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Social media revolutions: The influence of secondary stakeholders

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Abstract   Traditionally, firms have tried to listen to primary stakeholders (e.g., customers, suppliers, creditors, employees) but have paid little attention to the concerns of secondary stakeholders (e.g., the general public, communities, activist groups). This is because primary stakeholders were perceived to have power, legitimacy, and urgency behind their requests, while secondary stakeholders had little or no leverage. With the coming of the Internet and social media this asymmetry of influence has changed. Today, secondary stakeholders have to be managed as adroitly as primary stakeholders. In this installment of Marketing & Technology, we show managers how social media and the Internet have amplified the influence of secondary stakeholders, and offer guidance on how to manage these groups effectively.
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1. A shift in power

Senior managers now recognize that devoting attention to their primary stakeholders is not enough to ensure the success of an organization's external relations. Increasingly, communication and marketing managers must deal with secondary or 'fringe' stakeholders who have succeeded in capturing the public's attention (Sharma & Henriques, 2005). One needs simply recall the potency of the social media campaign waged against BP during the Deepwater Horizon crisis to appreciate the nature of the dilemma facing corporations today. BP's credibility was shattered, and four years later the firm is number two on the list of companies with the worst reputations (Hess, Callo, & Frohlich, 2014).

The conventionally accepted approach for how to manage stakeholders was described by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), who explained that primary stakeholders—typically large clients, suppliers, shareholders, and employees—receive the bulk of the corporation's attentions simply because the corporation requires the resources they provide in order to survive. Because of this resource-dependent relationship, those stakeholders with the greatest power, legitimacy, and urgency of

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demands on the organization are most likely to garner senior management attention. Meanwhile, secondary stakeholders—including consumer groups, communities, special interest groups, individuals, and the public—struggle mightily to be heard, often to no avail (Frooman, 1999).

We are now entering a new era of stakeholder affairs. Though it was speculated more than a decade ago that the Internet would give real power to ordinary consumers (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002), and this has certainly proven true, the essence of the current change comes from the impact of social technologies on firm-stakeholder interactions. Firms today depend on positive Internet and social media commentary in order to maintain their reputation and legitimacy. User-generated content on social media is easily transmitted among stakeholder groups, reducing the corporation's ability to control its own image (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). With good reputation now seen as a vital resource and the firm's ability to control the same declining, secondary stakeholders now possess the kind of influence over the corporation that previously was the prerogative only of primary stakeholders (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011).

Secondary stakeholders have increased their influence in three ways: (1) through an increase in the ability to gather and share information, making connections between data and communities; (2) through an increase in the capacity to frame issues to appeal to large audiences; and (3) by means of Internet-based 'mobilizing structures' that allow secondary stakeholders to reach and organize large populations. Together, these three capabilities have given secondary stakeholders a more equal voice in the firm.

Why should managers care about the greater power of secondary stakeholders? More influential secondary stakeholders provide senior management with a check on the powerful voices of primary stakeholders. They also act as watchdogs, providing insight into the behaviors and practices of some of the less accessible parts of the organization.

We begin by taking a closer look at social technologies and their impact on secondary stakeholders' influence strategies. We then suggest ways in which managers can deal with increasing secondary stakeholder power.

2. Understanding social technologies, secondary stakeholders, and social movements

Secondary stakeholders are characterized by particular qualities. First, unlike suppliers, customers, and employees, they are isolated from the firm; they have no physical contact, no personal connection, and no access allowing them the direct interaction with management that is routinely enjoyed by primary stakeholders (Zietsma & Winn, 2008).

Second, they generally represent a diverse group of people with diverse interests regarding the firm. While one group might have concerns about the firm's waste disposal policies, another might find its air pollution safety standards insufficient, and yet another might protest its community engagement practices (Gardberg & Newburry, 2013).

Third, secondary stakeholders are primarily concerned with bringing about institutional or 'field-level' change: changes in the manner in which an entire industry or group addresses a specific issue. They question the legitimacy of existing practices and, if the firm is seen to be a major protagonist in the practice, the legitimacy of the firm itself (Zietsma & Winn, 2008).

