

MAKING SENSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

March 2010

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For marketers who understand how to harness the power of social media marketing, suddenly there is an opportunity to connect and communicate with customers more widely and rapidly than ever before.

Social Media is the most talked about marketing topic of the last several years. When Time Magazine ran a cover story called “How Twitter Will Change the Way We Live” (June 5, 2009) that was a sure sign that what was once a niche topic had become a major story. This is understandable based on the remarkably rapid growth of social media – Facebook alone added 50 million in users in just three months¹. No medium has ever grown nearly this fast, and along with this growth, perhaps because of it, the daily habits of millions of customers are changing.

While in the past, they may have watched TV in the evening and paid attention to the commercials, today they have the TV on as background while they are texting friends and browsing the Internet. **Despite the avalanche of available information on the rise of social media, there is still not a consensus on how to use it with consistent effectiveness for marketing.**

The reality is that the rise of social media is creating a wrenching and disruptive challenge for marketers. Suddenly marketers find that past methods of reaching and influencing consumers are not working. And yet, for marketers who understand how to harness the power of social media marketing, suddenly there is an opportunity to connect and communicate with customers more widely and rapidly than ever before.

I. THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

The adoption of online social media has been exponentially faster than prior media.

- Facebook added 50 million users in about three months. TV, in contrast, took 13 years to reach 50 million and the Internet took four².

- Facebook now has about 350 million users³ with the fastest growing segment being 55 to 65 year-old females¹!
- By 2012 more than 800 million people will participate in a social network via mobile phone⁴.

For the millennial generation, an emerging cohort of consumers numbering over 60 million in the US⁵, social media is simply the norm. For marketers, these numbers cannot be ignored.

As we think about the rise of social media, it is critical to note the recent declines in consumption of traditional media like television. In 1980, the three major TV networks (NBC, ABC and CBS) had a 75 share of viewers. By November 2006, their share had declined 55%⁶. According to *The Wall Street Journal*⁷, the number of people watching shows on weeknights between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m. on NBC, CBS and ABC has declined 23 percent from three TV seasons ago. In cable TV, the average audience for cable news declined 12 percent in 2006. Other TV day parts also are registering dramatic audience losses. For newspapers, the changes have moved from dramatic to catastrophic. Since March 2007, more than 10 US daily newspapers have gone out of business and many others are in grave economic peril⁸. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr, Publisher and Chairman of the New York Times Company goes so far as to say, “I really don’t know whether we’ll be printing *The Times* in five years.”⁹

These changes have had a profound impact on marketers who are trying to reach audiences. *The State of the News Media 2007, An Annual Report on American Journalism* says that with audiences splintering across ever more platforms, nearly every metric for measuring audience, from circulation in print to ratings in TV, is now under challenge as either flawed or obsolete. The report goes on to say that the effect is more than just audiences migrating to

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new delivery systems. Technology is redefining the role of the citizen by endowing the individual with more responsibility and command over how he or she consumes information.⁶ The communication conduits between marketer and consumer are being rerouted.

NEW TECHNOLOGY ENABLES NEW CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

New communications technology is the cause and effect of new types of consumer behavior.

Today consumers are more connected, more distracted, more creative, seeking greater control, and more skeptical of media messages. Here are some relevant trends.

CONNECTED AND COLLABORATING:

eMarketer forecasts that by 2012 over 800 million people will participate in social networks via their mobile device, up from 82 million in 2007. Constantly sharing one's life digitally is a meaningful change in consumer behavior.⁴

DISTRACTED BY MULTITASKING:

Seven in 10 Web users report watching TV while surfing the Internet. They may also be connected to friends via the phone or texting or communicating through email — all at the same time!¹⁰ The result is a decrease in the impact of commercial messages in any of those media.

CREATIVE:

People now “create” content, not just watch, read or listen to it. This signals a change in consumer expectation when interacting with media. Even a passive medium like TV is included in this trend (e.g.: voting for winners on *So You Think You Can Dance*).

SEEKING CONTROL:

Consumers are increasingly using social media to gain a feeling of control over their lives. They are controlling the view of themselves that they present to the world in places like LinkedIn and they are using mobile devices to create constant connections. Parents are in touch with children, employers are in touch with employees, professionals are in touch with clients—all the time.

SKEPTICAL:

Consumers today believe that that traditional news services may be biased. They also access news from more sources than they used to including blogs and through social media. As a result, consumers increasingly question the origin and accuracy of information whether it is the nightly news or a brand message.⁶ ¹¹

II. MAKING SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING WORK FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

As the effectiveness of traditional marketing communications strategies declines, it is critical for marketers to understand and harness the increasing power of social media marketing.

“WORD-OF-MOUTH” IS THE BIG IDEA

“Word-of-mouth” is the most basic and powerful form of promotion. It comes to life when one satisfied customer recommends a brand to a friend or neighbor. It is powerful because endorsement comes from the most trusted of sources — the friend or neighbor who has no reason to endorse the product other than pure satisfaction and a desire to help. Once a brand is able to create high levels of interest and satisfaction, the question is how to facilitate the pass-along of endorsements.

