Social media strategy

Word-of-mouth marketing for the digital age

Social media allows people to be more connected than ever before and the mediums available for marketing are changing rapidly as new technologies come available. Online users are communicating in real time and every brand in the world is being caught up in the conversation whether they are participating or not. Venturing into social media means opening up your brand and company to the world at large and giving up control over how your message is spread. Find out how to take back some control (even as you give some up) to make sure that your brand is being promoted in a positive and effective way.

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Social Media Strategy

Word-of-mouth marketing
for the digital age

Building and managing your brand strategy on the
social Web

Social media strategy:
Word-of-mouth marketing for the digital age

Summary

The Challenge

Social media allows people to be more connected than ever before and marketing is changing rapidly as new technologies come available. Online users are communicating in real time and every brand in the world is being caught up in the conversation whether the company is actively participating or not. Venturing into social media means opening up your brand and company to the world at large and giving up some control over how your message is being spread. How do you take back some control and make sure that your brand is being promoted in a positive and effective way?

The Solution

Harnessing the social Web and social media to promote your company's brand the way you want it to be seen requires a well thought out plan to achieve long-term results, but it is not difficult. By following clear evidential best practices and choosing the strategy that best fits your goals (whether they are brand building, link building, an integrated campaign or a long-term social media plan), you will drive your company's online presence to success.

The keys are flexibility, transparency and swiftness of response. Your company can use a dedicated team or enlist the whole company to help, but it is important to be "yourself." The public wants and expects to communicate with you and if they have a good experience, they will spread "social proof" about your brand to new audiences and networks, even some that you may not have thought of yet.

Word-of-mouth is still the most effective form of marketing and engaging your audience via social media is simply using technology to drive this kind of strategy forward.

Facebook has over 250 million active users around the globe who spend (in total) over 5 billion minutes on the site each day. Two-thirds of those users are outside of college. More than 1 billion pieces of content are shared each week, including blogs, videos, links, microblogs and more.[1] Online applications show that the average number of Tweets per hour is at over one million (for the period between July 18 and July 27, 2009, Tweespeed measured 1,034,545 postings per hour on Twitter).[2] Over 100,000,000 YouTube videos are viewed every day.[3]

These numbers are only the tip of the iceberg, drawn from three of the most popular social media networks. The sheer size and activity of the audience gets bigger every day and is something you and your company cannot afford to ignore. With the advancement of technology and the establishment of real-time social networks like Twitter and Facebook, social network marketing can now reach a global market faster than any other kind of marketing before.

But reaching your market with this next-generation version of word-of-mouth marketing is about more than speed. The other side of the coin is an audience that is actively participating in the message that is being sent. It is imperative to the success of your company to embrace and engage the ongoing social media growth. To do that effectively, you have to put a strategy in place that is based on the best ways to harness the social Web in order to spread the word about your company in the way that best reflects your message.

Social media is the perfect opportunity for you to listen to current customers, industry experts, prospects and other influencers and use that to improve your business. When you start participating in the conversation, you need to speak to the overall market and take part with helpful, quality content so that your audience will share the experience they have with your company with others online. Building these relationships with customers and market conversation influencers will help your online presence evolve positively and organically.

Social media statistics

- Facebook has 250 million active users
- Time spent per day on Facebook: 5 billion minutes
- More than 1 million posts on Twitter every hour
- Over 100 million YouTube videos are viewed every day
- 73% of active online users have read a blog; there are more than 346 million blog readers worldwide
- 55% have uploaded photos to share
- 40% subscribe to an RSS feed

Social Media, Web 2.0 And Internet Stats (n.d.). Retrieved July 25, 2009 from The-FutureBuzz Web site: http://thefuturebuzz.com/2009/01/12/social-media-web-20-internet-numbers-stats/

Multiple platforms, multiple audiences, infinite opportunities

Technology has enabled people to talk to each other across the world in every imaginable way possible. As new ways of communicating are introduced and temporarily overshadow other methods, they add to your own marketing arsenal. With all of these options, it is of critical importance to choose the best platforms for your company, the ones that will best get your message out to your audience and allow user-generated content to spread your product and services marketing. Microblogging platforms (like Twitter and Facebook's activity streams) are the latest technology to emerge in a long line of social networking environments, but

