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NETIQUETTE: MISS MANNERS FOR THE WEB

Welcome to the world of the new influencers. The reason the social web is sometimes called the “wild west” is that we’re still working out the kinks of how best to communicate with one another online. The rules of conduct may not be set in stone, but the social web isn’t a total free-for-all either. You should be aware of some key, often mystifying, communications protocols before striking up conversations with the locals. This chapter provides some lessons

on how to communicate with *new influencers*—bloggers, YouTube stars, Facebook friend magnets, and Digg superstars. Think of this chapter as finishing school for Internet communication. If you understand the social innuendo, you’ve got a much better chance of breaking into the inner circle and getting mentioned or reviewed by powerful online influencers who can send thousands of visitors—and potential buyers—your way.

We will run through a variety of communications techniques here, but if you take one lesson from this chapter, take this: Listen first. Thankfully, nearly all new influencer communications occur in the Internet’s public forum, so you can adopt an anthropological approach. By emulating the influencers’ behavior and learning their dialect, you can be confident when you approach them. As Jane Goodall discovered, the best way to learn about a species is to live among them. So you’re going to start being active online right now. Have your computer in front of you while you read this chapter, because we’re going to put you to work.

Lesson #1: Listen First

The golden rule is “listen first.” Start by finding some blogs and online communities that are discussing your product or organization. In Chapter 3, we lay out a strategy for searching out the relevant new influencers in your industry, but here are a few quick pointers so you can reconnoiter a few corners of the Web right away:

- Start with Google, of course. Unless you’re IKEA or General Motors or in the entertainment industry, you probably won’t find blogs dedicated specifically to your company or brand. Still, doing a complete search for *<your company> blog* can’t hurt. You’ll probably discover some blog posts that reference your company. Poke around the associated blogs, and see if they mention your organization on a regular basis. If they do, start reading them.
- Can’t find any blogs exclusively dedicated to your company? No problem. Do you have larger competitors in your industry? Try searching for *<your competitor> blog*. Start reading the corporate blogs written by your competitors, as well as the third-party blogs that cover them.

- You can almost certainly find blogs covering your industry. Don't believe us? Pick the most unlikely industry and do a search for *<industry> blog*. Our favorite way to prove this is by doing a quick search for *funeral blog*. Try it—you'll find dozens. If your industry has newsletters, magazines, and conferences, at least a handful of bloggers are writing about it, too. Find a few, and start reading them today.

With just a few clicks, you've got a virtual stack of reading material that will help you get to know the new influencers in your industry, what they're talking about, which companies they're watching, and perhaps most importantly, what they're *not* writing about. If you do your homework and read these blogs weekly, you're laying the groundwork for good future encounters with these folks.

Lesson #2: Take Baby Steps

In Chapter 1 you learned about the Conversation Prism, which illustrates a variety of social media channels. Rules exist for communicating within the different channels. For this beginner lesson, let's look at Digg. Digg is the most popular social news site on the Web. Users submit their own news stories to the website, and others vote for or against the news stories (we explain Digg's full marketing potential in detail in Chapter 13). The best way to understand how folks communicate within Digg is to set up a user account. To begin, visit <http://www.digg.com/> and click the **Join Digg** link in the top navigation bar. Complete the registration process, and upload a photo to make your profile a little more personal.

Next, browse the site using the topics listed in the navigation bar. Digg uses somewhat peculiar categories for organizing its stories (for instance, Technology has Apple and Microsoft categories, but no Google). Each section displays items including news stories, videos, and images that have recently been voted up or *dugg* within that section. Likewise, the front page displays popular stories that have been *dugg* for the whole site. The stories that appear on Digg's home page can send hundreds of thousands of visitors to a website. On Digg, the community chooses which stories become popular and which stories get voted down, or *buried*.