Largely because of these features, secondary stakeholders display many of the characteristics of participants in a social movement (Zietsma & Winn, 2008). Secondary stakeholders gather information about a firm and its practices, discuss and debate the information, develop ways to frame what they have learned in the context of their social and economic concerns, and then make their voices heard against the firm.

Social movement theory suggests that the key elements for gaining momentum in a social movement are for those involved to assemble evidence about a perceived wrong and to develop sufficient self-justification for mobilization (Klandermans & Goslinga, 1997). Klandermans and Goslinga's model for the generation of collective action is presented in Figure 1.

Starting from the left, the individual's own personality/disposition influences the sources of information and interpersonal interactions to which the individual is exposed. Cultural themes/counter themes prevalent in society also influence these. Information and interpersonal interaction (second-from-left boxes) combine to create an 'injustice frame' and an 'identity frame' (third-from-left boxes), which together will determine the position an individual decides to take on a given issue ('agency'; second-from-right box) and whether or not he/she will participate in the movement ('participation'; far-right box). An injustice frame involves the perception, based on accumulated and interpreted evidence, that an injustice or wrong exists or has taken place. An identity frame involves the perception of events relative to one's own situation and conditions. The more relevant to one's situation an event is perceived to be, the more likely the identity

Figure 1. The generation of collective action*
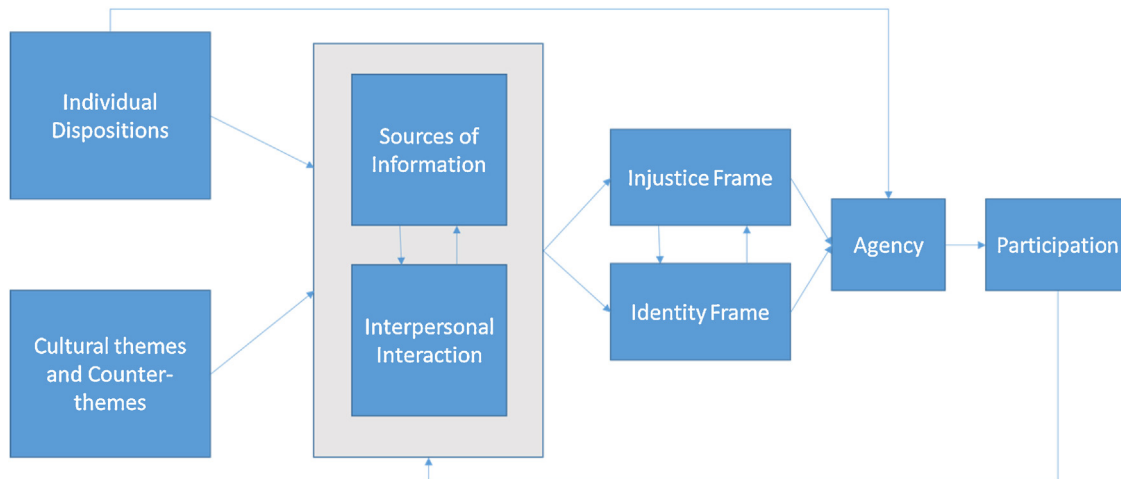
*Adapted from Klandermans and Goslinga (1997)

frame will support a move toward protest, action, or participation. Depending upon an individual's disposition, he/she may (or may not) decide that action should be taken and will then decide to participate (or not) in the movement. Participation in some form of action, such as a protest, provides additional information and interaction and influences the evolution of the individual's injustice and identity frames.

In the pre-Internet era, the process of collective action was often long and drawn out. Large movements required cooperation of the journalistic community to confirm and provide legitimacy to the issue in question. The environmental movement, for example, took many years to develop after the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Several well-publicized ecological events occurred in the 1960s before the movement really gained traction. Klandermans and Goslinga (1997, p. 327) explain: "Information is processed not by individuals in isolation but by people interacting with other people in informal circles, primary groups, and friendship networks. Much of what goes on within these networks concerns the formation of consensus." This has changed greatly since the social media revolution began in the middle years of the first decade of this century.

