



White Paper - Web 2.0

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What does 'Web 2.0' mean to the world of Public Relations?

This paper provides communications professionals and marketers with a variety of best practice approaches for communicating on the web today, as well as some simple suggestions that companies can implement to make the most of the changing world of communications.

WEB TWO POINT WHAT?

As technology companies, both Text 100 and Squiz have longstanding experience of the internet. Our clients include publishers, mainstream media, and technology firms young and old. Both of our firms contain experienced marketing professionals, but when it comes to 'Web 2.0,' we must confess a certain scepticism...

On Saturday November 4th, The Guardian's 'Weekend' magazine was devoted entirely to the hottest media and technology property on the planet – Web 2.0. Hot? It has to be! Google just paid \$1.65 billion USD for YouTube. It's clear that the Internet is back in vogue, which is a very good thing, but the notion of 'Web 2.0' sits a little uneasily with us.

You see, nobody told us what 'Web 1.0' was about, and we're also a little miffed that we only got to hear about it after it was pronounced dead. Also, 'Web 2.0' seems a little woolly – we're having a hard time figuring out what it's about, let alone what we need to do with it. (It seems like silly season for the techno-evangelist club once again!) So we're just plain unsure. How much of a distinct property is 'Web 2.0'? And as communicators, to what extent do we need to accommodate the existence of a trillion blogs, a million mashups and a bazillion web sites with curved edges and drop shadows? Is RSS the new SMS? SOA the new Siebel? LinkedIn the new Excite@home? Is Bloglines the new grapevine? Will IPTV replace ITV?or are we just blowing bubbles all over again?

Well, when all's said and done, we realise that something profound is happening right now. And so this white paper is an exorcism. Its purpose is to dispel the hoopla surrounding '2.0' and bring some meaning and direction to the question of how we need to communicate today. As a result – and with a more sober head on - we will suggest how key 'Web 2.0' concepts and tactics can be applied to help us to communicate better – with more people, more of the time.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

So, let's define what 'Web 2.0' is.

To date, the best description we've found is by web developer and blogger Ian Davis. In his words, 'Web 2.0' is "an attitude rather than a technology. It's about enabling and encouraging participation through open applications and services." By this definition, 'participation' means the ability to contribute, share, mix and publish both data (technology) and ideas (content) through today's web applications and services. Practical examples include the ability to post a photo from your smartphone in response to a BBC News article on their web site. Or taking the Google Maps API and mixing this up with some of your own code to produce a site that allows estate agents to reach customers directly – and show where their property is. 'Web 2.0' is giving businesses new ways to reach customers – be they tech savvy teenagers or hard-nosed businessmen.

As such, today's innovation is predicated on a realisation that the connected, chaotic nature of the web is something to be embraced, not restricted. AOL/Time Warner fails. YouTube wins. Any example of 'broadcast' communications on the web fundamentally misses the opportunity to exploit its connectedness, cost-effectiveness and scale. The future is all about creating 'open' web services, and standing back and letting customers loose on them. Which of course is anathema to the way in which communication networks have been run until now. This is the same point that was made during the last dot-com boom by The Cluetrain Manifesto:

"The Internet is a place. We buy books and tickets on the Web. Not over, through, or beside it. To call it a "platform" belies its hospitality. What happens on the Net is more than commerce, more than content, more than push and pull and clicks and traffic and e-everything. The Net is a real place where people can go to learn, to talk to each other, and to do business together. It is a bazaar where customers look for wares, vendors spread goods for display, and people gather around topics that interest them. It is a conversation."

As Ian Davis points out, the ability to contribute, take, remix and repost is a step back in time to the spirit of good old Internet 1.0 – where the birth of the networked hyperlink "encouraged participation from the start."

What's happened in between times is that we've managed to apply traditional modes of communication through the medium – e.g., webcasts (read conferences), banner ads (read TV ads), email spam (read direct mail), etc – and lose our way a little.

