

Listen.

You Can't Answer the Questions
You Don't Hear.



The dinosaurs had it easy. They dominated the landscape for 160 million years, at a time when evolution occurred slowly. But change today comes much more quickly. One day, you're mailing a press release to your good friend the journalist, the next you're faxing on thermal paper and now, well, things have really changed.

Unlike an asteroid collision that may have caused the dinosaurs to become extinct, the advent of social media and the incredible volume of available information merely changes the landscape, rather than wiping communication professionals—or our relevance—out of the picture.

A recent study of the 2010 Inc. 500 (a list of the fastest-growing private U.S. companies compiled annually by Inc. magazine) by the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth found that 83% of these companies use at least one social media channel. What's more, 50% of them have corporate blogs and 56% believe social media is "very important" to their business and marketing strategy.¹ In addition to reaching out to customers and prospects, search engines and social networking sites are being used to recruit employees and connect with vendors and partners. There's no denying that the present and future of marketing, public relations, investor relations and all facets of communication have changed. And will continue to change.

However, major news outlets are still trusted sources of news and information, which means media relations still plays a big role in reach and distribution. Even on Twitter,[®] Facebook[®] and other social sites, audiences still reference traditional publications like The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal (and their digital editions) when they want to pass along interesting stories, facts and articles.

Further, the modern press release is even more relevant in the digital world, where it gets distributed immediately to the public via the World Wide Web. And when the 21st-century release is turbo-charged and optimized with keywords (to make it indexable to search engines) and content (with links, photos, videos and social media integration to make it interesting and shareable), it becomes a new strategy in and of itself.

So, why is it then that with this rapid change and explosive growth in communication channels, and with so many companies using and ascribing

value to social media initiatives, real audience engagement still remains low? Probably because while many professionals have adopted new channels for communicating, they haven't adapted the way they communicate. Many continue to use all available channels (including social media) as broadcast platforms to push their messages to the masses. Instead, communicators need to learn to use these channels (new and traditional) to nurture conversations, tailor content to specific audiences and become participants in the evolution of the message.

But how do you do this? How do you integrate both the old and the new to reach and engage all of your audiences—whether they consider themselves social or not? The truth is, what you've always known about creating relationships, talking about things that matter and being consistent and intentional are still relevant. We're just going about things in a whole new way—one that begins, ends and cycles around direct engagement with the customer.



Tweet this.

A Chapter-by-Chapter Introduction to the Audience Engagement Cycle.

Are you ready to explore the new world of communications? This eBook will guide you through this exciting environment and help you reinvent your role as an audience engagement professional. Each chapter discusses a section of what we call the Audience Engagement Cycle, a constantly evolving, often simultaneous process for creating advocates for your brands.

- Chapter 1: **Listen.** You Can't Answer the Questions You Don't Hear.
- Chapter 2: **Plan.** How Can You Measure Success If You Don't Know What Success Looks Like?
- Chapter 3: **Create.** Presto! You're a Publisher.
- Chapter 4: **Share.** Hello. My Name Is...
- Chapter 5: **Engage.** No More Sitting on the Edge of the Pool—It's Time To Dive In.
- Chapter 6: **Analyze.** Are We There Yet?



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Marketing, PR and corporate communications have always tended to be about talking. Often we were prompted by whatever new product we were launching—and hoped our product development team did their due diligence before coming up with the reason for our next big announcement. Then we found our angle based on what we thought our audience wanted to hear, crafted our story and blasted our message for hungry audiences to consume, hoping that we hit the mark.

The greatest upside of the new communication landscape is the way it takes guesswork out of the equation. There's no need to try to imagine what people are thinking anymore. Prospects, customers, shareholders, potential employees—they will tell you what they believe and what they want to know. Leading communications strategist Sally Falkow believes, "Social media offers the best research tools you could ask for. You can listen in on what people are saying about you, your industry, your products, your competition. You can see what they're responding to and sharing." So why not use this open forum to equip yourself with an engagement strategy that works?

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That said, you may have wondered why "Listen" is the first chapter of this book, instead of "Plan." While the old model always began with planning, in today's world, you have to listen and learn in order to inform your engagement plan. Unless you listen first (and then listen continually) even your most brilliant ideas for engaging your audiences will be based on nothing concrete. You may hit the right note, but you're just as likely not to. Instead, by listening carefully, you can find out exactly the content, experiences and interactions people need and want. You just have to create and deliver on it, and people will say, "That's exactly what I was looking for!"

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Finding the Grapevines

Listening begins with research—you need to know who is talking, what they're saying, where they're getting together, how much activity is out there, how people are connecting and what motivates them to act. But identifying your audiences and uncovering all of these variables can be overwhelming. Digital analyst, sociologist and futurist Brian Solis likens the solution to the old saying, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." He assures that building a strong listening framework that documents activity can help break the task down into bite-sized pieces.

