CNNMoney 🌐

NASA-style mission control centers for social media are taking off

October 25, 2012: 10:38 AM ET

Companies from Gatorade to Dell are building multimillion-dollar mission control centers to man their social media operations.

By Ryan Holmes, contributor

FORTUNE -- Houston, we have a tweet. Growing numbers of global organizations -- from Gatorade to Dell and major universities -- are building multimillion-dollar mission control centers for social media: dedicated physical hubs for monitoring and responding to the torrent of social commentary and queries flooding in via Facebook, Twitter and other channels. Decked out with giant flat panel screens, sleek mood lighting and banks of monitors, the command centers track a dizzying array of real-time stats and indicators, from mentions on Twitter to general consumer sentiment and social media market share.

The glitziest of the bunch would give NASA a run for its money. Dell's **social media ground control and command center** in Round Rock, Texas, has a total of 70 employees monitoring social conversations from around the globe, according to ReadWriteWeb. Scanning Facebook (**FB**), Twitter and other networks, the team processes 25,000 daily social media events about Dell (**DELL**) in 11 different languages, responding to most queries and complaints within 24 hours.

While not every company is swamped with thousands of social media mentions, even mid-sized businesses and brands are facing increasingly daunting demands from social-savvy customers, says **Altimeter business analyst Charlene Li** in a recent post. "Today, **66% of online Americans are actively using social networking**, but only **16% of companies use social media** to engage with customers," Li says. "You cannot have credibility saying you are customer-centric if you ignore your customers in social media channels."

MORE: The Facebook tweak that killed a billion-dollar industry

With consumers flooding social media, and companies integrating Facebook and Twitter into business strategy, command centers are becoming standard equipment. Applications range from tracking ad campaigns and monitoring community engagement to handling crisis management. **Gatorade pioneered the social command concept in 2010**, deploying a mission control center in its Chicago headquarters with six reporting screens and space for five workers. Today, they use it to analyze product reception and connect followers with star athletes via Twitter. Earlier this year, the **Red Cross launched a digital operations center** staffed by three people to reach out to victims during natural disasters, with modules displaying everything from posts by people seeking family members to recent press coverage. And **Clemson University recently developed a social listening center** where students monitor a half-dozen screens, pooling data for, among other purposes, research on how to better respond to campus emergencies.

Behind the sudden command center craze is a serious case of data overload. Social technologies have given companies access to an unprecedented flood of new analytics, metrics and user data. But making sense of it all has been a challenge. Underneath the hood, command centers are wired to analyze millions of social conversations from not just Facebook and Twitter, but YouTube (**GOOG**), LinkedIn (**LNKD**), blogs and more. Results are spit out onto wall-mounted screens customized with dozens of different modules -- colorful charts and graphs tracking everything from retweets and Facebook Likes to buzz in the blogosphere and overall consumer sentiment. At a glance, teams can take in social trends from thousands of users that would otherwise require hours, if not days, to sort through.

During the 2012 Super Bowl, organizers set up a massive **2,800-square-foot social media ground control** in downtown Indianapolis, outfitted with 150 square feet of networked screen space and more than a mile of ethernet cable. For more than two weeks, 50 experts logged 15-hour days inside, sorting through some 64 million social impressions. On average, they responded to questions within three minutes. The payoff? By providing real-time answers to queries on everything from parking availability to half-time shows while also amplifying fan feedback, the command center generated $3.2 million in positive press and a 12.5% boost in consumer sentiment.

MORE: "Rogue IT" is about to wreak havoc at work

"[Organizations] are monitoring online conversations about their brands, reacting instantly to viral buzz and creating companies that consumers feel involved in -- and, in some cases, even bringing in bigger profits as a direct result," says Intel (**INTC**) **social media strategist Ekaterina Walter** in a recent *Fast Company* article. The latest generation of

command centers is already taking this a step further. (Full disclosure: my company provides software, HootSuite Command Center, which powers these kinds of nerve centers.)

For corporate managers and members of the C-suite, investments in command centers are already proving money well spent. The ability to instantly visualize key metrics has helped streamline decision-making and bridge different departments, keeping sprawling companies on the same page. "I think it is worth noting that the social media "mission control" is not just about contact centers or customers with support issues," **explains Manish Mehta**, Dell's former vice president of social media and community (and the man behind the 110,000-employee company's 70-person command center), in a recent post. "[It's] about getting that information to the right people wherever they are . . . globally and functionally."

Ryan Holmes is the CEO of **HootSuite**, *a social media management system with five million users, including 79 of the Fortune 100 companies. In the trenches everyday with Facebook, Twitter and the world's largest social networks, Holmes has a unique view on the intersection of social media and big business.*

Recommended for You

Super-talented employee driving you crazy? How to deal.

Cutting the high cost of end-of-life care 🖻

11 Apple iPads per hour vs. zero Microsoft Surface tablets

Around the Web

How Google's 'Penguin' Update Will Favor those that Produce Quality Content
Advertising Age

7 Money Mindset Myths That Are Keeping You Poor
Moneyning.com

If You Have Gmail... You Must Have This
Young Upstarts

[what's this]