And so 'Web 2.0' is offering a 'back to the future' style path upon which we can really exploit the Information Super Highway. It's enabling us to get closer to our customers and to understand what they really think about us and our products.....so that we can serve them better and become more competitive and profitable as a result.

COMMUNICATIONS 2.0

OK, so if 'Web 2.0' is an attitude towards to the web, underpinned by the provision of services that empower customers to do their own thing, then let's take a look at why this is useful for us as communicators. To do this we'll establish the key "2.0-ish" principles that we need to consider, and discuss each one in detail. They are:

- Content is king (again!)
- The web site as a communications service
- Beta is beautiful
- Participation is mandatory
- Technology is meaningless
- (If content is king, then) Open source is queen

Content is king (again!)

...in the sense of user-generated content, that is. Imagine Amazon without user reviews, eBay without user ratings and life without wikipedia. These are the big, glamorous consumer examples but there are a thousand business networking forums, email discussion groups, and loose gatherings in the blogosphere discussing everything aspect of business – including probably your own. These examples wouldn't be what they are today without having been built upon the two way nature of the web. Broadly speaking, all of them have ceded a measure of editorial control around their services in exchange for the value that user-generated content can bring. And each has become a 'trusted' source of goods, services and information as a result. The value of their service depends on their users. It's a no-brainer.

A referral or a recommendation from a like-minded individual inspires confidence. Commerce has always worked this way - it's why so many of our clients clamour to publish glossy case studies on satisfied customers. The difference today is that this act of endorsement can be easily built into your web site at source. If you know that you can engage with your audience, then give them the opportunity to provide comment and publish the results. All it takes is some fairly commonplace technology, an 'open' attitude, and an eye on your site publishing processes.

The impact can be profound as user-generated content can:

- Solve customer questions via support forums
- Give early insights and feedback into product developments though a blog
- Extend the value of news reports via comment forms and image uploads
- Challenge your editorial thinking through simple five star rating systems

Bottom line...User-generated content adds tremendous value to your goods & services – with very low overheads!

The web site as a communications service

But to do this stuff effectively, as well as rethinking the way you communicate, you need to tweak your communications channels. By this model, a web site is no longer a 'publication.' Instead it becomes a service. New tools need to be introduced. Why not set up a blog, launch a forum or allow your users to publish pictures to a Flickr photo pool? And, where you find conversations happening, just join in. You may get to learn some valuable insights directly – the kind of things that companies spend thousands of dollars on acquiring through workshops and complicated audit systems.

As well as monitoring what the web thinks of you, your underlying processes and systems also need to be rewired in order to accommodate and re-use public voices. Essentially this means thinking about your web site as a database which is capable of re-presenting content in different ways. Once you've captured a piece of content, you need to re-purpose it for effect. Think of Amazon, and how it markets goods through 'manufactured serendipity': people who bought the 'Alias Season 3' box set also bought '24,' etc.....and how social networking sites like MySpace, Ecademy, LinkedIn connect people around their interest areas, helping them find anything from friends with common interests in 'emo' bands to a second round of VC funding.

More than being good web sites, these kind of services have been built as extremely skilful databases that are capable of making intelligent guesses in the name of cross and up-selling their services. And with this operating principle in place, they also enjoy big fringe benefits such as superior performance in search engines (Google loves deep resources of well structured content) and better functioning content or product inventories (elsewhere described as 'The Long Tail' effect, whereby back catalogue content is given new life by being made more accessible and presentable to users).

Bottom line...Successful organisations do not over-engineer the production of their content. Instead, they excel at accepting content from all quarters and publishing the resulting data.

Beta is beautiful

Google is everyone's most indispensable web service. It structures the majority of our web-based activity through its search tool, and increasingly through new services such as Google Maps, Google News, Google Alerts and Froogle. And this list of applications and services is growing on a monthly basis. Its model is to release early and often, and to back the winning horses – in fact the majority of its newer services are labelled 'beta' even though they are being used publicly. This mentality runs counter to traditional technology and media models whereby a product launch is preceded by lengthy research, development, production and testing procedures (is anyone still waiting for Microsoft's Vista operating system?)

