

Module 3. Constructing messages for traditional and digital media

Imagine this scenario:

Silvio Mastrianni, the general manager of the the Ligurian Soccer (Football) Club, arrived home at 8:30 p.m., dropped his briefcase on the floor, opened a bottle of wine, poured a big glass, and took a long sip. It had been a rough day. He sighed heavily and his wife asked him why his day was so rough. The day began on the wrong note, Silvio told his wife, and just got worse from there. When he arrived, he saw that he needed to reschedule a meeting for later in the week that included four very important sponsors. He called the first one and nobody answered. He called the second one and she said the meeting could only happen at two on Wednesday. The third and the fourth both said Friday was fine but at either 1 p.m. or 11 a.m. He called the first back. Again no answer.

Frustrated, Silvio, yelled at his secretary wondering why SHE wasn't taking care of this. His anger at the secretary was sparked because he knew later in the day he was going to fire his secretary because she had done such poor work. Silvio opened his email and saw a note from the PR department that "this is going to be bad. I can't believe Mario [one of the players] tweeted THAT!" As a person who didn't regularly use social media, Silvio had no idea what the PR department was talking about, so he checked his account. He was horrified to see that Mario had tweeted pictures of himself and a group of friends breaking tables and bottles of liquor in a local bar before shoving some women to the ground. This wasn't Mario's first time behaving this way and as Silvio scanned his email inbox, he saw about 30 messages from the media asking for commentary. He went back to Twitter and saw that the images had been retweeted over 7000 times and then checking the team's Facebook page, saw about 100 angry posts and then quickly sent off seven angry emails to reporters accusing them of exaggerating the importance of Mario's tweets and that the team would deal with it. Silvio couldn't believe this happened TODAY of all days because at 3 p.m. he had to present his 3 year strategic plan to his board of directors and he needed to finalize his PowerPoint slides.

It was only 8:30 a.m. and Silvio wanted the day to be over but he had to deal with the crisis caused by Mario, he had to fire his secretary, he had to rearrange the meeting later in the week, and he had to prepare the presentation for the board of directors. He poured another cup of coffee and decided to begin by firing his secretary and sent her an email telling her to pack her things and leave before lunch.

Silvio's story should not be that foreign to experienced managers. Sooner or later, every manager will face a complex set of challenges in a single day, all of which need to be solved through some form of communication activity. Recall from the prior modules that communication solves problems. In Silvio's case, the problems themselves arise from communication, but the solutions are also to be found in effectively communicating. How should Silvio solve each problem? Should Silvio have sent an email terminating his secretary? Should he have spent time calling to reschedule a meeting? How will he handle the social media crisis caused by Mario? In this module, we'll address these questions as we examine how different types of media function followed by a deep exploration of social media itself, including managing crisis.

Unit 3.1 Understanding different channels and media types

In the prior modules, we have talked about “media” and “channels.” These are not synonymous terms although most people use them interchangeably. The topic is also complicated because we call television, newspapers and other information sources “the media.” It’s important to understand the differences between these three terms because effective communication requires understanding which MEDIUM (the singular of “media”) is appropriate and within each medium, which CHANNEL is appropriate.

Media (medium): This term refers to the delivery mechanism of information. For example, presentations are an oral medium, newspapers are a print medium, email is a digital medium, and television is a visual medium. The challenge arises because we often combine different media types, although one type is always the foundation. For example, the television news combines oral speaking, visual images and printed words. However, the basic medium is visual: we WATCH television. Digital media are the most complicated because they can combine all the other media and they introduce interactivity much like face-to-face conversation. Even with these complications, however, essentially there are four fundamental media types: 1) Oral; 2) Visual; 3) Print; 4) Digital. All the communication we produce is one of these types.

Channel: A channel refers to the specific way we share information within a medium. For example, in oral communication, the most important channel is face-to-face conversation, although we might also speak through the phone or via Skype. Visual communication might include photographs or television or even movies. Print communication includes this document you’re reading now, books, magazines, or newspapers. Finally, we can think of digital communication as a channel that can combine all the others through technology. Nearly all communication that occurs today is digital because it is transmitted through digital technologies but certain channels like email and social media are exclusively digital. The point to remember is that a channel is a particular category of a specific medium. First there’s a medium (oral, visual, print, digital) then there’s information presented by a channel within that medium.

