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The Impact of Social Media on an Organisations Brand Image: A Public Relations Perspective

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Declaration

Author's Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Master's Degree (M.A.) in Public Relations with New Media is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfilment for that stated above.

Signed..

Date..

Abstract

There has been an increased interest from academics, public relations professionals and industry professionals in the importance of social media in the role of public relations. With the advent of social media people have found a new platform on which to communicate with each other through conversations, sharing, and networking online. It is more of a two-way conversation, rather than a one-way broadcast like traditional media and this directly affects the way in which public relations practitioners how they manage the reputation of the companies they represent.

A qualitive approach was taken, through industry professional interviews from PR, Social Media, Communications and Marketing backgrounds, to ascertain how social media is impacting on an organisations brand image and how Public relations professionals will have to adapt to the social media phenomenon.

The research findings show how social media is changing the role of PR in relation to dealing with a new and very different type of media, social media, in managing the reputation and brand of businesses. Through the research carried out author learned of the potential social media has in helping enhance the brand image of companies and what tools PR practitioners should utilise in order to achieve this.

It can be concluded that many advantages and disadvantages exist for companies who engage with their consumers on social media platforms. While there are many different tactics used by companies to engage with their consumers , no one set of guidelines can be established universally because each company has to tailor their tactics to the target audience and reflect their own brand image in their message, these are unique to every business and cannot be easily replicated.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

Rationale

Consumers traditionally used the internet to gather information through text audio and video and they used it to buy products and services, communication was one way, simply putting information out for consumption. However customers are increasingly utilising social media platforms like content sharing sites, blogs, social networking and wikis. This represents the social media phenomenon, which can now significantly impact a firm's reputation, sales, and even survival.

Many executives previously ignored or underutilised this form of media because they don't understand what it is, the various forms it can take, and how to engage with it and learn. With the rise of social media businesses have found a new place to market and brand their company, social media sites provide information on what your company is doing and offers a platform to engage with potential customers in a two way conversation that can be used to create a positive brand image and ultimately increase sale but can also generate spiteful negative comments that could hurt the reputation of your business on social media sites.

Having a medium available to connect with customers in a non formal way creates loyalty and awareness but could leave a company vulnerable to hackers and hecklers, with this in mind I believe an investigation into the effects of these sites have on a company's reputation and image to ascertain whether social networking sites are a tool to be used to the advantage of the company or something to be feared.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Questions

The purpose of the study is ascertain the possible advantages and disadvantages of the incorporation of social networking sites in corporations activities and the effects their absence from networking sites might have.

Some of the more specific questions going to be addressed include

- Is social media an effective platform in promoting a good brand image for companies?
- What tools and tactics are used in social media to stand out from a crowded community to enhance brand image?
- Different methods of communication or tactics on your social media sites?
- Social media complements or conflicts with mainstream traditional media?
- Disadvantages of companies using social media?
- Do social media posting reflect a brands identity or the personality of the writer of the posts? (personal touches and humour being expressed through a organisations page)
- The future of social media?

From these questions we can establish a research question

"The impact of social media on an organisations brand image"

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Objectives

Electronic forms of communication and digital technology has changed the face of communication and Public Relations in Ireland. PR professionals need to be aware of these changes and of how these changes can aid them in their work. The translation of information is much more volatile and PR practitioners have more responsibility for messages and the organisations reputation. The internet can be less forgiving than traditional forms of communication. There are number of new challenges for Public Relations practitioners with the evolution of social media and this study is designed to establish them and recommend solutions.

The objective of the study is to analyse the potential benefits of social media for Public Relations professionals and how they are implemented but also to highlight the vulnerabilities attributed with the rise of new media.

Once this research has been undertaken it will be of interest to PR students, PR professionals, Brand managers and those in the business of developing and maintain social networking pages. It will give them an understanding of how social media can be used in conjunction with traditional PR methods to give effective results and indicate where it integrates into the overall PR industry. It aims to give them the tools to search and find social media relevant to them and an insight into how social media can be used to their advantage. It will also be beneficial for those who have a limited understanding of social media and its uses in the business world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 includes some broad indications of what lies ahead in the dissertation including the rationale behind the studies and the objectives of the study.

Chapter 2 contains all the literature researched on the topic that creates a solid base for well informed further study into the topic.

Chapter 3 will outline the methods and procedures of research used to gather the primary research of the study.

Chapter 4 will include the product of the primary research (interviews with professionals) that was gathered to guide and support the study and also detail the analysis of all the primary research and findings gathered to see if they met the objective of the study.

Chapter 5 sums up the research in a short conclusion of the analysed data.

Chapter 6 outlines recommendations based on the information gathered.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to compile a foundation of all relevant information to create a backdrop for analysing the findings and guide the research. The information is taken from a wide variety of different industry professionals from Public Relations/communication, research, marketing and social media.

Public Relations Definition

Public Relations has many definitions that are constantly changing in design and interpretation with the changing roles Public Relations professionals have had to adapt to. Although PR has its foundations in the early 1800s it only really came into an outright profession for the advent of widespread mass media. The emphasis came off the localised, family run firms to large industry giants whose practices were coming into question by the journalists from the emerging newspaper industry. These journalists were able to amass startling public support by printing information the industry giants would rather not be in the public eye.

To counter and defend themselves the large industries started to employ tactics to negate bad press and highlight the positive stories about their company, these tactics are the first basic tools of the emerging PR profession.

Some of the more prominent definitions of Public Relations are that "There is no choice about whether or not to engage in Public Relations. Public Relations exists anyway. The decision an organisation takes is whether or not it tries to manage the Public Relations it has." (P.Seitel, 2007) Implying that Public Relations was always there but is only now being categorised into a management function to be utilised by companies.

"Public Relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations practice is the discipline

which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between and organisation and its publics." (CIPR)the effort must come from and be sustained by the heads of the company, Cutlip Center and Broom say that "one of the few safe generalisations in PR is that an organisations public reputation derives in substantial part of the behaviour of its senior officials" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000)and that the "power comes to the PR function in an organisation when the members of the DC(Dominant coalition) value it as a vital management function"

All of these definitions highlight the fact that PR is about managing communication in order to build good relationships and mutual understanding between an organisation and its most important audiences (Gordon, 1997). But put very simply "Public Relations is exactly that – relationships with publics" - Carty

Brand Image

We are surrounded by many brands in everyday life that, like it or not, effect or spending and product choices. There are many different definitions of a brand and what they mean to a corporation or a consumer. Cateora & Graham describe a brand as the "use of a name, term, sign, symbol (visual and/or auditory, design, or combination thereof intended to identify goods or services of one seller from those of their competitors" (2005) while a simpler definition is saying "a brand is an identifiable entity that makes specific promises of value." (Dolak, 2003)

There are two main sub-categories that make up an effective brand. The first of them is brand image. Dolak states that the brand image of a company is "a consumers perceptions as reflected by the associations they hold in their minds when they think of your brand. " the brand image identifies the initial

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thought a customer is met with and the impression of the brand reflects itself onto the product in question.

The second main sub-category of a brand is brand awareness; brand awareness is when people recognize your brand as yours. This does not mean they have *brand preference* for your brand, it does not necessarily mean they prefer your brand, "attach a high value to, or associate any superior attributes to your brand, it just means they recognize your brand and can identify it under different conditions." (2003)

Brand awareness in turn is split into two categories, of both brand recognition, which is the ability of consumers to confirm that they have previously been exposed to your brand, they have used or see a brands product being used, and brand recall, which reflects the ability of consumers to name your brand when given the product category, category need, or some other similar cue.

There are many perceived benefits of a strong brand, below is a list of benefits identified by Dolak in his book:

- A strong brand influences the buying decision and shapes the ownership experience.
- Branding creates trust and an emotional attachment to your product or company. This attachment then causes your market to make decisions based, at least in part, upon emotion-- not necessarily just for logical or intellectual reasons.
- A strong brand can command a premium price and maximize the number of units that can be sold at that premium.
- Branding helps make purchasing decisions easier. In this way, branding delivers a very important benefit. In a commodity market where features and benefits are virtually indistinguishable, a strong brand will help your customers trust you and create a set of

expectations about your products without even knowing the specifics of product features.

- Branding will help you "fence off" your customers from the competition and protect your market share while building mind share. Once you have mind share, you customers will automatically think of you first when they think of your product category.

- A strong brand can make actual product features virtually insignificant. A solid branding strategy communicates a strong, consistent message about the value of your company. A strong brand helps you sell value and the intangibles that surround your products.

- A strong brand signals that you want to build customer loyalty, not just sell product. A strong branding campaign will also signal that you are serious about marketing and that you intend to be around for a while. A brand impresses your firm's identity upon potential customers, not necessarily to capture an immediate sale but rather to build a lasting impression of you and your products.

- Branding builds name recognition for your company or product.

- A brand will help you articulate your company's values and explain why you are competing in your market. (2003)

A strong brand basically has the ability to drive interest in the business helping revenue and gives the Public Relations professional a strong standing when dealing with crisis management issues. So if social media can help develop a brand it should become a priority for businesses, after all (Cateora & Graham, 2005) say that "a successful brand is the most valuable resource a company has".

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is the term given to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 esssentially refers to the transition from static

HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users. Communities developed online to enable collaboration, sharing and creativity among users. These communities included social networking sites, blogs and wikis. Web 2.0 empowered people to create, gather and share information. The term web 2.0 is described by Solis & Breakenridge as "a new way for groups of people to converse, and it presented an opportunity for them to gather and then share information collectively" (2009)

New Media

New media is a generic term for the many different forms of electronic communication that are made possible through the use of computer technology. It is a term meant to encompass the emergence of digital, computerised and communication technologies. The most important of all these technologies is the Internet. "The Internet has evolved into a second generation: Web 2.0. It is now possible for PR, multimedia and the Web to intersect and create a new breed of PR practitioners" (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). "One key feature of new and emerging technologies is that they are often portable and facilitate mobility in communications. New media has a wider reach than anything that came before it" (Galloway, 2005). Wireless and digital technological improvements to media have lifted previous restrictions that required connecting to a physical network or machine.

New media are enabling content delivery on demand by consumers. Examples of this media include Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds that allow favourite news and information updates to be delivered to users as soon as they appear online without the user having to search for content. Other media include: video news releases (VNRs) which are delivered digitally via satellite or the Internet, podcasting that allows for online delivery of audio programs, VODcasting that allows for online delivery of visual programming and digital television that allows users to customise

their viewing. These new and emerging media are facilitating two-way communication through the availability of email, text messaging (SMS), multimedia messaging (MMS), instant messaging, online chat forums and blogging.

One of the most attractive key concepts of new media is the use of user generated content. User Generated Content refers to a manner in which we all are capable of producing new media content. Anyone with a camera phone can "report" the news. The role of the pro-sumer and the phenomenon of citizen journalism have evolved with the rise of new media.

Many believe newspapers and magazines are going out of use. News out of old media camps of late include numerous shut downs, layoffs, and some are even switching to an all digital format. Some fault social media as the cause of old media's decline. This study tracks the debate of old media versus social media in an ever-evolving landscape. (businessweek)

Key New Media Terminology

Web 2.0 is the term given to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 basically refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users.

Convergence is the process of technologies coming together from different directions. The mobile telephone is the product of convergence between telecommunications and computers.

User Generated Content refers to a manner in which we all are capable of producing new media content. Public Relations practitioners must acknowledge that new technology today means that anyone with a camera

phone can "report" the news. The role of the prod-user and the phenomenon of **citizen journalism** have evolved with the rise of new media.

Interactivity is generally seen as a central feature of new media and can occur at many different levels and degrees of engagement. Users can become fully immersed in their experiences by viewing material, commenting on it and then actively contributing to it. It enables a more powerful user engagement.

Social Media

Social Media essentially is a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online. Most social media services encourage discussion, feedback, voting, comments, and sharing of information from all interested parties.

It is more of a two-way conversation, rather than a one-way broadcast like traditional media. Another unique aspect of social media is the idea of staying connected or linked to other sites, resources, and people.

"Social Media comprises the tools for people to create, share and publish content online. It is the name given to blogs, wikis, online communities, social networking sites", but is always evolving as new digital and technological innovations become available. In response to this, "companies are finally learning how to use the Internet as a tool for marketing and PR campaigns. The tools people use to share content online are the same tools PR practitioners can use to reach them. PR has to go where the customers are, using the channels of influence that reach them" (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). These tools offer a huge advantage to the PR industry over traditional methods used.

"A strong company voice on social media should emphasize the company's values, objectives and key differentiators that set it apart from its

competitors. These can be expressed in the tone of the communication and the content that is shared with community members and the target audience." (Reid)

Social Networking

Social networking sites have gained a lot of popularity since there creation with almost all 3rd level students using one or the other such site. These have played a crucial role in bridging boundaries and enabling them to communicate on a common platform. It has become a popular and a potential mean for them to stay friends with the existing ones and to grow up their social circle at least in terms of acquaintances. This has grown into a socialising evolution where everybody uses and communicates through on social networking site or another.

With the rapid growth of people who use or have access to the Internet, social networking websites are a must for the Internet community to stay in touch with each other. Social networking web sites help people keep in touch with old friends, make new friends, distribute new data or product, and many more aspects of our everyday lives.

The first official social networking web site was Classmates.com which was founded in 1995 (Social Network, 2007). What followed was a slow but steady growth in numbers of social networking websites to the number of sites we have today.

