



## TrendWatcher: Coming Soon to a New Media Channel Near You

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Remember when the Internet moved from dubious fad to business imperative? Not only external but internal corporate communication changed dramatically with the advent of e-mail and intranets. Now it seems to be happening again, except this time with social media communication channels such as blogs, podcasting, wikis, and RSS feeds, sometimes called Web 2.0.

Of course, there's still a gap between those who ask, "What the heck is a wiki?" and those who note, "This stuff is stale. Why are these tools still being called 'new'?" But the gap is closing fast as the technologies spread. And there's already a talent demand for communication professionals who can make the best use of these tools.

Most (89%) of 409 European communication professionals surveyed by professors Ansgar Zerfass, Swaran Sandhu, and Philip Young (2007) agreed that, within a few years, "social software" and blogs will be widespread and fully integrated communication platforms. Eighty-five percent concurred that social software tools such as blogs are revolutionizing communication (European Public Relations, 2007).

Toward the end of 2006, a survey of 1,149 internal communications professionals conducted by consulting firm Melcrum positioned these technologies as still just emerging among the general business community. Only 12% of respondents used blogs at the time of the survey, for example, while 23% planned to start. Similarly, 8% used podcasting then and 16% planned to begin (Melcrum, 2007).

Just a few months later, however, another Melcrum survey of communication executives from large global companies found significantly higher rates of adoption. About half of the responding corporations said they used or were about to begin using social media for communication: More than half (55%) used blogs or were planning to begin in 2007, while 51% said they used or will use RSS/webfeeds. Podcasts (43%) and social networks (41%) were also in frequent use as business tools for communication. It turns out that online video (63%) was the most popular social media technology ("Key Findings," 2006/2007).

A *McKinsey Quarterly* global survey of 2,847 executives garnered reports of even higher usage rates, but this survey asked about "internal collaboration" rather than conventional communication. Seventy-five percent of respondents were using one or more Web 2.0 tools, defined as "[collaborative] Web services, peer-to-peer networking, blogs, podcasts, and online social networking" (Martin, 2007). The higher rates reported by this survey may show that these technologies are being implemented as collaborative and knowledge-management tools before their potential as conventional communication channels is as widely realized.

Of course, lines blur between collaboration and communication usages, and one purpose is likely to lead to others. This might bump up the amount that organizations are willing to spend on these tools. Indeed, *McKinsey* respondents predicted that their investments in social media/Web 2.0 communication tools would grow (Martin, 2007).



So what's keeping these technologies in the "emergent" rather than "ubiquitous" category? One of the difficulties is "a resistance to experiment with channels unfamiliar to the organization," concludes the communication consulting practice of Edelman Change and Employee Engagement after an Edelman/PeopleMetrics survey of 111 industry-leading organizations (Edelman, 2006). According to Zerfass, Sandhu, and Young's study (2007), another is a lack of communication professionals with the right skills to undertake social media/Web 2.0 communication projects such as setting up and authoring/moderating blogs.

So, despite a trend line that shows a growing acceptance of usage of these tools, communications professionals have their work cut out for them. In fact, the survey of European communication professionals - presumed early adopters all - identified "dealing with new communication channels and technologies" as the most important challenge for communication management in the 2007-2010 period (Zerfass, Sandhu, & Young, 2007). These challenges include not only breaking down natural resistance to change but wooing and retaining the kind of skilled employees who can make these technologies work effectively. Of course, like many new technologies, these tools also present opportunities for organizations to develop the kind of cutting-edge practices that give them a competitive leg up in the increasingly crucial areas of knowledge management, internal communication and even customer communication.

**For more information:**

For much more information, see the institute's [Internal Communication](#), [Knowledge Management](#) and [Customer Focus](#) Knowledge Centers.

**Documents referenced in this TrendWatcher include the following:**

Edelman Change and Employee Engagement. *New Frontiers in Employee Communications*. 2006.

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Melcrum Publishing. "Social Media Is Proving a Big Hit for Global Corporations Inside and Out, but Risks Remain." Press release. March 20, 2007.

Zerfass, Ansgar, Swaran Sandhu, and Philip Young. *EuroBlog 2007: European Perspectives on Social Software in Communication Management - Results and Implications*. March 2007.