ME, MYSELVES AND MY TEAM

How communications teams can harness the power of online impression management.

By Christian Fieseler, Miriam Meckel and Giulia Ranzini

Are you on Facebook? Only four years ago, this simple question would have been a hot topic among professional communicators. Today, it has become a rather obsolete ice-breaker as we ought to ask an entirely different question: "who are you on Facebook?" As a matter of fact, professionals who spend a significant part of their job engaged in communication often maintain simultaneous profiles on multiple social media outlets, covering different aspects of their online existences. Many of them create a number of entirely separate online selves to take on different strategic roles and to freely communicate with their audiences. For example, one might engage in conversations with customers on an eye-to-eye level, another might share company news with colleagues and industry communities, and yet another 'self' might advertise personal milestones and musings to a small circle of friends. Such a conscious and diversified impression management not only allows for a playful and safe experimentation with different audiences and communication styles, it also helps bridge our professional, semi-professional and private communities and thus opens up unexpected brain pools and creativity. The question remains: how can we harness our multiple selves to the advantage of our communication teams?

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS: MEET THE NEW TEAM Within social media, communication and communication methods are essentially private in nature. So it is not surprising that professionals – even communication professionals – have so far hesitated to dedicate resources into tending presences in social media. However, as Facebook et al have evolved to be much more than just throwing sheep, poking friends and liking videos, social media are no longer a uniquely private playground. Instead, they have evolved into a vast and buzzing field for professional interaction. It is precisely this merging of professional and private purposes that makes digital media particularly valuable for professional communicators. The advent of social media encourages professionals to revise the formal boundaries of their staff, considering the possibility of extended teams where contacts from outside the strict office sphere would be allowed to partake in work-related questions and processes, thereby contributing to the team's brain pool and creativity. The management of such extended teams, however, poses a series of challenges. How to "lead" an extended team in the hierarchy-free space of social media? How to ask the community outside the formal team for input or even help without compromising one's authority or professional credibility? How to interact with extended team members in an informal way, when the interaction among core team members is formally regulated?

The answer lies in a professional and carefully-planned impression management consisting of multiple, distinctive, but complementary selves. One single online presence might in fact struggle to reconcile interaction with professional, semi-private and private communities, as well as internal and external team dynamics; multiple online presences (or multiple online personas), on the other hand, enable communication professionals to harness the potential of their various commu-



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nities and networks, be they private or professional. Among European communication practitioners, four separate yet complementary online personas are most frequent: the online leader, the help-seeker, the digital care-giver and the self-promoter.

THE ONLINE LEADER Judging from how communicators act on the internet, formal hierarchies seem not to be in contradiction with social media use. Leadership can indeed be translated online: by creating a social-media-bound extended team, online leaders are capable of mediating their formal professional role with the connections belonging to all the other parts of their lives. In fact, including private contacts and interactions within the general social media use allows team members to have a more complete and more personal view of their peers. This means being able to guide - and eventually correct - the behaviour of one's peers, but also involving others in deeper conversations. Furthermore, a version of leadership which is socially mediated can help to better shape formal relationships and prevent informal ones from being entirely overlooked. For the online leader, the extended team is a source of experimentation and a space for testing ideas: creative outlets and campaigns emerge from the exchange with all of his contacts and can easily be reported to the core team for revision. Through digital exposure, the online leader has therefore a chance to extend his active audience and establish an informal, down-to-earth, digital leadership.

THE SELF-PROMOTER Self-expression seems like the most obvious use of social media; however, there is a huge difference between random chatter and a conscious and strategised self-promotion through the circulation of information about us. The self-promoter uses social media to make her colleagues aware of her successes, of the progression of her projects, and of what goes on in her work; this keeps her friends outside the office updated on her life but also contributes to the well-being of her team. The reinforcement of one's strengths and successes can be a way to foster the confidence of the whole team by stressing that objectives are aligned, and each personal achievement goes towards a common goal.

