

Is Social Media a Moving Target?

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Abstract

Social media is an expanding and evolving collection of online tools, platforms and applications that allow individuals and businesses to create, interact with and share information. Social media enables businesses and organizations to engage consumers through interactive dialogue making interactions feel more personal leading to improved relationships. This new marketing tool enables marketers to know their customers and prospects in ways that were not previously possible. Nearly every day a new social media platform is brought online offering texting, audio, video, images, podcasting and other channels of multimedia communications. With this mind-numbing array of new social media platforms being introduced many feel that the study of social media is like shooting at a moving target. But, is it really? By looking at the fundamental principles that set social media apart from traditional media we can make a determination as to whether social media is a moving target or not.

Introduction

When discussing social media it is important to remember that it is born out of the promotion element of the marketing mix. Promotion incorporates advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations. In the past these categories of promotion had concrete distinctions. However, since the advent of new technologies that gave birth to social media these lines have become less distinct, in fact, they are quite blurred. In this paper I examine the uses of social media as it pertains to the promotional mix.

The key word in promotion today is “engagement.” It is critical to engage customers and prospects via a firm’s marketing communication. Social media is the most engaging, interacting and transparent form of communication. It is an inexpensive, fast and efficient way to get your message communicated worldwide. It enables people to share information, which, in turn, can be shared again and again by subsequent receivers. A marketers dream!

Social Media Strategy

The first step in creating a social media strategy is to create a written plan of goals and objectives and criteria for success. The following list of goals and objectives have a hierarchy and the first goal of relationship development carries extra weight. Relationship development is at the top of the list followed by finding new customers, market research, introducing new products, selling and recruiting staff.

Do you notice where selling is located in the hierarchy? In today’s world of permission-based marketing it is imperative that companies understand the 80/20 rule as it pertains to social media. Eighty percent of a firm’s posts should be informative and/or entertaining. Posts that followers want to see and become engaged. Only 20 percent of posts in social media should be self-promoting. Robertson (2013) This concept is new to marketers who have a long history of delivering “in-your-face” advertisements via traditional media.

When a company establishes social media policies and procedures they need to consider technology capabilities, departmental and individual responsibilities, training, content parameters, and engagement strategies. When creating a social media road map one must make sure the strategy is consistent with overall marketing communication goals.

Marketers must research social networks to find appropriate vehicles that are used by their target audience and will facilitate the delivery of the firm's message. In addition, brand advocates must be found and leveraged to help share your message. George, T. (2013) And one must include an evaluation method to determine return on investment.

Social Media Policies and Procedures

Companies want their employees to use social media to help bring business. However, management must choose the voices of the company wisely. Younger employees have grown up with internet access and come to the workplace with the ability to use their "knowledge" at their workplace. While employees should be encouraged to blog, post and participate on social networks, companies have to be very careful about what information is posted.

Some social web guiding principles for employees include listen before you talk, think before you speak, say who you are, respond to ideas not people, know your facts and cite your sources, stay on the record because you are on record, when you respond to a problem, you own it, protect the organization from liability and slander. Ross, J. (2009)

Keep in mind that like the all night diner social media is 24/7/365. Therefore management should designate employees to monitor social media networks outside of working hours. Conversations need to be continued and problems addressed in "real time."

Social Media Promotion

Social media is an excellent, cost effective way of promoting a business or organization. One important difference between traditional promotion and social media promotion is networking. Building a large network is key to promoting on social media. Building your network is an ongoing task and a considerable amount of time should be dedicated to it. Your network/audience should include customers, prospects, brand advocates and social influencers.

In social media promotion takes the form of posts. A company must have a strategy for posting. They must post often but not too often. A determination must be made as to how many posts are appropriate for your target market. Every situation is unique and the number of posts is determined by the desire of the audience to see the posts. Some companies may post once a week, others multiple times per day.

Posts should give something of value to your audience. Value can be in the form of interesting information, entertainment, fun activities, contests and sweepstakes, discounts, etc. The 80/20 rule applies here. Be sure that no more than 20 percent of your posts are self-promoting. Two important aspects of promotion include generating an immediate response to an offer and creating brand awareness to keep your brand top-of-mind. Remember to do both with your social media promotion.