1   Facebook Statistics (n.d.). Retrieved July 25, 2009 from Facebook Web site: http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

2   Twitter speed (July 27, 2009). Retrieved July 27, 2009 from Tweespeed Web site: http://www.tweespeed.com

3   YouTube Fact Sheet. (n.d.). Retrieved July 30, 2009 from YouTube Web site: http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet

its predecessors are just as critical to your company's social media success. Blogs, forums and threaded discussions, reviews and comments, video, webinars and podcasts can all play a role in your participation in the conversation that is happening online.

Blogging, while one of the "older" platforms for getting your company's message out, is one of the most effective. Tom Peters, author of *Re-imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*, calls blogging "the best damn marketing tool by an order of magnitude" for the simple reason that blog entries are quick and to the point, have enough content to explain that point and can be posted frequently to satisfy a curious audience.[4] Like all social media, blogs can have followers who are alerted to updates. A corporate blog can address the concerns of your company directly, announce benefits to your consumers and address the issues that affect your industry, all establishing you and your company as an entity that can be relied on. It gives a transparency to what you are doing and where your company is going, on your terms.

Blogs of fans and experts can spread this message further. They may not talk about your company all of the time, but if your company participates in the conversation going on in comments, you can establish relationships with other participants and the authors and be seen as a positive part of the social media flow. This applies to any blog, whether it is an industry expert, product reviewer or an influential consumer. Blogging demonstrates a commitment and passion for your industry that will live on after the blog is initially written. This goes for comments attached to them as well. Old articles are valuable and still read weeks, months and even years later, and can be referred back to again and again.

Microblogging platforms, primarily Twitter, are fast moving, real time methods for communication. Commentary and reaction is quick and can spread like wildfire. While this can be unnerving, it is also one of the best ways to communicate with your audience and respond to their questions, concerns and needs. The conversation about your industry and your company is already occurring in this kind of environment and participating here is an opportunity for you to direct the conversation even as it evolves. You can use this forum to promote and protect your brand and establish your expertise, responding to commentary (positive and negative) and quelling concerns before they spread too far.

Fast moving information not only spreads quickly, but good information can disappear just as fast. It is important to participate on microblogging sites to continue the conversation and help it evolve, even directing it to other content that exists for a longer time online.

The more user-generated content that occurs around your company as a subject, the better coverage you have across social media. Microblog posts move quickly, but are short and can often leave out more in depth information that readers want and need. Blogs can address that need, but they are primarily one-sided. Forums and threaded discussion boards provide a space where in-depth conversation can take place.

You can find these on subject-area dedicated sites and on broader social networking sites, taking place within groups. However, the best place to have them is on your own Web site, where you can steer the conversation and very directly discover what your customers are looking for. Participants in these on-site discussions are also participating in other social media, carrying the story out to a wider public, linking back to the forums on your site and pulling additional people into the conversation. Along with ratings and reviews on your Web site (and on other sites), the discussion taking place here is in the context of a single topic, making it easy for others who are interested in the same thing to find it.

Social content like videos, podcasts and webinars can be compelling ways to start and direct the conversation.

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4   *Seth Godin and Tom Peters on blogging.* (April 2009). Retrieved July 30, 2009 from YouTube Web site: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=livzJTIWImY.

With the capability to access these resources on multiple platforms (including mobile devices) and spread interesting content virally, this kind of social activity is an attractive addition to the arsenal of your social media strategy.

ROI = Risk of Ignoring

With so much of social media activity happening off of your Web site and outside of traditional analytics, it is difficult to accurately measure the return on investment you get by participating as a company. Your analytics can only see traffic patterns on your site and they do not tell the whole story of the conversation that is happening around your brand.

