

Everybody's talking at me!

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS
CHANGING THE RULES OF
BRAND ENGAGEMENT.

Join the conversation

Until recently, marketing was a one-way, top-down monologue. Companies talked and we listened and, sometimes, bought. The Web, with its emphasis on connections, participation and transparency, has changed all that. Now, consumers talk back—to advertisers and, more importantly, to each other. Rather than taking corporate spin on faith, customers are more likely to trust and act on peer endorsements and word of mouth.

So how can your company engage in and profit from this conversation?

Social media. The new way to talk about the brand experience.

Social marketing is the systematic application of marketing, along with other concepts and techniques, to achieve specific behavioral goals for a social good.

Social Networks

With hundreds of millions of unique visitors, Facebook and MySpace are the giants of social networking sites. Originally created for college students and teens, they connect users (from your former college roommate to the likes of Best Buy, Ford and NBC) to friends, colleagues, user groups and like-minded networks. LinkedIn, a close third, is designed for professional networking and business development, with users representing 170 industries. And then there are nings, smaller, customized niche sites for discrete communities of professionals, hobbyists or groups with narrowly-defined demos or interests.

Like focus groups, networking sites can give marketers an intimate view of their consumers, uncovering insights about target behavior, needs, brand loyalty, product usage and purchasing trends, all of which can translate into greater market share and revenue.

As with any conversation, you can't just charge into a site and interrupt with your brand message. Listen first and then engage participants with content that informs, tools that encourage input and features that build trust, good will and referral to their friends on one specific site or across multiple platforms.

The same rule applies to advertising on these networks. Algorithms based on behavioral or demographic targeting may decide on whose pages your ads appear, but your message must seem as though it is directed to only one individual at a time. It must be relevant, responsive and customized to the specific needs and mindset of your consumer.

Points of engagement:

www.facebook.com

www.myspace.com

www.linkedin.com

www.ning.com



Content-sharing Sites

For photos, there's Flickr. For videos, there's YouTube. And when integrated into a larger online strategy, sharing user-generated content on these and similar sites can result in greater buzz and top-of-mind-awareness about a brand, company or cause. Anyone with a computer can easily post a video or photo that millions of viewers can watch, respond to and pass along almost instantly. (Pass along is key. Content that goes viral—has high pass-along rates—is content that sells.)

From small personal moments to blockbuster ads and events, content-sharing sites fulfill one of the Internet's biggest promises—the building of communities through shared experiences we can re-visit again and again. And with images of employees doing or creating cool things, photos or videos put a human face on a company, welcoming new and existing fans and customers to the corporate family.

Points of engagement:

www.flickr.com

www.youtube.com



A blog (web log) is a regularly- updated online diary reflecting the interests, musings and experiences of the writer. They can feature graphics, video or links to other content, but the key to their vitality are the comments readers post (supportive and not). Good blogs speak with a unique voice, feature useful, relevant or thought-provoking content and are frequently updated and refreshed so that readers stay around and return often. Their success is measured by how widely they are linked to or mentioned by other blogs, websites or opinion leaders in their space. There are blogs for every cause, company or industry, and the most effective are those that nurture a highly personal, one-to-one dialogue between blogger and readers.

For many companies, blogs are perhaps the easiest entry into social networking. They can be free-standing or a separate section on your website. Marriott, Sun Systems, IBM and Dell are great examples of how corporate blogs have built and sustained relationships, defused crises and engaged with their customers in honest, intelligent conversation. An effective blog will create communities around posts, which can also help the company's ranking in search engines.

Along with blogs, online discussion groups like forums or chat rooms are all about passion—for the subject, the product, the company. The more you have, the greater the number of connections you will cultivate with like-minded individuals...individuals who become ambassadors for your brand.

Points of engagement:

www.blogger.com

www.livejournal.com

www.typepad.com

www.wordpress.com



Twitter is a micro-blogging service that allows users to send mini-messages (tweets) of no more than 140 characters. Twitterers stay connected by following the activities of friends and others (colleagues, celebrities, companies) and are followed in turn. Twitter's immediacy makes it ideal for sharing late-breaking news or responding to customer needs in a quick and personal way. A great tracking device, it helps companies monitor and defuse negative stories, broadcast positive information, post events and offer instant service and gratification.

