

THE REALITY OF TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: *Social media is currently an evolving “wave” in business marketing. Marketers are beginning to drive the use of social media as a component in their marketing strategy and campaigns to reach out to customers and fans. Among the sub disciplines of marketing that may utilize social media include promotions, marketing intelligence, sentiments research, public relations, marketing communications and product and customer management. However, these methods often lack the depth of information needed to understand why people engage in certain behaviors. This paper will explore recent examples of types of on-line participation and classifications.*

Keywords: *audience, on-line, social media, marketing communications, consumer behavior, engagement, web 2.0.*

1. SOCIAL MEDIA PART OF ONLINE WEB. CHARACTERISTICS

The real power of people can be noticed in the new revolutionized media channel – social media. Social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online media, which share most or all of the following characteristics:

- Participation & Engagement: social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience.
- Openness: most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password-protected content is frowned on.
- Conversation: whereas traditional media is about „broadcast“ (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation.
- Community: social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.
- Connectedness: Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

Social media allow us to “listen” to naturally occurring conversations and behaviors... to hear the unexpected. These insights come at us like a continuous river, changing the cadence of research. “Listening pipes” as Pete Blackshaw, executive vice president of Nielsen Online Digital Strategic Services, calls them, go beyond “push surveys” to include social media conversation, search, digital analytics, customer

interaction in the “brand backyard,” interactions at retail, and managed communities [18, Strategy Analytics Report, pp 25].

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users ‘ networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing / refining of informational content.” Social media and Web 2.0 are two terms which are often used interchangeably in the marketing literature, even though they are not entirely the same. From the marketing perspective, the Web 2.0 should be perceived as the new tools for the marketing communication mix and facilitator and enabler of social media. From technological perspective, there are not many changes in the Web 2.0 compared to Web 1.0 applications; the real value is created by people not only using this social software but participating in the creation process of it (by creating and editing the new content or even in some cases modifying the application itself) [12, O’Reilly].

2. MARKETING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

The Engagement Concept

In the ‘Groundswell’ (2008), Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff outlined the following as core activities that define the engagement with the groundswell: listening, talking, energizing, supporting and embracing. This is the framework that has been developed and proposed by Li and Bernoff to facilitate the transition for companies to understand and engage their customers within the social media space. They argued that social media is predominantly about the people and those relationships and communities must be the cornerstone of any social media marketing strategy. Although the framework, as outlined, provides a clear community engagement model, it does not satisfactorily provide an understanding of the long-term value of investment in these activities. Engaging closely with customers and prospects on a broad scale represents a significant cost to most companies. However, Mitch Joel, in his book ‘Six Pixels of Separation’ (2009) makes a clear argument for close engagement. People are increasingly becoming digitally connected to each other via social networks and online activities. With current rate of adoption, the online population will represent a significant, easily-targeted market for businesses. By investing in getting connected with their online market and customers now, companies will have the edge and advantage on competitors in the future. Customers’ trust and rapport built over time are durable business assets that are hard to encroach on by competitors [6, Godin].

Objections to Social Media Marketing

Nonetheless, the consensus on marketing via social media is not universal. Tom Martin (2009), in *Advertising Age*, is adamant that social media is not a channel for marketing and that any corporate involvement behind a social identity devalues the conversations. Marketers points out the argument that marketing has no place in 'social' media and that it 'destroys social media's foundations' by undermining its human elements. This, he contends, is because of the very nature of marketing, which is a commercial corporate function. This study however is not in agreement with these views. Even in traditional marketing, engagements with prospects through advertising and promotional channels are activities that involve multiple levels of human interaction, seen or unseen (for an example, an advertising creative devising a copy for an audience). The marked difference at present is that social media allows for reciprocal, two-way communication between advertiser and customer. Essentially, the core marketing principle of satisfying human wants and needs does not change. Marketing in social media is an evolution of commercial practices in tandem with the times [3, Brogan].

Different Disciplines

Further in this, the prominent blogger and social media expert, Chris Brogan, in his blog post 'Marketing is NOT social media-Social Media is NOT marketing' (2007), argues that social media and marketing are distinctive disciplines and independent from each other. His primary argument is that social media is a set of tools that 'permits regular people access to potential audiences of shared interest' and that marketing should not 'own' these tools. Instead, he suggests that marketers should observe and take advantage of the effect of having the media in the hands of regular people. The same sentiment is similarly echoed by Lee Odden, voted number 15 by peers in 2008's top 100 list of digital marketers. Odden (2009) believes that social media is 'no place for direct marketing' and that people join social networks, and the Web 2.0 space in general, to be social with a like-minded community, instead of being marketed to [13, Odden].