Paula Drum, vice president of marketing at H&R Block, refers to ROI as "Risk of Ignoring."[5] Whether the benefit is directly quantifiable or not, social media and social networks are how people are communicating on the Web and where they are spending much of their online time. By not taking an active role on the social Web, your company risks missing opportunities and losing revenue:

- Competitors will reach the audience you want to capture. Without your participation, your competition will own their mindshare.
- Non-participation is rapidly being seen as meaning you do not care about your clientele. Gaining the public trust is critical to gaining their business.
- The conversation will happen about you, whether you are involved or not. If you are not involved, you cannot exercise any influence or control over the way you are perceived.

Missing these opportunities will result in your audience ignoring or forgetting about your company when it is time for them to make a decision. In the case of H&R Block, Drum has used social media (specifically Twitter) to stay in contact with their customers throughout the year, not just at tax time. This kind of engagement has established H&R Block with the audience that they are looking to reach and has positioned them as experts and influencers in their field.

Understanding social proof

The perception that your company is an expert in its field is critical to your future success. When other people refer back to your company when they are talking about your industry, they are establishing "social proof," a trust that extends throughout their network of friends and colleagues.

Online social network users are three times more likely to trust their peers' opinions over advertising when making purchase decisions and less than 20% trust advertising when it comes to making decisions.[6] Influencers, including friends, friends-of-friends, colleagues and recognized experts, exist everywhere on the social Web. They are the people within peer groups that others go to for recommendations, advice and trusted opinions. By engaging them, you harness the power of word-of-mouth marketing, with the resulting effect of expanding your audience from them to their friends to their friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend.

This is of utmost importance on the social Web. While it is critical to participate in the conversation that is going

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5   Drum, P. (2009, March). *Social Media: If You Liked it, Then You Should Have Put a Digg on It....* Panel discussion presented at SXSW, Austin, TX.

6   "Social Networking Sites: Defining Advertising Opportunities in a Competitive Landscape." (2007, March). JupiterResearch.

on, it is nearly impossible to be everywhere that the conversation is happening. New groups, new networks and new connections are forming all of the time and no company has the resources to maintain a quality relationship with all of them. The colleagues, friends and followers of the "go-to" people you are actively communicating with are capable of spreading your message organically to these other sites. By giving them good information to talk about and honestly and transparently caring about them as customers and clients, they will actively talk about their experiences with your company, bringing that message to other networks you are not aware of and can even defend you if necessary. The social proof they establish is the most powerful offense and defense you can have in your marketing arsenal.

Social proof is not just influential from a brand building perspective. It should be part of your search engine optimization strategy as well. The goal of search engines is to find trusted, authority sites and rank them high in search results. Search engines like Google are paying more attention to how site visitors view Web sites, not just how often they are visited. Google has recently added a Digg (a popular link-sharing site) button to their toolbar and is now indexing Twitter. In addition, members of Google can rank sites with GoogleWiki, customizing their own search results and influencing the results of other searches.

Social proof is the foundation of word-of-mouth marketing online and offline. Not only do you want people to talk about your company and talk about your message, you need people to take ownership of the message as well.

Getting started with a social media strategy

No single strategy is appropriate for every company. The customer base, the product or service, the goals and the makeup of the company itself are all variables that influence the path that will lead to success. It is extremely important that your company stays true to its brand, both in the guiding principles of the campaign and the path of engagement that you choose.

The audience you reach out to exists in two spaces. The first is the already captured audience that visits your Web site. They are already aware and are getting the full thrust of your brand. They are the perfect accomplices to engage in your word-of-mouth marketing. Because of their awareness of the message they can spread it to the audience that is off-site or "in the wild."

Even though your audience will help you reach other people, you need to decide what external networks your company is going to be active on. To start with, your company needs to have a Facebook and Twitter presence. These are two of the most popular and active social networks and the vast majority of people you want to reach will be active there. Beyond that, you should look at platforms that are more focused on your own industry.