For much of the last century, word-of-mouth was literally one person talking to another on

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the phone, at the water cooler, or over the back fence. But social media has created a new venue for word-of-mouth: digitally connected social networks. Through these new networks the scale of discussions about products has dramatically broadened, and the pace of information flow has accelerated. Part of the reason for this is the scalability of networks—each connection you have has multiple other connections. It is easy to see how news spreads in a flash through these networks.

FOUR STEPS TO USING SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

How does your organization harness the power of this accelerated word-of-mouth endorsement that we call social media marketing?

- 1) **Listen:** Hear what is being said about your brand, your competitors and your category.
- 2) **Plan:** Based on what you've heard, develop a communications strategy.
- 3) **Join:** Implement your strategy to amplify positive conversations that are already taking place, change negative and neutral ones to positive, and create new ones.
- 4) **Measure:** Use ongoing measurements to define impact and plan course adjustments.

As an aside, if this methodology sounds like your public relations plan, that is a fair comparison. Both social media marketing and public relations seek to join or amplify marketing-related conversations. The following is a more detailed explanation of this methodology.

Listen to What Customers Are Saying: Social Network Brand Audit

Many of the customer conversations about your brand that used to be held over the back

fence are now on Twitter, or Facebook, or blogs, and it is easier for you to hear them.

Start using social media by listening to what is being said about your brand and your product category and by conducting a social network brand audit.

Hospital marketers may hear that new mothers are congregating on websites that provide information about baby care. If you make software, you may hear customers on Twitter complaining about bugs. If you make medical devices, you may hear nurses on blogs sharing patient experiences. If you manage a supermarket, you may hear busy parents on Facebook complaining that they have run out of meal ideas for the week.

Plan the Communications Strategy

Use what you heard from your customers to plan how you can join the conversations that are already taking place or to start new ones. In doing this, you will create communities of supporters who know you and will promote you. Planning social media strategies can be summarized as planning “the what” and “the where.”

What is the message?

Defining the message for social media begins as it would for any marketing communications plan: who are the key audiences, and what do you need to say, within the constraints of your brand's personality, to create appropriate action. However, additional planning is required for social media messages. Carefully consider how you will communicate your key messages authentically through conversation, rather than through broadcast, and how to craft content and messages for viral pass-along.

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Where should that message be communicated?

Using findings from the social network brand audit, you can see where your target audiences are conversing online. You may find them on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other community hubs like these. Based on where you find them, develop a strategy for either joining them where they are or creating branded communities that they can join.

JOIN THE EXISTING CONVERSATIONS AND CREATE NEW ONES

Implementing the communication strategy is next. This phase involves work that is both proactive and reactive. Here are several examples.

The hospital targeting new moms can proactively use Twitter to share health tips with them and it can react to their questions individually.

The software maker can proactively create a LinkedIn Group where customers can help each other, and it can react to customer service issues as they arise within the group discussions.

The medical device maker can proactively start a blog with safety tips for nurses and react to news around safety issues with its own brand-appropriate response. The supermarket can Tweet meal ideas to parents while re-Tweeting the ones that its followers suggest themselves.

Each of these activities enhances customer brand experiences and creates communities of supporters. These efforts are not instant, free, or independent of other marketing efforts, but they can influence customers in strong, lasting and positive ways.

MEASURE IMPACT

Since “conversations” are a measure of success, measurement of these conversations is critical.

Measurement should be both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative measurement shows consumer sentiment about your brand. Do

their conversations portray the brand positively or negatively? Quantitative measurement shows how often your brand is mentioned. Using the original brand audit as a benchmark, a successful social media marketing effort should show measureable increases in the positive sentiment about your brand and in the number of times your brand is mentioned.

Three Myths About Social Media Marketing

No discussion of social media marketing would be complete without trying to dispel common myths.

Myth # 1:

Social media is a substitute for an integrated marketing plan. It is not. In reality, social media is a marketing tactic, not a marketing strategy and it does not work alone. So it will be one part of your integrated plan, not a substitute for it.

Myth # 2:

Social media works instantly. It does not. Building a community of followers, or creating trust within an existing community, takes time.

Myth # 3:

Social media is free. Sorry. It's not. See myth # 1. Social media will be a tactical part of your overall plan which is not free. Plus, while setting up a Twitter or Facebook account is free, the time that your staff takes to manage those activities is certainly not free. And, as for those videos that “go viral,” in most cases they are either part of an aggressively funded integrated campaign, e.g. Evian's “Dancing Babies,” or they are not part of any marketing effort at all, e.g. “Reporter with Fly in Mouth.”

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Conclusion

Major changes are happening in the lives of our customers. The very structure of their days is being altered by changes in connectedness and media consumption. These changes are diminishing the impact of “traditional media” and creating opportunities to connect and influence customers in new and powerful ways. What this world of new media has in common with the past is the need to plan and implement marketing efforts through a disciplined process of listening to customers, understanding their needs, and then connecting in ways that truly benefit them. Will Twitter really change the way we live? Maybe. What is certain, however, is that social media marketing will change the way marketers reach customers.

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A JPL White Paper Published by:



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