Discomforting Truth

Herein lies the disconnect. On one end, consumers are empowered by the internet to have their say and opinions on brands, and some, including experts such as Brogan and Odden, believe that consumers should be given total freedom to decide when to engage with brands. On the other end, marketers are desperately trying to leverage on social media to drive their marketing campaigns and to manage perceptions of their brands online.

The Believers

Supporters of social media marketing for enterprise believe that the right approach can be beneficial for both businesses and customers. Eikermann, Hajj and Peterson (2007) support the notion that companies should re-strategize and profit from this 'threat'. They believe that companies should actively seek to engage in conversations with their customers. However, companies must observe a condition of moving away from 'controlling the message' and let consumers decide on the flavor of the

conversations. Additionally, in their research, they observed that Web 2.0 has caused the fragmentation of marketing channels, in that, communities and websites tend to cater to niches and particular demographics. These should be used to the advantage of companies as they can be efficient through the use of highly-targeted effective marketing messages despite the clutter [4,Eikelman, pp 293-295].

This study agrees that the sheer volume of advertising clutter is causing consumers to question the authenticity behind the claims of these messages. It is also agreed that brand recall is suffering from increased consumerism as companies capitalize by developing countless new products and brands. Tellingly, a CBS news report (2006) states that an average person is exposed to about five thousand advertising messages in a day. This report argues that, with the explosion of cheap, one-way advertising channels and growing customer literacy in the art of marketing, the impact of traditional marketing communications has been undermined. Therefore, Meadows-Klue is of the opinion that social media is the right channel for marketers to regain attention from customers.

3. INFLUENCING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1. The Main Factor: Influencers

Despite the opposing arguments for social media's involvement in marketing, it is ultimately social media's creation of a new layer of influencers that will prove to be beneficial for both marketers and consumers. In 'The Tipping Point' (2000), author, Malcolm Gladwell, emphasizes on the importance of influencers in the transference and spread of any new idea or knowledge. Without these idea facilitators, many commercial successes, such as the Apple, Hush Puppies and Google brands, will remain on the peripheral. For consumers, recommendations through peer influence tend to be perceived as highly authentic and objective. For marketers, whose predominant purpose is the influence of customers to their products, the easy creation of consumer-influencers is a vital benefit that can be reaped from the integration of social media in their campaigns. Moreover, many marketing experts agree that word-of-mouth (WOM) is an effective element of promotion. In the Web 2.0 era, the WOM activity can be easily facilitated through the sharing of viral videos, email or peer reviews on Facebook. A research on the effect of WOM on social networks' sign-up, found that the elasticity of WOM referrals is 20 and 30 times higher than that of marketing events and media publicity, respectively. Thus, this study is of the opinion that a major role of social media in marketing practices (if adopted) must be objectively related to the creation of influencers within communities [19,WOMMA].

3.2.Return on Influence

Another applicable theory in the matter of WOM through social media is the Return on Influence. The prevailing idea is that marketing must be strategically carried out through identifying and influencing those with the most influence over others. At present, social media is the only medium that allows for such detailed effort. Despite the intricacy of this tactic, the objective of focusing messages to the right audience is in accord with marketing fundamentals of segmenting and targeting audiences for maximum

conversion. The influence of a Connector personality ('Connectors know lots of people') over an ideology or trend will quickly mobilize its spread and reach until it reaches the 'tipping point'. This is when an idea achieves critical mass and universal recognition through a sudden exponential growth.[4,Brogan]

3.3. Brand Advocates

However, traditional marketing philosophies do not explicitly cater for external contribution to a brand by anyone, other than an employee of a company. Commercial marketing objectives are typically aligned to achieve incremental revenue through quality lead generation and brand building. Because of this, no added emphasis is usually given to building external non-sale relations with customers. Nevertheless, with social media, the unpaid brand advocates are a reality. In the 'Groundswell' it is proposed that brand advocates are 'grown' through purpose-built community forums for ardent fans of brands such as Lego, Dell and the iPhone. In retrospect, this act of 'energizing the groundswell' is in effect a controlled and strategized word-of-mouth effort [2,Bernoff].

