Ragan Communications Study: PR wins social media ownership battle

By Shel Holtz

PR trumps marketing when it comes to controlling the social media budget and strategy

Despite the introduction of models for structuring a company’s social media activities, the reality is that PR/communication departments have their hands on the wheel in most organizations.

The debate over ownership of social media has largely raged between PR and marketing. In various forums, both sides have made cases for centralizing social media activities under their jurisdictions. According to a just-released study, however, PR is winning, hands down.

Slightly more than one-fourth of companies put between 81 to 100 percent of budgetary control over social media in PR’s hands, compared to marketing, with only 12.6 percent getting the same level of control, according to the sixth Communication and Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) study. The study is produced every other year by the Strategic and Public Relations Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism.

Budget isn’t the only factor. Nearly a quarter of respondents said PR has strategic control over social media in their organizations. Only 9 percent of organizations have given strategic oversight to marketing. In fact, just over a quarter of respondents said marketing has no budgetary control at all and about 22 percent said marketing had no strategic control.

The rationale, according to the Center’s director, Jerry Swerling, is that social media “require a relatively non-commercial approach; they entail dialogue rather than monologue; they often convey objective information rather than product features; and they tend to be free-form in nature, which is just the opposite of the highly controlled world of marketing.”

Measurement could well be another reason leadership is entrusting social media to PR. The study revealed a connection between the amount PR departments spend measuring their efforts and the degree to which the CEO believes PR contributes to the company’s success. As a result, respondents said, senior management is taking PR’s recommendations more seriously.

What’s more, measurement efforts—which make up an average of about 4-5 percent of PR department budgets—are earning PR a seat at the management table. That makes a whole lot more sense than hoping to get management to take you seriously by dressing for success. (If you haven’t read it, Gini Dietrich suggested that it’s public speaking in jeans that’s keeping PR from getting that coveted seat at the management table. Show management that you’re contributing to the bottom line and they’ll invite you to the table in cutoffs and flip-flops.)

“While we can’t yet prove a causal relationship between what you spend on evaluation and management’s attitudes, these correlations are certainly compelling and logical,” Swerling said. “CEOs love hard data. By spending more to get better data, you will improve perceptions of your department. If your department is seen as a bottom-line contribution, you will probably do better at budgeting time. And if you do better at budgeting time, you will recoup your investment in evaluation.”