According to Solis, one of the biggest mistakes companies make is assuming that their target is comprised of a single audience. And they listen with a singular focus in preparation for developing a single message to this audience. Solis says that different types of consumers look to different types of media and there is still little crossover in terms of how they search, discover and share information: The traditional consumer is still watching the evening news, flipping through newspapers and Yellow Pages, and reading magazines. The slightly more sophisticated online consumer is influenced by the online edition of that same newspaper and news outlet as well as a few online communities and influencers, and the social consumer is most reachable in the social stream through status updates, wall posts and tweets. So it's important that you understand each of your audience segments and the channels they use to consume information. But once you have a handle on your audience segments and their consumption patterns you can begin building your listening framework to address the patterns of each of your segments. Here are a few things that you should consider:

- ***How many mentions of your company, competitors, etc. are occurring on a monthly basis?***
- ***Where are these mentions happening?***
- ***What is being said? Be sure to track mentions, share of voice, favorability and sentiment, both online and off to try to develop a complete picture.***
- ***Who is doing the writing/commenting/tweeting/blogging? Ask yourself if your company has relationships with any of the influencers.***

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- *How are these people connected? What common interest has brought them together? In today's age of social media and online communities, context is now king. It's important to understand how people are connected, and uncover the common interest that has brought them together in the first place so that you are prepared to address them according to their individual interests later.*

The Hard Work of Listening

But don't confuse that listening framework with the actual listening. Data alone won't tell you if any of those mentions are significant. To understand your audiences, you have to read what is being said and glean intelligence and meaning from the conversations. Sure, it saves a lot of time to simply export results into a report that shows a number of media placements, Twitter and blog mentions, and "likes" but you need insights. Real listening, not just data, will make you a better communicator.

Taking the 'no' out of Domino's: Turning a mea culpa into a major success.

The case of Domino's perfectly represents the potential of proper listening. The pizza chain had long been known for substandard ingredients and a less-than-perfect pie. After a long-term sales slump, Domino's changed their communications approach in 2010. They listened to their customers both online and off, finally admitting that their pizza could use some improvement. And they started a social media campaign to address the feedback they were hearing.

It started with a microsite (PizzaTurnAround.com) to profile the rebuilding of their product from the crust up. As trials increased and feedback improved, they then used third-party social media endorsements to boost credibility. And they began to mix social media and sales, integrating Facebook functionality into coupons to make it easy to try a pizza while talking about it. Slowly but surely, by leveraging new media opportunities they turned the moderate disbelievers into brand ambassadors.

Domino's approach is an example of best-practice public relations at work: Listening to stakeholders and changing an aspect of the organization to effectively meet stakeholder needs. They turned a reason to avoid their product (the "no") into the very reason consumers should give them a second chance. And if it can work for an enterprise-level pizza chain, it can work for anyone.



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So be sure to spend time seeking out the bloggers who have an ear for your industry and a lot of followers, comments or reposted content. In addition to doing your own free searches, you can use subscription tools like Sysomos MAP to find those on Twitter and other social media outlets who are wielding the most influence. Look for the communities where your audiences congregate. Subscribe to or follow them, or aggregate their posts through an RSS reader, and read as far back as you have time to go.

Listening is all about empathy, and empathy lies in the words people use. The expressions, the questions, the answers that never come, the experiences that never get fixed— this is where the real listening happens.

Keep in mind that social media in particular is the most emotional of the channels available. Some call it the “egosystem.” People share what touches them and react to what they care about. They repost the stories that surprise, delight, upset or anger them. Listening to what they say will help you understand them and empathize. While a sentiment report is a great way to benchmark your position and gauge the effectiveness of your efforts, Solis explains, “Listening is all about empathy, and empathy lies in the words people use. The expressions, the questions, the answers that never come, the experiences that never get fixed—this is where the real listening happens.” Long-time technology journalist Paul Gillin adds, “The way people describe satisfaction or dissatisfaction varies by culture, gender, geography, language, etc., so trying to interpret whether people are happy or not is difficult without getting down into individual conversation threads.”

This dedication to listening allows companies to dig deeper than the conversations getting the most play. But you have to be careful. The majority of what people say is neutral, so it's easy to ignore. If you do that, you risk focusing on the few negative comments at the expense of the larger community—trying to satisfy

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a small number of people who like to gripe—and you may take your eye off the bigger picture, which is making all of your customers happier. However, if you find that your gripers are the ones wielding the most influence, then you may decide to pay more attention to them after all.

Instead, try to keep everything in perspective by supplementing your reading with online and offline research. And remember that each community has to be monitored on its own turf. The Twitter stream will only give you one set of data. Your invitation-only customer community provides another. Seek information from a variety of sources and pay attention to it over time so that you can see how the conversations, stories and perspectives change.

