

In the new Social Media environment, are there any hard-and-fast rules? Just one – you can't sit on the sidelines anymore...

Is the communications landscape really all that different than it was five or three or even one year ago? You bet.

Blogs are becoming an increasingly more influential and relied-upon source of information. Videos are created en masse by businesses and ordinary people alike, and uploaded to sites such as YouTube, Blip.tv and Yahoo Video. Social networking sites like MySpace, Flickr, Twitter, Scapblog and many others are supporting existing communities and forming new ones, in effect helping people “lifecast.” Traditional media outlets are incorporating blogs and videos and other online tools into their platforms, with members of the public contributing original content, resulting in a combination of mass media and custom-targeted niches.

One of the most important differences between today and a few years ago is that virtually everyone is now an information consumer and disseminator. And because they are actively participating in the creation process, they have their own voice, are expecting to be heard, and are demanding that others respond to what they have to say.

So what should companies and organizations do? Continue what they've hopefully been doing all along, namely providing excellent services and products.

But beyond that, more than ever, they also have to actively listen and engage people via whatever means the individuals they're trying to reach are already using. That's key – go where the people already are and engage in the conversation, and invite them to participate in what you're doing.

Ask them to share their opinions (they will), ask them what they're looking for and what they hope to find (tap into the power of user-driven innovation), let them know their input and feedback will shape the service and product, and how (and then actually follow through).

And the right way of doing this is by being transparent (being open about what's trying to be achieved and how that's being done), authentic (being accessible and real, not hiding behind anonymity), open (you never know what wonderful things you'll find out), and engaging.