The Media: This refers to public sources that disseminate information and should not be mistaken with “media.” THE media are television news shows, magazine companies, cable companies, and bloggers, for example. These are companies and individuals that share information via different media and different channels about events, or topics or news. These are organizations whose business is to distribute or create information.

If you reflect on Silvio’s story, you notice that he is using oral media through the channel of calling on the phone. He uses digital media by sending and receiving information through the channel of email as well as interacting through the social media channels of Twitter and Facebook. He is also preparing visual media via the channel of slides that will

accompany his oral presentation. Finally, he has read emails from the media about Mario's actions but has not yet interacted with them. Although it seems complicated, really the important thing to remember is that different media exist and they are used for different purposes. Each medium contains different channels that present that type of information. Let's take a look at the four media types and when it is best to use each (Newman, Peck, Harris and Wilhide 2013).

3.1.1 Defining different media types

As noted above, there are four fundamental media types.

Oral Media. As human being our primary form of communicating is through oral media. We talk to each other with words face-to-face. This is the oldest form of communication and it is the richest form that carries, by far, the most information. If you think about communication as a pipeline, oral communication has the largest pipe because we see facial expressions; we hear tone of voice; we interpret the words spoken; we judge truth or falsehood or humor on subtle cues; we might even be able to smell the person we people with. Conversation engages all of our senses.

While conversation is the richest form, we can also deliver presentations, have phone conversations, for example, which are slightly less rich but are still loaded with communication. The challenge of oral media is that they are real time; we cannot rewind, review and alter what we said. We also have to work hard to maintain the attention of others because attention wanders if oral communication is not engaging. Even with this limitation, oral communication is by far the most powerful because it carries the most information. It is what scholars call "the richest" medium.

Visual Media. Humans have used visual media for almost as long as we've used spoken language. Perhaps even longer through nonverbal and bodily communication of our long distant ancestors. However, the challenge with visual media is that they are imprecise; they cannot convey with the same accuracy the type of content that word can. Imagine a famous painting like DaVinci's Mona Lisa. What does it "mean?" People have debated this question for centuries and nobody really knows. DaVinci might have told somebody in person but that story has not carried through time. Recall that oral media occur in real time and exist only in that moment.

Visual media, by comparison can remain over time and can carry multiple meanings depending upon the frame one uses to analyze them. Most of us won't paint great art works, but we do create tables and graphs and we do include photos in our communication. Because these visual media are ambiguous, they require explanations and so when we use them to explain or present, we must include words to ensure that

our audience arrives at the meaning we intended. If we don't explain our visuals, we leave them as open for interpretation as DaVinci left the Mona Lisa.

Print Media. Mass literacy—the ability to read and write—didn't become possible until after the printing press was popularized around 1500. Even after 1500 most people remained illiterate until around the mid-1800s when education started to become compulsory and technology enabled mass distribution of printed channels such as newspapers. According to UNESCO (2016), today about 85% of the global population can read and write at some level, but this massive literacy has only existed for maybe half a century. Print media are extremely important because like visuals, they can be distributed, stored, studied, debated, reproduced and updated. Print media enables information to exist outside of time and often the particular relevance of print messages changes as times change. Does Shakespeare's poetry mean the same today as in 1610? Probably not. However, we can still read it and extract meaning more than 400 years later.

Most often we associate “educated” with the ability to use printed media—the ability to read and write—precisely because print media enables us to consume information across space and time. Although print media are powerful because they exist outside of time and space, they are still more “lean” than oral media because they rely on just sight. We receive only the information on the page encoded in the words. Those words might spark flights of imagination but words are not “real” in the same sense as oral conversation. Scholars therefore classify print media as “lean” meaning that it does not carry lots of different types of information simultaneously.

Digital Media. When the Internet became popular around 2000 and when social media began to explode around 2008, the communication landscape changed. In comparison to all prior media forms, digital media's unique strength is that it can be all of the media that exist, all at once. We can converse with somebody via Skype while texting with another friend in the same application. We can post videos with a layer of words on the video commenting on it and then our friends can comment on it. Some types of digital media like blogs are meant to be “permanent” and we can refer to those over time but some digital media are meant to be transitory like SnapChat or SMS messages.