3.4. Stickiness Wins

Another triumphant brand advocate campaign was the successful bid to have Barack Obama elected as President of the United States. The synchronized use of social media channels gave extended awareness and publicity to the Obama digital campaign and a measurable edge over John McCain, the Republican Senator. This was achieved through endorsements made online by Obama advocates which has a lasting and visible impact as the internet retains a level of permanency and transparency. Again, this observation concurs with another of Gladwell's theory in 'The Tipping Point', the Stickiness Factor (2008). This is the study of the strength of a message in a person's mind that will allow it to be relayed from one person to another effortlessly until it reaches tipping point. From a marketing perspective, the Stickiness Factor is an important criterion in the crafting and testing of marketing messages: the viral effect of 'United Breaks Guitars' and Susan Boyle's 100 million YouTube views are evidence that the carefully-crafted message is a powerful tool for the marketer. Conclusively, the use of external resources, who will evangelize a brand to friends, relatives and colleagues for "the most honest form of marketing" is similar in effect to an over-achieving direct marketing campaign, at minimal or no cost. The Obama campaign is compelling evidence that social media can assist in achieving marketing objectives if efforts are focused on marketing through influence and brand advocacy [14, Ostrow].

3.5. Permission and Trust Marketing

Irrefutably, traditional marketers are grappling with the decline of mainstream advertising and the rise of social media which has deeply affected the media and newspaper industry. Forrester Research, in its 5-year forecast, reports that global advertising budget will decline significantly and this will be supplanted by a 34% growth in social media budget This is a strong indication that advertising is fast losing its effect as a promotions tool. Without a doubt, the works of Seth Godin in the area of permission marketing have influenced a new generation of digital marketers. In 'Permission

Marketing' (1999), Godin explores the use of interactive technology, such as email and online games, in order to receive explicit customer permission for a brand to initiate direct interact. Godin argues that only marketing messages and approaches that are relevant, personal and anticipated will be readily accepted by customers. Godin's theory has been proven just as relevant today as customers continue to eschew traditional advertising in favor of word-of-mouth recommendation and peer reviews. With social media, practitioners of digital marketing are able to gain inroads to potential customers through the proven method of permission marketing. Instead of brands pushing and 'shouting' their messages across, social media channels allow for consumers to voluntarily 'befriend' (via Facebook Fan Pages) or accept communication (via Twitter or email newsletters) from brands. The building of trust through such relationships typically benefits both companies and consumers. As organizations become exceedingly visible through social media, it is therefore notable that marketing of trust is important. The experts expounds the theory that if an organization does not provide value, be open and transparent and create opportunities for two-way communications, the brand will not survive in a time when social media is becoming an accepted platform for brand-building. Joel further states that these ideals are can only be possible through the 'building of community based on trust'. Based on these arguments, this study therefore has the opinion that modern organizational marketing must involve efforts in social media in order to maintain and increase trust and authenticity from customers' perspective.

3.6 The Reality of Social Media

The above arguments indicate that social media can be mutually beneficial for both parties if the boundaries of engagement are specified. In areas where corporate sponsored social media activities are managed (such as product support forums), branding and direct marketing should be reasonably accepted. In public and closed social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook respectively, permission must be sought for marketing messages to be broadcasted or relayed to specific users. Breaching these boundaries is akin to interruption marketing, similar in purpose and effect to untargeted advertising and email spam.

4. CONCLUSION

The above study has shown that social media do indeed have a significant role to play in contemporary marketing. Although there are dissenting voices in regards to the use of social media as a marketing tool, generally, social media has been proven to have important applications for marketing campaigns, public relations activities and customer relationship management programs.

A balanced and complementary approach is required to integrate social media into marketing practices. The expert consensus calls for marketers to engage in a subtle and restrained manner when engaging customers in social media. Making inroads through influence and permission, rather than direct selling, will more likely provide the benefits of long-term engagement. Therefore, the objective for social media marketers is indeed to turn customers into brand advocates.

The significance of social media as a possible corporate ideology cannot be ignored. With open and transparent communication through social media, companies can benefit from the increased level of trust by customers and stakeholders. This is important in an era where corporate social responsibility is emphasized in the wake of corporate scandals, Social media has also been proven to be an effective tool for public relations and in the creation of thought leadership for a company.

Although social media is a recent arsenal to the field of business marketing, its potential as a marketing tool cannot be overlooked. However, further development in its practice and usage is required in order to increase corporate adoption. Also, a study into the measurement of social media's effectiveness and its return on investment must also be undertaken. Only then can the real value of social media to an enterprise be ascertained. Nonetheless, social media is a powerful tool for any organization moving in the Web 2.0 space and beyond.

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