There's no question that listening takes a great deal of time—but then it's been said that we should spend 80% of any conversation listening. Therefore, it's important that you and the rest of your organization realize that your role as a communication professional is no longer to simply be the mouthpiece of the company. Now you have to be the ears of the company as well—listening on an ongoing basis in order to proactively engage and to address changes in the conversation as they arise over time. We know it works—the best corporate listeners out there also rank highest in terms of engagement. Some of the forerunners in listening to online communities have gone so far as launching social media command centers, sophisticated listening hubs with dedicated employees monitoring for brand mentions, watching for trouble spots and analyzing user experiences. Dell® and Starbucks® are leading this charge, with the support of the organizations' highest levels, including Dell CEO Michael Dell.

The Role of Reporting

With 50,000 new blogs² and 50 million tweets³ each day and a myriad of news content, videos and other items being posted to the Web, you can't read everything that pops up about your competitors, industry or marketplace. It's even overwhelming to follow every mention about your own company, so some of the heavy lifting has to be automated. That's why automated reporting tools

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are integral to the listening stage, as well as the planning and analysis stages of the Audience Engagement Cycle. While these tools cannot glean meaning from individual conversations like the human brain can, they can more quickly and easily identify trends and shifts in topics and sentiment, and can help pinpoint influencers and quantify the impact of conversations—providing a broader point-of-view on the issues you're hearing about.

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A variety of subscription-based monitoring tools have been developed, including Sysomos Heartbeat. Tools like this are powerful and can help you cut through the noise quickly to get to the heart of where conversations related to your brand are happening so you can better allocate your own resources and embrace the right channels. For example, it's of no use to set up a Facebook page and put all your time and energy into it when your audience is all reading blogs and communicating on Twitter.

For more listening depth, research products like Sysomos MAP can tell you where conversations related to any topic, trend or idea are happening so you can focus on topics that matter most to your audience.

In combination, these tools can help you answer that important question quickly, and can also help you identify:

- **Key influencers and opinion leaders**
- **Conversation topics and themes**
- **Community size, activity and growth**
- **Positive, negative or neutral sentiment**
- **Audience demographics**
- **Competitive performance, and more.**

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If you are invested in audience engagement and have the budget to properly monitor and listen, a powerful and comprehensive monitoring tool will serve you very well. However, if you don't know how long you'll be investing in audience engagement because you are still building a case for your CEO and therefore can't afford premium tools, then you can get by with some of the free tools available to you. Chances are, you've already signed up for Google® Alerts and Google Reader, but you can receive similar feeds about social media posts from Social Mention. Then look to sites that track specific platforms such as Twitter and blogs to gauge activity and seek out influencers. You can also click on the Facebook Insights link on your company page to gather some context regarding your fan base.

Free Listening Tools

These are just a handful of the countless online information providers you can try.

Google Reader: Aggregate new postings from Google Alerts, websites, RSS feeds, blogs, Twitter, Flickr,® YouTube® and more.

Social Mention: Receive social media alerts, and search data.

BoardReader: Scan forums and bulletin boards.

Icerocket™: Search blogs, news, images, the Web and MySpace.®

BlogPulse®: Identify influential bloggers and track buzz on topics and brands HootSuite™, TweetDeck™, Twazzup, Seismic®, Twinfluence or Twendz™—Find the most-followed tweeters for your topics and organize your feeds.

¹ Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. The 2010 Inc. 500 Update: Most Blog, Friend and Tweet but Some Industries Still Shun Social Media. Available at: <http://www1.umassd.edu/cmr/studiesresearch/2010inc500.cfm>. Accessed January 24, 2011.

² BlogPulse. Available at: <http://www.blogpulse.com/>. Accessed January 24, 2011.

³ Twitter Blog. Measuring Tweets. Available at: <http://blog.twitter.com/2010/02/measuring-tweets.html>. Accessed January 24, 2011.

Enter the Audience Engagement Cycle with Confidence

As the way people consume news and information evolves, Marketwire remains at the apex, helping marketing, public relations, investor relations and communication professionals engage audiences in new ways. From listening to important conversations and developing strategies to creating and sharing messages and measuring the results, our intuitive tools and knowledge resources make it easier to actively participate in and steer conversations about your company, products and brands.

Let Marketwire be your guide every step of the way. Click below to request more information or a free demonstration of how our many products can help you throughout the Audience Engagement Cycle.

[CONTACT MARKETWIRE](#)

Thank You. We'd like to thank our social media experts for generously sharing their time and ideas.

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Sally Falkow has spent the past decade becoming a noted social media coach after more than 30 years in public relations. Her blog—one of the first 20 PR blogs launched—can be found at ProactiveReport.com, or you can follow her on Twitter @sallyfalkow. Sally's *Mastering Social Media: A handbook for PR professionals* will be available through Amazon.com and at bookstores in May 2011.

Paul Gillin is a writer, speaker and consultant who specializes in business-to-business uses of social media marketing. His most recent book, *Social Marketing to the Business Customer*, co-authored with Eric Schwartzman, was released in January 2011. He was editor-in-chief of *Computerworld* and founding editor of *TechTarget*. Read his blog at PaulGillin.com

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