Creativity is essential to get people to pay attention to your posts. Creative, interesting posts can also help build your network when shared by your audience. Make your promotion easy to share. Sharing must be easy and intuitive. Sharing is instrumental for effective social media promotion. Find creative ways to initiate user-generated content in your promotion. Technology has made it very easy for people to submit text, photos and videos on social media. The key is to share users' posts right away to break the ice and provide others with inspiration for their own submission. Pickering, B. (2012)

Know your social networks. Some require apps for promotion, and others have constraints you have to work within. Some are based on text, others image and others video. If you run a promotional contest be sure to give milestones and updates regularly to increase interest and engagement. Vaughan, P. (2012) Expand your network by cross-promotion to include partners and sponsors which will help all parties increase audience reach.

You have spectators who will just watch, joiners who will engage in low barrier formats such as a sweepstakes, or text format, and creators who will post photos or videos. Pickering, B. (2011) Current customers are most likely to engage. You should use traditional media to drive traffic to your social media promotions.

Social Media and Public Relations

One of the biggest changes social media has on marketing communications is in regard to public relations. By definition public relations is building good relations with the company's various publics by obtaining favorable publicity; building up a good corporate image; and handling or heading off unfavorable rumors, stories and events. Kotler & Armstrong (2012) Pg. 450 Historically organizations have had to rely on traditional, non-interactive media to relay PR messages. In the past, organizations would write a press release about a newsworthy item, mail/fax it to appropriate media and hope they conveyed the message. The media was not paid to convey the message.

Every business needs to create and maintain relationships with their public. Social media has made a dramatic change in the way businesses communicate with the public. Specific public relations disciplines include: IPR.org.uk. (2012)

- Consumer/lifestyle public relations- gaining publicity for a particular product or service
- Crisis communication- responding in a crisis
- Financial public relations- communicating financial results and business strategy
- Internal communications- communicating within the company itself
- Government relations- engaging government departments to influence public policy.

An online public relations strategy can help build a web presence that gets increased search engine visibility, creates social interactions that deepen relationships with your customers and builds your brand. Social media monitoring is important for today's public relations professional. Monitoring social media conversations about your brand enables you to get involved. Most major social media sites have tools to monitor conversations concerning your brand.

Public relations duties have become more demanding. Public relations professionals need to be able to move faster and think quicker than ever before. The "Golden 24 hours" when a company was expected to respond to issues has become the "Golden Hour!" Burnside, B. (2013) The demands of the PR professional are 24/7/365. Negative news will always spread faster than the positive. Whenever there is a mention of your brand on social media you need to know because if it is negative it could be a possible threat to the company.

Obtaining coverage in the media is a great way to spread the word about an organization. Public relations gives a business free third party credibility. Use creative content as outreach tool. Create fun and interesting content and promote it in social media. Utilize a pull strategy by becoming part of media. By posting dynamic content you will attract the attention of media. They will share your content and build your network for you. TopRank Online Marketing (2009)

Customer Relationship Management – Social CRM

Data is the key to an effective customer relationship management program. Social media will open the door to a plethora of data! Take advantage of the power of social media to become closer to your customers. Use Social CRM to improve customer support, streamline customer research to understand the customer experience, develop innovative e-commerce programs to increase sales all while increasing revenue and efficiency while reducing costs.

An IBM survey found that customers are more interested in getting real value out of their social media interactions with companies, rather than seeking them out to feel connected to the brand. Baird, C & Parasnis, G. (2010) So, instead of just managing customers, the role of the business is to facilitate collaborative social experiences and

dialogue that customer's value. Does this sound familiar? The importance of the 80/20 rule cannot be over emphasized.

Social media is a game changer and the customer is in control. Only a small percentage of consumers on social sites can be counted on to interact regularly. Most consumers interact with brands or businesses with which they already have a strong connection. Parrish, M. (2013)

Businesses may be confusing their own desire for customer relations with consumers' motivations for engaging. To make the customer experience picture perfect start thinking like a customer. If you don't know what customers value, ask them. Give your costumers what they want and more! Companies need to deliver tangible value for customers' time, attention, endorsement, and data.

Retention and building brand loyalty is the key. It is less expensive to sell to existing customers than it is to find new customers. Customers who have some interactions with a brand via social media spend 20-40 percent more on that brand. Dugan, L. (2012) Over 50% of posts to companies are being ignored. Pring, C. (2012) So, by responding to these comments quickly and reacting to customer comments as soon as possible, a business may create a competitive advantage.

