

Riding the Tsunami: Harnessing the Power of Social Media

BY LINDSAY PEDERSEN

Why Use Social Media

As marketers, it is our role to drive demand for our businesses by empathizing with our consumers. Social media provides a powerful empathy tool by enabling us to listen, engage, participate and encourage conversations that can turn loyal consumers into passionate advocates.

Social media is clearly striking a chord among a growing segment of consumers, and no longer only among techies and young people. Traffic to social networking sites has risen meteorically in the last year, as has the amount of time individuals spend on those sites. Why is social media resonating so? What do consumers find so compelling?

We believe that there are two fundamental consumer needs driving the growth of social media:

1: EMOTIONAL NEED TO FEEL HEARD

Social networking deeply satisfies people's need to feel heard. They enjoy advocating for brands that they love, and are gratified when given the opportunity to expound upon topics they are passionate about.

2: PRACTICAL NEED TO FILTER INFORMATION

Social media also can serve as a filter in an increasingly overwhelming information environment. By using social media to learn about products, consumers can cut through the flood of information on the Internet to yield information only from like-minded networks of individuals. In this way, social media is edging out traditional Internet searches, thereby transforming the purchase consideration process.

In order to harness the true power of social media, marketers should remain attuned to these fundamental consumer needs that are driving social media's popularity among consumers.

How to Succeed with Social Media

Social media marketing today presents many of the challenges posed by Internet marketing during the mid-to-late 1990s. Back then, marketers knew that the Internet was a revolutionary way to market their products, and that it was an important component of their marketing mix. But given the uncharted nature of Internet marketing, they were struggling with how to use it.

Many marketers are facing the same uncertainty with social media. For those of you searching for some proven success tips, here are the demonstrated best practices our research has uncovered.

1: USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TACTIC (NOT A STRATEGY)

Marketers should not abandon their marketing strategy in their enthusiasm for launching into social media. As important as it may be, social media is not a strategy. Social media is a tactic that, when used to activate a sound strategy, can complement and augment the effectiveness of other marketing efforts.

Before employing any marketing tactic, including social media, revisit your marketing strategy. Describe your target consumer, her habits, needs and interests with crisp and incisive detail. Being inside the head of your consumer enables you to focus on social media that is already relevant and compelling to her. Articulate your brand's

positioning and personality, and craft your message accordingly. What you say (messaging) and how you say it (positioning and personality) is as important as the vehicle you use.

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A brand that does a great job bringing their strategy to life through social media is Maximus-Minimus, a gourmet, Seattle-area food truck appealing to “foodies” who are also sports fans. Maximus-Minimus’s personality is irreverent but positive, accessible and free-spirited, and their messaging reflects this. For example, their vanity plate and Twitter name both read “Some Pig,” playfully conjuring pork, their mainstay ingredient.

Because their consumers tend to be sports fans, Maximus-Minimus often parks near Safeco Field, and uses Twitter to cheer for the Seattle Mariners. Other Mariners fans then see Maximus-Minimus’s “tweet” and become Maximus-Minimus followers on Twitter – even “re-tweeting” their tweets, which further reinforces the brand. This use of social media is a natural extension of Maximus-Minimus’s strategy. The resulting buzz generates awareness and a brand-appropriate feeling of goodwill toward Maximus-Minimus.

2: EMBRACE A TEST-AND-LEARN CULTURE

To best position yourself to unleash the power of any emerging tactic, including social media, know that some endeavors will be more successful than others, and celebrate this experimental

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attitude. This is easier said than done. When you are spending precious marketing funds, it can feel uncomfortable to try unproven tools. The best social media marketers are embracing this discomfort as an opportunity to make their marketing spending more effective.

One company that has reaped benefits from social media marketing is Dreambox Learning, an online educational math program for elementary school-aged children. Dreambox Learning has embraced a

“test and learn” marketing culture in which marketers are encouraged to try a variety of social media tactics in the spirit of learning. Dreambox Learning’s acceptance of uncertainty makes them nimble, enabling them to evolve their social media tactics as their consumer base evolves. For example, when Dreambox Learning’s marketers noticed an unexpected advocate for their product in teachers, they created social media tactics that engaged teacher communities. Through its website, blog, Facebook page and Twitter presence, Dreambox Learning keeps fans engaged through a variety of messages and vehicles - including daily tips for family activities, company news and video YouTube contests.

Without the organization’s willingness to experiment, Dreambox Learning never would have learned that this resource could be a useful marketing lever.

3: ADOPT A TRANSPARENT AND AUTHENTIC VOICE

There is something about social media that makes it easy for people to sniff out overt promotion. The rule of building your brand through social media, therefore, is transparency. A company’s participation must truly add value to the consumer. The efforts must be in a spirit of generosity and authenticity in order to resonate.

Beecher’s Handmade Cheese, for example, even posts messages on Facebook to support its competitors, because Beecher’s

If your social media gives something valuable to fans and followers, it builds trust and credibility for your brand.

recommendations are valuable to their artisan-cheese-loving target. This establishes Beecher’s expertise, fosters brand goodwill and trustworthiness, and ultimately drives awareness and trial of their own products.

Part of the appeal of social media is that people feel they are connecting with real people. Putting a face, a name and a real personality out in front of a corporate logo allows companies to establish a feeling of authenticity and familiarity with their customers. For example, Kodak’s CMO, Jeffrey Hayzlett,

communicates regularly with his 12,000+ Twitter followers about the ordinary happenings of his day.

4: TURN IT OVER TO INFLUENCERS

This goes back to embracing uncertainty. Previously, we marketers tried to minimize uncertainty by testing our messaging rigorously before launching a campaign. Now the magic lies not in decreasing uncertainty, but in cultivating advocates, and then letting them run with building your brand in a way that resonates for them. This requires openness to both positive and negative discussions about your product. You must accept the negative along with the positive in order to get truly compelling social media.

Influencers may be already-loyal consumers that you can connect with one another and give a forum for discussing your product. For example, Nike started a social community on Loopd to connect athletes interested in similar activities with the brand. Similarly, Graco has built a community around sharing photos (via Flickr and the Graco blog) of Graco baby products in use. To nurture this community, Graco has organized real-life meet-ups that further vitalize the influencers and humanize the company.

In effect, social media often functions much like traditional PR, only without the media as a middleman between the company and the

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consumer. Indeed, social media still plays a key role even in traditional PR outreach, as the media now uses social media as a source for stories.

Company news often breaks nowadays on social media sites (such as the news of the Chow Foods partnership breaking on Twitter). In order to own your PR story, you need to be using (and reading) social media to reach the traditional media.

5: TAP INTO CONSUMER INSIGHTS

Social media is a useful (and, as a bonus, inexpensive) method for understanding your customers. It can complement traditional methods

of market research and provide unique and timely feedback on such topics as:

- *Brand Health Tracking* – While it may not always be easy to hear criticism, listening to and responding to feedback can keep you close to your customers.
- *Innovation* – Savvy companies invite consumers into the innovation process, and now social media can facilitate that conversation. For example, Qdoba posted a tweet saying “Hey guys, what would you like to see new on the Qdoba menu?” and within 10 minutes, 170 suggestions flooded in. Qdoba often tweaks recipes and adds menu items based on feedback from Facebook and Twitter.
- *Messaging Effectiveness* – After new messages are introduced, companies can monitor social media to ensure their messaging effectiveness.

In sum, social networking is a powerful tool that harnesses and returns untold energy and feedback from your consumers – one that will likely be used by your competitors and definitely by the consumers you are trying to reach. To effect positive impact on your brand, it must be used with openness toward and respect for the consumer, and should be a natural extension of your brand.



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