The benefits in the Google model are manifold:

- Better customer feedback, which leads to more intelligent development choices
- Less development 'wastage' as non-essential features are identified and dropped earlier
- Better customer satisfaction levels as expectations are kept manageable and more products/services are shipped on time

This model is central to all successful 'Web 2.0' organisations. They eschew mega product 'frameworks' in favour of ever-evolving, fit-for purpose 'services.' Think of Salesforce.com's on demand CRM product. Users don't even have to buy software - they simply use the product via a browser and 'bolt on' additional widgets that are developed by third party developers and sold through Salesforce.com's website. These type of products are simple and subject to constant change, but nevertheless incredibly well received (for example, businesses such as Nokia now use Salesforce.com's products).

The lesson to be learned for those in the business of communicating is that these companies are successful because of their lack of polish. They recognise that customer participation and acceptance is a critical part of their product development. Consequently they create more winning products than duds and save more money in the process. In addition, they recognise that they can't please everyone all of the time and that the world is a big enough place to carve out niches in marketplaces. Again, this runs counter to the received wisdom of classical marcomms, where product launches must be meticulously planned and executed and markets must be dominated with pin-point accuracy. What the web is showing us today is that it's OK to throw stuff out there, and to see what sticks.

To be more specific, it's good practise to set up a variety of different communications channels to suit different purposes, to test them, tweak them and invest in the ones that work best. Whether your end audience is C-level insurance executives or 'tweens,' the low cost of 'Web 2.0' initiatives means that the old conservative marketing model doesn't apply. A blog can be introduced for your partner or developer community; a web page can be published to a phone browser for mobile employees; and feedback forms and rating systems can be introduced into just about anything. None of these will break the bank and some will become absolute winners. But the good news is that it's possible to experiment because none of them have to be built as a single, monolithic 'communications' framework. Rather, they can be grafted on to your existing site quickly and at a relatively low cost. Then, should they prove successful, they can then become more integrated with your other site content over time.

Bottom line...Treat everything as a beta program. Communicate with more people, more of the time through the introduction of new 'micro' technology channels. When new media technologies emerge, don't sit back conservatively waiting to see if they pan out: if they're appropriate, then they're right for you. And get moving!

Do you remember any of the tiny mistakes that companies made during the dot-com boom? Neither do we, but we do remember the successes. So don't be afraid of failure because the risks are low. And, if you're unsure, then ask – there's a lot of good advice out there.

Participation is mandatory

Because the flip side of the 'perpetual beta program' is a threat. If you're not communicating in this way, then your competitors will be – innovating quicker, and communicating more closely with your customers. They'll be in your markets, stealing your share of voice. Rest assured that this will be the case – doing it is cheap, and so the barriers are low. Further, competition on this level is now very high indeed. Your customers expect to be able to communicate with you, and so if you're unable to accommodate them then you'll turn them off. As such, participation is mandatory.

Bottom line....no comment is not an option. Let your users interact with you.

Technology is meaningless

...at least from a user's point of view. Your web services need to be designed for a multitude of devices – smartphones, PC's, Apple Macs, iPods, PDA's, etc, (you've heard the story!). As such, your customers don't care how you build your stuff, they only care that they can use it. This means all you need to worry about is ensuring your content is accessible. And to do this you need build your communication channels around standard web formats such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication), XML (Extensible Mark Up Language), and newer methods such as Microformats....and design them elegantly using CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and XHTML (Extensible Hypertext Mark Up Language) to ensure that they can be received and presented in tact. (And this will also ensure that you

can re-use the content that they provide back to you.) In addition, the use of standard technologies will ensure the lifespan of your services, since by making this choice you are also opting into the widest possible pool of skilled people who can support and develop it in the future.