Companies can utilize applications that search for brand names and key words on social media. These filtered posts can be used to help create a strategy to respond to customers appropriately. Divide comments into categories, like questions, criticism, and compliments. The questions should be answered as quickly as possible, and the business should set up a process for questions to be directed to the appropriate responder. The number of consumers using social media for customer service response is increasing greatly and social media is a significant opportunity to cultivate good will toward your brand. Pring, C. (2012)

Creating Online Social Brands

A brand is the promise a company makes to consumers. Companies should use social media to communicate their brand strategy, their promise. It is important to know your target market. An organization must have a very detailed definition of the target market that includes demographic, psychographic and behavioral characteristics as well as how they utilize the web and social media for information discovery, consumption and action with social content.

Locate your target audience and bring them back to you. Gunelius, S. (2011) Find your target audience by searching keywords that consumers would be likely to use when searching for your brand. Follow the paths that those consumers would follow and locate where your brand needs to be involved.

Develop a social content plan that includes your unique selling position, key topics, phrases and words that best support your message and drive traffic to all your online vehicles. Create an online home... blog, podcast, video channel, etc. Then expand into appropriate social networks committing a consistent amount of time growing your networks by sharing, engaging and being useful to your community. Gunelius, S. (2011)

Make sure your social media profiles match your brand image. Optimize your logo for social media use. Use your corporate colors strategically. Include your slogan and other brand identity elements in your social media. Cross-link your web site and social media. Include your social network icons on your web site. Consistently use keywords on your web site, blog and social media for search engine optimization. Be sure to have a uniform brand message across all of your social networks. Spoerl, C. (2013)

Networking, content creation and engagement should be scheduled in a marketers daily plan of activities. Spend 30 minutes daily finding useful resources to share and schedule times to publish. TopRank Online Marketing (2013) Schedule time each day for content creation. Creativity is key... and that takes time! Take time each day to review

social channels, answer comments and interact on your social channels. Connect with social influencers and brand advocates. Seek them out and engage with them. Aquino, J. (2013)

Give more than you receive. Being successful in social media marketing depends on relationships. You will lose followers if you spend the majority of your time promoting. Use the 80/20 rule. Spend 20% of your time self-promoting and 80% of your time providing informative or entertaining posts that of value to your audience. Robertson (2013)

Build your authority from the messages and interaction you have with members of your community. Hines, K. (2013) Join social networks to answer questions. Each time you interact with members on a social network you'll be reaching friends of these people. That gives off perception of authority and will help build your network. Participate in conversations about your brand. Always take time to respond to posts on your blog and social networks. Also proactively search for conversations on social media outside your brand's page. Be available to answer questions and respond to comments, both positive and negative. Social media builds awareness and drives conversation. Social media is a powerful way to enable communication between company and consumer. But, always remember, selling is a secondary benefit of social media.

Encourage outside discussions where users will participate in the site for emotional and social reasons. This keeps them coming back and strengthens the bond between them and the company. However, letting go of control means the business may be faced with criticism being posted to the site. This is not a bad thing, as the insights the company can gain from complaints are valuable tools.

Create an online community. Include forums for discussions unrelated to the brand, ability to post personal history, pictures, videos, ways to announce social events, and reputation tools or ratings by fellow users. You must influence people by inspiring and enabling people to share messages and stories about your brand. Visitors that communicate with each other begin to feel a part of a special group, growing in loyalty to your brand. Consumers are more likely to purchase a brand they engage in on social media. Chadwick Martin Baily, Inc. (2010)

Social Media and Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is online advertising that relies primarily on word of mouth to gain brand recognition by reaching many people in a short amount of time. Verhoeff, (2013) The strategy encourages those to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the start for exponential growth. By creating buzz a great viral campaign can inject new life into a business!

An effective viral marketing campaign depends on two aspects: outstanding content and excellent social networking skills. It must provide for effortless transfer to others, and scale easily from small to very large— from a few to millions!