Now's your chance to get your hands dirty. Drill down into a section that interests you, or use the **Search Digg** text box to locate stories. Given the demographics of the Digg community, you're going to find more stories about astronomy than ballet. Once you find appealing stories, click the link associated with each story summary to visit the story's originating website. If you like the story, return to Digg and click the **Digg It** button associated with the story. The number of diggs will increase by one (or more, if the story is rapidly receiving many votes from other users).

Congratulations! You've just participated in your first careful, discreet social media discourse. By voting up a story on Digg, you've become part of the community by saying which stories deserve to be promoted. The lesson here is to start small. If you haven't already been commenting on blog posts or participating on social news and bookmarking sites, begin conservatively in a social media channel like Digg. Participating on Digg is a safe way to look before you leap.

Tips for Choosing a Username

If you're shy about getting active online, then take baby steps. You can always register using an alias on Twitter, Digg, and MySpace while you check out the services. Remember, everything you do online is tied to your personal reputation, so choosing a username can be very important.

What if you want to get up to some hijinks on the Web—antics that your employer, customers, or online contacts might frown on? Don't worry, your social life doesn't have to come to an abrupt halt. Consider creating an alternative, anonymous persona that allows you to express yourself without causing repercussions for your professional life.

Alternately, building your personal brand online can be a powerful tool for making inroads with new influencers. If you're working hard to make valuable contributions on social networks, blogs, and Twitter, then don't hide behind a screen name. People like to know who's behind a profile and often engage more readily with "real" people than with handles. If you use your real name, you'll begin to enjoy the professional benefits of online exposure, including building stronger online relationships.

Before you choose a username, consider your goals. Are you trying to obscure your identity to keep your personal life separate from the professional sphere? Or are you trying to make a name for yourself in specific web communities so you have more influence with the right crowd?

Lesson #3: Make Friends

Making friends online can be a lot easier than making friends in the real world. That's one of the reasons social networking and online dating is so successful. Thankfully, online small talk is considerably less awkward than real-world cocktail chatter. You can extend your hand to online influencers by linking to their websites, subscribing to their blogs, adding them to your blogroll, following them on Twitter, or joining their Facebook groups. Before you start forging online relationships, you should familiarize yourself with these tools. Now is a good time to sign up for Twitter and Facebook accounts if you haven't already.

Bloggers, podcasters, and video creators notice these connections because they are constantly monitoring their growing audience. Think of these low-key, first moves as your calling card; they break the ice when contacting new influencers with your story. We've discovered that if the new influencers recognize you as a regular reader, a Facebook group member, an RSS subscriber, or a Twitter follower, they're more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt and hear what you have to say. A word of warning: Unless the person you're trying to befriend has hundreds and hundreds of Facebook friends—and is obviously not very discerning about who he friends—we suggest holding off on sending him a Facebook invitation. For most, a Facebook invitation is one step too far into the inner circle. Wait until you've had one or two email conversations before getting too friendly.

Lesson #4: Lay Your Cards on the Table

Pop quiz. What are the two critical tenets of new PR? If you said “authenticity and transparency,” then kudos for paying attention and thoroughly reading Chapter 1. These tenets apply to all your interactions with social media creators. You've got to be completely up front about who you are, what company you're working for, and what your motivations and goals are. For starters, the message needs to come from you, not *info@yourcompany.com* or *news@yourcompany.net*. You're trying to forge a personal, lasting relationship with the person at the other end of your outbox. If you appear to be hiding

anything (and that includes hiding behind a generic email address), your email will likely be filed among the Viagra and Rolex ads.

When we're contacting bloggers for the first time, our opening line is often something like this:

Hi, My name is Darren Barefoot and I'm a blogger (www.darrenbarefoot.com) and a marketer (www.capulet.com). I'm working with ACME Blow-Up Toys (www.acmeblowup.com) to help them get the word out about their new line of . . .

Our goal is to divulge as much information as possible as quickly as possible. The URLs are key because links are the language and currency of the Web. Bloggers can immediately visit any of the sites we provide to confirm our identity. Links work like little tokens of trust—a personal detail disclosed that helps to strengthen a connection.