Bottom line...Ensure your services are accessible to the widest possible audience, and can be supported by the widest possible development community through the use of open, standard web formats.

(If content is king, then) Open source is queen

Having said that the above 'Web 2.0' principles are low-cost and easy to do, implementing them may appear daunting. Where do you start? Fear not. You are not alone. Behind every new piece of web site functionality there is a multitude of interested parties, the majority of which can be tapped in to free of charge. The 'open' principles of web standards and accessibility also extend to the way in which the technology itself is developed, and this model is called 'open source.'

As a movement of developer talent, open source software generates new answers to tricky tasks faster than any traditional software firm could ever manage. The quality of its code is unsurpassed, and its focus on market dynamics is unique. It scores highly on both of these things because of the way it's organised. Firstly, a problem (or a market opportunity) is spotted, then a piece of software is developed to address it. Secondly, this software is released to the outside world in a naked form (accessible source code) and subjected to peer review, then it is tweaked and improved. Thirdly, it's used rapidly in production environments by people who are empowered to offer feedback into the development effort, then it is further enhanced to meet market demands. In this way an open source solutions can evolve at the speed of light to address common requirements. And take note – because of its licensing model, it's FREE!

As such, it's possible to take technology direction (and code) from your peers and adapt it quickly and at low cost since your only overhead will be the time it takes to implement it. In this way, you can acquire a Content Management System (CMS) or a blog, and then test and deploy it without spending a zillion dollars. Forums such as Sourceforge are indispensable for successful 'Web 2.0' organisations. In addition, if you don't have the resources to go it alone, then new breeds of commercial companies are on hand to help through the provision of development, implementation and support services around open source products (such as Squiz, MySQL and Red Hat).

IT'S A PROCESS, DUMMY!

...because, in the brave new world of 'Web 2.0,' communications can best be described as a process not a destination. The act of communicating changes – set pieces can be set aside in favour of seeding new opinions or ideas. Press releases serve a different purpose – they no longer announce the fact; they become a record of its existence. Product launches are smaller in scale and 'softer' – they celebrate the fact rather than revealing it. Product development is less of an 'ivory tower' exercise – it responds to and builds upon customer demand rather than second guessing it. In other words, the discipline of communications becomes all about, well, the process of communicating. And to support this, the underlying technologies and tactics that we have already described will become lighter, easier to use and more adaptive.

Now, for many organisations the thought of letting a PR executive loose on a set of customers may be a little scary, but the remit of Public Relations departments are changing for the better, and so must their structure and staff.

The Public Relations profession is - after a long period of being demoted to Press Relations - finally returning to its roots. With today's technology at your disposal your PR team can enable you to get closer to your customers and tell you exactly what they're thinking. Be it blogs, podcasts, wikis, open APIs, virals, website builds, mashups or even a simple email newsletter, the principles of effective PR are built into 'Web 2.0' as a real two way conversation.

THE COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT OF TOMORROW

To recap: yesterday, communications was all about grand stand events, product launches, and costly and time intensive production models; today we're adapting to the introduction of new web technologies that make communication faster, more two-way and more extensible. And tomorrow we need to deploy organizational structures that exploit these new mechanisms and tactics. This in itself should be good news – after all, it's easier to control a discussion than an oil tanker!

So, what will the marcomms team of tomorrow look like? Firstly, PR or marketing manager of the future should be:

- Tech savvy
- Able to understand and directly address all constituencies/influencers (not just the media)
- Global in their outlook

Able to consult across your organization on interactions that effect every external 'touch point' In the near future, the web will be a central part of every brand and marketing department. Alongside established disciplines such as media relations, internal communications, brand management, and analyst relations will sit a new person – the 'web relations' manager. Her role will be to integrate the web into every aspect of corporate communications, not just as an isolated channel but as a fundamental part of the department's thinking. She'll be up on all the latest trends and possibilities; she'll have a fluent understanding of web technologies; she'll work hand in hand with the company's

web development or IT team; she'll have a discretionary budget; and she'll have a seat at the decision making table for all brand-related discussions. Most importantly, she'll be highly trained in customer relations and able to deal with her public directly. As such, she'll also report on a dotted line to the company's customer service and product development teams.