Perhaps the biggest characteristic of digital media that separates it from other media is the concept of CONVERGENCE. In digital media, time and space converge as we communicate synchronously across the globe. Film, words, and music converge as we create videos for YouTube that represent our personality to friends. This convergence, however, is understood to be TRANSIENT, the second major difference of digital media to others, such as print. We don't think of digital media as permanent like we do words. We believe that what we send by SMS to our friends should be regarded much like words in oral conversation, it exists only in that moment. That challenge, however, is that digital media can be ARCHIVED and therefore digital media are not transient like words spoken

in a barroom conversation even though we often think of them that way. Notice how the language of SMS differs from that in this document but is similar to a friendly conversation. However, that SMS “conversation” can be captured and stored and forwarded to others making digital media both very powerful and extremely dangerous when misunderstood as unimportant or impermanent. This duality has created headaches for people across the world who misunderstand that we believe digital media are only transient but forget that they can be archived. Mario’s actions in our story reveal this exact problem.

3.1.2 Describing the different channels within a medium

Different media obviously present opportunities for communicating effectively and within the realm of sports organizations, a few are more important than others. Let’s take a look at some channels within each medium.

Oral Communication. In Module 2 we talked about speaking with journalists face-to-face. Obviously, that includes “regular” conversations over lunch, for example, but also phone calls. Within sports organizations, we also have to think about the multiple audiences outlined in Module 1. For example, we need to address players, employees and the public. Coaching is a type of oral communication for players and mentorship for employees is also best delivered through oral communication. For the public, we hold press conferences and events where players might interact with fans. The point is that oral communication occurs in real time, usually face-to-face, and involves conversing with one another. Finally, we need to remember that radio is an oral medium and remains an important medium for presenting live sporting events and news about sports.

Visual Communication. What sports organization does not have a mountain of photographs? We take and distribute them all the time. But we also create graphs and charts of player performance to accompany statistics about players. We might also create graphs and charts to describe the financial health of the organization. A new, and increasingly important, type of visual is the infographic. Infographics share large amounts of data in a small visual space and increasingly, these types of visuals explain all sorts of different concepts, including sports. And of course we can’t forget about television, probably the most important visual medium to sports. As we outlined in Module 2, television changed sporting by greatly expanding the audience. Television, especially via cable and satellite, enable audiences to see events in real time from around the globe. As sporting organizations, we also need to think about the global reach of all the information we produce and since our audiences are accustomed to interacting with sports via television, much of our information should be presented in this same manner.

Print Communication. With the rise of mass literacy in the 1800s came newspapers and magazines as we discussed in Module 2. As the primary form of journalism, print media

remains powerful and we need to distribute information about our organizations in print. Perhaps more importantly, email—written communication—now dominates information sharing within organizations. Email also dominates communication with external organizations when that communication needs to be a bit more formal. As a form of print communication, email is “lean,” which means it doesn’t carry much information, and so we need to be very careful about reserving email for more routine activities. Certainly we can write longer emails to increase the complexity of our messages, but readers usually prefer shorter emails.

Digital Communication. Email certainly is a form of digital communication. However, social media and websites are equally important to sports organizations. Nearly every organization has a website now that gives audiences everything from basic information about the organization to a fully interactive experience with streaming audio and video, archived interviews, blogs, and other types of content. Social media dominates the digital media landscape, however, and for that reason, in Unit 2 of this module, we’ll elaborate on social media (Newman, Peck, Harris, and Wilhide 2013). Some areas of digital communication integrate other forms of communication. For example, podcasts are now very popular, and are forms of oral communication that are transmitted across digital networks.

3.1.3 Explaining the best use of different media

Understanding the characteristics of each medium outlined above is important to help us select which medium to use in what circumstances. As we have learned in the prior two modules, each communication event is unique and we have to think carefully about our audience, our purpose, and the constraints. Effective media choice is a constraint of every situation because we choose the medium (and channel) depending upon the audience and the message we are trying to communicate. Effective managers know that all situations are different and choose media and channels that are appropriate in that moment. There is not one medium or channel that fits every communication situation. Effective communicators match the requirements of the situation to the medium.

*“Choose rich media in complex situations and choose lean media in simple situations”
(Lengle and Daft, 1989)*

When thinking about which medium to use in what type of situation, effective communicators follow one chief rule (Lengel and Daft, 1989):

Let’s examine this maxim in greater detail and then use some examples from our opening story to explore it further.