The reason that social networking websites work so well is that, they start of small and then grow in a vibrant extended community. The site starts off with a few people who then tell their friends about the site, then those friends tell their friends about the site and soon the site is a interconnected network of friends, acquaintances, or just random people. These web sites are made to "...allow users to create a "profile" describing themselves and to exchange

public or private messages and list other users or groups they are connected to in some way." (Free Online Dictionary of Computing)

Most social networking websites are tailored to fit a certain type of community such as the college community being mirrored by Facebook.com or a music/party community mirrored by MySpace.com. With the rapid growth of social networking web sites and their global scale usage, anyone can find a community to interact and engage with that suits their interests.

Social networking web sites contain many potentially dangerous elements and many people are recently concerned about some major problems that they contain. One such problem is privacy issues. With social networking web sites like Facebook.com and MySpace.com, it can be very easy to retrieve personal information about someone and potentially use it to harm them. In a case with MySpace.com, the availability of being able to customize one's own site has allowed people to use phishing html code to create phishing profiles that allows that person to access anyone's profile who have visited the phishing profile. Phishing can often lead to the loss of personal information such as usernames, credit card numbers, and passwords. This in turn causes great privacy issues since that person can now access personal information and then sell it off to marketing companies for a profit. This selling of information to companies has led to the rise in spam emails that we all receive.

Despite the potential risks, social media sites continue to expand in the form of their reach and their activities. These issues have not proved to be a disincentive a company, most businesses today cannot afford to ignore the opportunities offered by social media and networking.

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PR 2.0

Brian Solis coined the term PR 2.0 in the late 1990s. Solis & Breakenridge say that with PR 2.0 "we no longer rely solely on promoting products through 3rd parties. We can take off our marketing hats and have real conversations with people". (2009) In a Web 2.0 world, where thousands of communities are built, the traditional methods of web communication cannot be incorporated and are not suitable. Web 2.0 technologies combined with an audience's desire to build and share content has transformed our industry. As a result, PR professionals are incorporating Web 2.0 resources into their brand's PR strategy and planning for more targeted and impactful Web communication. The implementation of social media is not without risks, but these risks can be mitigated through the development of policies and employing new media experts. The speed with which news can travel and inaccurate myths spread as a result of inaction with new media technologies can have a lasting effect and caution needs to be taken when engaging with them.

Web 2.0 has 'democratised' the internet, and PR 2.0 is essential for professionals to keep up with the changing methods of communication. The PR industry must take notice of the huge power this kind of media has upon organisations. PR 2.0 is simply when this form of media is used. When the organisations join in, not just at a spectator level, or a superficial attempt to fit with what publics expect, but to actually join in and take part in conversations will it become effective. Using the format to not only communicate with the stakeholders at a business level, but also personally.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Models of Communication

Press Agentry

Press Agentry is one-way communication, which means it is without a dialogue with the intended recipient. Press agentry is a sales-driven approach, it aggressively and unapologetically does whatever it takes to get the client exposure, it is not above bending the truth or outright lying to reach its pragmatic objective (Horton, 2003). It serves a propaganda function we would associate with dictatorships but in Ireland this model is most common in celebrity PR where individuals are publicised through media coverage. Press agentry "emphasises generation of media coverage of an organisation or individual by any means necessary, including deception and trickery (Dozier, 1995). A modern day advocate of the press agentry model is publicist Max Clifford, whose name is synonymous with front page exclusives as well as some of the most successful businesses and personalities in the world.

Public Information Model

The public information model differs from the press agentry model in that it is "the dissemination of accurate information" (Jo, 2005). It is related to the press agentry model in that it is still one-way in nature as it involves the dissemination of information to the public. "Accuracy is now important, indeed essential" (Theaker, 2004).The main aim of this model is to inform rather than to persuade. The PR practitioner functions essentially as an in-house journalist, whose job it is to report objectively information about their organisation or client to the public as unbiased as possible.

Two-way Asymmetrical Communication

The two-way asymmetrical model of communication is the first of the communication model that introduces the idea of feedback or two-way communication. This model is rooted in scientific persuasion and aims to generate agreement between the organisation and it's publics by bringing them around to their way of thinking. The practitioner gets feedback from the public and then applies the latest communication and persuasion theories to persuade the public. Evaluative research is conducted but the results are used strictly to alter public attitudes in favour of the organisation's objectives. Grunig argues that the asymmetrical model may be unethical as it is "a way of getting what an organisation wants without changing its behaviour or without compromising" (Grunig, 1992).

Two-way Symmetrical Communication

The two-way symmetrical model of communication is seen as the most ethical and the most effective of the four models. Two-way symmetrical communication's main aim is to generate mutual understanding. "The practitioner acts as a negotiator between the interests of the public and the interests of the organisation. This model attempts to achieve balance by adjusting the relationship between organisations and publics and focusing on negotiating mutually beneficial outcomes" (Dozier, 1995).

"Persuasion still plays a part in this model, where both the public and the organisation endeavour to influence one another" (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). There has been much criticism of this model with many believing that it is too idealistic. L'Etang argues that "the Public Relations practitioner is never disinterested. There is always someone to represent and since it is a rarity for organisations not to act in their own interests, the communication is still considered asymmetrical. " (L'Etang, 1996)

New Media Vs "Old" Media

The way we consume information has drastically changed in the last century, information is not passed by the traditional methods of news – journalist – public, but travels freely between all interested parties because of the rise of citizen journalism "the traditional journalists of years past are not the only reporters interested in the news and offering their opinions about events affecting their lives. Everyday people are now part of the equation." (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009)

Web 2.0 Tools

A **Social Networking Site** is a Web site that provides a virtual community for people interested in a particular subject, to simply "hang out" together or to increase their circle of acquaintances. There are dating sites, friendship sites, sites with a business purpose and hybrids that offer a combination of these. Globally, hundreds of millions have joined one or more social sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn.

If you have a question, a social networking site might be the best place to get an answer. In fact, many businesses such as United Airlines and Hyatt Hotels now have a profile on Twitter. Followers can get immediate answers to their questions. When done tastefully, social networking gives you the opportunity to educate people about your business. Since most social networks do not charge a membership fee, they provide a cost-effective way to promote your business.

Video News Releases (VNRs) PR professionals can now tell their stories through video much easier than ever. One can launch a new product, document trends or shifts in consumer behaviour or tell a compelling story the VNR can be a great visual communication tool in broadcast television without having to send crews around the country or world. Social video can

benefit and provide value to any business of any size as it enables the business to demonstrate a product in a way that is more interesting than just reading text.

Social Media Release (SMR) A Social Media Release (SMR) is a new way to reach groups by employing social media tools in news releases. These releases include a list of bullets, quotes and links that include search engine optimisation (SEO) keywords to improve pickup by Google and Yahoo. The difference between traditional releases, new media release and an SMR is intent, media, socialisation and distribution (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009)

Web 2.0 has enjoyed explosive growth and has affected nearly every industry in every country in the world. It is changing how we socialize, how we educate ourselves and how we do business.

Today, social media tools are accessible to brands large and small to reach audiences who want to control their own communication. In a Web 2.0 world, where thousands of communities are built, the traditional methods of web communication are not flexible enough to react and adapt quickly. Web 2.0 technologies combined with an audience's desire to build and share content has transformed our industry.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Research Design

The aim of this chapter is to "identify a rigorous and scientific" approach that will be used to gather the relevant information and the "approach to the justification of the various decisions made in the execution of the research process" (Donovan, 2011). Burns & Bush define research design as a set of advance decisions that make up the master plan specfying the methods and procedures for collecting and analysing the needed information. (2008) It is a road map that is pursued in completing a study. "A research design will ensure that the study will be relevant to the problem and will use economical procedures" (Churchhill & Iacobucci, 2002). "A proper research design is necessary for the researcher to achieve the research objectives" (Burns & Bush, 2008).

There are no model research designs to guide the researcher, since many different designs may achieve the same outcome therefore "Implementation of the research design should result in all information needed to structure or solve the main research question and objectives" (Malhotra, 2002). "With a research design in place the next stage for the researcher is to decide how, when and where the required data is to be gathered" (Domegan and Fleming, 1999).

Qualitive Vs Quantitive

The first step in collecting the necessary data is choosing the method of data collection; these can be loosely divided into two categories, qualitive of quantitive methods.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Quantitative data is described by Glatthorn, as Data which is measurable, "countable" or quantifiable, i.e. numeric information while Qualitative data is typically data which is hard to measure, count, or express as numerical information, usually in textual or narrative format (1998)

Quantitative: derives from a "positivist epistemology" (O'Suilleabhain, 2010), believes we can "prove things" with numbers, data with an emphasis on experiment, measurement and search for relationships Qualitative is "phenomenological", reality is in the perceptions of individuals which focuses on a emphasis on understanding things in a naturally-occurring setting.

Though the two approaches are often contrasted they can actually be combined, like using qualitative data to interpret quantitative data or use quantitative follow-up to interpret qualitative data. Some research **instruments** are more quantitative/qualitative than others, for example Quantitative data includes information gathered from Closed Questionnaires, Tests, Experiments, Highly structured observation while Qualitative research uses Unstructured or semi-structured interviews, Open (free-text) questionnaires and unstructured observations

Qualitative Research

For the purpose of this study, qualitative research was best suited to meet the author's objectives and to deal with the author's research questions as stated for this dissertation. Qualitative research is interpretive; therefore, the researcher needs to collect in-depth information to be able to answer the research questions, which is something that cannot be done if the researcher uses static, quantitative methods.

"Qualitative research is designed to be an enquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in

a natural setting" (Creswell, Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 1994). Qualitative researchers often study only a single setting or a small number of individuals or sites, using theoretical or purposeful sampling rather than probability sampling (Bickman, 1998). Qualitative research is known more for conducting smaller and more in-depth studies, which is only possible if you have a limited number of units to examine (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials including interview transcripts, case studies, recordings and notes, observational records and notes, audiovisual materials and personal experience materials such as artefacts, and journal and diary information (Denzin, 2000).

Qualitative research is carried out when the study is exploratory, which would suggest that not much has been previously written about the topic, and the researcher seeks to listen to informants to build up a picture based on their opinions and ideas (Creswell, 1994).

This research is an exploratory study which is qualitative in nature, in order to assess the impact social media has on the development of the brand image of a company. The researcher determined qualitative research to be more beneficial as such little research has been carried out in the area of branding and social media being linked to PR. Subsequently, there are no theories to test and no statistical information to aid in quantitative research. Furthermore, little has been done by way of qualitative research to understand the impact of social media on the rebranding and in particular, little or no research has been carried out concerning its relation to PR. For the purpose of this study, the research aims to gain knowledge of different perspectives of the impact social media has had on the branding/rebranding of a established company. I think the choice of choosing quantitive research methods can be summed up by the following description Qualitative methods are typically more flexible – that is, they allow greater spontaneity between the researcher and the participant. Qualitative methods ask predominantly

"open-ended" questions that are not required to be worded in exactly the same way with each participant. With open-ended questions, participants are afforded the opportunity to give elaborate responses and provide greater detail than is normally the case with quantitative methods. Qualitative research has been highlighted as the perfect research strategy for exploring new areas in study and developing hypotheses (Mack, 2005).

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Data Collection

For the case of this dissertation a qualitive method approach will be taken to get a more personal feel to the information gathered in the primary research to hopefully expand and build on the information.

The qualitive research will take shape in the form of five personal interviews with professionals who deal with the brand of companies based in Ireland and/or manage the online new media of that company. Qualitative data collection methods were viewed as generating the greatest results for this study, therefore making it the methodology that best supported the purpose of this study.

The five interviewees chosen are:

- Niamh Skally
    - Centra Brand Manager
- Lillian Courtney
    - Managing Director, LC Consultancy
- John Dineen
    - Director, C2 IT learning services
- Robert Hartnett
    - Managing Director, Hartnett Public Relations
- Owen Lynch
    - Supervalu Assistant Brand Manager

Interviews

The best way to gather information on how companies are actually using social media to promote their brands and the difficulties they are inclined to face is to actually interview them. A personal one on one interview was organised with a number of industry professionals to gather inside information into the running of the sites and the rules and regulations they use to control their output of news, information and other methods they use to promote their brand online.

The benefits of the interviews are that it can obtain relevant information specific to the research by directing the questions to the chosen topics, it also allows you to target a specific audience to maximise the potential return of information by interviewing the right people. The interviews can also be structures as to allow for comparison between one interviewee and another while at the same time allows you to converse freely to explore general views and opinions in more detail. It also is a better method for getting more sensitive information because of the personal nature of the interview

A good descriptions of the values of an interview over other research is that "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone else's mind but to assess the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe" (Patton, 1990).

Choosing the interviewees

The people used for the interview were chosen for their experience and knowledge in the subject. They were chosen because it was felt they would be in the best position to give the information needed for the research but at the same time should be able to give an unbiased opinion on the subject. The

interviewees were also taken from a wide pool of different backgrounds and business types from entertainment, education to grocery.

The interviews were organised by sending introductory emails to the candidates, which outlined general information regarding the researcher, the topic chosen and the significance of the candidate's participation. After initial contact was made with the participants, another email followed with the attached interview questions for each participant. Telephone calls followed up the emails to arrange the interviews at a time and location convenient to both the researcher and the interviewees.

Conducting the interviews

The interviews were held in either the subjects place of business or in hotels agreed on by the candidate. Most of the interviews lasted for approximately forty-five minutes and were recorded by a digital recorder providing a permanent record of the interview to be transcribed later, recording the allowed the author to focus my full attention on the interview and keep the interviewee focused on the relevant information.