Clarity is key. If your goal is to get a blogger to review your product, simply ask him. Don't send him tickets to the opening night of your play as a gift. Explain that free tickets are available for reviewers. If he wants free tickets, his intention should be to review your play. Whether you send a blogger a laptop or a new brand of dishwashing detergent, be sure to request a review or he might misconstrue the gift as a bribe. Take your lead from Andrew Milligan of Sumo Lounge International. Milligan wasn't selling enough bean bag chairs to make a go of it. But when he began approaching bloggers and offering to send them bean bag chairs to review, his luck changed. Two years later, after more than 250 blogger reviews or web posts about his bean bag chairs, the company's annual profits have tripled. In Shelly Banjo's *Wall Street Journal* article "Ripple Effect: Blogs Help Businesses That Can't Afford a Lot of Marketing," Milligan says, "This approach saved my business. It took Sumo from nothing to a fairly large and profitable company."^{*}

^{*} Shelly Banjo, "Ripple Effect: Blogs Help Businesses That Can't Afford a Lot of Marketing," *Wall Street Journal*, May 2008, http://www.wsjclassroomedition.com/crel/articles/08may_cs_entr_blogs.htm.

Lesson #5: Bloggers Aren't Journalists

Traditional journalists and bloggers have some obvious similarities, but recognizing that they're not one and the same is important. Here are some key differences:

Bloggers' requirements for content are less rigid.

A reporter on the entertainment beat has specific weekly requirements for articles. In an average week, she might write one celebrity profile, two movie previews, and two movie reviews. Bloggers are free from such stringent requirements. A movie blogger might preview six movies one week and none the next. That said, almost all of the top-tier bloggers publish lots of new content all the time. Conveniently, this means they're constantly on the lookout for new material and aren't tied to the same lead times and deadlines as print journalists.

Bloggers' writing is usually informed by their opinion.

Bloggers don't have to write about anything they don't want to. Instead, they tend to write about things they respond to emotionally (whether with outrage or adoration). So bloggers will not want to transcribe your media release announcing a new corporate partnership—press releases are utterly devoid of feeling (and, of course, are boring, manufactured news).

Bloggers make connections.

If you can't include a hyperlink in your pitch, don't target bloggers. They'll look for something to link to, and if you don't provide a link, they might link to your competition—or an unflattering article about your organization.

Bloggers reject marketing language.

In our experience, journalists are accustomed to the corporate hackery of the modern media release with its superlatives and glowing prose. Journalists typically receive dozens of corporate entreaties a day and are proficient at cutting through the noise and PR flacks to get to a story's source. They recognize biased marketing messages as a necessary evil.

Bloggers aren't as hardened to spin, but they aren't fooled either. In fact, bloggers can be publicly critical of your marketing process. We sometimes see naive marketers mercilessly mocked by bloggers because they've made unfounded or exaggerated claims in a press release. Journalists won't often ridicule you; bloggers aren't always so kind.

Will bloggers respect embargoes?

That is, if you ask them not to publish your news before a certain day and time, will they hold off? Probably, but aside from a few *probloggers* (those who blog as a day job), they may not know what an embargo is. Still, if your entire marketing campaign revolves around radio silence until a particular time on a particular day, select the influencers you pitch with extra care.

In practice, this rule is slightly tricky because sometimes you'll benefit from treating bloggers exactly like the mainstream media. For instance, you wouldn't pay a journalist to review your product, so in almost every case you shouldn't pay a blogger either. And just as you wouldn't dream of telling a journalist how to write her story, you also should not attempt to write a blogger's review for him. As a general rule, approach bloggers with the same professionalism as you would a journalist.

Lesson #6: Your Reputation Precedes You

A marketer's profile is a lot more public and personal than it used to be. Although some influencer communication happens via email, online communication tends to spill over into public spaces—like blog comments, Facebook profiles, and YouTube video responses. Your name is associated with every message and comment. The sun has set on the age of the “unnamed company representative.” If you're just getting started in social media marketing, this lesson is important to learn immediately—before your online reputation gets sullied by impetuous blog comments, indignant posts, or too much information about your personal life.

