

The new printing press?

Steve Dale discusses the revolutionary impact of the social web on 21st century organisations

We are witnessing an extraordinary growth in user-generated content, whether it is conversations on social networks such as MySpace, Bebo or Facebook, or photos and videos uploaded to websites such as YouTube and Flickr, or comments and opinions published in the 'blogosphere' or 'twitterverse'. It has never been easier to get 'digitally connected', where more often than not the only technology required is a mobile phone.

What some commentators initially referred to as a trend is now being seen more as a revolution, with a potential impact as great as that seen in the 16th century, where the introduction of the printing press made mass production of books possible and created the environment for better educated societies

The phenomenon has been variously labelled as Web 2.0, or social computing, but the term 'social web' is a more accurate description since it invokes the concept of people and relationships that are supported and enabled by technology. Perhaps the best description for the social web is that it is the democratisation of voice, conversation and opinion. It is no longer necessary to be elite or famous, or have a newspaper, TV or production company behind you in order to be heard. The cost of participation is trivial, where almost anyone can blog, or upload their clip to YouTube, or their photos to Flickr.

But what does all this mean for 21st century organisations? Opinion remains split between two camps; those who see the social web as something to be embraced and incorporated into how their business is developed, and those who consider it as irrelevant or hostile to their business, or a time wasting activity for their staff.

In the 'pro' camp are those organisations that are aware that their products and services are being discussed by their users and customers, and have realised that this can be a rich source of intelligence and research. Participating in these conversations provides a potential

business advantage if they can respond to, adapt and deliver on user requirements ahead of their competitors. eBay and Amazon are two of the more well know organisations that have embraced this way of working, where the social web is providing thousands of touch points with their customers, replacing the more traditional single-channel CRM model.

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An example from the public sector is Patient Opinion, which encourages hospital patients to comment on their experience in their local hospital. These comments are then collated, categorised and aggregated before being automatically directed to the relevant manager in the NHS. Though each comment may focus on some micro aspect of the service – e.g. "The ward orderlies never knocked", or "The consultant never once washed his hands"; collectively they have the same power as a highly organised lobbying group for influencing policy change and improvement.

The 'con' camp is more likely to comprise of those organisations that are conservative in their outlook, and hence more risk averse. However, the new risk is in not being able to adapt to an increasingly volatile environment. The social web is an agitating presence that can create rapid change in user requirements and erosion of brand loyalty.

Organisations that remain oblivious to the social web also remain oblivious to what their customers are saying, with the consequence that their products and services become irrelevant. Successful 21st century organisations will be fully tuned into the social web; they will have a better understanding of their customers' needs and concerns, which will drive innovation, improvement and efficiency.

What is certain is that everything remains uncertain; that the ability to adapt and change are prerequisites for survival, and that the social web can no longer be ignored – by anyone!