A lot of thought had to go into the development of the questions to ensure they kept in track with the research objectives and questions. The interviews allowed the author to adapt the questions to the type of business the interviewee worked with and made it applicable to each subject category, including PR, social media and branding. Many of the questions were used in multiple interviews with only a few being tailored or excluded for certain interviews. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recording in verbatim by listening to the digital recording. Although this was time-consuming, it allowed the researcher to obtain specific information and direct quotations from the interviews.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to using the in-depth interview as a research method. There is a chance that interviewees will be prone to bias and not be entirely truthful in their responses because they are professionals in the field and would not want to undermine their own career.

This also opens up the issue of validity and reliability. Every effort was taken in creating the right questions to allow for minimum bias and control the interview but some trailing is to be expected. Time management when carrying out an interview and the analysis is essential. It can be a very time consuming process, so care was taken to include time for transcription and analysis of the collected data.

There is very little written on the subject the interdependence between social media and branding together. The researcher hoped to address this imbalance with the primary research that has been carried out. The scope of research was also limited during the data collection stage i.e. the number of interviews and there distribution.The researcher strived to get a larger amount of candidates from the PR industry as well as people from the brand management sector.

However, conducting interviews with a representative from every PR company as well as more people from social media or communication backgrounds would have been impossible due to geographical, cost and time restrictions. This will limit the findings as some candidates that were not interviewed may have revealed some interesting findings through their opinions, beliefs and experiences of social media and the celebrity industry. To eradicate interview bias, the researcher ensured that the interviewees spoke their mind for whatever length of time without interruption. On hearing the interviewee's responses, the researcher managed their tone of voice, body language and responses in order to achieve a non-judgemental tone towards the responses of the interviewees.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Discarding Alternative Research Methods

When carrying out qualitative research there are other research methods at your disposal, these can include focus groups, questionnaires, case studies and action research. Due to the nature of the research question, carrying out the in-depth interviews was more fitting with the results wished to achieve. The research methods chosen were very time consuming and it was thought that they would be sufficient in addressing the research strategy.

Ethical Issues

The researcher has a moral and professional obligation to be ethical in the research process. The researcher has a responsibility to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of participants. The following emphasise the ethical conduct and responsibilities employed by the researcher.

1. All participants took part in the research voluntarily.
2. All participants were given a copy of questions via email before the interview process.
3. The research objectives were articulated verbally and in writing so that they were clearly understood by the participants.
4. The participants were asked for their permission to record the interviews and focus group using a Dictaphone.
5. Transcriptions were made available to all participants.
6. Written information to proceed with the study was received by all participants.
7. The final decision regarding the participants' anonymity rests with the participants.

Therefore, the research is of a high ethical standard and the data was used only for its stated purpose.

"A lot of valuable information can be gained through an interview, especially in non-literate populations. Interviews allow researchers, in partnership with an effective interpreter, to delve deeper into issues of interest and follow up on conversational cues in a way that simple survey research simply does not allow. Interviews also strengthen the relationship between the interpreter and the researcher, as well as the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study. Interviews allow the researcher much greater insight into the population of interest, but this insight comes with certain risks that the researcher must address *before* and *during* the interview process. Remember, a researcher who is proactive in addressing possible complications will be more successful and will conduct his or her project in a more ethical manner than a researcher who is not as vigilant." (unite for sight, 2009)

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter is designed present "data of a primary nature that has been gathered in the research process" (Donovan, 2011) the findings are supported by quotations from the transcripts of the interviews carried out by over the course of the dissertation. From the transcripts common themes have been identified, I have outlined main topics of interest to the study.

There are a few topics that the interview has to cover; the first is to understanding the reasons behind the company's choice to become involved in social media, when and why they decided to make themselves take part in using social media tools to enhance their company.

The next question was to find in what manner to use social media, some use it as a further customer service tool others see it as a another form of advertising and basically post special offers but the most prevalent use of social media in the interviewed companies is the use of it as a brand enhancement tool.

Also the dissertation needs to ascertain the potential pitfalls of using social media and identify the preferred methods of dealing with these problems.

These companies used their facebook pages to express the brand identity they wanted to express to the public like in the case of Centra Ireland a young, fun and vibrant page was set up with competitions to reflect the perceived customer base.

Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis

Why did you decide to use social networking sites?

From the interviews the general consensus was why wouldn't I use social media? Everybody recognised the phenomenon of the rise of social media and most viewed it as a necessity to involve themselves in social media to stay in competition with competitors and there's a recent perceived expectation that they should be involving themselves in social media. Although some admit the return from social media sites such as facebook are hard to gauge they all acknowledge the potential the medium could posses.

As a foundation the interviewees pointed out that social media sites were first and foremost used to create interest in the company, to remind people of the company and what it does and effectively maintaining brand awareness. The second important point most interviewees seemed to focus on was the creation of a dialogue with their customers by either making conversation topics that bring people together on the companies page or by addressing problems much the same way a customer service page would do so.

Niamh Skally described the importance of Centra's Facebook page and its development by saying *"As an organisation it's very important it will continue to be important but I believe facebook as an organisation will have to adapt their strategy over the next few years, there's an element of wear-out, people are doing the exact same thing, most brands tactics are very similar. If I recall correctly it was April 2010 that we re-launched the Centra facebook page, there had been one set up previously but it wasn't set up as a business profile so it was a personal one was probably the wrong way to do it and there was only about 400 fans, so when I came onto the project it was April 2010 I worked with an agency called radical in Dublin and there are a specialist digital and social media agency and we wrote a strategy for the page and our vision for it and we re-launched in April and we've grown from a base of 400 to nearly 2000 fans since then so you know it required a lot of creativity and investment you know but we do believe it is doing good things for the brand."*

How did you decide on how to position your brand?

When looking for the type of models for a company to base you brand on the interviewees all expressed that they looked extensively at the leading brands in there given markets, brands that they felt used their social networking facilities effectively and gained a good response, Niamh Skally says in the development of the new Centra page that *"in terms of inspirational brands we certainly would of looked at the UK market before we built our own page and looked at a lot of the UK supermarkets through it that had an established presence and things like Starbucks and Mc Donald's and Dunken donuts the really big American brands there far more literate in the space because obviously social media was far more advanced in the us before it came to Europe so we learned from them in terms of what they did and what we liked, big brand behaviour so we aspire a lot to them."*

How do you utilise social media to aid the business?

From the interviews it became clear that the companies in question utilised the same facebook pages in different ways, some saw it as an extension of their customer care services focusing on the addressing of customer queries and complaints, they used this because of its transparent nature and it lended itself to the developing a good corporate image for their customers.

Other interviewees stated that a main activity on social networking sites, namely Facebook, was the purchasing of ads on the sites sidebar aimed at the company's ideal demographic, this was perceived as quite an effective tool because it allowed the company to target directly the potential customers of most interest to them effectively using the customers own information they had posted freely on the site.

Others used the built in facebook competitions system to get people involved in their site by offering tickets to events or free products that would be of interest to the target market. Because of budgetary issues only the larger companies partake in this activity and refer to the strict limitations and guidelines set out by facebook of the competitions run on their service, but each of them that took part in creating competitions highlight how effective

they have been at driving interest onto the page and developing awareness of the company.

Centra are one of the companies using the competitions to gain interest "First of all we built the page with a view to having a central destination for Centra online, so obviously we have our website centra.ie, but we knew that facebook was a unique opportunity in that it enabled us to have dialogue with our shoppers so it was a two way conversation whereas centra.ie was only a one way, wed post something and that's it, it was static, so we wanted to really create a hub where anything you needed to know about the brand, would be in one place, but also where it project the brand personality which we viewed as really important, so we wanted Centra to come across as a youthful energetic, dynamic, innovative brand as you can see from a lot of what we created, its clean and fresh and modern and it appeals to a younger target so really for us facebook is a way to project the essence of the brand toward that, it really gave the true personality of Centra, so we had that very much in mind at the start and from there really we built the page and grown our fan base and how we have done that is through of rotating ads on facebook so you can buy a lot of advertising so there's kind of a two pronged approach firstly it's the ongoing ad inventory that you can buy on facebook which our agency buy and manage for us and that targets our target segment so a single guy for example, male living in a urban area aged between 18-30, we are targeting specifically for him so that we reach him so we do that by going through the ongoing ad inventory with facebook. The second piece is any brand campaigns that we have on at a time we also make sure there's a call to action on facebook so driving traffic through, be it with the GAA or where talking about some new bakery product that were launching if we're talking about price cuts we always make sure there's a call to action with facebook and that really is key driver. in terms of driving numbers it's through advertising and then once they arrive at our page they need to have a positive brand experience and we have done a number of competitions over the past 18 months and they have been very successful to date, our probably biggest one is that we actually doubled our fan base in a two week period where we went from 25000 to 50000 Was at Christmas so basically it was the creative advent calendar that you opened a door every day and you

got a prize search everyday for a prize we gave away things like digital cameras, iphones vouchers and that doubled turnover so yes there very effective and I suppose it creates a fun place, we want consumers to feel rewarded and to feel that they can win something and have a positive experience with the brand.

In the case of a social media company that operates completely online fully utilising the tools provided by social media is paramount *"ok so when you were choosing witch college to do your business course in, what we wanted to do is, you went to CIT right? so you looked at CIT right but maybe you might of chosen a different college if you could of followed each course of each college so you could see if they had good social activity there and the types of questions that are coming in about the courses so you basically get a much better insight into the courses that are available rather than just reading what cit put out there about their business course or other colleges put out about their positions so where trying to create a loop between experts and between the instructors and people who are interested in doing the courses and also people who are actually studying there, at the moment because it's tricky for you as a perspective student to hook up with people already doing the course unless you already know someone already doing it already, so it can potentially let you hook up with people who can give you an insight into the what actually happens and ask questions like what's it like and what are the lecturers like, is it very intense? Is it semesterised? What are the exams like that kind of stuff you know"*

Another potential tool that can be used are partnerships, Supervalu uses partnerships that will appeal most to their key demographics, *"we got a sponsorship partner in the form of EU mom, they work with proctor and gamble and we ran a competition with them and basically they supplied a years free baby products to the mother who answered a question correctly......that partnership got uss 20,000 followers in the space of two weeks because it targeted the people who would most likely be using our page".*

All agreed on that whatever tactic used whether it is a competition, videos, partnerships or just comments, continuous engagement is necessary, Rob Hartnett describes what he thinks the main focuses of business should be *"the most important thing is that you are willing to listen, that you are willing to engage with people, it has to look nice but within twitter and facebook particularly you have so many of these devices[holds up a smart phone] now you have got your iphones your ipads you've got PCs you've got Macs, you've got so many media devices that you can never be sure about which way it will actually physically look, the way that people are actually engaging with it so it's like a band it might look really good but if the music isn't any good then it really doesn't matter, social media has to be about engagement, the brand will be strong enough, if you're a big brand, your strong enough to actually engage people that they want to come and listen to what you have to say and they want to come and talk to you, if you don't talk back to them then there gone it's just another faceless corporate site, it's just another website, it's just another TV ad it's not what social media is all about, so most important thing is engagement, second most important thing is engagement, third most important thing is engagement, you really do have to answer the question and put forward content people are going to find interesting and when they do find it interesting and when they start to have a conversation back with you, engage with them and make sure your doing what social media does which is to be social."*

The perceived benefits of Social Media

All sources focus on the point of social media allowing you to target your market to specifically who you want and the potential of avoiding expensive print and radio advertisements, it takes out the middle-man and lets the companies deal directly with the consumers, not only that but it creates a much more in-depth two-way asymmetrical communication.

The larger companies interviewed stress that social media is a very effective branding tool that creates a positive, responsible and approachable image of

the company that gives the brand a more personal nature instead of an uncaring cooperate view.

"I don't even see the negative posts as a particularly bad thing I think it's really positive because when someone does come on and have a go they genuinely had a poor experience with the brand so I think it's a great opportunity for us to build on our weaknesses learn where there's issues I really don't see a lot of negativity with it in terms of social media in general I think the downside of it is its taking people away from one to one interaction which is quite sad but that's not social media that's the digital age, the whole world people are now texting and emailing when they could of picked up the phone or called around to someone's house so I think it's about bringing people together but ultimately it probably really isn't putting people into to digital spac3e where there not having social interaction so I would see that as the downside but in terms as facebook itself a brand medium it's a wonderful opportunity to talk to your audience." Niamh Skally

A big positive from most of the is the inbuilt feature of facebook analytics which is used by the companies to create reports on everything from demographics to site hit rates, this allows the company to get real time information equivalent to expensive market research for free, something that is considered to be very expensive.

"so on a monthly basis we get a report in from our agency all about wall comments and likes growth usage frequency and demographics so you can see our numbers growing depending on what campaign it's on, all our comments it goes on about quality interactions, there is very detailed statistical data available in the background. We know exactly that 69% of our audience are female and where there from, what county."[Niamh Skally]

"Old Media Vs "New Media"

While the interviewees point to new media, especially the use of facebook, as a key tool in they use in getting in contact with their customers the traditional methods were defiantly not to be forgotten.

Most said that social media would never replace the traditional methods but instead it has become a key integrated part in their activities. Between the candidates interviewed its agreed that print and radio will continue to be dominant forms of communication with their publics and that for the foreseeable future new media lacks the strength to be a standalone method of communication.