First, complex situations are those that are not routine, where the stakes are high or there is possibility for misunderstanding. In complex situations we have to use all of our communication faculties to ensure that our audience understands us and that if they don't, we can adjust and clarify in that moment. Complex situations have many variables, have high emotional value and are not routine which means they usually are not repeated with the same people in the same way. Non-routine activities include hiring or firing personnel or negotiating disagreements among employees, for example. Other complex situations might be managing a crisis with the media or persuading others to give money. Notice that these situations align with the purpose of "persuasion" and "narration" and sometimes "explanation".

Second, simple situations are those where understanding is easy, where very little interpretation is required. Expressed in a common way, "it is what it is." In simple situations, we don't need to worry about hurting people's feelings or we don't need to worry about multiple variables. Our audience doesn't need to study our message because it's a familiar one and probably doesn't require a lot of interaction. These situations are routine and often repeated in the same way with the same people. Simple, routine activities might include changing or scheduling a meeting, reporting quantitative data, explaining concepts or describing situations. In these cases, we communicate things as they are. Notice that these situations align with the purposes of "description", and "explanation" and perhaps "narration".

So how did Silvio do? In short, not very well. He was trying to reschedule a meeting using a rich medium—a phone call—when he could easily have used email—a lean medium—to accomplish the same activity. He chose to send emails to reporters rather than addressing them in person even though Mario's actions required complex communication to explain what the team would do or how it viewed Mario's tweets. Finally, he wrote an email to his secretary to fire her even though terminating an employee is not a routine event and one that carries high emotional value, especially for the secretary. If you were in Silvio's place, how might you have handled the situation better after reading about media richness?

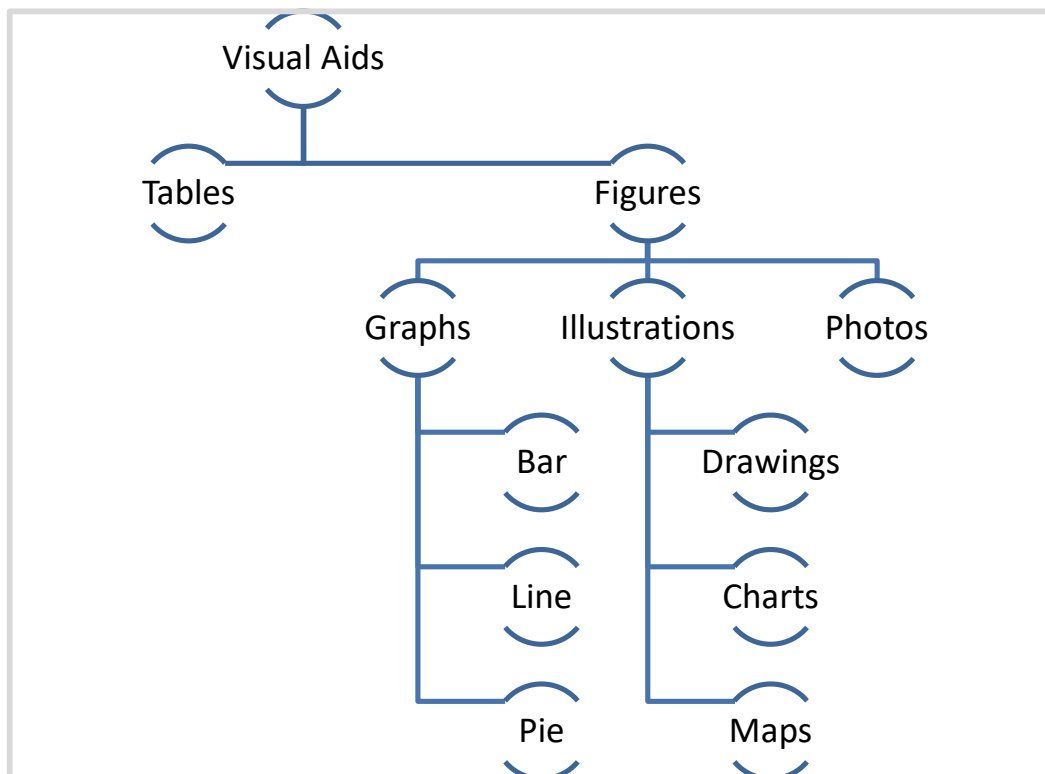
In the current sports communication landscape, organizations have to master multiple types of media and within each of those multiple channels. In this respect, managing an organization is now more complicated than ever because managers have to consider so many more possibilities for internal and external communication. However, if you remember the three primary components of a communication even—audience, purpose, and constraints—you'll find that it is easier to decide which medium and which channel is most suited to any particular situation.