With the escalating use of cell phones to access the web and social networks a successful viral marketing campaign must focus on the mobile component. But, you cannot just send an ad to consumers' phones and expect it to go viral. Viral campaigns need to drive the viewer to take action— submit a photo, watch a video, get something free, enter a contest, etc. Verhoeff, (2013)

It takes creativity to design a campaign that will stimulate viewers to share it to the point where it becomes viral. Build a story with wings to fly! Content should be emotionally charged! The desire to be cool. Greed drives people. So does the hunger to be popular, loved, and understood. A combination of imagination and creativity can improve viral marketing tactics within social media channels by capturing the users' attention.

The campaign should encourage viewers to join your community and give you information. Getting reviews in the form of photos, videos and stories about your brand should also be a goal of a viral marketing campaign. However,

remember that a business must also convert this attention into an actual sale or call-to-action. After all, the primary goal of any business is to make a profit.

Social Media Analytics, Metrics and Measurements

Every brand has a different social media strategy for tracking metrics and return on investment. The finance department will calculate return based on investment and they will ask the marketers to calculate what social media brings to the bottom line.

Return on investment is measured by financial gain (revenue, transactions, new customers) minus investment (time, manpower/consultants, technology). The traditional metrics, which are easier to track, include traffic, leads, impressions, and revenue. But social media campaigns require assessing different metrics. Social media metrics include social page views, video views, engagement rate, sharing rates, social referrals and application programming interface (API). Leibowitz, B. (2013)

One goal of social media is to drive traffic to your web site. You also need to measure web site metrics such as page views, time on the site, actions and sales. These metrics are available in the form of web logs.

Businesses should designate a web analytics team to set up the correct reports and track social media into conversion. It is best to include management, marketing and IT representatives on the team. The team should take in all the data from online consumers and turn it into an understandable dashboard with actionable recommendations. A weekly activity log should be kept to track improvements or determine where improvements are needed. It is important to keep a close eye on what is working and what is not. Include social media as part of your overall online marketing to view a larger, more complete picture of how online marketing is achieving brand objectives.

Choosing Appropriate Social Media Platforms

New social media networks and platforms pop up nearly every day. An organization must think about what they are trying to achieve with its social media strategy when selecting appropriate platforms.

One must consider what type of platform would reach your target audience the best, and make sure they are using the platform in the way you are intending for them to. Define what kind of content you want to share because different social media platforms fit different types of content.

Understand the significant features of each major social media platform and think about any special technological needs the platform might have. Also consider costs and return on investment. No social media is free when you consider the time it takes to set up and maintain.

Questions to consider when selecting a social media platform. Sprague, M. (2013)

1. What is the demographic profile of your user base?
2. Which social networks are your consumers and prospects using?
3. Is the community in-facing (for employees), out-facing (for users) or both?
4. Build the platform in-house, or hosted by 3rd party?
5. What do you want your users to do while engaged?
6. What is your social communications strategy?
7. What type of content will you be primarily seeking to share?
8. What types of messages appear to engage your audience the most?
9. What are the goals of the community, what do you want to accomplish?

Selection of an appropriate social media platform is a process not an event and should be reviewed periodically. Remember, what is popular today may disappear tomorrow. Choose more than one social network to drive sharing across platforms and increase brand awareness.

When choosing a social media platform for your business make sure you will not abandon it. When you gain a few followers on it those that followed you will not like that you deleted your account and you will lose trust.

Writing for Social Media

Businesses need to generate content on social networks on a regular basis. That could be multiple times a day or once a week, depending on the situation. Frequency of posts – you don't want to post too often or not often enough. You need to understand your target market and post according to their needs and desires.

When writing for social media don't forget the 80/20 rule. Robertson (2013) It is important that 80% of your posts should be performing non-self-promotional activities. Only 20% should be self-promoting. This helps to build trust with your audience. Trust is imperative to building brand loyalty in your customers.

Be sure to include keywords – including keywords in your posts enhances search engine optimization and attracts relevant traffic to your post who will in turn share it with others. However, do not over stuff your posts with keywords. DiSilvestro, A. (2013) Search engines and users will recognize this and it will not be appreciated.

Write a killer headline. The headline should be written to attract attention. Safwan, A. (2013) So put much thought into writing headlines. Newspapers have one person dedicated to only writing headlines. The headline must compel the user to read on. Competition for attention is heavy on social networks. Your headline will determine how popular your social media content gets.