"it's not something that replace traditional media, were never going to say that we're not going to bother with the advertising or radio and where going to put our money into this, it needs to compliment it and be integrated with it but it's not about going for just paid for media, even internally it's all facebook, its fine its important but we can't forget our roots, it compliments what we're doing, it's a very powerful tool and it allows us to talk to people in a way we never could before but it's not about replacing so, if you go into Centra around the corner and you have a bad experience no amount of social media is going to change your perception of the brand. Year on year where putting more money into digital, were following where people are going because there's less and less time watching TV or the news papers and we know that for a fact but there spending time online."[Niamh Skally]

On the long term some of the candidates stated that at the very least it will continue to grow in importance and eventually become the dominant platform of communication with their publics, John Dinneen says that "I think in the long term it will replace it to be honest id say if we look at where we spend our marketing zero would go offline everything would be online, where at the other end of the spectrum to most businesses in that we live online, but definitely, we spend a good bit of time in silicon valley and if you even look at the way even coffee shops and you know local bookstores you have every single one of them at a cash register you have their twitter name on the back of the cash register saying find us on twitter and there at whatever their coffee shop name is on twitter so you see their using an offline method to promote themselves, trying to put people online, so I think in ways they complement each other but i think where the balance where companies found there main

marketing area will continue to shift from offline to online, it's absolutely inevitable."

But even further development into the social media side of creating awareness wont specifically lower costs for companies, Niamh Skally says that *" it may surprise some people that social media is quite expensive, it's not cheap, there's a perception out there that it is a really cheap medium, now it can be but in order for it to work hard you need to invest in it so buy your advertising and target it correctly and to do that you need to buy the space like you would an outdoor billboard or a radio ad by equally there's a resource required there so we work with the agency who need to manage all that for us and they charge us. Ya keeping it creative is a challenge without a doubt and I'm on facebook like everyone from our generation it's the same when you log on and check your wall and brands are talking the same way and so I think there's a responsibility on brands to try and differentiate which we try to do and its challenging but I do think an expectation out there for facebook to maybe try and ease up on their terms and conditions and there very strict in terms of running competitions and all that kind of thing so there will have to be a period of transition where they'll be looking to reinvigorate it"*

Rob Hartnett says that "I think it complements it but in the same way as motion pictures replaced silent movies, television replaced radio but then radio comes back alive again and that different media will always emerge to capture peoples imagination and to capture the way people are engaging, it has to be disruptive in order to muscle its way onto the pitch so to speak, or else people won't take any notice of it so it has to be different but in time the fact that coca cola, eircom and Guinness all get engaged in social media means that they kind of put manners on it and begin to shape it into more of a corporate styled approach, design from the outside world comes in and shapes social media, twitter will change over time from where it was which was absolute rubbish, you know the "I had corn flakes for my breakfast this morning" that kind of thing you don't see any more. twitter has changed remarkably, twitter is a media source, I use twitter as my web browser for the most part because I've got people in my own timeline that are interested

in what I'm interested in and they will actually tell me things that I would of previously found through a browser,"

In- House or external contractors

The use of external companies to control and monitor a facebook pages has become common place in medium to large businesses, from my interviews most people controlling social media pages are of marketing or PR backgrounds and lack the technical skills to implement the more advanced tools facebook has to offer when asked what level of activity Centra Ireland participates in-house she says its *"very little to be honest so because our page is quite significant, facebook control comes down very heavily if we say for example, we were just doing daily posts saying "hi how are you, where doing such and such in Centra HQ " that's fine but the majority of our work is not about that its more about competitions and so a tab needs to be built on the wall and to do that it requires Tec expertise so there's app developers at the agency we have and so the majority isn't simply updates so we can't bring it in house so we end up just managing it, I suppose in terms of what we do in-house we sign off the content schedule for the week in advance so we just say what were going to talk about and draft the posts the agency does that they send it across to us and we approve it but it's very little apart from just having a vision for the medium managing it you know keeping an eye on it, I mean I check on it more or less every day, some days I wouldn't, but the majority of the time I would and making sure the agency are coming in on cost."*

"It's very much developer stuff, it's not easy basically all these kind of things are expensive activities. We try to respond to as many comments as possible, we wouldn't reply to all of them but at least all the negative ones, so you have all the brands coming on trying to footfall too there places, with this spam we leave it as it is, because the new layout, there was a time when on the old page those would of appeared on this wall but now it doesn't actually show them anymore, it's just a non issue with us, we don't really see it as a problem, where not in the business of going around deleting other peoples posts, well get people

who come on and give out, but on the whole were very lucky. when we were doing our homework, we spent a lot of time analysing Marks and Spencer's in the UK and spar, there was a time there when spar had super negative comments, people just really giving out, they actually had 4 individual comments and each comment was negative which was bad, there are certain brands that we'd admire and Marks and Spencer's would probably be a good example while there tactics in terms of strategies are very different to what we use it for, they use it almost like a customer service desk so people are coming on and giving out about online shopping or other issues they may have with the service, it's a customer service and queries page, it's not meant to be but it has manifested itself into that whereas we see it as a positive brand experience page so where fortunate in that respect, Dunken Donuts in the us I really like a lot of the stuff they do they thought a lot about how to interact with their customers and I love this piece that they do which is fan of the week so basically a couple of million fans and everyday fans come on and just post a picture of them at Dunken Donuts and out of the hundreds of thousands off pictures posted they pick one and that becomes there fan of the week and I think it's a very cool tactic that we might try for Centra soon, if we did it for Centra theirs a real personal connection that has the potential to be really fun an create a lot of interest. they has been that now for a while and it obviously working for them and its nice cheap activity there's not that much to it, and it rewards people and it gets people really engaging with the brand so, I mean you'd have to be really engaged with the brand if you're going uploading your photos to the brand social page."

Marketing tool or PR

While the interviewees recognise the potential cross over between the Public Relations profession and marketing they don't see social media as mutually exclusive to either, rather it depends on how the company wants to present themselves, Centra brand manager say that social media is "Both, Public Relations, which is representing the brand and getting slightly more corporate messages out there so we'd see it like that but a slightly more marketing tool, but PR, as we'd see it is a part of marketing now it depends on the organisation,

a business say down in little Island (a Pharmaceutical hub) might only have a PR department for whatever there doing because they just need to manage press releases and communicate out to the world whereas where a brand so we have a marketing department but we see it very much as both, a convergence between the two but I think predominantly it is a marketing tool for us anyway."

Reflect company values or just the writer

One of the key questions I felt needed answering in this dissertation was the treat of the personal in charge of the management of online social media in a company not reflecting the preferred image of the brand through the companies site by getting too personal or off topic, John Dinneen expresses his opinion on this by saying *"companies again seem to fall into, I see a lot of any way, smaller ones usually say things "like went for a few drinks there on Friday night and got totally drunk", from a company profile that is very inappropriate, we would like the companies pages to have a personality but I think you need to draw the line between the persons personality and a company's brand image.*

To create the brand you want be it your personal brand or you personal brand. we wouldn't be all that careful but from our perspective, where a small company, its different for a big brand with a big legal team behind them but i think that you do need to draw the line between what your tweeting about and the image you want for your company using social media, obviously one of the real issues is that any person in your organisation can tweet and tweet on behalf of the company so your then trusting their skills to be able to tweet and represent the company themselves effectively and that can be a problem, like we have very technical people in the team, we have people who their primary language is not English, we'd have you know very good marketing people who obviously the way they tweet would be different, while their intentions would be absolutely good for pushing their agenda forward they have very different ways

of going about it and the bigger your company gets the more complimented that become.

So let's say if your company, say a search engine optimisation company based in Romania and if your team is tweeting all the time and there tweeting in broken English and not getting their message out very effectively you can imagine that any company interested in using their services and see that they don't have a very good command of the English language and trying to offer search engine optimisation the two of those are not going to marry, you're going to say that how are these people going to optimise my site when they don't have a proper command of the language we use? so you have to be careful about things like that."

Niamh Skally expresses that it is a problematic issue but can be negated by exposure to the company long enough*" first of all you need to be inducted into a brand into the brand before you start work so that has to happen with all of us and then after a period of time, I'm working on Centra for two and a half years, I think I know the brand intimately, I'm very intuitive at this stage so I wouldn't worry, I could go on and say hi its Niamh from Centra HQ how's your Friday going, I don't say that but we could do that very easily and make jokes and stuff and hope that it wouldn't offend the people that are true to the brand and who know it's a joke or whatever I don't see it as a concern but equally for another brand for example if you were working for Leuis Vaton or Toyota and you don't know your brand very well it is a dangerous space because the brand manager is ultimately responsible for people are hearing and if there not saying what suits the brand they can do brand damage but from a personal perspective I suppose I'm well qualified to be the voice of the brand."*

"when looking at other sites, Sainsbury's is a good example, when someone comes onto the site Sainsbury's responds, they'll say " hi its Joe here" or one of the teams names letting the consumer know there dealing with a particular person, so they'll actually put a name to their face, when I asked our agency if it is something we should be doing from a Centra perspective and they said

categorically no definitely not and the reason is when people come onto our page and say "hi Centra Ireland......" there have a persona in their heads, of course they know there's people in the back office typing pretending to be Centra but they do engage with the brand as a personality which is fantastic so if we changed it to saying "hi its Niamh here....." it takes away from the image and dilutes the personal interaction with the brand."

Over use/ bad use of social media

All the interviewees recognised an importance for setting up rules to guide them in the use of their social media techniques particularly on the frequency of posts and tweets John Dinneen says that "I think you really need to get the balance right between, it depends on weather, it has a lot of companies don't know how to use social media and there, social media is an interactive medium , it's not a broad cast medium, and I think that some companies are using it like a broad cast medium in a lot of instances so say like large companies that we would be monitoring there profiles on twitter they shouldn't be just sending out tweets they should be replying to tweets and addressing to issues that are coming in and responding to them, their customer base whereas I think that in reality what is happening is that there is either an all like standard form messages that are going out like a special offer on such a such item or hotel room tonight or whatever it is so overuse of social media like that can really cause distress among the users whereas if a company like one of the ones of was reading about recently, I think it was virgin one of their flights was cancelled and people were actually tweeting the airline to get responses and get updates and they were actually actively engaging with their personal base over twitter and got a very good response to it so it's like a two way channel and its important for companies to keep that in mind, so do I think that companies are abusing their social media feeds, yes because there not using it effectively but do I think that lots of tweets from one company is a bad thing? No I don't as long as it's a relevant conversation."

Niamh Skally talks about the need for guidlines to control the amount of information put up by a large company *"we do but for a brand perspective it's been trial and error a lot of brands would post everyday for five days of the working week we feel that there's an element of spam in that that your annoying people if there are too many posts on their news feed, so we try to post between 3-4 times a week and wed vary it by day post one on Monday we might say something in the morning and the Tuesday it would be the afternoon certain we might post more times because there is news."*

On the subject of social media being used as a news medium there are varying opinions John Dinneen says that *"i think its peoples position on it, you have un trused sources putting news out into the world but i think you always had that like if you look at what's going on in Libya there Gadaffis news channel you hardly see that as a trusted news medium all along, they were just pumping out propaganda for their government, so its the same online except the volume of questionable content is has increase exponentially with the same rules applied, you don't believe everything you hear on TV and you don't believe everything you read online. social media in general, by in large ya I think a lot of people are following people that they either respect or have an interest in them, like for us we follow really business leaders, journalists and really good thought leaders in the different areas that were looking at so basically would we trust there views and view those guys as a legitimate source of information wed say absolutely yes, no problem with that, do I think it's an effective search and discovery tool no I don't think it is, I think it's terrible actually, trying to find the information you want say on twitter is nearly impossible because of the vast amount of information out there its very difficult"*

When asked about issues with user comments that can potentially harm the brand image of the company there are varying methods to dealing with these posts, John Dineen says that *" people definitely think that but the thing with it is that if basically a business or a college or any type of organisation is out in the public domain you going to get happy people and unhappy people and that is regardless of whether there absolutely brilliant or terrible are going to have*

to a mix of people and you also find that people tend to, I suppose it's human nature in a way, people tend to complain more and will go on and search out a site to vent anger or dissatisfaction and people would be less likely to do that to go on and share positive experiences with people, that's people's perception, but in reality we really don't find that, we try to get the balance between positive comments and negative comments, good reviews and poor reviews is a lot more balanced that what people perceive it to be."

Other social media sites used

While most depend on facebook as their main medium of online communication but some also take the time to engage on other platforms.

John Dinneen says that *"tumbler is for our blogging platform, facebook, actually I'm a total facebook under utiliser of facebook, absolutely no interest in it what so ever, I get it i really do but I don't feel the need to be continuelingly putting my photographs up there, linked in we have use to a lesser extent, twitter would be the biggest one from us by miles, but again it is all about the integration of the profiles like if we say add something on tumbler its automatically tweeted its automatically posted to our facebook profile and that inter-connectedness means that all of our profiles are a little bit richer, whereas if we had to do everything manually we probably pick one or two, which for us would be twitter or tumbler, twitter because of the messaging and tumbler because it's the platform which our content lives on, but we probably wouldn't bother with the other ones then."*

Centra brand manager, Niamh Skally that they *" use our one on twitter as well, it's good we tweet similar to what we do on facebook but the Irish twitter audience is only a couple of hundred thousand whereas facebook is nearly 2 million your talking to a very small base it tends to be made up of a lot of journalists and media that engage on twitter in Ireland, it's not something that is very high on our agenda right now and to be perfectly honest it's a tic the box*

exercise on twitter, we do put thought in terms to what we say but we say the same thing as we do on facebook as on twitter more or less but we kind of want to see twitter grow more in the Irish market before we put more investment and effort in too it, it's very celebrity driven and I don't think that facebook is going away anytime soon now whether it will tail off like bebo did once upon a time, that may happen and it may not but we just want to see social networks grow in the Irish market before we really put effort in and commit to them."