2.1. Social media revolution #1

The first major change that social technologies have wrought entails heightened ease of educating the public, the press, and other stakeholders about the cause. The Internet and social media are fast and easy resources for providing others with facts and information. Via these channels, secondary stakeholders can gather several years' worth of information on a company—such as regulatory records, executive interviews, employees' ratings and comments, proxy statements, and records of accidents—in minutes. While the public may not be convinced by one or two examples of wrongdoing, it will be swayed by a pattern of bad behavior. The onus on accumulating evidence need not lie with one individual or even one stakeholder group. With Facebook and Twitter accounts, circles of friends and colleagues can quickly add evidence and arguments and transfer the information to other blogs and websites. Once the discussion reaches other communities of linked networks, substantial evidence of misdeeds will begin to accumulate.

A good illustration of the power of these virtual information networks comes from the Deepwater Horizon crisis. BP first estimated the flow of oil that leaked from its well at 5,000 to 10,000 barrels per day; however, many questioned those figures and that prompted exchanges on social media. A West Virginia-based activist posted the first amended estimate. Subsequently, teams of scientists and researchers posted revised flow estimates—all of which were greater than BP's—ranging from 25,000 to 80,000 barrels per day. The incident created the impression that BP was hiding data from the public about the seriousness of the spill (Achenbach & Fahrenthold, 2010). Protest groups leveraged this example demanding that NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the Coast Guard, and BP be more transparent with information

on the spill. In short, open access to valuable information shared across diverse groups via social technologies made it possible to overcome a lack of access to private information held by BP and its partners. Information asymmetry, which is the normal state of affairs between the firm and secondary stakeholders, can thereby be mitigated through the use of social technologies.

2.2. Social technologies revolution #2

The second impact of social technologies has been the facilitation of the rapid development of injustice and identity frames. Injustice and identity frames energize a stakeholder movement, but they require discussion and exchange before the movement can grow beyond a small radicalized group. The message needs to be refined to appeal to a broad audience. Social technologies do two things to enable this process. First, they speed it up by allowing for multiple iterations of framing to be shared and improved upon through user-created content. Second, they make it easier for the message to reach 'influencers': those who, because of their stature and perceived integrity, can have an impact on public opinion.

Framing is an iterative process that takes into account both information and the sense-making of information relative to one's own situation and perspective on the world (Weick, 1995). User participation in social media, on blog sites, and in other open-exchange forums permits individuals to absorb information, read what others have to say, and finally put their own spin on a given event (Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2014). Common themes on an issue develop across websites and evolve into a common protest language (Parent et al., 2011).

To appreciate the dynamics of how this works, let us consider an example. On the morning of January 8th, 2015, a college student learns about the Charlie Hebdo shootings in France from an online newspaper (e.g., *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*) he has tagged on his Facebook page. He clicks to read a French version of the story (e.g., *Le Monde*), then chats with his U.S. and French friends about the incident, thereby drawing conclusions about his own network's perspective on this issue (injustice and identity frames). He speaks to his mother over breakfast, confirming both the injustice and identity frames he has begun to adopt.

The next step in his process involves moving outside of his immediate group of friends and family to tap into other networks of individuals concerned by the Charlie Hebdo events. Research on networks has shown that individuals are embedded in small networks and tend to communicate and exchange

their views with people from their existing network (Grabowicz, Ramasco, Moro, Pujol, & Eguiluz, 2012). Indeed, thus far, this college student has stayed within his own network. Individuals in the same network tend to be like-minded and to reinforce one another in their opinions, interpretations, and behaviors: the self-similarity principle (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). Yet, access to other networks is needed in order for individuals to transcend parochial views to those that can form the basis for a major social movement. Connections to other networks are made through 'super-connectors': individuals who serve as bridges between smaller groups or clusters of individuals (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005).

Super-connectors and super-connecting are important to the development of stakeholder movements, because without the ability to connect to diverse networks and develop a consensus of opinion, the movement will die on the vine. While super-connectors have always been with us, the tools for super-connecting have not. Today, Facebook and Twitter are the super-connector's primary tools.

Now back to the college student who is watching Charlie Hebdo events unfold on Facebook. By noon he has clicked over to several discussion boards, participated on a college blog site, shared a link with another friend, 'liked' several articles and photos, and received links to comments and contributions from several people he doesn't know personally but who appear similarly concerned about the events. In short, he has connected with other networks and has continued to develop both his injustice and identity frames over the course of the morning at a fairly rapid pace. He might not be a super-connector, yet through his Facebook, Twitter, and other connections, he is interacting with people from all over the world. By the evening of the same day, he has—together with the worldwide Internet community—developed a consensus about the Charlie Hebdo events and adopted the worldwide slogan: "I am/We are Charlie."