Effective social proof

- 86.9% of respondents said they would trust a friend's recommendation over a review by a critic, while 83.8% said they would trust user reviews over a critic. (Marketing Sherpa, July 2007)

- Tech decision makers consider their personal experience (58%) first when short-listing tech vendors, followed by word-of-mouth and industry analyst reports, tied at 51%. Advertising (17%) and direct marketing (21%) were listed as the least important information sources

- 81% of online holiday shoppers read online customer reviews (Nielson Online, December 2008)

Industry Statistics (n.d.). Retrieved July 31, 2009 from BazaarVoice Web site: http://www.bazaarvoice.com/industryStats.html

These can range from specialized social networking sites, blogs that you can participate in as a contributor or commenter, news sites and more (for example, Dockwalk.com is an extensive social network for superyacht captains and crews. Digital-photography-school.com caters to both professional and amateur photography enthusiasts). As you engage more people on the core sites, follow them to the other sites they participate on to see where else you can take part.

"Authenticity is key; the public wants to connect with your company, not with an agency."

Make sure that your company is being transparent about their participation. Members of your company who are participating in your social media efforts should identify themselves as a representative of your company. This transparency goes a long way toward establishing social proof.

Link building vs. brand building

The two broad goals (and, admittedly, they are related) of building a social media presence are link building and brand building. The purpose of link building is to drive traffic to your Web site by promoting links to it on the Web. This not only increases the number of visitors to your site, but also builds SEO (the number of links back to your site is one of many things that search engines look at to determine ranking in search engine results). In addition to the core social media presence, you should focus on link building sites like Digg, Squidoo, Propeller, Del.icio.us and Weebly.

Brand building focuses on creating consumer awareness and is primarily about building social proof. Attacking social media from this angle captures mindshare and does more to encourage discussion about your company, rather than redirecting readers to other content. Brand building occurs on every social network (like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn) and you can also find more industry focused spaces (like the Ning network and other specialized sites).

There is absolutely no reason that you cannot do both. That requires dedication to the goals and Web communities that your company is building a presence through and will depend on the size and composition of the team that is managing your social media efforts. Should you choose to focus on one over the other, you should at least maintain a presence with the secondary strategy as well. Both build social proof: link building by spreading links to other networks and brand building by growing the buzz around the company and establishing expertise.

Determining the best style of campaign for your purpose

There are two primary types of social media campaigns, one with a finite end and the other more open-ended. Social media can be used as part of a specific, targeted campaign revolving around a singular product, service, event or other aspect of the company or it can be put to use as part of your company's ongoing exposure to the Web, covering brand building, customer service, public relations and specific promotions.

As part of an integrated marketing campaign, it mixes with aspects of more traditional marketing. It may include video on YouTube, promotion on Twitter, podcasts, dedicated Facebook or MySpace groups and even a social portion on your company's site or a micro site. The key is to have the social media aspect of your campaign build

up to a clear conclusion, one that your "followers" will look forward to. Too often, integrated campaigns assume that the event or product is enough, but with social media, the public plays a much bigger role in determining the success of the marketing. An anti-climactic social media campaign results in an audience who is left with a bad taste in their mouths and may spread word of their disappointment to other networks.

On the other hand, social media can be a long term aspect of your marketing strategy in its own right. This is an ongoing effort with no definitive climax and is built on a brand (or brands) as a whole. Activity occurs across different aspects of social media as resources allow and as appropriate. YouTube videos, Twitter accounts, Facebook groups, company blogs and activity in on and off-site threaded discussions are all positive places to participate in the larger conversation in your industry and with consumers. Your company can build on previous successes, crossover with and launch integrated campaigns, run A/B campaign tests, address customer service issues and answer questions as they come up. This kind of social media plan can be rolled out around a single product or brand to "test the waters" and test your approach before adding to it, or it can be launched in one shot under a main brand, letting public participants in the conversation determine which products and services they want to talk about.

The integrated marketing campaign is more directed, with a clear beginning and end. The social media plan will evolve over time, with input from the participants on both sides. It needs to remain flexible, allowing user-generated content to spread your company's brand and allowing you to introduce and remove elements to your social media marketing strategy. Having a team that has the agility to respond to this ever changing environment is essential to a successful social media presence.

Media dollars or human capital?

Budgeting marketing dollars for social media applies primarily to integrated marketing campaigns, where many of the social media elements double as collateral that needs to be produced. At the end of the day, rolling the strategy out to the social Web costs very little and is more reliant on human capital.

