How Do You Make Sense of New Social Network Sites?
*By Sam Ford, director of audience engagement at **Peppercomm***

Vine. Snapchat. Instagram. There are so many social media tools and social network sites that no one person—or even whole company—could possibly keep up with them all. So how do PR pros best keep their fingers on the pulse of what's happening in the social sphere? Here are a few tips:

Listen to your audiences.• The best way to stay abreast of where you need to be is by building strategies for listening to audiences. If you have an ongoing commitment to truly knowing the communities you seek to reach with your communications initiatives, you stand a greater chance to see emerging patterns and platforms.

Dedicate resources to exploring.• At Peppercomm, one of our team members is charged with exploring new platforms/tools. In that role, she constantly monitors for promising new sites and sends regular briefing reports out to the agency, highlighting ways in which they might be of interest to our clients.

Follow trusted voices.• Find people whose opinions you trust and who regularly share insights about new platforms and tools in the social media space. Often, you'll find there's no better way to discover promising new platforms than through colleagues and contemporaries.

Be curious and experiment. • What you dabble in during your leisure time might eventually bring new strategies to your professional life. Encourage your team to think about how any new platforms they may try personally might play a role in your communications strategies at work.

Focus on types of engagement, not the platforms themselves.• Most important, though, don't get too tied up in the social network sites themselves. Many platforms will come and go, but the ways people use these technologies to engage will stay. It's vital that you don't have, for example, "a Pinterest strategy," but rather a strategy for curating visual content that may morph over time, depending on where and how your audiences' patterns in engaging with visual content continues to change.