Negative comments management

One of the main attractions of social media for most brands is the creation of a dialogue with potential customers but while all feedback is not necessarily positive, problems can be dealt with online and procedures can be put in place to stop these issues rising again, sometimes negative feedback from people who had a bad brand experience can be out of control and spiral into a situation where it can seriously damage the brand image of a company, in Niamh Skallys experience with Centra she says that *"thankfully Centra hasn't, we obviously get the occasional isolated comment where someone, they tend to be younger people tend to come on and have a go, there would be a few expletive comments but as a brand as a whole, no but we have seen it happen to other marketing brands, there was a particular campaign, a guy set up a profile that attacked spar and we watched it with keen interest for a couple of months and thought it was hilarious, basically this guy had gone into a shop there was an offer on fire logs at a price, I think they were on allocation and the cashier wouldn't serve him anymore so he decide to go away and set up a profile called Freddy fire logs and basically attack them so anytime spar posted something he'd jump on and what are you on about your a pack of "beeps", and he did that for about two months, but thankfully we haven't experienced reactions like this, most of ours are positive comments and the few negative ones we always respond to, so if a customer went in a bought something on special offer and the offer never scanned through and they posted it wed get straight onto them and ask them what store it was they had a bad experience in and we try to minimise these things from getting out of control, and we try to*

trouble shoot it there but from an overall brand experience no. but what the spar campaign did make us very wary of was a robust policy in place, so if the equalivant of Freddy the fire log was to attack Centra what would be our response and there's a document there that goes through it in detail but it would be at a very top end level is to respond to them immediately and try to negate the problem. where very reluctant to delete comments, I'll tell you why, when the queen was in cork we posted some comment about it and these guys came on and said "what are you doing supporting the royals" and another guy can on and said that he'd love to bring semtex and blow the queen up that was a very short conversation and I remember at the time it was quite interesting because one of my colleagues wanted me to delete the comment, and I was categorically saying now if I went deleting his comment like that, he would be the exact type person to go on then and a Freddy fire log and attack Centra at all cost we minimise negative comments and I think that the majority of people on facebook understand that that comment came from that individual and has nothing to do with Centra and if you go into our tabs we have terms and conditions in the background which says the opinions expressed on the page are those of the people that comment on the wall there not of Centra Ireland so no , we try not to unless it really was extreme bad language, because if you log onto Centra for the first time and see a whole message of bad swearing then we would make a decision to delete that."

Rob Hartnett says that it's a real concern "it is really difficult, I've ran a number of campaigns for the PR union they were nervous about facebook in Ireland because there are 60000 users of facebook and you can't have all of them happy all of the time so when you put up a big general post on the union facebook page you run the risk of being too vague and allowing other people to determine what is going to be the discussion on it, but we ran it with certain specific campaigns whereby we knew we had a specific message to get out there and we could engage with the people we wanted to weather they were members within the local community and it worked really well, generally speaking, there were some negative comments on it the first few that came in, ones that can leave you scratching your head, it's almost on a case by case basis, you have to allow people to be negative up to a point and

you have to hope that the community of people gathered around you, which actually is your facebook page, your facebook page isn't you anymore as a brand it is the community that is engaging with it."

When it comes to actually monitoring the page for these negative comments Niamh says that "myself personally, not that much time, like i suppose in a week o would spend an hour in the whole working week, I literally just go on and check the page, I suppose for the monitoring it varies week to week, could spend hours some weeks like the launch of our GAA competition, there's a whole lot of background work, you're on to the agency and organising it worth others, you're getting into nearly a proper normal campaign at that stage. But for me as a brand manager its agency managed, I literally go on and check that everything is ok, I spend a lot of time looking at other brands to look for any ideas though."

Lillian Courtney says that "these sites should be monitored at all times and if someone says something bad it should be rectified straight away, I would advise having someone hired to constantly monitor your site, but good or bad comments, it's still all advertising for you."

Different language and styles on the different platforms

The different social media platforms offer many different ways of getting your information across and what works on one platform might not be as effective on another so some care must be taken to tailor the information for the differ platforms, John Dineen talks about the difference in writing styles by saying "well a lot of our tweets would be automated, so where we not even writing the tweets, like you say if it's like a blog post it will just pick up the title and put in the URL and that's what's going to be tweeted but ya you obviously change your styles, twitter you defiantly change your style, its almost the next generation of text speech, you know the way kids text, for us I couldn't even understand the way they were writing about but there's that evolution on twitter, like if you're sending something its @learnpipe or @whatever and at

first I wondered what were they on about, but it just becomes common place when your exposed to it enough."

This change in styles is just an extension of common marketing principles between the traditional forms of communication Niamh Skally discusses the change in format between different social media platforms and digital media verses traditional "*the way we articulate a message on digital is very different what we do on radio or on print so I suppose we do adjust our tone of voice slightly, not all the time actually, so if you were to hear a Centra radio ad and an ad online there a bouts or very similar but for things like facebook wed be a lot more fun and upbeat in our tone of voice because it's a fun space and where just a lot more light hearted in the medium because it's a very quick response medium so if you feel something isn't working or delivering what you need you can change it very quickly enough, no one wants to go changing advertising and we never done it actually but if we felt that a competition wasn't getting what we wanted to achieve then wed change tactics we can target other segments or other people, we might also give more prises away to try and drive numbers that type of thing. So I suppose our approach to it from a medium we defiantly do take a different approach. if you take TV ads for example we advertise its very much about price and compete in a very difficult market place and when we look at the digital side of my job is all about the projecting the brand and it's a space for us to do that and we can also deliver quite nice messages about offers."*

The future of social media

The future of social media is described by the interviewees as being bright, they all agree it is only going to get better and impact in our daily lives increasingly, John Dineen says that the real word applications of social media is already here and will only become more prominent "*it's a given that it will continue to develop with new additions coming out, what I think is most eye opening is the development over the last 18 months has been the adoption of mobile and social media on mobile and how you can actually leverage, I hate*

using the term but a person's social graph, linked into a mobile device and then link it in with real world businesses I just think that cocktail there is so powerful, in San Francisco we found what was actually more valuable to us than Google in trying to find businesses and different things is yelp, the restaurant customer review site and basically on that is on your I phone you can walk down the street and have the conical view open on it, I mean that's already the beginnings of your augmented reality type of interface. a peer review tied in with GPS location, if put in the right position. so there basically putting their online information and putting it out into the real world because with your phone you can look at the coffee shop and see there's a 180 reviews and has an average of say 4.5 rating which is very effective you know and that is the beginning of the merge between offline and online."

Niamh Skally identified the same potential developments as John Dineen by saying "it'll be interesting to see facebook, they announced at the start of the year, facebook places which would be the equilivant of foursquare, you know checking in and getting offers by using GPS location software, that's a real footfall driving behaviour, that's really commercial so you'll be able to track sales but at the moment they haven't advanced that enough yet for us to really drive sales with it but Ya its a pure brand medium and from that point of view and as a brand manager it's a lovely space to be in because you can say the right things about the brand do a nice job and when you get into TV and radio it's much more cut-throat your basically just shouting an offer to try and footfall in and drive sales"

But for the immediate future, until new developments like effective GPS systems com out Niamh skally says that "no I don't I think where just going to have to get really creative so where optimising the brands assets at the moment so we happened to sponsor the GAA, so what I think we have to do is to start challenging ourselves a lot harder and about differentiating ourselves from everyone else, like when you go into all the different walls brands are starting to say the same things, well I think we need to get a lot more entertaining and what I mean by that for example we generate all this material that's all Centra

team ourselves and it requires time energy and money but is I was to go onto you-tube and find a funny video that could tie into our motto, "brighten up your day" and totally free of charge and post it to our wall and ask what our Centra fans think of it tying to brighten their day, its free content, can easily get a laugh from people and I think if it was the right content it would be very compelling, like if I knew that Dunken Donuts were posting a great video every friday i would definitly be inclined to check back in every now and then and it would generate alot of conversation bolster our fans, i think in general companies are going to have to get alot smarter in utilising free online content that reflects the brand image but that is interesting so that people can interact with it. everyone needs to get a little more creative with this and there's an element of wear out with facebook to the point that it almost starts to annoy viewers, luckily theirs an expression in marketing that the first people to tire of advertising campaigns are the marketing people themselves first so we start saying its old, and it's over and we need to change it but consumers don't see it like that, they haven't gotten to that stage yet, exposure to social media over a prolonged period of time you defiantly get used to online marketing tactics. To the point of your question it's all just about not being complacent and really trying to get creative and differentiate yourself."

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter is to sum up the research in a short conclusion of the analysed data detailing the outcome of the research carried out on how social media has begun to affect the brand image of companies through a Public Relations Perspective.

In order to reach relevant conclusions to the study they will be answered through the original research questions. After these questions have been answered an overall conclusion of the whole study will be discussed.

Is social media an effective platform in promoting a good brand image for companies?

From the both primary and secondary research carried out it seems that categorically social media is fast becoming a primary area to focus on the brand development and maintenance of most companies. In fact some of the companies interviewed viewed it primarily as a brand enhancement tool.

There are a number of reasons why social media is such an effective tool and the two main identified by the research points to social medias two way communication ability and the specific targeting of key demographics.

By engaging in dialogue with potential consumers the image of a big unapproachable brand is softened and if managed properly can be used to enhance the company's core values of what they think there brand should represent by adding personality and character.

As for the targeting of key demographics, firstly people who have an interest in the company will like/follow or generally check up on the comments and posts of the brand and when used in conjunction with facebook advertising it becomes particularly effective.

What tools and tactics are used in social media to stand out from a crowded community to enhance brand image?

There are different methods of using social media to promote the brand of a company, weather it is a fun, near entertainment style to reflect the company's values, a customer care focused use or an information gathering tool. Each of these has their own benefits and drawbacks but is generally considered effective depending on what the company wants to get out of the involvement in social media.

After the direction of the companies social media campaign has been established the ways of getting people onto the site can be looked at, there are many tactics for companies to look into. The simplest is to create a conversation with its existing base; this conversation breaks out to friends or followers and onto their friends and followers and so on. The retail brands interviewed seemed to focus on creating competitions aimed at their given target markets and facebook ads again aimed at their key demographics.

Do social media posting reflect a brands identity or the personality of the writer of the posts?

This is an issue that was identified by each of the interviewees but one that was carefully managed by all so it never materialised into a problem. The first step taken to negate this issue was to ensure the poster was a competent writer and didn't use slang, swear words etc. And also use the right language that is appropriate for their target audience. The next step was to ensure that the writer was fully indoctrinated the company's policies and more importantly there brand values before they start posting comments on facebook or twitter.

The future of social media

The general consensus from the study indicates that social media is going to continue to grow, and continue to have more of an impact on our lives, it's not a fad that will disappear after a time. From the research it can be said that it will even reach a level that will challenge the traditional forms of media and even become a dominant player.

Social media needs to keep evolving to keep itself active and continue to attract an ever widening following. One of the most prominent theories is the incorporation of social media and online content into the real world, already we see the birth of this with "yelp" and "Facebook places" which overlay a digital image onto a real world picture with information about the place and user generated comments.

It can be forecasted that these two powerful tools of social media and augmented reality will join together to bring another colourful layer to our everyday lives, enrich our social media experiences and bring it to the next generation where companies will have to adjust to the new opportunities and difficulties it will bring.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

Chapter 6 Recommendations

Introduction

A number of recommendations can be made as a result of this study. They are as follows:

- Practitioners should continue to educate themselves on the uses and benefits and potential pitfalls of social media and use other similar companies as a benchmark for their own efforts. They should also stay abreast of technological advances like mobile augmented reality apps. Education is a key aspect in utilising new media effectively.

- Practitioners should keep in mind that social media is much more transparent than traditional media so honesty and ethical behaviour is essential, in dealing with social media and as a company as a whole.

- Traditional media, while being challenged by social media, is still a powerful tool to be utilised and should be used to complement social media activities and vice versa.

- Users of a company's social media platforms should be fully indoctrinated into the brand to ensure a continuity between the brands preferred image of itself and what the writer is portraying to the public.

- Public relations professionals should also not only tailor their messages and tactics to reflect the brand but to also to the target audience of the brand.

- Social media requires constant monitoring and maintenance in order to be fully effective so there should always be someone capable in a position to deal with any issues that arise.

Suggestions for further study

Further research on the successful use of social media in PR campaigns in other countries may give Irish practitioners more innovative ideas on incorporating social media into their own PR efforts. The declining mass media industry and how it affects Irish PR practitioners was only briefly touched on in this study. There is scope for further research here.

Further study could be carried out on the role that the Internet has to play in the future of Public Relations.

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Appendices

Appendices
Introduction Email

Dear _____,

My name is Kieran Collins and I am currently completing my dissertation for the MA in Public Relations with New Media in Cork Institute of Technology.

The dissertation is centred on assessing the impact social media is having on the brand image of a company affecting the new role created by it in public relations.

I am looking to arrange an interview with you as with your experience, I would like to get an insight into your opinion on this topic as research for my dissertation.

I look forward to hearing from you.
Kind Regards,
Kieran Collins

Interview Questions

What are your views on social media?

When did your company first start using social media?

When did your company start viewing social media as a effective promotional tool?

How has your company used social media to promote their brand image?

Do you use different methods of communication or tactics on your social media sites?

Some of the big changes we see nowadays are people using social media to break news, a lot of edgy stuff you didn't see before, what's your view on this?

Do you think social media complements or conflicts with mainstream traditional media?

When do you think this change started to come about? What was the turning point for you to start taking note that online PR was the way to go? Do you think blogging had something to do with it?

And what about the disadvantages of companies using social media?

Do you think it is working for people who use social media to promote themselves online?

So where do you see it all going in the future?

Do you think there are any serious negative issues with the use of social media?

How do you deal with negative comments or "trolls" on your sites?

How important do you think online promotion is compared to traditional methods?

Can you tell me about how you use social media as a way of promoting your own brand?