The Internet never forgets, and that can be a problem. If you don't believe us, visit <http://www.archive.org/>. Internet Archive is an organization dedicated to, among other things, archiving the entire

Internet. And if that's not enough, Google can store old copies of websites for months or years. As the Web ages, definitively removing content—whether a social networking profile, a blog comment, or a video—is only going to get harder. Additionally, the Internet doesn't discern between personal and professional content, so your public persona online is your professional persona. They are inseparable. Of course, not all is doom and gloom, drunken spring break photos on MySpace, and unearthed sex videos; all the good works you do show up online too. If you're a member of your local town council, teach community salsa dancing lessons, comment astutely in forums and on blog posts, join affinity groups for good causes, or blog on a topic you're passionate about, that all bolsters your online reputation. When you work on the Web, remember that taking care of your digital reputation is good for your business and for your career.

Science-fiction novelist and world-famous blogger Cory Doctorow devised a name for this kind of digital credibility: *whuffie*. In his book *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, whuffie is a reputation-based currency accessible to everyone. When characters meet for the first time, they instantly check each other's whuffie to gauge each other's reputation. We're not quite at that stage yet—where are those brain implants? But any sophisticated web user can, in a couple of minutes, paint a remarkably complete portrait of any other regular web user.

Lesson #7: Don't Be a Social Media Spammer

I don't know the first thing about [*this company*]. But then this morning they spammed me. Any email that lands in my inbox that's written in marketing-ese and I don't know who sent it, that's spam.

—Tim Bray, software developer, entrepreneur, and blogger

Spammer is pretty much the worst aspersion you can cast on a web denizen. In the online world, being called a spammer is like being called creepy, desperate, and corrupt all at once. Marketers rightfully worry about demonstrating spammy behavior and often ask us how to avoid looking like a shady online citizen. If you practice what we preach elsewhere in this book, you should be okay. For the sake

of completeness, however, this behavior is the kind that will brand your forehead with a big red S:

- You send generic emails to bloggers and podcasters with salutations like “Dear Webmaster.”
- You contact bloggers with grand promises of link exchanges. Bloggers value links, but offers of link exchanges have all the appeal and personality of pyramid schemes.
- You post promotions for your own Facebook group (or worse, your product) on the walls of other Facebook profiles, pages, and groups.
- You haphazardly respond to blog posts, podcasts, and videos that discuss your competitors and leave promotional messages about your services.
- You don’t consider the topics a social media creator covers, and as a result, you pitch a chick lit novel to the guy with a hockey blog.
- You send press releases out to large lists you bought or culled from the Web without obtaining the recipients’ permission.
- You sneakily insert links to your products and services into Wikipedia.
- You offer to covertly buy editorial coverage on a blog. On that note, you should be skeptical of anyone who accepts payment to promote your organization without first publicly disclosing that payment or sponsorship.
- You forget to listen first.

Lesson #8: Don’t Fib

With all our talk of honesty, authenticity, and trust, this point should be obvious. But surprisingly, companies still try to deceive, misdirect, and spin conversations on the Web. Don’t lie, because you’ll get caught. And when you get caught, your online reputation will take a beating.

In addition to all the ways marketers usually lie, two related, insidious strategies seem increasingly prevalent in the social media

sphere: astroturfing and sockpuppeting. The former refers to a PR strategy where a campaign tries to appear spontaneous and grassroots but is actually orchestrated by an organization. *Astroturf* is a metaphor for fake grassroots support. *Sockpuppeting* is the creation of fake web profiles for the express purpose of promoting or advocating for a particular company or organization.

Exposed examples of astroturfing are legion. In 2006, science journalist Antonio Regalado exposed a YouTube video critical of Al Gore as being produced by DCI Group, a public relations firm with ExxonMobil and General Motors on its client list. DCI Group claimed the video had been spontaneously created by an amateur filmmaker in California. What made Regalado suspicious? DCI Group was running advertisements on Google results pages shown to web users searching for *Al Gore*. Do a search for *DCI Group* on Yahoo! or Google. Consider how many of the top 30 results are unflattering accounts of this incident or otherwise critical of the company. That's the cost of astroturfing.

