platforms they are using. More research – possibly with a larger pool of respondents – is needed to draw any conclusions on the other motivations.

Implications

Organizations benefit from having a clearer idea of what SNS users are looking for when they initiate contact. Public relations professionals and social media managers can apply the lessons of this survey by conveying useful information in all responses to customer inquiries – meeting SNS users' chief motivation (at least of the four that were measured). Understanding how those gratifications differ by method of interaction can also help social media managers predict what an SNS user is looking for. For example, survey results suggest tagged mentions may be more likely to reflect an SNS user's efforts to boost self-status than other methods of contact. In this scenario, a social media response that celebrates the tagger might generate more favorable perceptions than a response that simply shares useful information. Likewise, results suggest SNS

users posting on public profiles are more likely to be looking for opportunities to socialize than those who tag or direct message. PR professionals should consider including conversation starters in their responses to public-facing posts when appropriate. In summary, while social media is among the newest game changers in organizational communications, the implications of the study confirm an old PR tenet: listen to your audience and deliver what they're looking for.

Contact

This white paper is part of a graduate project for the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) School of Communication. For more information or to request a copy of the full study, please email study author Sam Petto, a UNO graduate student, at spetto@unomaha.edu.

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