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## Navigating the Fast-Paced World of Social Media

[By John Pilmer, APR]

Over the past few years, we've seen the rise of social media, which is now an essential tool for business and PR professionals. Internet use is off the charts as more than 70% of Americans go online, and taking advantage of this medium is now a basic part of reaching target markets.

Social media includes online technologies where users share content, opinions, and experiences through mediums such as message boards, weblogs, podcasts, social bookmarking sites, and others. The most popular sites boast tens of millions of users. Traditional news publications are now moving to mimic the two-way communication occurring on these sites.

The [Online Publishers Association](#) recently published new data revealing that Internet users are spending 47% of their time online reading content and another 33% communicating. Social media blends both of these activities, offering both original content in the form of blogs or online news sites and communication vehicles through sites such as [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#).

### Some Users Reject Corporate Messages

Companies are hearing that addressing social media is integral to a comprehensive marketing and PR campaign. But a recent [Computerworld](#) story, "Facebook users resisting Wal-Mart's latest Web 2.0 endeavor," reminds us that we have to remember to be careful when we use social media sites for marketing or public relations — because not every endeavor will be met enthusiastically by social media users.

[Computerworld](#) reported on the backlash Wal-Mart Stores Inc. has received for creating a "Roommate Style Match" group on [Facebook](#). Wal-Mart likely created the group to utilize the enormous popularity of Facebook to reach its target customers.

Unfortunately, some users don't appreciate being targeted with corporate advertising or public relations when they visit their favorite social media sites. One post on Wal-Mart's Facebook group said, "Facebook should take the number of negative comments on this page as a note that we don't support this company for its use of a space for social networking. This space is for people talking to other people. Facebook, get your priorities straight."

### Targeting Social Media Effectively

To target social media effectively, you have to do plenty of research and truly join the online conversation. These days, it may be even more important to read [Slashdot](#) for a week before you submit a story than it is to read an issue of [eWeek](#) before you send a pitch.

Before you get started, make sure the news you are announcing or the company you represent will actually benefit from a social media campaign. This may sound obvious, but CEOs are hearing about the social media

craze, and your job is to help them stop and think about whether targeting social media makes sense. If they sell a consumer product or service, it absolutely makes sense. But if they are selling enterprise software to large corporations, the time required for a social media campaign might not be worth the investment.

Consider the following tips before beginning any campaign that includes social media targets.

1. **Use social media sites.** You can't truly understand the Web 2.0 world unless you are part of it. Start a blog, listen to podcasts, create a [Facebook](#) profile. As a user, you'll understand the best way to reach other users.
2. **Create a social media contact list.** Just like a typical press list, you should have a list of social media contacts. But don't mix them, since your pitch will be very different for each group. On the social media list, include very detailed information about what the contacts cover and how they like to be contacted.
3. **Don't send a press release.** Press releases are for reporters and editors. With a few exceptions (and



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they will tell you who they are), press releases are not for bloggers or [MySpace](#) users. With social media, you should casually tell your contact about the news by sending him or her a link to a news article.

4. **Realize you can't control social media.** Just as editors are the gatekeepers of traditional media, everyday users are the gatekeepers of social media sites. Many sites are specifically designed to shun corporate messaging. The only way to get involved is by joining the conversation; you will rarely be able to control it — unless you own the site.

5. **Set correct expectations with clients.** No matter whom you represent, you need to help them understand the world of social media. If they say, "I want you to get my story on the front page of *Digg*, *Delicious*, and the top technology blogs," you need to set correct expectations. Let them know that these sites are controlled by users, and if your news is compelling enough, they will take notice.

Targeting social media often means more work, since you'll need a different approach for each medium. Throughout the process, remember that you are joining a community. Study the community and its users, and tailor your tactics to each one.

**About the Author**

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