Do you think it is a more effective way for people to become aware of your brand?

Do you think people can overuse social media?

So to sum up, how do you think it's all affecting the PR industry as a whole?

Interview with Niamh Skally, Centra brand manager

What level of importance do you put on facebook?

As an organisation it's very important it will continue to be important but I believe facebook as an organisation will have to adapt their strategy over the next few years, there's an element of wear-out, people are doing the exact same thing, most brands tactics are very similar.

Is it only in the last 12 months you started partaking in facebook properly?

Ya I think, if I recall correctly it was April 2010 that we re-launched the Centra facebook page, there had been one set up previously but it wasn't set up as a business profile so it was a personal one was probably the wrong way to do it and there was only about 400 fans, so when I came onto the project it was April 2010 I worked with an agency called radical in Dublin and there are a specialist digital and social media agency and we wrote a strategy for the page and our vision for it and we re-launched in April and we've gown from a base of 400 to nearly 2000 fans since then so you know it required a lot of creativity and investment you know but we do believe it is doing good things for the brand.

What kind of tools do you use in your facebook page?

First of all we built the page with a view to having a central destination for Centra online, so obviously we have our website centra.ie, but we knew that facebook was a unique opportunity in that it enabled us to have dialogue with our shoppers so it was a two way conversation whereas centra.ie was only a one way, wed post something and that's it, it was static, so we wanted to really create a hub where anything you needed to know about the brand, would be in one place, but also where it projected the brand personality which we viewed as really important, so we wanted Centra too come across as a youthful energetic, dynamic, innovative brand as you can see from a lot of what we created, its clean and fresh and modern and it appeals to a younger target so really for us facebook is a way to project the essence of the brand toward that, it really gave the true personality of Centra, so we had that very much in mind at the start and from there really we built the page and grown our fan base and how we have done that is through of rotating ads on facebook so you can buy a lot of advertising so there's kind of a two pronged approach firstly its the ongoing ad inventory that you can buy on facebook which our agency buy and manage for us and that targets our target segment so a single guy for example, male living in a urban area aged between 18-30, we are targeting specifically for him so that we reach him so we do that by going through the ongoing ad inventory with facebook. The second piece is any brand campaigns that we have on at a time we also make sure there's a call to action on facebook so driving traffic through, be it with the GAA or where talking about some new bakery product that were launching if we're talking about price cuts we always make sure there's a call to action with facebook and that really is key driver.

Do you find the competitions you run help?

Absolutely, in terms of driving numbers it's through advertising and then once they arrive at our page they need to have a positive brand experience and we have done a number of competitions over the past 18 months and they have been very successful to date, our probably biggest one is that we actually doubled our fan base in a two week period where we went from 25000 to 50000 Was at Christmas so basically it was the creative advent

calendar that you opened a door every day and you got a prize search everyday for a prize we gave away things like digital cameras, iphones vouchers and that doubled turnover so yes there very effective and I suppose it creates a fun place, we want consumers to feel rewarded and to feel that they can win something and have a positive experience with the brand.

Do you feel that some of the other companies post are getting repetitive? Do you find it hard to think of new things to interest the public?

Ya we do without a doubt and it may surprise some people that social media is quite expensive, it's not cheap, there's a perception out there that it is a really cheap medium, now it can be but in order for it to work hard you need to invest in it so buy your advertising and target it correctly and to do that you need to buy the space like you would an outdoor billboard or a radio ad by equally there's a resource required there so we work with the agency who need to manage all that for us and they charge us. Ya keeping it creative is a challenge without a doubt and I'm on facebook like everyone from our generation it's the same when you log on and check your wall and brands are talking the same way and so I think there's a responsibility on brands to try and differentiate which we try to do and its challenging but I do think an expectation out there for facebook to maybe try and ease up on their terms and conditions and there very strict in terms of running competitions and all that kind of thing so there will have to be a period of transition where they'll be looking to reinvigorate it

What level of activity is kept in-house as opposed to external companies?

very little to be honest so because our page is quite significant facebook control it very heavily if we say for example we were just doing daily posts saying "hi how are you, where doing such and such in Centra HQ " that's fine but the majority of our work is not about that its more about competitions

and so a tab needs to be built on the wall and to do that it requires Tec expertise so there's app developers at the agency we have and so the majority isn't simply updates so we can't bring it in house so we end up just managing it, I suppose in terms of what we do in-house we sign off the content schedule for the week in advance so we just say what were going to talk about and draft the posts the agency does that they send it across to us and we approve it but it's very little apart from just having a vision for the medium managing it you know keeping an eye on it, I mean I check on it more or less every day, some days I wouldn't, but the majority of the time I would and making sure the agency are coming in on cost.

How regular are you posting updates? Do you have set guidelines on the frequency of the posts?

we do but for a brand perspective it's been trial and error a lot of brands would post everyday for five days of the working week we feel that there's an element of spam in that that your annoying people if there are too many posts on their news feed, so we try to post between 3-4 times a week and wed vary it by day post one on Monday we might say something in the morning and the Tuesday it would be the afternoon certain we might post more times because there is news.

Have you had any problems with, in the sense that it's a two way conversation, negative conversation coming back at you?

thankfully Centra hasn't, we obviously get the occasional isolated comment where someone, they tend to be younger people tend to come on and have a go, there would be a few expletive comments but as a brand as a whole, no but we have seen it happen to other marketing brands, there was a particular campaign, a guy set up a profile that attacked spar and we watched it with keen interest for a couple of months and thought it was hilarious,

basically this guy had gone into a shop there was an offer on fire logs at a price, I think they were on allocation and the cashier wouldn't serve him anymore so he decide to go away and set up a profile called Freddy fire logs and basically attack them so anytime spar posted something he'd jump on and what are you on about your a pack of "beeps", and he did that for about two months, but thankfully we haven't experienced reactions like this, most of ours are positive comments and the few negative ones we always respond to, so if a customer went in a bought something on special offer and the offer never scanned through and they posted it wed get straight onto them and ask them what store it was they had a bad experience in and we try to minimise these things from getting out of control, and we try to trouble shoot it there but from an overall brand experience no. but what the spar campaign did make us very wary of was a robust policy in place, so if the equalivant of Freddy the fire log was to attack Centra what would be our response and there's a document there that goes through it in detail but it would be at a very top end level is to respond to them immediately and try to negate the problem. where very reluctant to delete comments, I'll tell you why, when the queen was in cork we posted some comment about it and these guys came on and said "what are you doing supporting the royals" and another guy can on and said that he'd love to bring semtex and blow the queen up that was a very short conversation and I remember at the time it was quite interesting because one of my colleagues wanted me to delete the comment, and I was categorically saying now if I went deleting his comment like that, he would be the exact type person to go on then and a Freddy fire log and attack Centra at all cost we minimise negative comments and I think that the majority of people on facebook understand that that comment came from that individual and has nothing to do with Centra and if you go into our tabs we have terms and conditions in the background which says the opinions expressed on the page are those of the people that comment on the wall there not of Centra Ireland so no , we try not to unless it really was extreme bad language, because if you log onto Centra for the first time and see a whole message of bad swearing then we would make a decision to delete that.

Do you think there are any other negatives attributed to social media?

no, I don't even see the negative posts as a particularly bad thing I think it's really positive because when someone does come on and have a go they genuinely had a poor experience with the brand so I think it's a great opportunity for us to build on our weaknesses learn where there's issues I really don't see a lot of negativity with it in terms of social media in general I think the downside of it is its taking people away from one to one interaction which is quite sad but that's not social media that's the digital age, the whole world people are now texting and emailing when they could of picked up the phone or called around to someone's house so I think it's about bringing people together but ultimately it probably really isn't putting people into to digital spac3e where there not having social interaction so I would see that as the downside but in terms as facebook itself a brand medium it's a wonderful opportunity to talk to your audience.

Do you tailor you're out put differently to how you normally speak to them?

the way we articulate a message on digital is very different what we do on radio or on print so I suppose we do adjust our tone of voice slightly, not all the time actually, so if you were to hear a Centra radio ad and an ad online there a bouts or very similar but for things like facebook wed be a lot more fun and upbeat in our tone of voice because it's a fun space and where just a lot more light hearted in the medium because it's a very quick response medium so if you feel something isn't working or delivering what you need you can change it very quickly enough, no one wants to go changing advertising and we never done it actually but if we felt that a competition wasn't getting what we wanted to achieve then wed change tactics we can target other segments or other people, we might also give more prises away to try and drive numbers that type of thing. So I suppose our approach to it from a medium we defiantly do take a different approach. if you take TV ads for example we advertise its very much about price and compete in a very

difficult market place and when we look at the digital side of my job is all about the projecting the brand and it's a space for us to do that and we can also deliver quite nice messages about offers.

Do you see social media more of a brand development tool than a selling tool?

Ya it is and I think it'll be interesting to see facebook, they announced at the start of the year, facebook places which would be the equilivant of foursquare, you know checking in and getting offers by using GPS location software, that's a real footfall driving behaviour, that's really commercial so you'll be able to track sales but at the moment they haven't advanced that enough yet for us to really drive sales with it but Ya its a pure brand medium and from that point of view and as a brand manager it's a lovely space to be in because you can say the right things about the brand do a nice job and when you get into TV and radio it's much more cut-throat your basically just shouting an offer to try and footfall in and drive sales

Personal opinion coming through onto your facebook pages?

no first of all you need to be inducted into a brand into the brand before you start work so that has to happen with all of us and then after a period of time, I'm working on Centra for two and a half years, I think I know the brand intimately, I'm very intuitive at this stage so I wouldn't worry, I could go on and say hi its Niamh from Centra HQ how's your Friday going, I don't say that but we could do that very easily and make jokes and stuff and hope that it wouldn't offend the people that are true to the brand and who know it's a joke or whatever I don't see it as a concern but equally for another brand for example if you were working for Leuis Vaton or Toyota and you don't know your brand very well it is a dangerous space because the brand manager is ultimately responsible for people are hearing and if there not saying what suits the brand they can do brand damage but from a personal perspective I suppose I'm well qualified to be the voice of the brand.

Do you have direct control over the facebook page, is it just you?

I have access but the agency does too, there are actually about 12 people who have administrative access to it at the moment, but from a Centra point of view I'm the go to person in here, and then obviously the agency we trust and are being paid for do a good job with it as well.

It's very much developer stuff, it's not easy basically all these kind of things are expensive activities. we try to respond to as many comments as possible, we wouldn't reply to all of them but at least all the negative ones, so you have all the brands coming on trying to footfall too there places, with this spam we leave it as it is, because the new layout, there was a time when on the old page those would of appeared on this wall but now it doesn't actually show them anymore, it's just a non issue with us, we don't really see it as a problem, where not in the business of going around deleting other peoples posts, well get people who come on and give out, but on the whole were very lucky. when we were doing our homework, we spent a lot of time analysing Marks and Spencer's in the UK and spar, there was a time there when spar had super negative comments, people just really giving out, they actually had 4 individual comments and each comment was negative which was bad, there are certain brands that we'd admire and Marks and Spencer's would probably be a good example while there tactics in terms of strategies are very different to what we use it for, they use it almost like a customer service desk so people are coming on and giving out about online shopping or other issues they may have with the service, it's a customer service and queries page, it's not meant to be but it has manifested itself into that whereas we see it as a positive brand experience page so where fortunate in that respect, Dunken Donuts in the us I really like a lot of the stuff they do they thought a lot about how to interact with their customers and I love this piece that they do which is fan of the week so basically a couple of million fans and everyday fans come on and just post a picture of them at Dunken Donuts and out of the

hundreds of thousands off pictures posted they pick one and that becomes there fan of the week and I think it's a very cool tactic that we might try for Centra soon, if we did it for Centra theirs a real personal connection that has the potential to be really fun an create a lot of interest. they has been that now for a while and it obviously working for them and its nice cheap activity there's not that much to it, and it rewards people and it gets people really engaging with the brand so, I mean you'd have to be really engaged with the brand if you're going uploading your photos to the brand social page.

How much time do you spend monitoring your social media pages?

myself personally, not that much time, like ii suppose in a week o would spend an hour in the whole working week, I literally just go on and check the page, I suppose for the monitoring it varies week to week, could spend hours some weeks like the launch of our GAA competition, there's a whole lot of background work, you're on to the agency and organising it worth others, you're getting into nearly a proper normal campaign at that stage. But for me as a brand manager its agency managed, I literally go on and check that everything is ok, I spend a lot of time looking at other brands to look for any ideas though.

Do you think that the facilities on facebook have run its course now, is there anything new it can bring to enhancing the brand?

we'll see that is my question to the agency, no I don't I think where just going to have to get really creative so where optimising the brands assets at the moment so we happened to sponsor the GAA, so what I think we have to do is to start challenging ourselves a lot harder and about differentiating ourselves from everyone else, like when you go into all the different walls brands are

starting to say the same things, well I think we need to get a lot more entertaining and what I mean by that for example we generate all this material that's all Centra team ourselves and it requires time energy and money but is I was to go onto you-tube and find a funny video that could tie into our motto, "brighten up your day" and totally free of charge and post it to our wall and ask what our Centra fans think of it tying to brighten their day, its free content, can easily get a laugh from people and I think if it was the right content it would be very compelling, like if I knew that Dunken Donuts were posting a great video every friday i would definitly be inclined to check back in every now and then and it would generate alot of conversation bolster our fans, i think in general companies are going to have to get alot smarter in utilising free online content that reflects the brand image but that is interesting so that people can interact with it. everyone needs to get a little more creative with this and there's an element of wear out with facebook to the point that it almost starts to annoy viewers, luckily theirs an expression in marketing that the first people to tire of advertising campaigns are the marketing people themselves first so we start saying its old, and it's over and we need to change it but consumers don't see it like that, they haven't gotten to that stage yet, exposure to social media over a prolonged period of time you defiantly get used to online marketing tactics. To the point of your question it's all just about not being complacent and really trying to get creative and differentiate yourself.