3.1.4 Using visual communication

Visual communication deserves its own discussion because television and the Internet have made visual communication extremely important and most of us are not trained in effective visual communication: we spend years in school learning to read and write words, but very few of us learn how to effectively convey meaning through visuals. In what follows, we discuss a few key concepts of visual communication to help improve your ability with this important medium. While an entire course could be dedicated to producing effective television or even producing effective infographics, below we examine a few key themes for producing ordinary visuals that often accompany presentations, appear on webpages, within social media content, or enhance printed documents.

One of the most important concepts of visual communication is that different visual aids serve different purposes. The chart below shows that we have two types of visuals: tables and figures. Everything that is not a table is a figure. Tables present specific numerical data while figures can communicate anything from numerical data (graphs) to relationships and abstract concepts (illustrations) to things as they actually are (photos). As you design your communication for presentations, documents, or the Internet, be sure that you are using the correct type of visual to represent the information accurately.

Figure 1: Tables and figures



Source: Own elaboration.

The “Visual Communication Guy,” (Newbold 2016) offers us a useful way to remember other key topics for visual communication. He suggests that we remember the word CRAYONTIP which correlates to these concepts (which you can explore in detail on his website):

- Contrast: the way that design makes different elements appear salient.
- Repetition: repeating different elements, like color, in consistent ways to convey meaning.
- Alignment: how different elements align, such as type aligning with a photo.
- Y: actually the question “Why,” as in why are you creating this visual.
- Organization: how are the elements arranged to be easily understood.
- Negative Space: the way that “white space” helps to frame content.
- Typography: which font faces are you using and are they appropriate for the situation.
- Iconography: which images consistently represent what type of content.
- Photography: have you used photos to communicate or as mere decoration.

A full discussion of visual communication could consume an entire four-week course. However, the major theme is that visual design, is not simply an “add on” or something to make your communication “pretty.” Certain visual elements do make communication aesthetically pleasing but they also aid comprehension, help people to remember your content, and make communication easier to process. As you think about creating communication of all types, but especially presentations, documents and webpages, be certain that you can defend why you included a specific visual element such as color or a visual. If you can’t say why you did so, then it’s likely that you are simply making your communication more complicated without adding additional meaning.

If you were advising Silvio on visual communication, how would you recommend that he speak to the board of directors through visual communication? How might he help his secretary understand why she is being fired with visuals? These questions don’t occur to us because we’re so deeply trained in using words. However, visual communication is often more powerful—and efficient—than words and you should think about ways to use visuals to convey complexity whenever possible.

Unit 3.2 Effective uses of social media in sports organizations

Social media has become so important in modern organizations that we need to address it as its own topic in the certificate program. However, given the centrality of social media to communication, we discuss some concepts here. Furthermore, while social media training is becoming more common with how prevalent social media is in our world, developing a deeper understanding of social media will help you to use it better as a manager.

3.2.1 Comparing social media to traditional media

We have a conception that social media are simply extensions of print media or even email. They simply make interaction faster. However, social media differ significantly from traditional media because they are interactive—or they should be. Recall from Module 2 that until the rise of cable and satellite television all media was “push.” That is the organizations, whether it was a company or news outlet, determined the content and decided what to share with its audiences. However, cable and satellite TV began to erode the concept and when the Internet fully matured around 2000, the idea of “push” media had been replaced by “pull” media where audiences now demanded content and organizations had to provide that content when, how, and where audiences demanded.