Social technologies also help link small stakeholders to influencers and opinion makers such as journalists, bloggers, politicians, and other powerful groups who can draw the attention of the general public. While most people are primarily consumers of tweets and posts, others are influencers, responsible for the large majority of re-transmissions. These influencers pass on links on trending topics, reinforcing interest and activity (Grabowicz et al., 2012). Some of these influencers are journalists. Trends in press sourcing show that journalists are increasingly finding their leads for stories from social media and are effective in bringing issues to the public's attention (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009). These newsmakers and influencers

can raise an issue to prominence in public debate, supporting the efforts of small stakeholder groups.

Now let's go back to our college student, as he moves from agency to participation. Two days after first learning of the events in Paris, he responds to a Facebook invitation to attend a rally in Boston on January 11th, which coincides with simultaneous rallies held in Paris and around the world. He chats on Facebook to see who will attend the Boston rally, where they will meet up, and so forth. Ultimately, he attends the rally and joins several online groups discussing the topic. He has moved from information gathering, to framing, and now to active participation in less than four days.

2.3. Social technologies revolution #3

The third influence of social technologies lies in their ability to act as mobilizing structures for protest and action groups. The Internet and social media have impacted secondary stakeholder protest and action mobilization by making it easier to organize. Social media in particular enhances communication among activists. It reduces transaction costs due to its ''speed and spatial range of communication'' (Baringhorst, 2008, p. 66). A survey of 53 advocacy organizations confirmed that activists feel they can do more with less; social media has made coordination easier and faster, and allowed them to involve other communities in their plans (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012).

While the free connection aspect of social technologies reduces the cost of stakeholder protest and action logistics, protest and action mobilization is also moving online. There have been some notable early successes. Consider, for example, the 2011 protest of Bank of America's (BofA's) fee increase for those with low balances. The protest was carried out exclusively online and was very successful; initiated by primary stakeholders, it attracted and brought in large numbers of supporting secondary stakeholders such as students. BofA eventually gave into the online stakeholder protest, reversing its fee increase (Shapira, 2011). In 2012, there was another online movement to defeat pending legislation in Washington that proposed restriction of Internet activity: the SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protest IP Act) bills. Four and a half million people signed the (online) petition against the bills (Ngak, 2012). Ultimately, the online campaign contributed to the defeat of the bills in the U.S. Congress.

Online protest and action techniques are more sophisticated with the rise of expert online protest consultants, who create the tools others use. Tactics include corporate website jamming and website hacking, like the recent hacking events at Sony

pictures (Cieply & Barnes, 2014). One very humorous approach has been the development of the spoof site: a fake website or account that is designed to appear to be the real thing. Visitors to a spoof site will find ironic posts and misleading messages within a pseudo-professional setting. Such sites can draw large audiences as did the GWBush.com site in 1999 and the BPPR.com site in 2010 (Lacombe, 2010). To conclude, secondary stakeholders now have online communication and a toolkit of protest tactics that have proved to be both low in cost and highly effective.

## 3. A new model of secondary stakeholders' movement to action

We have explored how social technologies have increased the influence and power of secondary stakeholders by making it possible to overcome information asymmetry, by speeding up the consensus-building process on injustice and identity frames, and by making it cheaper and faster to mobilize. Integrating these effects, we arrive at the model portrayed in Figure 2.

Within small networks of families and friends, individuals evaluate and validate information that is obtained online and in person about an issue, exchange with their friends in person and online, and arrive at a preliminary injustice and identity framing. The link is then made to other networks through the intervention of (primarily) social media: the super-connector. Via online discussions, blog posts, social networking interactions, and exposure to the views of others, a consensus develops and the framing evolves to accommodate the views of the broader community. Individuals then make the decision to move forward toward protest or action.[1] The organization and scope of the mobilization process is facilitated by social technologies.