The simplest form of sockpuppeting in the blogosphere is also the most common. Company representatives leave fake comments using dummy user profiles in response to blog posts that are critical of their organization. Some pretend to be customers who are over the moon about the company's fantastic product; others ruthlessly bash their competitors. Many marketers aren't savvy enough to know that when bloggers look up their IP addresses, the sockpuppets' identities can become very clear. The *IP* in *IP address* stands for *Internet protocol*. They're numerical addresses that identify computers that are connected to the Internet. IP addresses can sometimes be used to determine, in general terms, the geographical location or Internet service provider associated with web activity such as posting a comment to a blog. In 2007, the CEO of Whole Foods, John Mackey, wrote anonymous online attacks of a smaller competitor, Wild Oats, in Yahoo! financial forums. He seemed to be trying to devalue Wild Oats' stock before Whole Foods offered to buy the company. In the end, Mackey was outed by the Federal Trade Commission when it investigated the acquisition. The sockpuppet debacle publicly embarrassed Whole Foods and Mackey and must have cost the company a fortune in legal fees.

Who Are These New Influencers, Anyway?

So who are these new media masters you want to communicate with, and why should you be so concerned about getting on their good side? Simply put, they're going to help you sell your products and services. They've got the power to send hundreds, even thousands, of potential customers to your website. That improves your chances of making sales. Plus, each link from a powerful new influencer is recognized by Google as a thumbs up for your website. Google rewards you by moving you up the search rankings, resulting in more visibility in search engines.

So how do these new influencers feel about marketers pitching them stories, products, and services? Margaret Mason, Muhammad Saleem, and Marshall Kirkpatrick let us in on what works and what totally turns them off.

Margaret Mason, Shopping Diva at Mighty Goods

Mighty Goods (<http://www.mightygoods.com/>) is a popular shopping and design blog that has been listed as one of *Time's* Top 50 Cool Sites and has been selected best shopping website by both *BusinessWeek* and *Forbes*. Mighty Goods posts new content five days a week, so the site is always on the lookout for new products to feature. Margaret Mason is the brains behind Mighty Goods.

Q: How do you decide whether or not to cover a product on your blog?

A: If you send me something that I otherwise would have listed, I'll list it. If somebody sends me a big basket of body and bath products, and it's good, I almost always list it, especially if it's beautifully designed. I feel like I can say, "They sent this to me and it's something I would've bought myself, so I thought my readers would like it."

Q: Most of the time, do marketers get it right or wrong?

A: Mighty Goods has been running for three or four years. In that time, I've received only two things that I would not have bought with my own money. And I get several items a day in

the mail. Anybody who has ever looked at my site understands what aesthetic appeals to me.

Q: What are you trying to accomplish with Mighty Goods?

A: The reason I started my style section was to give back to the community. There's a woman who makes these little bags in Japan who has, like, 10 visitors a day. I linked to her website, and she sold out of all of her stuff. She sent me an email saying "Awesome!"

Muhammad Saleem on Getting Digg

Muhammad Saleem is a Digg superstar. We can give you a very good reason for enticing Saleem—and other top diggers—to vote up your posts. If Saleem diggs your article, you've got a much, much better chance of getting on the Digg front page. That's because Saleem's network is watching which stories he's digging and, in many cases, will follow his lead. We asked Saleem how he feels about marketers sending him stories and what criteria he applies to voting up content on Digg.

Q: How often do you get contacted by marketers who ask you to digg their stories?

A: I get asked to submit or vote on stories fairly often. However, I don't know how many of them are marketers and how many are just content producers and publishers just trying to get a little exposure.

Q: Do you ever digg on a marketer's request?