Social media enlarged that trend. Specifically, social media were designed to replicate the kind of turn taking that occurs in face-to-face conversation. Individuals were now able to “converse” with one another through these social media channels and they were also able to “converse” with organizations. The smartest organizations realized this and began building teams to interact with their audiences by taking questions and responding to concerns. Importantly, with social media both organizations and individuals are BOTH author and audience; each needs to listen to the other and each needs to produce content. Additionally, social media democratize information sharing. Specifically, individuals can now forward, share, like or distribute content among their connections. This means information spreads much faster than through traditional “push” media. In short, social media have created a situation where the entire world with access to the Internet could potentially engage in dialogue with anybody else about anything. That’s a profound change from 1970 when media companies controlled the information. Additionally, once an organization pushes something out on social media, they lose control over what the audience can do with the message. Social media audiences are “active” and consequently, social media requires careful planning to avoid audiences spinning content in ways that reflect negatively on sport organizations.

3.2.2 Describing the function of different social media channels

We often talk about “social media” as if it is just one thing. However, social media can be divided into multiple categories with multiple subcategories. Below, following Newman, Peck, Harris and Wilhide (2013), we examine three major categories of social media and present subcategories within each. Finally, we list an example for each type of social media.

Publishing Services. These technologies enable people to create content and then to share it online where others can comment on them. There are three major types of publishing service:

1. Forums. Forums are the original type of social media where authors who are part of a group can post information and comment on other people’s posts. These are usually topic-specific and often have rules about what types of content are presented. (e.g. www.covers.com/postingforum).
2. Blogs. Blogs are short pieces, usually 1000 words or fewer, and are updated regularly. Authors write content and share information (including visuals) about particular topics and the audience can leave comments on the article itself or on other people’s comments. (e.g. www.espn.com/espn/blogs).
3. Wikis. Wikis allow people to build websites on particular topics and then link those pages together. One key difference between wikis and websites is that anybody can edit the content on wikis and the content is curated by the group. Content on wikis therefore represents the common understanding of a topic among a group of interested authors. (e.g. lol.esportswikis.com).

Media Sharing Services. These technologies allow organizations and individuals to share their original content, connect their content to that generated by others and to share links to others’ content. At least six types of media sharing services exist:

1. Social News Sites. Social news sites allow people to share links to their favorite news stories and those with the most “likes” rise to the top of the list. The homepage for these sites change frequently as the most popular stories change. (e.g. www.reddit.com).
2. Social Bookmarking. These sites allow users to share links to content that they find interesting. Users tag the links and then their friends can search by keywords or tags. The homepages of these sites often show the most popular tags or keywords. (e.g. www.stumbleupon.com).
3. Video Sharing. Video sharing has become ubiquitous on the Internet with millions of people creating, loading, and sharing their homemade videos. Organizations do the same and often videos are collected into channels on themes or by content creators. The audience can also comment on the videos. (e.g. www.youtube.com).
4. Photo Sharing. Similar to video sharing, photo sharing sites allow users to post their

- photography and share it with friends. The creator can comment on photos as can the audience. On some sites, these photos are listed for sale. (e.g. www.instagram.com)
5. Audio Sharing. In the past, audio sharing occurred when individuals shared their own libraries, often illegally. Now users can listen to music channels that they have created and can share their stations with friends, along with podcasts which have grown in popularity (e.g. www.spotify.com).
 6. Document Sharing. As people begin sharing more and more information in “the cloud” and work collaboratively, document sharing sites have become more common. These sites enable individuals either to read documents without commenting or sometimes to actually alter the content whether it’s a document or presentation. (e.g. www.slideshare.net).

Networking Services. Networking technologies connect people who have similar opinions and these sites dominate the social media landscape because they are realizing the Internet’s logic of CONVERGENCE discussed earlier. Specifically, networking sites aggregate all of the services in the prior forms of social media making these the single portal that many organizations and individuals maintain.

1. Social networks. While this term is often used synonymously with “social media” they are not the same. Social networks allow individuals to create public profiles that present views or information shared with only those who are connected and allows users to peruse the information contained in the profiles built by their connections. (e.g. www.facebook.com).
2. Microblogging. Much like the blogs, these offer users the opportunity to share, in very short messages, their opinions or information they think others should know. These sites also update users on activities or other news and that is then broadcast to those who follow—are connected to—the creator. (e.g. www.twitter.com).
3. Opinions and Reviews. Many sites exist for users to post their thoughts on products or services and shoppers often use these posts to validate merchant claims. Opinions and reviews are increasingly a part of all ecommerce websites making most shopping experiences social to the extent that buyers can read the opinions of real people and can comment on the usefulness of those reviews. (e.g. [www. Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

An important trend to emphasize is that social media increasingly embody the CONVERGENCE logic of the Internet. Services such as Facebook include most of the others from shopping to microblogging and it is now more common to see different social media channels completely integrated. For example, Twitter and Facebook can integrate with Instagram which can all be embedded in a shopping experience at eBay.

