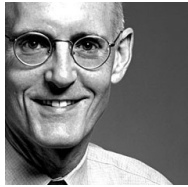


Social Media Marketing: Falling in Love with 1:1 Relationships



Gilman Hanson

Social networking sites like Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn and Twitter are more than just the rage these days as consumers, celebrities and companies jump on the emerging media bandwagon. Yet, online networking and sharing tools are still a relatively new concept to many people — and certainly most companies — making the social media explosion both enticing and uncertain for brand marketers.

On one hand, it enables a direct 1:1 relationship with consumers with meaningful dialogue and feedback, and the chance to fall in love — or out of love — with a brand quickly. On the other, it hauls the marketer off the brand pedestal and drags it into an unpredictable global community of empowered consumers.

Regardless, these transitional times seem to call for a more engaging, softer sell marketing that social media offers. It's a “new brand world” full of contradiction — it offers immediacy and demands flexibility, but the principles of smart brand communications and marketing can't be discarded. For companies not already online, what's the smart way to get involved?

THE BASICS AND BENEFITS

Social media marketing increases the rate at which people can publish and spread information or content about a company or brand and its products and services. It is based on connecting directly with target communities, engaging them in a more natural, human way and generating content or discussion online that can be shared throughout the web.

However, putting a brand on one of the net's hottest sites shouldn't be done just because it's the hot new trend. The social media landscape has plenty of room for everyone, and alternative new sites and communications vehicles will undoubtedly follow.

Do it because your company has a reason, a plan, and respect for today's connected audience. Don't jump in with commercial crassness because it could easily backfire and make communities feel invaded, used and “marketed to.” That's not good for anyone's brand image.

When done right, social media marketing will entertain and stimulate, and enable a genuine two-way dialogue with consumers that brands have craved but traditional one-way marketing vehicles couldn't deliver. An honest, consistent communications stream through the social media toolkit — blogs, podcasts, wiki's, video, forums and networking sites — offers significant benefits:

A) Increase awareness and conversation about your brand

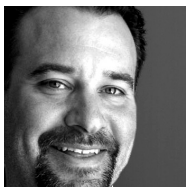
Engaging target communities (customers and influencers) through the social web can help a brand establish a vibrant online reputation and reach people it could never attract previously.

B) Attract and retain customers, build advocacy and loyalty

Well-engaged customer and employee advocates are not only inclined to support a favored brand and its products/services, but also often fight back online if communications about that brand go sour.



Dave Thompson



Eric Livingston

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C) Spread the word efficiently and effectively

Social media allows more people to watch, talk about and spread branded content largely without restriction, and gives companies a low cost option to test, observe and evaluate consumer reaction to products and ideas.

D) Build web traffic

Social marketing generates links and web site traffic from profile pages at social media sites, and through web widgets, social network applications and messages that travel virally, resulting in higher rankings in the organic search results at Google, Yahoo, Microsoft Live Search and others.

PLAN SMART

Entry into social media marketing should be based on one key premise — Respect the people to whom you're marketing. Social networks are communities, and communities have certain expectations about their members' behavior, not the least of which is that its members shouldn't exist solely to try to make a buck off the friendships. So companies should plan smart by:

A) Setting business and marketing goals

All investments in social media must be linked to a business goal. What do you want to achieve through a Twitter presence: create visibility? Improve customer service? Promote a product online? Setting clear objectives upfront helps determine the scope, budget and ROI of a campaign so results can be tracked and measured.

B) Find out where the target audience hangs out online

Research the social web to find out where the target audience and influencers are active online, what their social networks are, what content they share and what conversations they have. When you bring a brand into conversation with the consumer, don't hide the company flag, enter with transparency and honesty.

C) Prepare messaging and content in advance

While fun and flexibility clearly play a big role in social media, don't do it haphazardly or solely on the fly. Plan content in advance that

is relevant and integral to the overall marketing strategy so a brand's presence can be consistent and engaging wherever consumers come in contact.

CREATIVE CONTENT IS KING

While social media has spawned new communication platforms and sites, the components of strategic brand communications and marketing remain the same: relevant and creative content is king.

For brands, social media is about telling great stories and delivering unique experiences. It is about blurring the lines between advertising and conversation. It is about having fun. And while there will be opportunities for brands to attach themselves to stories people share, it's even better when brands help initiate those stories.

As traffic to YouTube demonstrates daily, brands should focus on social marketing content with the greatest potential for visual exposure, and for generating user engagement and word of mouth.

Other content tips include:

- Make a contribution. Don't be a company whose updates consist of generally the same message, "Here's my product." Answer questions, volunteer helpful information on relevant subjects, and provide unique opportunities;
- Reward consumers with incentives and valued offers and you'll likely increase interest in your brand and attract new converts;
- Optimize content (videos, images, blog postings, podcasts, press releases) for wide-spread viral distribution to popular social media web sites, and to enhance traditional search engine optimization efforts.

MONITOR AND MEASURE SUCCESS

Monitoring and measuring the results of social media marketing campaigns is critical to building budgets and momentum within a company. It requires tools that go beyond basic Web site analytics tools that measure traffic and page views. Social media analytics

tools are concerned with tracking buzz, and measure the full potential and extent of the various tactics. A sample of metrics that are most important when measuring social media marketing success include:

- Amount of social bookmarks received
- New links attributed to a social media campaign
- Blog comment activities, forums and conversations
- Increase in number, visitors, fans, views
- Length of visitor engagement

DON'T WALK AWAY NOW!

Social media is like dating: Consumers can fall out of love as quickly as they fall in love, and the fastest way to alienate new online communities is to create a presence, invite them to be part of your world, and then fail to stay in touch. So, once your brand has entered the social web, be diligent about managing and maintaining its presence.

This new brand world for marketers teases with the possibilities of genuine 1:1 consumer relationships, as well as global reach and influence that could never be achieved before without massive budgets. But there's no magic bullet. Success in the social media world still requires attention to the fundamentals of strategic brand marketing and communications — know your audiences, plan smart, give great content, and be a consistent presence. And then have an enormous amount of fun finding out what works for your brand!

Know the New Consumer

Today, the new consumer — especially in the juicy 18-34 year old demographic — is one that has grown up with a fresh new perspective on companies and brands and has largely redefined the relationship of communications, media, technology and brands. Before putting your brand online, understand that the new consumer:

- Is empowered as never before through new technologies and communication platforms;
- Has many more outlets for learning about new products from sources they trust more than conventional media sources — blogs, social bookmarking sites, social networking sites;
- Chooses to consume products and services they find useful in their lives, over manufactured marketing needs;
- Responds to honest, relevant content from peer consumers over marketing speak and celebrity endorsement;
- Can repurpose and associate with your brand as they see fit;
- Cares about respect and having a larger voice in the brands they support.