If you're inducted enough in a brand you know the brand very well

when looking at other sites, Sainsbury's is a good example, when someone comes onto the site Sainsbury's responds, they'll say " hi its Joe here" or one of the teams names letting the consumer know there dealing with a particular person, so they'll actually put a name to their face, when I asked our agency if it is something we should be doing from a Centra perspective

and they said categorically no definitely not and the reason is when people come onto our page and say "hi Centra Ireland......" there have a persona in their heads, of course they know there's people in the back office typing pretending to be Centra but they do engage with the brand as a personality which is fantastic so if we changed it to saying "hi its Niamh here....." it takes away from the image and dilutes the personal interaction with the brand.

Do you see Social Media or Marketing tool?

Both, public relations, which is representing the brand and getting slightly more corporate messages out there so we'd see it like that but a slightly more marketing tool, but PR, as we'd see it is a part of marketing now it depends on the organisation, a business say down in little Island (a Pharmaceutical hub) might only have a Pr department for whatever there doing because they just need to manage press releases and communicate out to the world whereas where a brand so we have a marketing department but we see it very much as both, a convergence between the two but I think predominantly it is a marketing tool for us anyway.

but in terms of inspirational brands we certainly would of looked at the UK market before we built our own page and looked at a lot of the UK supermarkets through it that had an established presence and things like Starbucks and Mc Donald's and Dunken donuts the really big American brands there far more literate in the space because obviously social media was far more advanced in the us before it came to Europe so we learned from them in terms of what they did and what we liked, big brand behaviour so we aspire a lot to them.

Do you use any other main social media sites?

we use our one on twitter as well, it's good we tweet similar to what we do on facebook but the Irish twitter audience is only a couple of hundred thousand whereas facebook is nearly 2 million your talking to a very small base it tends to be made up of a lot of journalists and media that engage on twitter in Ireland, it's not something that is very high on our agenda right now and to be perfectly honest it's a tic the box exercise on twitter, we do put thought in terms to what we say but we say the same thing as we do on facebook as on twitter more or less but we kind of want to see twitter grow more in the Irish market before we put more investment and effort in too it, it's very celebrity driven and I don't think that facebook is going away anytime soon now whether it will tail off like bebo did once upon a time, that may happen and it may not but we just want to see social networks grow in the Irish market before we really put effort in and commit to them.

so on a monthly basis we get a report in from our agency all about wall comments and likes growth usage frequency and demographics so you can see our numbers growing depending on what campaign it's on, all our comments it goes on about quality interactions, there is very detailed statistical data available in the background. We know exactly that 69% of our audience are female and where there from, what county.

Do you utilise these Facebook analytics?

social media is an important medium that we have to utilise, I was looking at a email recently about the global marketing director of coca-cola and he called social media seminal, so something that is here to stay, it's not going away, it's not a fad and they take it very seriously as well so I think that all professional proper strategic brands are harnessing the medium

its not something that replace traditional media, were never going to say that we're not going to bother with the advertising or radio and where going to

put our money into this, it needs to compliment it and be integrated with it but it's not about going for just paid for media, even internally it's all facebook, its fine its important but we can't forget our roots, it compliments what we're doing, it's a very powerful tool and it allows us to talk to people in a way we never could before but it's not about replacing so if you go into Centra around the corner and you have a bad experience no amount of social media is going to change your perception of the brand. Year on year where putting more money into digital, were following where people are going because there's less and less time watching TV or the news papers and we know that for a fact but there spending time online.

John Dineen MD of C2

We run it like it is much more a social Q and A, what did you do in college by the way "a masters in public relations with new media" ok, what did you do your primary in? "business" ok so when you were choosing witch college to do your business course in, like what we wanted, to do is, you went to cit right? "ya" so you looked at cit right but maybe you might of chosen a different college if you could of followed each course of each college so you could see if they had good social activity there and the types of questions that are coming in about the courses so you basically get a much better insight into the courses that are available rather than just reading what cit put out there about their business course or other colleges put out about their positions so where trying to create a loop between experts and between the instructors and people who are interested in doing the courses and also people who are actually studying there at the moment because it's tricky for you as a perspective student to hook up with people already doing the course unless you already know someone already doing it already, so it can potentially let you hook up with people who can give you an insight into the what actually happens and ask questions like what's it like and what are the

lecturers like, is it very intense is it semesterised what are the exams like that kind of stuff you know

Do you see any disadvantages with using social media as a n information gathering platform like in your case trolls, students who weren't happy with their experience there?

no I don't really, people definitely think that but the thing with it is that if basically a business or a college or any type of organisation is out in the public domain you going to get happy people and unhappy people and that is regardless of whether there absolutely brilliant or terrible are going to have to a mix of people and you also find that people tend to, I suppose it's human nature in a way, people tend to complain more and will go on and search out a site to vent anger or dissatisfaction and people would be less likely to do that to go on and share positive experiences with people, that's people's perception, but in reality we really don't find that, we try to get the balance between positive comments and negative comments, good reviews and poor reviews is a lot more balanced that what people perceive it to be.

Do you think it is an effective form of communication? Of getting peoples knowledge of courses out there?

obviously we do, it's our whole business like but to bring it back to social media in general, by in large ya I think a lot of people are following people that they either respect or have an interest in them, like for us we follow really business leaders, journalists and really good thought leaders in the different areas that were looking at so basically would we trust there views and view those guys as a legitimate source of information wed say absolutely yes, no problem with that, do I think it's an effective search and discovery tool no I don't think it is, I think it's terrible actually, trying to find the information you want say on twitter is nearly impossible because of the vast amount of information out there its very difficult

Using a traditional search engine, I don't think that your search and discovery is that effective on social media as it is through the likes of Google,

Do you think that there is a risk of some of the social media sites being over used?

ya I think you really need to get the balance right between, it depends on weather, it has a lot of companies don't know how to use social media and there, social media is an interactive medium , it's not a broad cast medium, and I think that some companies are using it like a broad cast medium in a lot of instances so say like large companies that we would be monitoring there profiles on twitter they shouldn't be just sending out tweets they should be replying to tweets and addressing to issues that are coming in and responding to them, their customer base whereas I think that in reality what is happening is that there is either an all like standard form messages that are going out like a special offer on such a such item or hotel room tonight or whatever it is so overuse of social media like that can really cause distress among the users whereas if a company like one of the ones of was reading about recently, I think it was virgin one of their flights was cancelled and people were actually tweeting the airline to get responses and get updates and they were actually actively engaging with their personal base over twitter and got a very good response to it so it's like a two way channel and its important for companies to keep that in mind, so do I think that companies are abusing their social media feeds, yes because there not using it effectively but do I think that lots of tweets from one company no I don't as lome its a conversation.

Do you think it compliments or conflicts with main stream media, old media like newspaper and radio?

I think in the long term it will replace it to be honest id say if we look at where we spend our marketing zero would go offline everything would be online, where at the other end of the spectrum to most businesses in that we live online, but definitely, we spend a good bit of time in silicon valley most of the time and if you even look at the way even coffee shops and you know

local bookstores you have every single one of them at a cash register you have their twitter name on the back of the cash register saying find us on twitter and there at whatever their coffee shop name is on twitter so you see their using an offline method to promote themselves, trying to put people online, so i think in ways they complement each other but i think where the balance where companies found there main marketing area will continue to shift from offline to online, its absolutely inevitable.

What do you think of the future of social media?

it's a given that it will continue too develop with new additions coming out, what I think is most eye opening is the development over the last 18 months has been the adoption of mobile and social media on mobile and how you can actually leverage, I hate using the term but a person's social graph, linked into a mobile device and then link it in with real world businesses i just think that cocktail there is so powerful, in San Francisco we found what was actually more valuable to us than Google in trying to find businesses and different things is yelp, the restaurant customer review site and basically on that is on your I phone you can walk down the street and have the conical view open on it, I mean that's already the beginnings of your augmented reality type of interface. a peer review tied in with GPS location, if put in the right position. so there basically putting their online information and putting it out into the real world because with your phone you can look at the coffee shop and see there's a 180 reviews and has an average of say 4.5 rating which is very effective you know and that is the beginning of the merge between offline and online.

Social media being used for breaking news and the reliability of it?

ii think its peoples position on it, you have untrused sources putting news out into the world but i think you always had that like if you look at what's going on in Libya there Gadaffis news channel you hardly see that as a trusted news

medium all along, they were just pumping out propaganda for their government, so its the same online except the volume of questionable content is has increase exponentially with the same rules applied, you don't believe everything you hear on TV and you don't believe everything you read online.

Do you think it's an effective tool to promote the brand?

Absolutely its now how a brand is being promoted if people are broadcasting, broadcasting, broadcasting its fine if that's what people are signing up to, but if a company are interacting with and engaging with their followers online by just using a one way communication channel social media can actually damage their image of the brand.

Do you use the same methods of communication across all your social media platforms?

we have multiple profiles and there all integrated, so we have a question feed so that everytime someone posts a question to learnpipe.in which is our Indian site that automatically gets sent to a twitter profile we have set up for questions but every time someone asks a question they can share on facebook tumbler or twitter so the whole site is fully integrated with our different social platforms.

Do you think the social platforms will eventually merge and become one social medium?

i hope not, I defiantly don't want one system, but i do think that the open sharing of data, like when i put a post on face book and linking to my other profiles is a really really positive development so that companies aren't walling off their information and so you don't have to do something on facebook and then go away and do it on Google+ and then go do it on twitter

having these apps talking to each other and sharing information is much more effective.

What platforms do you use the most?

tumbler is for our blogging platform, facebook, actually I'm a total facebook under utiliser of facebook, absolutely no interest in it what so ever, I get it i really do but I don't feel the need to be continuelingly putting my photographs up there, linked in we have use to a lesser extent, twitter would be the biggest one from us by miles, but again it is all about the integration of the profiles like if we say add something on tumbler its automatically tweeted its automatically posted to our facebook profile and that interconnectivness means that all of our profiles are a little bit richer, whereas if we had to do everything manually we probably pick one or two, which for us would be twitter or tumbler, twitter because of the messaging and tumbler because it's the platform which our content lives on, but we probably wouldn't bother with the other ones then.

Do you change your writing techniques for the different platforms?

well a lot of our tweets would be automated, so where we not even writing the tweets, like you say if it's like a blog post it will just pick up the title and put in the URL and that's what's going to be tweeted but ya you obviously change your styles, twitter you defiantly change your style, its almost the next generation of text speech, you know the way kids text, for us I couldn't even understand the way they were writing about but there's that evolution on twitter, like if you're sending something its @learnpipe or @whatever and at first i wondered what were they on about, but it just becomes common place when your exposed to it enough.

When do you think the tipping point of when social media became recognised properly to come onboard a good company strategy?

I think twitter is the catalyst to that, when all the celebrities started promoting their own twitter profiles on TV shows and every opportunity they had, just saying follow us on @whatever that was when really I thought that twitter in particular went mainstream as a medium in general that was a big fish.

We started using social media about 3 years ago, through twitter first.

Personal touches to companies profiles?

I would follow very different people on my personal profile than on the company profile because obviously your company is around a particular theme, ours on education courses, and training companies, but in my personal page then I probably tweet a lot about start ups and entrepreneurship and working with entrepreneurs and who I would generally follow online would be entrepreneurs and my personal contacts would be different than I would on the companies pages, companies again seem to fall into, I see a lot of any way, smaller ones usually say things like went for a few drinks there on Friday night and got totally drunk, from a company profile that is very inappropriate, we would like the companies pages to have a personality but I think you need to draw the line between the persons personality and a company's brand image.

To create the brand you want be it your personal brand or you personal brand. we wouldn't be all that careful but from our perspective, where a small company, its different for a big brand with a big legal team behind them but i think that you do need to draw the line between what your tweeting about and the image you want for your company using social media, obviously one of the real issues is that any person in your organisation can tweet and tweet on behalf of the company so your then trusting their skills to be able to tweet and represent the company themselves effectively and that

can be a problem, like we have very technical people in the team, we have people who there primary language is not English, we'd have you know very good marketing people who obviously the way they tweet would be different, while there intentions would be absolutely good for pushing their agenda forward they have very different ways of going about it and the bigger your company gets the more complimented that becomes so let's say if your company, say a search engine optimisation company based in Romania and if your team is tweeting all the time and there tweeting in broken English and not getting their message out very effectively you can imagine that any company interested in using their services and see that they don't have a very good command of the English language and trying to offer search engine optimisation the two of those are not going to marry, you're going to say that how are these people going to optimise my site when they don't have a proper command of the language we use? so you have to be careful about things like that.

Negative comments or "trolls" on your site?

that is actually an issue for us, we have people come on and they'll add comments basically just for search engine optimisation trying to get links on your wall so our policy is just its irrelevant rubbish to us so we delete, so I defiantly recommend using facebook comments where first of all you have no following and secondly the comments are not actually posted directly onto the page so that if threes a spammy link posted onto your page it's not actually on your page, techcrunch actually is a big one, it's the biggest technology blog on the internet, they do it by discus, they used it for their comments then they shifted over to using facebook comments and the logic was that on discus you get a huge amount of trolls and fake profiles and are going on and commenting on every article that's on techcrunch and there only purpose is to add a link back to their own site so now they changed over

to facebook, you're a lot less likely to leave a negative comment on be unfairly harsh on a company because your using your own facebook profile, it's your real identity not just a fake identity you make online. this has lead to a huge decrease on the level of trolls and negative comments on the site and the level of real comments has increased since the shift over, and not just because there using facebook comments it's because there using real profiles to post on them so people are less likely to spam on it.

