

Social Media: Turning The Internet Into A Conversation

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Introduction

AdServices has been tracking the rise and spread of a new communication system known as Social Media, also called Social Networking, or Web 2.0. We consider this an important advertising platform, especially while some traditional media audiences decline and prospects become harder to reach. As marketing professionals, it is our responsibility to research, analyze, and then educate regarding topics of significance. Therefore, we present this paper, hoping that it will be both informative and thought provoking in the application of Social Media to the marketing mix. It must also be noted that Social Media is a quickly-changing phenomenon. While the points given in this paper are accurate to the best of our knowledge as of the date stated above, things could be different by the time you read this.

Social Media Defined

In the beginning of the Internet age, websites were isolated information silos. People went on the Web to read content posted by the companies that controlled each site. This earliest incarnation of the World Wide Web has been called Web 1.0. Eventually, groups and individuals began to create places to come together and exchange their own information and ideas. People formed networks, influenced one another and organized into online communities. This phase of the Internet is referred to as Web 2.0, or – due to its very social element – as Social Media or Social Networking.

Social Media quickly became mainstream. Polling by Forrester Research indicates that in the second quarter of 2008, 75 percent of Internet users participated in some form of Social Media, up from 56 percent in 2007. While younger demographics were the earliest adopters, Forrester Research found 35 to 44 year-olds and older involved in Social Networking daily. These numbers have no doubt grown considerably since the research was conducted.

Consumers seeking community and companionship have built platforms where they talk about anything and everything. There are Social Networks for moms, dog lovers, political pundits, sports fans, gossip junkies; you name it. They are huge, with members in the tens of millions.

Social Media is also highly influential. A 2008 study by USC's Center for the Digital Future noted the "profound social impact" of online communities. In the past, family and friends helped people form opinions and judgments. With Web 2.0, the advice and positions of total strangers are increasingly trusted.

The implications for marketers and advertisers are profound, as consumers use Social Media to share their experiences with companies, products, and brands. Previously, a business could use advertising to control the message it presented. Not any more.

Today, the opinions of others who have interacted with that company or product are shared online and given much more credibility than advertising. Strong emotional brand attachments – and detachments – are formed. It becomes increasingly important that a company meet its customers where they are and join in the conversation.

Social Networking Strategy

The marketing continuum line, in general, looks like the diagram below, with 100% Branding at one extreme and 100% Lead Generation at the other.

100% Branding -----100% Lead Generation

Social Media is primarily a branding exercise. Indeed, the Web 2.0 culture severely punishes those who blatantly use it for hard core promotion. Obvious sales messages are as welcome as the greasy, unshaven used car salesman in a poorly fitting plaid suit.

Social Networking efforts must provide value while being informative, current, and relevant. They should engage the other members of the community and build relationships. They can be lighthearted and fun, almost to the point of entertainment.

Popular Social Media Communities

There are many Web 2.0 communities, where people connect, interact and converse in writing, video, photos, and any combination. Some are marked by their simplicity and others are complex. There are sites devoted to personal interests and professional pursuits. Further, the landscape changes frequently and rapidly.

A comprehensive discussion of every Social Network, with examples and applications, is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, therefore, is a high level overview of today's most popular Social Media options, and the marketing opportunities and cost factors we feel they present to businesses.

E-Newsletters

Though purists may not consider the e-newsletter a Social Medium, we include it here due to the ease with which consumers can provide feedback to the sender. An e-newsletter is exactly that: a newsletter distributed via e-mail rather than through the U.S. Mail.

E-newsletters are a low cost way to keep in touch with existing customers, stay top of mind, retain loyalty, and gain referrals. They also build a sense of community among those who have interacted with a particular company. E-newsletters are not lead generating tools. Their effectiveness, in fact, will drop dramatically if attempted to be used as such.

Sending an e-newsletter requires a list of e-mail addresses of those who have given permission to receive one. A company can compile this by going through its current contacts, and by placing an E-Newsletter Sign Up form on the firm's Web site. Beware of purchasing an e-mail list, including opt-in lists. Unsolicited e-mail is a serious Web 2.0 violation.

The E-Newsletter must be written and designed with full compliance to the CAN-SPAM Act which regulates mass e-mails. We further recommend using a third party e-mail distribution service to avoid being accused of sending SPAM by conservative Internet Service Providers.

Blogs

The word “blog” is a contraction of the phrase “Web log.” A blog is a Web site where a person – the owner(s) of the blog – posts messages to which others can respond. Posts can include graphics, photos, audio, video, links to other Web sites and blogs, etc. The most recent submission typically appears first.

A blog can be an effective branding tool. One or more company representatives should make blog posts related to the firm’s products and/or services. Posts should be informative and subtle; never overly sales oriented. Blatant attempts to use blogging for lead generation is contrary to the spirit of the medium, leading to a negative reputation and attacking posts from other bloggers. Posts should be made at least once a week, as the Web 2.0 world gets impatient with stale content.

