

creative communication by steve crescenzo

Are you a ‘social media evangelist’ or a communicator?

It’s OK to be addicted to social media in your personal life—but think twice before you try to convert everyone in your workplace

Just because Facebook has changed your life doesn’t automatically mean it’s the right fit for your organization.

Admit it: You’re a social media junkie. You’re hooked, and you know it.

It started with a harmless Facebook page that you barely paid attention to. But then you fell in with a bad group of “friends,” and before you knew it, Facebook was nothing more than a gateway drug to other social media.

And now you’re an addict.

You jump into the Twitter stream before you jump out of bed. You check to see if anyone retweeted you during the night before you even get dressed. You update your Facebook status while you’re on the bus, in the grocery store and sitting in the carpool line. You’ve actually updated your status while you were supposed to be listening to your spouse, haven’t you?

Maybe you’re even a hard-core social media (SM) addict. Maybe you play Mafia Wars and grow your crops in FarmLife while you tend to your Twitter lists, comment on blogs, send people virtual drinks and take 45 quizzes a day.

You’ve Facebooked under the influence, tweeted while driving and blogged in bed.

It’s OK. I’m not judging. In fact, I’m right there with you. (Except for you hard-core addicts: If you’re killing imagi-



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nary Mafia criminals on the same day you’re raising fake crops on a make-believe farm and poking your friends, it may be time to get some help.)

I used to wake up in the morning and reach for my wife. Now I reach over my wife to grab my iPhone from the nightstand. Before I get out of bed, I check Facebook, Twitter, my blog and several other blogs. I read a couple of newspapers online, then I recheck Twitter. Then I get out of bed.

We’re all turning into social media junkies. When I teach a seminar or speak at a conference, I usually ask how many people in the crowd are on

Facebook and Twitter. A year ago, maybe half the people were on Facebook, and less than 10 percent were on Twitter. These days, 99 percent of the room are on Facebook, and about 75 percent are on Twitter.

Now, all of this love for social media among communicators is great. Social media are going to be a big part of how people communicate in the future (in fact, they already are). But this infatuation with social media has a downside: namely, the danger that we are so in love with SM in our private lives that we will want to convince our organizations to start using them right now.

Before we can help our organizations use these tools properly, we damn well better understand them ourselves.

Some of us (and you know who you are) are turning into social media evangelists—wide-eyed, drooling, SM zombies who want to push our organizations at breakneck speed into the social media waters without thinking things through. I get calls every week from someone who heard me speak and who wants me to help them create a “social media plan.” Some of these folks don’t even have a communication plan, but they still want help diving into social media.

And the dangerous element to this is that social media evangelists, in their rush to embrace social media, forget one simple fact: The things social media stand for are in direct opposition to what most organizations are used to, in terms of how to publish and share information. Here are just a few of the differences:

- **With social media**, everyone is a publisher. Organizations are used to being the publisher, the gatekeeper of information. They decide what to say, how to say it and when to release it.
- **SM leads** to instant updates and instant conversation. Organizations are used to weeks of approval processes and tons of checks and balances before anybody says anything out loud.
- **When you communicate** with social media, it’s usually a free-wheeling conversation where everybody is on equal footing. Organizations are used to top-down information flow, org charts and hierarchy.
- **SM is often** about individual

voices and personalities. Organizations want everyone speaking in the same corporate voice.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: *Well, organizations and corporations had better change with the times, because social media are here to stay.* And of course you’re right. But change comes hard to many organizations, and for it to happen, leaders have to see the benefits of that change.

If we go riding into our organizations like wild-eyed drunken cowboys hell-bent on changing the very nature of how we communicate without taking into consideration the fear that many organizations have of social media, we’re not doing anybody any good. That’s why it’s critical that you be a communicator first and a social media expert second. Just because Facebook has changed your life doesn’t automatically mean it’s the right fit for your organization. Just because you love your blog doesn’t mean your CEO should have one. You may be addicted to Twitter, but that doesn’t mean it has any use for your organization.

Before you charge around the organization fighting for social media, ask yourself some basic questions—questions that will help you incorporate SM into your overall communication strategies and vehicles.

- **What can social media do for our organization that our current tools cannot do?** I can almost guarantee you’ll come up with something, and that could be your excuse to give SM a try.
- **What short-term opportunities are out there for us to try**

out some SM tools? Maybe a trade-show blog? A community relations initiative that lends itself to building a community on Facebook? A short-term podcast series with leadership? Selling social media to the Powers That Be is easier when they think it’s going to be temporary. And once it works, you’re off and running.

- **What is management most afraid of?** Losing control of the conversation? Losing productivity? Not controlling all the messages? Whatever plan you come up with had better deal with fears up front.

- **How will social media fit in with our other communication vehicles?** What can we kill off in order to make room for the new stuff, so we’re not just overloading our various audiences? How can the new stuff and the old stuff work together?

- **How can I change the organization’s communication style and content so it fits into the social media space?** “Corporate” communication—that whitewashed, sterilized, sanitized form of communicating that so many organizations rely on—doesn’t really work in the SM space. You’d better be ready to change your content first, before you ever think about using social media.

Taking the lead in helping your organization understand social media and put those tools to good use is a great role for today’s communication professional. But it’s important to do it right.

Which means being a communicator first and a social media evangelist second. •

about the author

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