Being informal and casual about one's achievements (as is often the case with social media communication) helps managers keep their feet on the ground and motivates peers to strive for more. For the self-promoter, the extended team is an option to keep her friends close and her peers even closer, as she allows informal news about herself to circulate from her professional to her personal networks and vice versa. A precise management of the type of shared information allows for an equal level of self-promotion, without resulting in excessive exposure.

THE ONE WHO NEEDS SOME HELP Sending out a message presumes a choice over the recipients, which is why an extended team offers an option to find answers by exploiting connections which go beyond those suggested by the formal hierarchies. The assistance-seeker is an example of this: he uses social media to find the support he needs for daily work-related activities. He has a good opportunity to find the requested information from not only among his group of colleagues but also further within his connections and acquaintances. Furthermore, given the connection among his contacts, answers can also be exploited for unspoken or unsolicited questions: in this sometimes affection-driven form of crowd sourcing, the extended team maximises the options to find support, reinforcing the motivation for individuals to stay within the network.

For the assistance-seeker, the extended team is an occasion to reach out from his professional network towards more-or-less established personal contacts, finding the acquaintances endowed with the skills to support him in his search for answers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A case of split personality?

- The findings of this article are based on the 2011 University of St. Gallen/ EACD social media survey
- Professionals who spend a lot of time online often maintain simultaneous profiles with separate selves
- Such diversification allows for safe experimentation with different audiences and approaches
- It also unlocks new sources of creativity as we meld our private and professional lives, as well as extending the work network outside the office walls
- The four most frequent online personas are the leader, the help-seeker, the care-giver and the self-promoter

Selves-Promotion

Communicators with low selves-promotion levels tend to stress their personal success over their professionalism and their work dedication.

…talk about their personal success, or that of their company

…stress their professionalism and that of their company

…highlight how dedicated they are to their work

Communicators showing high selves-promotion levels combine personal and professional dimensions, exploiting the many faces of social media to achieve their self-representation goals.

THE DIGITAL CARE-GIVER The same also works with the opposite approach: collective problem-solving is, in fact, maximised when the skills of individuals have the biggest opportunity of meeting a match among peers.

So let's meet the peer-supporter: she uses social media as an opportunity to share her knowledge and to make sure that the members of her network - be it colleagues, friends or both - are provided with assistance and support at any time they need it. This works within the informal extended team as a reinforcement of the bond that already exists, and allows managers to be there for their peers in the same way they'd be by the side of their friends. In a wider perspective, we can think of caregivers and contributors to be the engine with which collaborative social media exist, as wikis and crowd sourcing platforms rely heavily on knowledge-sharing efforts. Within organisational boundaries, the extended team offers the peer-supporter a way to provide support and to strengthen her feeling of being helpful to her core team, providing to their needs, independently from how far away they are.

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DIGITAL (HUMAN) NATURE Whether you recognise yourself in one or more of the digital selves exemplified here, one element remains clear: just like relationships IRL (in real life), interaction through social media is widely shaped by the personal characteristics of the individuals involved. Unlike real life, however, social media offers the possibility for managers to share with their colleagues a wider array of their personal traits through the different roles they cover throughout their days.

The online extension of their formal teams - including acquaintances, friends and other contacts - allows for a truer representation of a person's multiple selves and enables us to make our progress known or ask for support without losing credibility or authority. Furthermore, an extended team in which all components feel free to express themselves with their personal traits, characteristics, and perks brings experimentation to the formal core team by means of creativity, boundary-spanning and crowd sourcing.

TOLERANCE Overall, the effort required of managers comes even before strategising practices of impression management: it lies in exploring what social media can do for themselves and their teams and in accepting the higher degree of flexibility which comes with the representation of more than their strict, professional persona.

Establishing a climate of digital tolerance and openness to all the selves that the members represent can bring unexpected resources and can lead to previously unconceivable objectives.



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