

# Rolling Forward: Advancing Your Communication Strategy With Social Media

BY ED CAFASSO

**T**he increasing power of social media has rewritten the traditional expectation of success in strategic communications.

Until the proliferation of social media channels leveled the communications playing field, message control had been the guiding principle of any integrated program. Today, the first step toward social media success comes from accepting that you no longer truly control anything online.

“Audiences are starting to trust themselves and their peers much more than traditional sources of information. They still want the information, but they don’t nec-



Christopher Barger

essarily want to come to you to get it,” says Christopher Barger, the director of social media at General Motors.

When Barger joined GM in March 2007, the company’s pioneering FastLane blog had already earned attention and acclaim as a platform for transparent corporate communications. But FastLane was still a controlled environment, and there were hundreds of blogs in which GM did not have a share of voice.

“Our challenge was: How do we start to become part of conversations where they are actually happening?”

How do we earn our way into the communities that are out there? How do we start getting our information from where our audiences are going for information,” Barger recalls.

Traditional advertising, marketing and public relations can influence audiences through awareness and preference, but they are blunt instruments compared with social media, where peer-to-peer conversations shape perceptions with or without the brand’s direct involvement.

“Each individual interaction can have great influence,” Barger says. “After all, we still sell cars one at a time.”

## An online homecoming for Saturn

Near the end of 2007, one GM brand, Saturn, had successfully launched five new crossover products, with a sixth in the wings. But the traditional communications avenues had already been exhausted. Jill Lajdziak, general manager at Saturn, and Steve Janisse, communications manager, needed a way to keep the momentum going.

When a social media content analysis found that hundreds of online conversations were already taking place about Saturn, Lajdziak and

Janisse’s next steps became clear: Create ImSaturn (ur2), an online network for drivers, employees and motor enthusiasts.

“Saturn has always been a social company, beginning with our Saturn Homecoming picnics for customers in the 1990s,” says Janisse, noting that Lajdziak had enjoyed posting on FastLane and interacting with bloggers. “A social network seemed like a logical extension of the Saturn brand and of GM’s social media communications.”

In developing the ImSaturn platform, Saturn hoped for 1,000 active members in the first six months. Launched in April 2008, the site reached that milestone in just three weeks — with the help of other Saturn fan sites, which welcomed and promoted ImSaturn as a collaborator as opposed to a competitor.

The site also fueled enough buzz to trigger top-tier media coverage without any media relations outreach. “The best pitch is being discovered,” Janisse says.

By the end of March, ImSaturn had 4,180 active members and averaged more than 600 visitors per day. Members have contributed more than 5,800 photos and more than 170 videos since its launch.

The site not only helped Saturn energize its base, it also uncovered supply-chain problems and serves as



Steve Janisse

SOCIAL MEDIA



Taking off: Saturn created an online network for drivers, employees and car aficionados.

a valuable channel for the company to talk with stakeholders about Saturn's future when it spins off from GM in the next two years.

Janisse believes that social media needs to be an integral part of the modern strategic communications plan.

"I don't think one can replace the other," he says. "Where social media helps is if you want to take the conversation a bit deeper and engage people. It also has a much longer shelf life than traditional advertising and public relations. It's a unique way to extend the conversation."

**No longer an afterthought**

Barger agrees. "When my team was first formed two years ago, we

were sort of an adjunct — a small group off to the side doing experiments and trying to learn how to do social media well, and working with anyone at GM who would give us the chance to do something new around their program," he recalls.

"Now we've gone from being an afterthought to being among the first areas that someone thinks about whenever new communications strategies are being developed. Social media is a significant part of the strategic planning discussion."

Janisse is a member of Saturn's executive team, which works closely with Lajdziaik, meeting weekly on strategic issues and developing joint communication plans.

"These are tumultuous times," he says. "It's crucial to send a clear, consistent message to all of our audiences: employees, retailers, media, customers and prospects. So, marketing and communications work closely on planning and execution."

Six people serve on social media teams at GM and Saturn combined. At GM, each member is assigned as the touch point for a brand and function within the company. At MS&L Digital, we provide agency support for both GM and Saturn, managing the online channels, planning editorial content, spotting trends and generating reports.

Barger says that the long-term value of social media is hard to ignore, especially as traditional media outlets continue to shrink. Most GM executives have come to view the channel as a strategic contributor.

"There's no time like crunch time to break out of the mold," Barger says. "Especially with what GM is going through right now, this is a much more cost-effective way to reach out to people and to prove that we care about

**Earning trust and credibility through social media:**

Ten lessons learned from Christopher Barger and Steve Janisse

1. Research the conversations occurring about your issues and industry.
2. Determine if your brand is buzzworthy. Is there a passionate base?
3. Integrate social media into your marketing and communications plan.
4. Determine if you are ready to have an honest discussion. Do you have thick skin?
5. Acknowledge who you are and what you are doing in the conversation.
6. Be genuine. Communicate like a real person.
7. Engage in authentic conversation. Talk with people, not at them.
8. Talk about the things the community wants to talk about.
9. Do not try to control the conversation.
10. Be patient and stay committed. Social media takes time and effort. ■

their opinion. It's recognized within the company that one-on-one direct interaction is one of the things that will help turn us around." ■



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