Comcast, Whole Foods, NPR and Zappos are just a few examples of how Twitter helps an increasing number of companies make friends and influence people.

Point of engagement:

www.twitter.com



Other Social Networks

Digg, De.licio.us, Reddit and Stumbleupon. Those exotic names and symbols you see alongside or beneath articles on news and other sites are shortcuts to informal networks of like-minded individuals who share your interest in specific content.

Digg lets you vote on your favorite stories and share them with your friends.

With Delicious, you bookmark your favorite websites and share your choices.

On Reddit, users can post links to content on the web, which other users vote up or down, influencing their ranking on Reddit's home page.

With Stumbleupon, you identify categories of content that interest you and are then directed to websites that play to those interests. Like Amazon or Netflix, it will also make recommendations based on previous choices.

The key is to produce content that visitors and their friends find worth bookmarking and sharing. As a stand-alone, these are not powerful business development drivers, but as part of a broader online initiative they can reach out and capture additional visitors who are not affiliated with official social networks.

Points of engagement:

www.digg.com

www.delicious.com

www.reddit.com

www.stumbleupon.com



10 Conversation Starters

1. Before you commit to a social media strategy, think about your overarching marketing objective and how this vehicle could help you engage with your target in ways that will generate more positive word of mouth and effective community-building.
2. Social media is highly dynamic. The best way to understand it is to jump right in and be a part of it. Create a page on Facebook or your own ning. Follow and be followed on Twitter. Start a blog. Share a story. Experiment and learn what you feel comfortable doing and monitor what works best. Don't be afraid to tweak and refine your strategy.
3. You are your own webmaster. Keep your content fresh, relevant and entertaining. Enrich with audio, video, stills and links to other sites and stories. Create excitement to build buzz and bring new eyes, minds and hearts to your community.
4. Content is forever, so think before you post, tweet or upload. You can be informal, but be polite. Tweets and comments are private conversations held in public, so everyone can—and will—listen in. Don't talk at or down to your consumers; be responsive and empathetic to their concerns. And don't let a small problem grow into a viral phenomenon. Like all internet communication, social networks spread information like dandelion spores. Be careful of what you send off into the cyber-world.
5. If your audience is online, you should be online. Social media's micro-targeting helps you identify, reach and communicate with desired user groups and their peers. It is especially valuable to B2B marketers looking to build relationships that reward current customers and convert prospects.
6. Social media make it easier for consumers to find information online when they're doing the research that will help them make buying decisions. Make sure your content tells them what they need to know and invites them to learn more.

10 Conversation Starters

7. Compared to traditional print or broadcast, the cost of entry into social media is low, but the ROI is potentially huge. While online advertising is expected to decline overall, spending on social networks is projected to reach \$210 million in 2012. Make sure your voice is heard in that noise with messaging that is appealing and actionable.
8. In tough economic times, everyone is looking to cut costs. An investment in social media is a cost-effective way to reach out and engage prospective buyers and nurture relationships that will pay off in better times to come.
9. Social marketing is counter-cyclical. In a bad economy with high unemployment, more and more people turn to networking, which means larger audiences eager for the support, information and community that only you can provide. They're ripe for engagement. Be there for them.
10. Don't overlook your website or current e-outreach. Integrated communications across all platforms reinforces the power and benefits of your brand and amps up the connection—and conversation—between you and your consumers. Social networks drive traffic to your site; make sure all your marketing speaks with one voice.

Done right, your participation in social networks can generate more leads, enhance greater customer retention and conversion, deliver more effective customer support and acquire actionable market intelligence to give you a competitive edge. It is an every-changing conversation with your consumer in real time, all the time.

We will engage, inform and inspire your prospects or clients.

To find out how we can position your company for success, give us a call or send an email to: David Franek, President 301-951-9195 david@thedesignchannel.com |

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