Rob Hartnett, Director of Hartnett Public Relations

Is social media an effective platform in promoting a good brand image for companies?

it does but I think it's actually more than that now, it has become an essential my view is that any major brand has got to be within social media because that's where conversations between consumers are actually taking place and if the brand isn't part of the conversation there having then I think the brand is at risk of just becoming yesterdays story, I suppose in sporting terms it's like a sport that really was at the heart of we talked about like snooker back in the 1970s/1980s was really popular was on television all the time people used to talk about it in the pubs and in the clubs and on the street and then all of a sudden it went off the television and it just began to lose people, eventually becoming a minority sport. you find weather it might be if you look back at a brand history and if you look back on old photographs you'll see brands that were there and say "that seemed to be really popular" and now it's just disappeared, because they didn't quite get whatever the marketing medium at the time was, now for snooker it was television I think of the television of the world we live in now but to an even greater degree is social media whether it might be facebook or Google+ one of the things that I took real heed of is, two years ago now, in Germany the televising of football matches in the champions league there was more people watching those football matches online than were watching on television in the corner this was two years ago and you can imagine the escalation of that kind of shift as well, I think if a brand feels that it can't quite risk connecting with its consumers or with its customers through social media I don't think that that brand will survive, I think that they are going to have to change and they're going to have to get involved in it but it is a very difficult thing for most brands to take, I have done a lot of work with coca cola down the years and they had a team, I would look after the PR side of it and two advertising

agencies in, on to keep an eye on the other, that was a market research teams they was all sorts of inputs from various different marketing people from parts of their marketing group working on a particular product and everything was tested, retested approved, everything had to be worked through a really tight channel or pipe line and it worked because you can't take it away from coca cola they do keep on hitting on the right thing, when coca cola came to facebook they were extremely nervous about it because it just didn't suit their style of test retest, make sure that everything is approved and everything is on message and the way that they handled it now is brilliant because they took 2 guys who had set up a coca cola page on facebook, coca cola initial feeling on that would of been close them down, shut them down don't dare to speak for us and that perspective idea, well look lets actually help these guys let's try just as an experiment and well feed coca cola material through to them and let them use imagery and state categorically that this is not coca cola but it's the coca cola venue on facebook and now there are millions of consumers who are identifying with them, coke has got I cracked because they're getting all of this fabulous feedback from customers which they would have never of gotten before and yet they haven't been the big bad guys because if they tried to run that sort of service themselves where everybody who was answering every query on facebook had to get it approved by a manager the whole thing just dies, it has to be a two way conversation and there's lots of brands particularly in relation to twitter as opposed to facebook will actually just kind of put messages out there and they use it as an advertising medium and then they just switch off and they don't actually engage and then they wonder why they have only got a couple of hundred of fans following them on twitter, it is a brand new medium and it has to be handled differently and it is in many ways it's just like when radio moved over to television the people who were making the radio ads had to switch to making television ads because all of a sudden it wasn't any good to have a person standing there talking into a microphone you have to work within the medium you got and the medium of social media is very much about two way communication and also to be willing to let it go, to throw something out there into your pool of people that you are hoping will buy your product and you have to let them play with it and throw it around between themselves there will be critical comments there will be negative comments but in the main if your product is right and your communication is right then you'll be able to wash over those and hopefully find a marketing nirvana which is what everybody is looking for at the moment it is social media and long may it continue because it's good for people who are in public relations and communications.

How would you approach negative comments?

it is really difficult, I've ran a number of campaigns for the PR union they were nervous about facebook in Ireland because there are 60000 users of facebook and you can't have all of them happy all of the time so when you put up a big general post on the union facebook page you run the risk of being too vague and allowing other people to determine what is going to be the discussion on it, but we ran it with certain specific campaigns whereby we knew we had a specific message to get out there and we could engage with the people we wanted to weather they were members within the local community and it worked really well, generally speaking, there were some negative comments on it the first few that came in, ones that can leave you scratching your head, it's almost on a case by case basis, you have to allow people to be negative up to a point and you have to hope that the community of people gathered around you, which actually is your facebook page, your facebook page isn't you anymore as a brand it is the community that is engaging with it. you have to hope that they're going to be the ones to actually tell Joe punter to get off his horse and that he's wrong, if I do the I'm the big corporate faceless giant, you know a guy who's coming in and just killing the conversation, with those first ones we did let them go there has to be a threshold because then was ones coming in were insulting individual members of staff in a particular facility and with those, no question you have to take those down so that's only upsetting the person that you actually taken off the site but you're not running the risk so if its general and perhaps constructive criticism then yes, you have to let it go, if its personal or really negative you have to take it down. I do some work with a gambling company in the UK and one of the big football clubs over there, Newcastle, has amassed 180,000 followers on facebook, a very lively community but a very unsettled club at the moment and every time they put something up about something that they have done there's this torrent of comments saying "oh Ya you can do this but you can't buy players, you can't score goals, you can't do the rest of it" and it kind of feeds into itself and they do let it go but the key thing I suppose is that it is a vibrant community so they have kind of got this channel at the moment they are not in a great place people are still listening to what they say, it might be in order to throw bricks at them but when they do have something good and when they are able to turn around, o when faith decides to turn them around the fortunes of the club they have got this vibrant community, and a 180,000 committed to your fan base, there's 4 of those to everyone that will actually go and sit in on the stands so from a commercial point of view it's important to keep them engaged even if you don't like what they're doing at the moment they still like you as a brand enough to be part of your facebook, there not on there just to criticise you, there trying to criticise you in order to make you better and from a brands point of view you kind of have to take that on board and nobody is right all of the time whether its coca-cola, facebook, Man United or say Kieran Collins you have to listen to

what people are saying about you in order to reshape the way you appear to them.

Would you say that you prefer to depend on your own followers to sort out negative issues?

Ya I think so long as the criticism can be seen as constructive you have to allow that to be made because that's what makes the community, if I'm only talk to people when I'm giving away free lollypops and people are only allowed to say thank you for the free lollypops that's not a community that misses the point of social media completely.

What tools and tactics are used in social media to stand out from a crowded community to enhance brand image?

the most important thing is that you are willing to listen, that you are willing to engage with people, it has to look nice but within twitter and facebook particularly you have so many of these devices[holds up a smart phone] now you have got your iphones your ipads you've got PCs you've got Macs, you've got so many media devices that you can never be sure about which way it will actually physically look, the way that people are actually engaging with it so it's like a band it might look really good but if the music isn't any good then it really doesn't matter, social media has to be about engagement, the brand will be strong enough, if you're a big brand, your strong enough to actually engage people that they want to come and listen to what you have to say and they want to come and talk to you, if you don't talk back to them then there gone it's just another faceless corporate site, it's just another website, it's just another TV ad it's not what social media is all about, so most important thing is engagement, second most important thing is engagement, third most important thing is engagement, you really do have to answer the question and put forward content people are going to find interesting and when they do find it interesting and when they start to have a conversation back with you, engage with them and make sure your doing what social media does which is to be social.

Would you promote the usage of the competition facilities on facebook or the questionnaires?

Ya the questionnaire ii suppose I do find to be quite useful, especially in the betting industry as content, I'm not on competitions I must be honest I think

the competitions are there almost a sort of cop out, in that you don't really have anything to say, it's like buying friends to go down and have a cup of coffee with you or have a drink with you in the pub or something like that, you have to pay your friends to actually come and talk to you, then that's a totally different dynamic to you all decide to go, I'd rather out up content I think is going to be of interest to them and then listen to what they're going to say about that content and continually reshape and refine it in order to make sure that it is something they're going to come back to and the key to that is their ability to share it with their own wider audience, when I'm engaging with people I can only engage one to one whereas if the engagement is right then they're going to share that out amongst everyone else and then all of the rest of the people are going to brought into it as well because advertising that you are on facebook and then doing nothing about it is a complete waste of money you actually have to be on facebook in order to really make it work, the competitions on twitter, you know retweet me now and you're in with a chance of winning an ipad 2, there tiresome, there spammy, you never see any of the people that would be in my timeline, I don't particularly see them doing these kind of retweets and if they are its for a brand that I'm not really interested in any way, Ya sure we'd all like a nice brand new toy but competitions, how do you know how many people are actually entering into it how realistic are the chances of winning it are, and your selling a little bit of your soul by offering to retweet it, now if you told me to retweet this and you have a chance of two tickets for the all Ireland football final then if it is something that really engages me then I'll throw my lot in then but not really, competitions will only work if they are really super ones and I still think they would come way down my list of priorities in terms of building a good social media campaign.

that's too broad, whereas they have concentrated down onto their Gaa audience, so if your into your Gaa you Supervalu is sponsoring, you might have a look to see if they have anything interesting and if feeding through the right kind of content it can work but there content is good it is backed up by competitions but I think it would be a different matter if they said our competition is the most important thing and I think just no because even if you do double your audience you're not engaging with them, you double them and then they go away.

Do social media posting reflect a brands identity or the personality of the writer of the posts?

I think if you're a big brand, and I think that eircom do this quite well and there's a company called relax payments who do it quite well, I'm aware of a

few of those and I would follow they maintain their own identity, so if I'm doing the eircom customer service ill always sign off with my tweets or ill sign off with my posts as Rob, so you kind of creating that little germ in people's minds that this is a real person as opposed to the brand that I'm talking to, but I think that the brand is acutely aware that they are at risk of having individuals speaking on their behalf who are not necessarily the corporate head of communications, the level of training of people who are engaging on behalf of the brand has got to be good as well in order to do that because if you're on twitter and if your avatar is the eircom logo then you are speaking as eircom even though if you tried to speak as eircom, if you didn't get back to people and didn't engage in conversation again it wouldn't work again I think training of a small team of people, I wouldn't ever advocate that a big company should just give it over to one person because the other thing about twitter and facebook is that it very much is always on medium and there's a real danger in that and there's a real danger in that something that eircom do quite well and they say it in there profile is they have got there timeline will be live between 7 am and 11 pm, and then they will always say goodnight to people at the end of the day so that there is a clear break line because twitter is one of those things that if you reply to somebody on twitter you actually will be hitting refresh waiting for an instant reply it doesn't work that you can come back to like on email in an hour's time or come back tomorrow so you have to be aware the parameters your working in but there has to be more than a nine to five with an hour for lunch so you need a team of people and that team has to speak with the same voice. if we look at one efficient brand in the UK, Betfair who have one guy who runs there sports betfair site and has a fan of the same football team I support, QPR, and he's known as that and it becomes almost a part of the quirkiness of it that he will never say anything bad about QPR and he will always say something good about them and people react to that and he's tapped into an audience that are by their very nature have a sort of tribal approach to this it's like in the Gaa if I know someone who is doing the Supervalu page and is a cork fan and is doing the Supervalu branding on that I can have a bit of a laugh with that and I can engage with them because even though there not my county or my team there wearing their heart on their sleeves a little bit and the fact that Supervalu is a Cork brand and Musgrave's is a cork brand it kind of makes sense, if they were from Donegal there might be a bit of a disconnect there between the corporate marketing of the brand and the individual so each brand would have to deal with it differently but if they go into it thinking they can just let anyone in charge of it because they have a nice twitter account and she seems to be a very personable kind of person that's not going to work, because a) they won't be able to handle everything that's coming her way and also your putting her under too much pressure to either be herself

or a version of herself so if you got the brand name over the door you have to reflect the values of the brand even if you are an individual.

Do you think social media complements or conflicts with mainstream traditional media?

I think it complements it but in the same way as motion pictures replaced silent movies, television replaced radio but then radio comes back alive again and that different media will always emerge to capture peoples imagination and to capture the way people are engaging, it has to be disruptive in order to muscle its way onto the pitch so to speak, or else people won't take any notice of it so it has to be different but in time the fact that coca cola, eircom and Guinness all get engaged in social media means that they kind of put manners on it and begin to shape it into more of a corporate styled approach, design from the outside world comes in and shapes social media, twitter will change over time from where it was which was absolute rubbish, you know the "I had corn flakes for my breakfast this morning" that kind of thing you don't see anymore. twitter has changed remarkably, twitter is a media source, I use twitter as my web browser for the most part because I've got people in my own timeline that are interested in what I'm interested in and they will actually tell me things that I would of previously found through a browser, like if I open my Firefox my home page has nearly 40 pages loading, that's my range of interests but even within that 40 I'm never going to capture the vast amount of information out there so I believe in social media and I live by social media in that people that are of interest to me, weather I agree with them or disagree with them will tell me and bring to my attention interesting facts, they may be people more knowledgeable on affairs like politics, sports, books anything that is of interest to me I say id feel so much more connected now at the age of 44 to what I would of when I was 24 even though that's the period of your life when you're hungry for knowledge and information the way that the media has changed now and has allowed us to actually go further faster higher than we have ever gathered before I think is brilliant, so it's part of the overall media it enhances the internet it enhances television, nobody who is on twitter watches tele without their phone beside them now so I watch a football match and have 3/4 of an eye on what's happening in the game and the rest on what people are saying about the match on twitter and making my own comments and observations in there from a commercial point of view that can be important, I work in betting so if I can talk about betting statistics through a game and people are listening all the better for my commercial proposition, but its more than just posting statistics saying there now 1.24 to win it wouldn't be enough, I have to build a conversation in context, the late show is back tonight and it is far more

entertaining watching the twitter comment than to watch what's going on the television.