3.2.3 Constructing effective social media campaigns

Given the exploding number of social media available and the convergence that happens among them, companies are faced with significant challenges in creating effective social media campaigns. Entire degree programs now exist on social media and below we cover only the most important topics that you need to consider as your organization creates a social media presence.

Notice that the POST method described below (Li and Bernhoff, 2011) largely mirrors the discussion in Module 1 about the components of communication in its concern with People, Objectives, Strategy, and Technology.

People. In every communication event, the audience matters most. Who are the people that you hope to target? What are their interests? What types of content are they posting? What technologies do they use? What are the demographics of this group? How does your audience interact online? Organizations can collect this data by hiring outside consulting firms or by using free services such as Google Analytics. You can also simply search on interesting terms, like your team name, to see who is posting and then follow the links that those individuals maintain.

Objectives. All communication events also have a purpose and unless an organization knows what it wants to accomplish with its social media, it will be difficult to create effective tactics. An organization might have multiple objectives for multiple types of interactions or it might have just one grand objective, but usually these align with business goals such as increasing revenue or building brand loyalty.

Strategy. A strategy is much like a plan to achieve objectives: how will you accomplish your objective? How will you move from where you are now to where you want to be? The objective states the ideal state and the strategy marks the pathway to get there. As we'll discuss in Module 4, strategy also includes careful attention to things such as the necessary resources—both human and financial—what type of content will be created, a timeline and the step most frequently ignored: an evaluation plan.

Technology. The audience and purpose largely drive the choice of technology. If your audience uses Instagram and you post on Pinterest, you've chosen the wrong technology. Don't be swayed by the latest and most fashionable technologies; instead understand what your audience uses and create a presence on that platform. Be prepared, however, to integrate your social media technologies to ease the management and be prepared to change platforms as your audience shifts their alliances.

If there is one constant in digital media, it's that they change frequently and the information above should be regarded as conceptual. Regardless of the specific digital channel, social media require that users have the opportunities to interact and engage in authentic communication with one another and organizations. If you try to use social media to "push" your messages, you'll lose audiences very quickly. Instead think about social media like face-to-face conversations and learn to be flexible with technologies and contexts since they will change frequently.

3.2.4 Managing a social media crisis

We all have heard about social media causing organizations headaches in the recent past. It's really not a question of IF you will face a crisis caused by social media but WHEN. Rather than waiting until a crisis occurs to realize that you don't know how to manage the crisis, instead plan for a crisis. In fact, the most important thing in managing a social media crisis (or any crisis for that matter) is to have a plan and to actively monitor social media to ensure that a crisis doesn't occur in the first place. Your organization should consider at least these steps below to create your plan and then if a crisis does occur, follow the plan outlined by Baer and Naslund (2011) to gain control of the situation.

Building Your Social Media Plan to Avoid Crisis

- 1.** Actively monitor social media. A number of free and nearly free tools help you to monitor your social media. Ideally, you'll have subscriptions to services or contracts with companies that have the tools to predict what is coming and can alert you that a storm is mounting before it actually strikes. If you can't afford subscriptions or contractors, your organization must have a strategy for who is listening, to what channels and when to help recognize social media trends that can negatively affect your organization.
- 2.** Understand what qualifies as a crisis. Not all social media activity is a crisis, even if the information is negative. Remember that social media needs to be authentic conversation and squelching conversation will be a crisis itself. Sometimes we have to hear what we don't like to hear. A real crisis exhibits an information imbalance where somebody knows more about your company than you do and they are sharing that information. As soon as you become aware of the imbalance you need to learn more than the public. A crisis also exists when the information can cause the organization significant harm. If the information is just negative, that's different from that negative information driving away customers. Finally, the activity needs to be substantially different from normal occurrences. Every negative Tweet does not require a response. Ten thousand angry messages do.
- 3.** Plan your response. Some crises are more serious than others and your organization should know who will respond to what type of crisis. Can customer service handle it? Does it need to be escalated to the next level? Does it need to go all the way to the top?