Human capital comes into play as you determine the size of the team that will be officially participating in your social media marketing.[7] It can either be a whole company effort or the responsibility of a specific, dedicated team. Both ways have advantages and disadvantages.

By encouraging the whole company to participate, you will have the advantage of a large cross-section of experience and expertise that represents you in the conversation online. It can be a very large presence (10% of H&R Block's 100,000 employees are active on Twitter)[8], giving you a bigger presence promoting the brand, educating consumers and addressing customer service questions. Social proof can be established rapidly as the different elements of your company reach different audiences. It creates a very transparent image of your company.

But with this large team comes lower control over the message you are establishing. Your message will evolve online in the social arena, but it is important that your whole company has a clear understanding of what that message is, how and when you want to roll out product announcements (this should be the responsibility of a select few employees, perhaps in marketing or PR) and the best practices that you want and need your company

*   Employees will participate in social media outside of official channels, so it is a good idea to have company-wide best practices for everyone, regardless of whether or not they are actively and officially promoting the company to the social Web.

7   Drum, P. (2009, March). *Social Media: If You Liked it, Then You Should Have Put a Digg on It...*. Panel discussion presented at SXSW, Austin, TX

to follow. You may also need to point people in the right direction of where to participate. Too many rules will stifle their participation but best practices will grow their positive social Web activity over time.

Having a smaller dedicated team of communication specialists gives your company more control over how the message is rolled out, but they need to be very active across many more platforms and mediums to achieve the same effect. It is easier for a small team to target audiences, but because there are fewer official company participants, you will need to rely more on user-generated social proof to reach other networks.

A hybrid approach is often the best method, encouraging the whole company to take responsibility for social media participation while a core group of employees monitors and coordinates responses and targets participation. Authenticity is key; the public wants to connect with your company, not an agency.

Getting legal involved

Your company's legal team should be involved early in the rollout of your social media strategy. Without a lot of legal precedent to draw on, it is more difficult to know the best way to protect the company. By helping your legal team understand your goals early on, you can build a partnership with them and not hit as many roadblocks as you roll out your plan. There are always solutions to mitigate risk.

Crisis management

No one likes to think about it, but it is important to have a crisis management policy in place from the beginning. Bad press spreads fast, but if your company is active in social media, you can take control, contain it and counter it. By having a clear point person who is actively monitoring the social Web, you will be able to execute a clear chain of response. The response should be same from everyone in your company who is participating.

Each crisis is unique. They can stem from non-social media channels and you should look for opportunity in the crisis. Very often, based on your company's response, you can turn detractors into fans and also use it to refine your message to prevent future occurrences. Respond quickly and engage your audience as soon as possible, with a well thought out answer. Response time has to be measured in hours, not days, and early action will help nip a crisis in the bud before it explodes into something larger. No action or ignoring it will only inflate the issue and if you are already active in social media, you will carry more credibility. The social proof you have already established will rally more supporters to come to your company's defense.

Content is still king

For people to talk about your company, they need something to talk about. That is why it is critical to give them something good and aligned with your message, in order to direct the conversation and accurately portray your company on the social Web. That content needs to come from somewhere:

■ Managed content on your company Web site is a direct reflection of your message and can come in the form of text, video, podcasts, images, the site design, corporate blogs and more.

■ User-generated content on your site can come from forums, threaded discussions, reviews and ratings.

■ Off your site, you can still manage content with information put up by your team, including conversations they are participating in, posted videos, blogs, Facebook and other networks.

■ User-generated content in the form of Tweets, blog entries, group discussions, product review sites, podcasts,

videos and more is out of your direct control, but your primary message and participation in the social Web will influence these elements.

Content is a direction, not the end result. What you put up is what starts the conversation, and others will carry it to other social networks for you where it will evolve. Good content equals good conversation. For instance, Adobe uses Del.icio.us to bookmark helpful sites for members of their site. This connects its community of users and partners together, creating a dynamic and engaging environment.