This new model has important implications for the strategies secondary stakeholders use to influence target firms. Historically, secondary stakeholders faced challenges in their attempts to influence firms. They therefore employed tactics that were primarily indirect and coercive rather than direct and cooperative. Primary stakeholders approach the firm directly through scheduled meetings and/or private discussions. With no direct access to the firm, secondary stakeholders had to resort to indirect methods, either coercive or cooperative.

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[1] 'Agency,' as Klandermans and Goslinga (1997) refer to it in their model.

Figure 2.   Process of movement-to-action facilitated by the Internet/social media
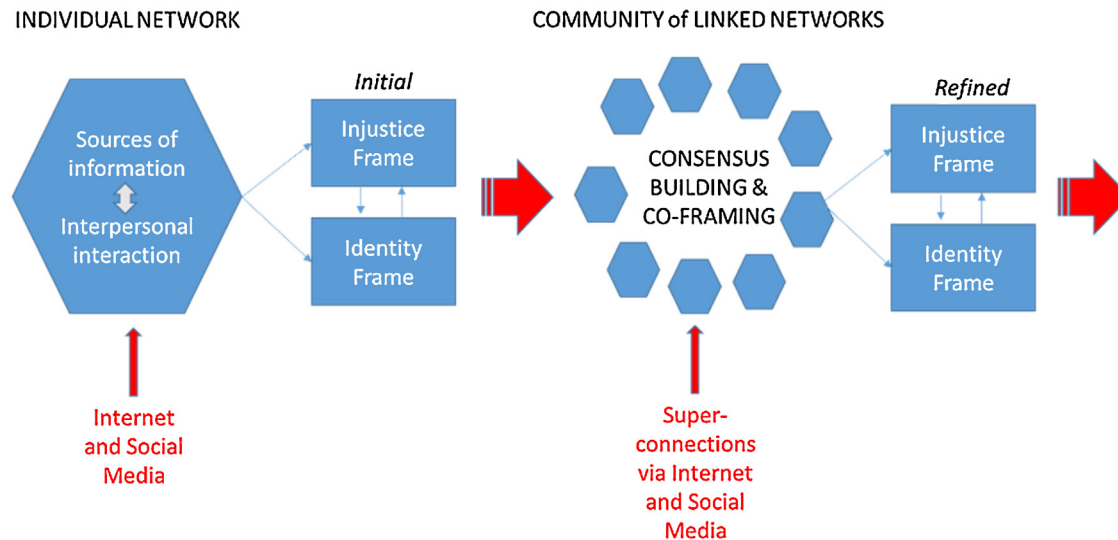
Examples of coercive methods include boycotts; protest rallies; and other, more violent or extreme forms of protest. Cooperative strategies involve trying to cajole the firm into good behavior or attempting to reward the firm for the same. Traditional examples of cooperative strategies include lobbying and attempts to convince large shareholders to side with secondary stakeholders on an issue (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Frooman, 1999; Sharma & Henriques, 2005).

Social technologies have altered the logic for using many of these strategies. The motivation for using coercive strategies in the pre-Internet era was based on a need to draw attention to the cause. Strapping oneself to a factory door to protest for workers' rights was a way to ensure that journalists covered the story and drew public attention to the issue. The limitation of these coercive approaches was that while they brought attention to the event, they did little to alter opinions. They also angered the target firms, which made it more difficult for secondary stakeholders to convince senior management to change their behavior. With social technologies facilitating mobilization around a cause, coercive strategies are now a second tier option: to be called on only once other, more peaceful, online methods have been exhausted.

Most firms have also woken up to the need to monitor social media activity in order to safeguard their reputation. Secure in the knowledge that their online messages will be heard and have impact, secondary stakeholders rely less on coercion and more on collaborative—even humorous—tactics to influence the firm. In sum, their position vis-à-vis the firm has been strengthened and their relative power vis-à-vis primary stakeholders increased.

4. Dealing with greater secondary stakeholder power: Is it really a bad thing?

We suggest that the new reality of greater secondary stakeholder power is actually good news. Having a strong, active, and vigilant secondary stakeholder community offers a number of advantages. They include:

- *Acting as a counterweight to overly demanding primary stakeholders.* Primary stakeholders often use direct approaches to the firm for their more delicate requests, conveyed via private conversations and behind-closed-doors discussions. Their influence can be detrimental to other stakeholders and potentially to the long-term interest of the firm. Strong, publicly active secondary stakeholders can serve as an effective counterweight to the privately communicated demands of primary stakeholders.