Readers of the company’s blog would then comment. Keep in mind that replies may be positive or negative. A company should not restrict or censor feedback, and should reply to all comments promptly and with straightforward answers.

Another way to use blogging as a marketing tool is to post feedback on other people’s/organization’s blogs. Again, the key is to provide information and opinions, never overt sales pitches. Identifying the blogger as connected with a particular company is about all that can be done. Solving problems of unhappy customers is also an extremely effective use of this type of blogging.

In Web 2.0 culture, frequent bloggers can and do come to be considered experts in their fields. Marketers should take advantage.

Blogs are very low cost, as the basic platform is provided free by several companies (as of this writing.) All that is needed is someone to create the look and feel, and – optionally – integrate the blog into a company’s Web site. (It can also stand alone.) Of course there is no set-up fee for posting on other people’s blogs. The main investment in blogging is time spent writing posts and comments.

The low cost of blogging and the exposure and credibility to be gained make it a viable marketing tool for most any business.

Forums

Forums are similar to blogs, except that they allow for anyone to write the first entry, to which anyone else can reply. (In a blog, see above, only the blog owner(s) can write the first entry.) Forums, however, allow for multiple topics, with many conversations, called threads, under each topic. The software provides administrative control, such as: requiring or not requiring forum membership and logins before people can post; holding posts for administrator approval prior to publication; etc.

A forum can be an effective marketing tool, giving customers a place to connect and share feelings on a company, brand, or product. They allow the organization to offer feedback, solutions, or simply conversation. Forums build community, which is the foundation of Social Media. Businesses can also post on forums other than their own, just as on blogs. The same unwritten rules apply.

Many robust forum programs are available at no charge. After an initial set up of the look and feel, these can stand alone or be integrated into a company’s Web site. Therefore, the main cost associated with forums is staff time to write posts. In our opinion, it’s well worth it.

MySpace

A Social Media pioneer, MySpace continues to be popular. Users have a space on the Internet where they can post personal information, maintain a blog, upload photos, audio and video, chat with other members, and send private messages. MySpace members form communities of “Friends” who have access to and post messages on each other’s space.

The corporate benefits of MySpace are, in our opinion, highly dependent upon the demographic a business is targeting. MySpace appeals primarily to a young audience: pre-teen to mid-20s. It can be a great place to market an indie band wanting to promote its latest MP3 download, but not a luxury car brand. Membership is free, and the set up process is simple. The investment is in keeping the page current – an absolute requirement of Social Media success.

Facebook

Similar to MySpace in functionality and some content, Facebook is also popular among adults and even professionals. While individuals use Facebook to stay in touch with one another, there is also an option specifically for businesses. This is called Facebook Pages.

Posts to Facebook Pages are made on what is called the Page’s Wall, and in other areas on the Page. These allow a firm to: provide company information; share updates such as thoughts, brief messages, etc., to which other people, called Fans, can reply; give Fans an opportunity to communicate with the company; place Photos in a Gallery; announce Events; have Discussions with people, similar to both a blog and a forum (see above); and quite a bit more.

Again, the Facebook investment for business is time. Membership is free. A Page is easy to set up and requires no graphic design, although the large number of features may present a learning curve. The challenge is keeping the Page fresh, which is of supreme importance.

Twitter

Twitter is a Social Medium where people enter messages up to a maximum of 140 characters. Each entry, called a Tweet, is automatically posted to the page of other Twitter members who “Follow” that writer, and can be seen by people who simply visit the writer’s Twitter page. In actuality, Twitter is a micro-blog.

Originally used mainly by young people who Tweeted their every move via computer or mobile phone (I’m eating breakfast. I’m getting ready for school. I’m on the bus. I’m in first hour.), Twitter has now been discovered by celebrities, authors, and businesses who send mini messages, stay in touch with customers, provide information, promote corporate branding and culture, etc. Followers enjoy the brief updates and advice. Very strong connections are created.

Twitter membership is free. Set-up and usage are intuitive. Some users choose to design a custom “skin” for their page, rather than using those offered by Twitter. This may require graphics assistance. The bigger commitment is time, as the Twitter culture expects Tweets at least daily, and some users post much more often than that.

LinkedIn

Think of LinkedIn as a huge electronic address book, where a member has access to the electronic address book of every other member in his/her network. Each entry in a member's LinkedIn account is a person, with the entry containing contact and other basic information. For example, if Leslie and Michael are linked to one another, Michael can see every entry in Leslie's LinkedIn account, and can click to see that person's information.

LinkedIn membership is free, and set-up is straightforward, though the amount of information requested could require more than just a few minutes. There is no graphical component requiring artistic talent, and there is little to no upkeep once the account is established.

LinkedIn is a great way to maintain vital information on a number of people, and an effective way to find people through its search feature. It can be used to mine data in a prospecting mission, but blatant cold calling efforts are frowned upon.

YouTube

YouTube is a highly popular site where everyone from ordinary people to professional producers post videos on any topic imaginable. YouTube offers businesses opportunity to present company and product information. Currently, there is a 10-minute limit on a video's length. YouTube culture presupposes that an organization not take itself too seriously. Some entertainment value is expected.

