

# Need the 411 on Web 2.0?

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From blogs to social networking sites, new media can provide real strategic advantages for your company. But it's not just business as usual. It's vital to understand how distinct these applications are from the Web we've come to know and use.

Traditional Internet sites give us silos of information in a top-down process: from a website to the person who reads, views or listens to it. For instance, if you are reading this online, then you are using the Web in this standardized way. E-mail, meantime, generates a level of connectivity between users.

Here is how Web 2.0 differs: new Web networks are virtual running faucets of interactive communication, allowing us to continually generate, pass and catch information between particular groups.

Examples include the ubiquitous online journals known as blogs, video-sharing websites such as YouTube, and social networking sites like Facebook and **MySpace** where people create online profiles to connect with others like them.

People decide when and how to use these low-cost, easily accessible sites. Some communities deliberately stay very small, only letting in accepted profiles.

Others, though, purposefully nest thousands of people who are thinking out loud with each other. Like cross currents, the discussions that many people are having at once are now shaping our world in new ways.

With content created and driven by its own users, Web 2.0 lets businesses find and create information in relation to their products, industry or expertise and then disperse it to targeted communities.

For instance, by maintaining a blog with thoughts on recent legal opinions, a boutique law firm can position itself as a thought leader in its niche.

By creating and posting a humorous video on YouTube, a retailer can reach not only existing customers but the contacts they forward it to as well.

By creating a profile on a social networking site, a restaurant can benefit from the virtual endorsements of customers who link their profiles to the restaurant's page.

So, which Web 2.0 tools are right for you? The most important thing to understand is that this is a fundamentally transparent experience.

Many companies, to varying degrees, are sharing depths of information about themselves: their expertise, thinking, products or services. They are actively inviting the public to participate, and even push back, with new approaches and ideas.

There may be no better way to way to build relationships or take customer service to a whole new level. There's also great potential to develop – and introduce – new concepts, products or services. This may be the best way ever to market, evaluate marketing and develop new demographic bases.

For some companies, though, this transparency can be deadly. If information is proprietary, or an unfair advantage could be seized, then it is important to think through which Web 2.0 tools are your correct resources – and how they can be applied appropriately for your needs.

Ultimately, these socially dynamic communities can't be ignored. So they ought to be maximized. They continue to evolve quickly. A strategic digital media communications plan will allow you to stay competitive. The best is certainly yet to come.

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