- *Supporting in the monitoring of the firm's activities.* Most large corporations today are both diverse, having multiple divisions and activities, and geographically distributed, with operations in multiple regions and countries. These types of organizations are difficult to monitor and control. Information shared on social media and the Internet often provides insight into weak processes and erroneous policies, or warnings about slack management controls.

- *Facilitating connections to the market.* Social media taps directly into public opinion about the firm and its practices. While it doesn't replace

market research studies that provide more re-fined information about customers and their needs, it does complement them. While a marketing department might be susceptible to marketing myopia, missing opportunities for innovation and growth, the tens of thousands of customers providing anonymous chats and posts probably aren't. Marketers might even find information about the firm's competitors and how it stacks up against them.

- *Offering free publicity.* Rarely can an ad do more for the business than an unsolicited recommendation from a happy customer. Yelp, Angie's List, Porch.com, and Google Local all provide information on customers' experiences. While we tend to focus on the complaints, these sites and others mostly provide valuable support for business growth. What better for the firm's reputation than to have a legion of folks say something wonderful about doing business with the firm?

Thus, our primary recommendation would be to embrace the new reality. There are more benefits than drawbacks to having powerful secondary stakeholders. In particular, the added support secondary stakeholders provide to senior management in doing the right thing in the face of powerful special interests is vital. It allows senior management the freedom to develop strategies and practices that more equally balance the interests of all stakeholders and provides comfort as they refuse to give in to inappropriate demands.

Our second recommendation would be to get out those reading glasses and jump online. Discussion boards, chats, and trends on the popularity of songs, clothes, topics, etc. on YouTube and Facebook are early indicators of social change. While reading tea leaves may previously have been a popular way to learn about the future, today we would recommend spending some time on well-followed Internet sites in the relevant field or those dealing with topics of importance to the particular industry. Managers can bring back some of the ideas from these sites to brainstorming sessions in the company on new products, innovative partnerships, and strategies for growth. Harvard Business School's Bob Simons (1995) highlighted the need for interactive control or scanning systems to keep managers aware of and discussing emerging threats and opportunities for the business. The Internet is a great example. Careful monitoring of trends on the Internet and social media will also keep executives abreast of changes in societal expectations of corporate behavior and of 'pain points' in firm-stakeholder relations across several sectors. Early insight into the direction of

change can allow the firm to elaborate and implement plans for evolution, rather than be taken unawares and become the object of a revolution led by secondary stakeholders.

Our third recommendation would be to leverage the Internet and social media to help you monitor your business practices and make connections to the market. Use the Internet to tap into what needs fixing and doing. If ex-employees chat online about a firm's loss control policies, it may be time to revisit them. If customers complain about the lack of responsiveness of the customer service department, it might be necessary to implement a new CRM program. And if social media discussion boards are full of comments about a firm being willing to do anything for the sake of profit, ethics and compliance officers should be asked to investigate. In a world of greater transparency, there is an opportunity to use these new virtual tools to improve a firm and make it more responsive and aware.

Our final recommendation would be to ensure that the organization evolves in the direction of social change. Participating online to monitor the direction of secondary stakeholders' expectations is only half the battle; the other half involves developing strategies that respond to those demands. Take, for example, sustainability. It is unlikely that a firm will become carbon-neutral overnight. Yet, secondary stakeholders' expectations about its progress are likely to evolve quickly and can be ambitious. This is perhaps an area in which secondary stakeholders can actually help managers: positive examples of other firms' successes that these stakeholders hold up as role models, technologies that these stakeholders refer to, and experts and consultants that these stakeholders reference are all resources that a firm can draw upon to develop its own strategies for success. There is no reason for the Internet and social media to be a one-way street. Senior executives' participation in the virtual world may open doors to innovation and creativity that can overcome some of the challenges facing the firm and society. And once an organization has made some headway, it can get out into the virtual world and talk it up: as an example to others, as a way to mitigate secondary stakeholders' criticisms, and as a way to herald its own successes and improve its reputation in the digital era.

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