In this age of information on demand, we expect access whenever and wherever we want it. We use portable devices such as tablets for both work and recreation: to send email, do our personal banking and play games. We bring our BlackBerrys and iPhones with us to meetings, on vacation and even to the bathroom. If we lose cellphone service—even if it’s just while we’re in the elevator or on the subway—we get annoyed at being temporarily out of touch.

And the use of social media is growing rapidly. According to a study conducted by digital research firm eMarketer, there will be 1.43 billion social network users in 2012—a 19.2% increase from 2011. And it’s not just Western countries leading this trend. While the U.S. still has the largest number of Facebook users (141.2 million, as of February 2012), eMarketer predicts that India will be in the No. 2 spot, with 68.1 million users this year, followed by Indonesia (49.1 million).

Social media is also accelerating the rate at which we access information. When Michael Jackson died, Twitter was the first to break the news. But the speed of social media brings challenges. From an organization’s perspective, it puts the company’s actions—positive and negative—very quickly into the spotlight.

Take Lassonde Industries Inc., for example, which makes the juice brand Oasis. In April, the Quebec company won an appeal in a lengthy legal battle against Deborah Kudzman, owner of a small local company that makes beauty products under the name Olivia’s Oasis, regarding the “Oasis” trademark. But Lassonde got more than it bargained for. When news of the successful appeal got out, there was a huge public outcry on Facebook and Twitter, including threats to boycott its products.

Ultimately, Lassonde wound up apologizing and paying Kudzman’s legal expenses. “Lassonde has listened to the consumers and has decided to take a positive step in reaction to their remarks,” said the company in a statement.

So how should your organization handle social media? Carefully, thoughtfully—and, most important, strategically.

In this special New Media issue, experts such as social media guru Amber MacArthur and digital communications strategist Tod Maffin offer insights to help you get up to speed and manage these tools more effectively. Because change is coming—the question is, Are you ready?

Alyssa Hodder
alyssa.hodder@rci.rogers.com