YouTube does not charge to upload videos, and once they're posted, nothing additional needs to be done. The cost, therefore, is in the video's production.

Private Networks

Social Media does provide some opportunities for closed, private networks. These might be valuable for applications such as a community of salespeople, manufacturer communicating with wholesale customers, distributor interacting with retail dealers, etc. Set up is specialized and can be complex, so details are outside the scope of this paper. In general, these could involve specific privacy settings in a Blog or Forum, or the use of what are called Facebook Groups.

Advertising On Social Media Sites

In addition to the Social Networking tools themselves, most Social Media sites offer banner advertising. Targeting can be tightly focused by geography, interests, behaviors, etc. Costs vary widely, and minimums apply, taking this outside the scope of some small businesses.

Examples Of Social Media Marketing

Both success stories and horror stories regarding Web 2.0 marketing are plentiful. Here are a few.

Metro Partners

Metro Partners, owners of rental buildings in Yonkers, decided to advertise their units using primarily Social Networking. They offered free rent to the person submitting the best YouTube video on the theme "I Gotta Move." While the offer didn't generate many video submissions, it caught the attention of a local ABC station which broadcast the story on its Eleven O'clock News. This stimulated other press coverage, resulting in enormous exposure for virtually no investment.

A Valentine's Day singles party, also by Metro Partners, was promoted on their Facebook Page, via targeted Facebook advertising, Google pay-per-click, and Craigslist ads. Their efforts drove over 20,000 website visits. Less than six months later, almost all the units were rented.

Bacon Salt

Justin Esch and Dave Lefkow launched an unlikely product called Bacon Salt, a spice that literally makes everything taste like bacon. The two spent long hours mining MySpace data, sending messages and "friending" anyone who mentioned a love for bacon in their profiles. They found themselves unprepared for the onslaught of orders, as news of the product spread to other sites in Social Media.

Motrin

Johnson & Johnson created a commercial for Motrin, touting its benefits for parents with aches and pains from carrying a child. The ad showed a mom wearing a baby sling, a device advocated by proponents of attachment parenting. The commercial was posted on Motrin.com, September 30, 2008 and was seen by only 15,000 people daily at its peak. Though the commercial was meant to be lighthearted, some viewers considered it irreverent and disrespectful. The ad generated very little buzz.

On November 15, 2008 a Colorado woman saw a mention of the ad on the "babywearing" section of a Yahoo group for devotees of attachment parenting and posted it on the blog related to her photography business. Just five hours later, another Colorado woman picked up the blog entry and posted a Tweet (Twitter) on the subject. Controversy erupted, generating up to 300 Tweets per hour by that Sunday. This helped move the subject to the top of Twitter's Trending Topics list, aiding the original bloggers' pitch of the story to conventional media. By Monday, November 17, 2008, the Motrin commercial debate was covered by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and AP and Reuters news services. Subsequent coverage came from *USA Today*, *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune*.

Due to the controversy first spread on Social Media, then taken up by traditional media, Johnson & Johnson pulled the Motrin ad, bowing to a vocal flash mob that actually represented only a small fraction of moms. This shows the impact of Social Media, and how quickly businesses and marketers can be forced to buckle to an outspoken minority. From start to finish, this entire situation occurred in only three days.

Are These Results Typical?

The results above are not typical. They do, however, illustrate Social Networking's power. More commonly, Social Media efforts start small and grow over time. Should something happen that turns a campaign viral, however, look out!

The greater lesson from these examples is that Social Media isn't a fad. It can raise sales, create brand awareness and promote positive customer relations. If used poorly, or by disgruntled consumers, however, it can play havoc with a business's reputation.

Other Examples Of Using Social Media

Additional examples of the use of Social Media include: A bakery using Twitter to tell customers when fresh bread is scheduled to come out of the oven; A movie theater using Facebook to solicit consumer reviews of films; A company using YouTube to post a virtual tour of its office; A band using MySpace to share tracks from their latest self-published CD; A manufacturer using YouTube to post product demonstrations; A Realtor® using Facebook to display photos of a property, along with mortgage advice; A self-help author using Twitter to give daily tips in addition to those in his book. The possibilities are endless.

Conclusion

Imagine attending a function where groups of people all over the room are talking about you, both positively and negatively. They are forming opinions that will determine your survival. Failure to represent yourself, if given the opportunity, would be ludicrous.

A company's marketing department no longer has total control over the messages presented to the masses. That power is now shared with the individuals who make up the masses. It is therefore crucial that businesses use Social Media to join the conversation.

Social Media is a marketing weapon that should be in every company's arsenal. Specifics, scope, degree, etc. will vary from one business to the next, just as with any other medium. This powerful tool, however, must be included in the mix of any serious marketer.

About the authors. This paper represents the efforts of various team members within AdServices Inc., a full-service advertising and marketing agency headquartered in Florida. www.adservices.net