Web Relations will become a core part of a company's communications mix, and its mission will be to spread messages to new audiences through new direct web-based channels, and to manage various user communities. This is a reality that has been well documented in pioneering firms such as eBay. In fact it's a role that has been forged through necessity in all companies that live and die by the web. Truth is, we'll all exist in a web-first world sooner or later, and so the sooner we can professionalise this role the better.

The good news is that, unlike traditional marcomms disciplines, the role of 'Web Relations Officer' is infinitely more measurable than a press clipping report since the communications practises outlined above can be endlessly analysed (eg, via the number of blog comments, the number of RSS subscribers, and the number of service subscribers, etc).

THE TAKEAWAY

OK, so no 'Web 2.0' manifesto is complete without a list. So here's our call to action. To practise Communications 2.0 is to:

1. Cede a portion of editorial control to your users – give them proper channels where they can get involved.
2. Treat your web site as a database of content, not a static publication – use open standards based technology.
3. Incorporate user-generated content into your web site to help cross and up-sell your services - offer comment sections, forums and content-tagging.
4. Place a web component within every single communications exercise – all your audiences are on the web so this is mandatory (to ignore the web would be like having an early 20th century ad campaign without newspapers!).
5. Look before you leap – Listening and monitoring through tools such as blogs should become a no-brainer. It's an excellent way to dip your toe into the water, understand what's going on and even get input from your community on the best way to pursue further engagement.
6. Assess your organizational readiness and prepare your engagement carefully - you need to consider HR, legal and IT issues before you embark on a new 'communications 2.0' strategy.
7. Develop a new PR policy – decide what you should do, why you're doing it and then, in the words a famous sports shoe manufacturer, JUST DO IT!
8. Consider the use open source software in order to deploy new communications channels cost-effectively – don't reinvent the wheel: the solution is out there somewhere.
9. Introduce new web-based tactics quickly and often – you have nothing to lose – everyone remembers the successes and forgets the (inexpensive) failures.
10. Measure everything that you do, all of the time – it's easy with the web. Make sure you get your hands on decent web site stats and talk to your PR/web agency about how you can track campaigns more effectively.
11. Invest in the tactics that are working and pull the ones that aren't.
12. Approach the discipline of communications as a process, a dialogue – don't be afraid of the market talking back...embrace user comment and content and put mechanisms in place that encourage it – it's far cheaper than a focus group.

Or, if all else fails, just remember that BETA is BETTER. Try new things more often, and talk to more people, more of the time.

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ABOUT SQUIZ

Squiz is one of the world's leading open source software development companies. We give you control in a content-driven world. Our open source CMS, MySource Matrix, helps leading organisations such as the UK's NHS and the Australian Federal Government to manage their content more efficiently and cost-effectively. It also helps top brands such as Future Publishing and Warner Music to sell more content and products to more customers via the web.

Squiz is a privately owned company, founded in Sydney Australia in 1998. Squiz has an international network of offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Hobart and London that provide a local service to hundreds of clients across a broad spectrum of industries. Our MySource Matrix open source CMS is internationally recognized as best in class (Gartner). For further information about Squiz and/or MySource Matrix, contact Squiz on (02) 8507 9900.

ABOUT TEXT100

Text 100 is a global PR agency serving companies that use technology for competitive advantage. Named 2005 Technology Public Relations Agency of the Year by The Holmes Report, Text 100 was built organically from the ground up and uniquely offers the dedication of local agencies and the power and reach of a global firm. With award-winning practices covering all public relations disciplines, Text 100 represents leading brands in 31 offices around the world. Clients of the company include Cisco, Fujifilm, IBM, Philips and Xerox.

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