Who needs to be involved and who needs to respond? Clearly, the more serious the crisis, the higher level of person needs to be involved.

Even with a plan in place, it's likely that your organization will experience a social media crisis eventually. So what should you do when the crisis hits? Remember that social media is about information sharing and imitates conversation and respond as if you were talking to real people using the steps below.

Responding to a Social Media Crisis After It Has Begun

- 1.** Acknowledge the problem. There is nothing worse than hearing "I don't know." Instead, acknowledge that you know about the problem even if you know nothing about it and reply that you'll provide more information as soon as you know something.
- 2.** Respond everywhere. You should respond first to a crisis in the channel where it seems to be building the most momentum. However, you should also respond in other channels to avoid a fire starting there while you are attending to another channel. Remember that your social media strategy should be integrated across platforms. This is the same idea. In fact, you should consider posting messages in channels that you don't normally frequent to be safe.
- 3.** Apologize. There is only one good response when your organization has caused a problem: saying you're sorry. Expressing remorse for the action or problem will immediately soften the social media response because often all people want to hear is an apology.
- 4.** Create a website with more information. As you learn more information about the problem, post that material on a website that remains current. This way, rather than responding individually to the same question 100 times, you can refer to the website that addresses those questions. Some important topics to consider include the nature of the problem, whom it affects, photos, actions being taken, and whom to contact for more information.
- 5.** Allow people to vent. Establish a Facebook or Twitter account or build a website specifically for the crisis. This way, you contain the negative commentary on a platform that you control rather than having all of the negativity penetrate the social media landscape and build momentum there. Similar to the analogy of fire in step 1, this allows the fire to burn in a safe space.
- 6.** Offer to speak offline. Again, social media is like conversation and if you offer to speak in real time with somebody who is complaining, they are likely to see that you acknowledge and respect their point of view. Often just that respect will manage an unruly person, but if not, everybody else who is only moderately angry will see that you've taken that person seriously and they will likely become less angry.
- 7.** Share information internally. When a crisis erupts, people contact anybody and everybody they know affiliated with the organization. Therefore, you should establish an internal channel of communication to keep all employees updated on the topic just

in case they are contacted.

8. Do a postmortem. After the crisis subsides, analyze why it happened, how it happened, and how you performed in managing it. Analyze which social media channels appeared most common, what type of person was engaged, how the staff responded and how your internal plans worked. Understanding how you performed in one situation will help you perform better in the next one.

In our connected world, understanding the nature of social helps us manage crisis or avoid it all together. However, it's likely that every manager will face a crisis sooner or later, even if it's within his or her small part of an organization, and the plans here can be used to mitigate any crisis, even if it's not on social media.

Now that you've reviewed the materials on different media, different channels, and social media, how would you recommend that Silvio respond? Should he have sent angry emails to the reporters? What is his secretary likely to do in this mounting crisis now that she has been fired? Did Silvio think through the components of communication in this story and if not, what are the likely consequences? Do you have an experience with social media crisis? How would you handle it differently now that you understand the different media forms? What is your plan for managing your personal and organizational social media? How can you effectively integrate visual communication into your regular communication events?

Key Takeaways

- 1) Media, channels and "the media" are all different things and we need to be which concept we are discussing.
- 2) There are four major types of media: oral, visual, print and digital. Each type of media has its own characteristics and history.
- 3) Each medium has multiple channels for distributing content. A channel is a specific type of distribution such as radio for oral, television for video, newspapers for print and social media for digital.
- 4) Different media are best used to convey different types of information and "rich media" are best for complex, non-routine situations and "lean media" are best for simple, routine situations.
- 5) Social media are most similar to conversation and represent a profound shift in the way organizations communicate with their audiences.
- 6) Social media can be divided into at least three major categories, each with multiple subtypes: publishing services (for example, blogs); media sharing services (for example, YouTube); and networking services (for example, Facebook).
- 7) The P.O.S.T method helps communicators build effective social media strategies.
- 8) The best way to manage crisis in social media is to prevent it from happening in the first place through good observation. But when crisis does, organizations need to

acknowledge the problem, respond everywhere, apologize, create a website with information, allow people to vent, offer to speak offline, share information internally, and do a postmortem on how the crisis was managed.



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