In another example, the Brooklyn Museum used social media to engage their audience. Using a Facebook group, they had over 2,000 people identify the pieces of art at the museum that they liked best. They also promoted a user-curated exhibit, where 3,000 people contributed ideas that were voted on (400,000 votes). The Brooklyn Museum's whole collection is now online, with the community identifying art with their own tags, so that they are searchable by similar art or specific topics.[9]

During a particularly bad ice storm, the Public Service of New Hampshire (PSNH), an electric utility division of Northeast Utilities serving 490,000 homes and businesses, connected with consumers via Twitter, keeping them updated and answering questions about outages and repairs. They posted photos of damage and work being done on Flickr (a photo sharing site) and added a section to their own Web site dedicated to updates. Consumers reTweeted messages, participated in the conversation, posting comments and their own photos. This established positive social proof around PSNH and they have maintained their social Web presence in the form of Twitter, blogs, YouTube videos and Flickr photos.

> *"Content is a direction, not the end result. It starts the conversation; other participants will carry it to their social networks for you where it will evolve and grow."*

On the other hand, bad content can equal damaging press. As a result of poor content management controls, Amazon miscategorized a large portion of their catalog of books, making it appear that they were imposing a discriminatory policy. This spread across social media and more traditional media like wildfire, appearing on Twitter as #Amazonfail and showing up in popular blogs and news Web sites. Amazon did not have effective crisis management in place, which resulted in them releasing multiple, conflicting stories of why it happened. It took them too long to respond to contain the crisis. Their recent removal of books from their ebook reader Kindle has been quieter as a result of improved crisis management.

United Airlines recently underestimated the power of social media. Poor handling of a musician's guitars followed by poor customer service inspired the musician to create a series of humorous and scathing music videos about his experience with the airline. These were posted on YouTube and Tweeted about and, like the Amazon incident, spread from social media to mainstream media in little time, with little response from United. By the time the airline responded and worked to fix the situation, the damage to their social proof had already been done.

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9   2008 Forrester Groundswell Awards Winners. (n.d.). Retrieved July 30, 2009 from Groundswell Web site: http://groundswelldiscussion.com/groundswell/awards2009/winners2008.php

Conclusion

As with all marketing, there is no one defined social media strategy that fits every company. There are, however, specific elements that every company needs to do to achieve social media success and encourage positive conversation about their brand on the social Web. Your goals with social media define your strategy and will fall into the broad categories of integrated marketing campaigns, ongoing social media plans, link building and brand building. These different approaches can be combined to fit exactly what you want to accomplish.

Pick the right team to lead your strategy and when they participate in the online conversation, make sure that they follow three key, common sense guidelines: listen to the conversation, learn from it and then join in. By doing this, you will gain an understanding of your audience before participating. It will help you figure out how you want to present your company and help you find your audience and where they are online. Your team should communicate as human beings, not as a rigid corporate entity, using the same professional and courteous attitude you use in emails and meetings. This is "face-to-face" time with your audience, building your reputation.

Make sure that you choose the right tools and networks for your social media presence, remembering that you cannot be everywhere. Social proof will spread your message to other networks. Take part in the core spaces for your conversation (Facebook, Twitter and content and Web 2.0 tools on your own site) and also seek out popular focused platforms that relate to you.

Following these guidelines will give you a solid, flexible and scalable social media strategy that can adapt to your needs and new technologies. This technology-enabled word-of-mouth marketing will serve your company well now and in the future.

About Ektron

Founded in 1998, Ektron is committed to providing revolutionary, scalable Web content management and authoring solutions. Ektron CMS400.NET empowers developers and non-technical business users alike: developers can take advantage of built-in Server Controls to deploy a Web site out-of-the-box or customize the deployment using CMS400.NET's well-documented API, and business users benefit from an intuitive user interface for managing their Web site's content and messaging. From enterprise level deployments to single sites, CMS400.NET ships with a wide array of functionality, including social networking, Web 2.0, SEO and page building and synchronization tools. Headquartered in Nashua, N.H., Ektron has more than 20,000 customer implementations worldwide, including LG, Sony, and Johnson & Johnson.

For more information, visit: http://www.ektron.com/CIO

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