A: I don't care if a person asking me is a marketer or someone else; I usually submit or vote as long as the content is good.

Q: What criteria do you use to decide whether or not a story is digg-worthy?

A: The criteria is simple:

Will the story be of interest to the general Digg community? Do I like the content? In most cases, I'll act if I think the community will appreciate it.

Q: What kinds of things would you say gets the Digg community the most excited?

A: The community's preferences are always changing. It used to be very technology-centric but has been leaning more and more toward world news (politics, business, etc.) and offbeat entertainment items.

Q: What's so great about Digg? Why do you dedicate time and effort to it?

A: There are several reasons I spend time on Digg. First, it's because of the platform. However flawed it may be, it's pushing boundaries and creating standards for how content is created and consumed online. Second, because by participating over the years I have built a fairly close group of friends. Finally, because it's just fun and allows you to keep up with trends in the social space.

For Marshall Kirkpatrick, *It's Just the Facts, Ma'am*

Marshall Kirkpatrick is the Vice President of Content Development at ReadWriteWeb, a blog that covers technology news, reviews, and analysis. ReadWriteWeb's got more than 275,000 RSS and email subscribers and is ranked by the blog search engine Technorati as one of the world's top 100 blogs. If you work in technology, getting covered by ReadWriteWeb should be at the top of your wish list. Though we've personally had good success with gimmicky, creative blogger outreach tactics, Kirkpatrick is a journalist at heart. He wants the facts. Here are his top tips on how to get your story on ReadWriteWeb:

Q: How many pitches do you receive each day?

A: I'm going to guess 40 or 50.

Q: Is getting pitched a drag or do you just see it as part of your job?

A: Bad pitches are a drag; good pitches are fabulous. Trying to figure out which is which quickly so I can move on to scanning RSS feeds is one of the most important parts of my job.

Q: What's the most original marketing pitch you've received? What about it made you want to write about the company?

A: Originality in a pitch is of very little consequence. The best pitch I've heard this year was when Eric Marcoullier from Gnip called me up while I was at the grocery store and he said, "This probably isn't very sexy, but I'm building a social media ping server that does data protocol transformation, including offering XMPP feeds from any participating source whether they publish in XMPP or not." I said to him, "Don't you dare forget to call me again two days before this launches; that sounds like the most awesome thing I've heard about in a long time." Just tell me in one or two sentences about what the technology does. I get excited about cool things for a living so don't try to trick me into getting excited about something unexciting, I won't appreciate it. Just tell me what it does, and if I like it, then help me get more information about it.

Q: If you could offer one piece of advice to marketers pitching news sites like ReadWriteWeb, what would it be?

A: Give me your client's RSS feed, make sure it's got interesting technology news in it from time to time, and put your phone number and IM in your email signature.

Q: If you could give marketing folks one tip about how *not* to pitch you, what would it be?

A: Don't refuse to tell me what the news is unless I talk to a CEO first.

Etiquette Cheat Sheet

Be respectful. Be honest. Don't lie. Send good content. This advice seems like common sense (or even common courtesy!), but we've seen so many examples of duplicitous marketing on the Web that we feel we have to say it again. One of the oldest and most reliable pieces of advice for online conduct is this: Treat the people you're talking to as though they're in the room with you. At a cocktail party, you probably wouldn't wield a megaphone to broadcast your commercial

message, constantly interrupt conversations with a product plug, or tell stories that simply aren't true. And surely you've watched enough sitcoms or read enough Shakespeare to recognize how foolhardy it is to pretend to be someone you're not. Be authentic, and you (probably) can't go wrong.

We encourage you to dive into these new landscapes and meet the locals. Whether that's signing up for a StumbleUpon account, posting your first photos to Flickr, or launching an internal blog on your corporate intranet, participation is key to comprehension. Plus, becoming involved in these communities is essential to establishing your online credibility and that of your organization. We can't learn about new cultures or how to speak their language if we don't leave our living rooms, and that's the first step in engaging with the world of social media. So get off of your virtual couch and explore the social web.