Follow with a great opening. If your headline gets attention you only have a few seconds to maintain that attention. Brantner, E. (2008) So your opening sentence must compel the user to keep reading. It should cut straight to the core of what the post is about. Many people will only read the opening sentence and appreciate getting good information quickly. Others will want to read on so give those folks more detail and a reason to move on to your web site.

Writing short is not easy – some social networks have constraints on length of articles. Practice writing short, effective articles. It is harder than it sounds. If you have an interesting "story" that compels your followers to read on you can add a link to your web site where they continue reading and hopefully view other content while they are there. But be sure readers that don't want to read on can get the idea of the post from your opening sentence.

Content should be unique. Don't post duplicate content people can find in another place. This will give you a bad reputation and you will lose followers. Content should be valuable and interesting – post only content that compels users to read and then be happy that they did. You need to understand your target market and know what they are looking for.

Use the power of emotion – know what emotionally energizes your audience and pack your posts with emotionally charged content! Don't just think about people as they are – think about people as they would like to be – liked, loved, powerful, athletic, beautiful, etc.

Allow your content to be easily skimmed. We are a skimming society. You are lucky if a person reads 20% of your post. Meyer, R. (2013) So use a thumbnail image, a great headline and opening. Eliminate fluff – everyone is in a hurry, don't include any content that is not valuable and relevant to the reader. Focus only on essential information that supports the topic. Brantner, E. (2008)

Use a conversational tone. The key word is “social.” Get rid of the stiff, boring content that lacks personality. Bring your readers into the conversation. Talk to the readers just like you would if you were sitting next to them. An interactive, personal tone will generate buzz for your content. Brantner, E. (2008)

Use proper grammar and always check your spelling. Readers will quickly point out your mistakes! Don’t hurry. Take your time and make sure your post is error free.

Be the expert. If you want your content to rise to the top of social media sites and to generate shares and comments you need to write articles that act as a resource. Brantner, E. (2008) Provide information that can’t be found anywhere else. Continue to do this and you will generate long-term followers who rely on your posts and your web site as a place for reliable, trusted information.

A picture is worth a 1000 words. Well-chosen pictures do two things—they will attract attention and help tell your story. Let’s face it, no matter how great your writing is, few online readers want to be greeted with a long block of text when they click on your post. Pictures are great because they make your content easier to scan and they add another aesthetic to your post. Brantner, E. (2008)

Social Media Ethics

Ethics are simply people’s values and their behavior with regard to right and wrong. People learn values at a very early age. Right and wrong don’t change when you enter the world of business.

A business has to decide what audience they want to share what information with and make an accommodating social media policy. The policy should include expectations of employees who post on social media. The action of an employee’s online presence reflects on the business. When creating a policy, the behavior expectation of the employees needs to be addressed. State what types of information should be posted and when. Determine who is responsible for responding to others’ posts. Babcock, P. (2013)

Understand other people’s perspectives and opinions and be open to what they have to say even if they criticize the business. You can learn how to better serve the customer. If something negative is being shared, analyze it for credibility and respond appropriately. When you respond to a negative post be fair in your post to create “social happiness” and build positive customer relationships. Cleveland, J. (2013) Respond in a positive manner to show you care about the customer and explain the action that is being taken to improve.

Social Media Risks

Social media risks include reputation risks, legal risks and security risks. Reputation risk involves posting information that could negatively impact the brand. Every company has the potential for a public relations disaster. While social media can take a PR issue and spread it like wild fire it can also be utilized to quickly address the problem. Moreno, K. (2012) A business should have a risk management team who will determine possible crisis scenarios, the type of content used to respond, the tone of the response, and responsibilities for each team member during an actual crisis. A business needs to have a social media component of its risk management plan in place that outlines how to respond in social channels when a problem arises. The risk management team should also train employees how to best avoid potential problems and what to do in the event of a crisis. Dreyer, L. et.al. (2009)

Legal risks include industries that have government restrictions placed on information sharing. Financial and other regulated businesses should have very specific policies in place to define what is appropriate to post. Copyright infringement is another issue that companies should address in their social media policy. All text, images, audio and video is automatically protected under copyright law. This is something some people seem to ignore in this “sharing age.”

Security is always a risk in business. Cyber criminals are trolling social networks looking for people and businesses to target. There is a risk that cyber criminals could attack your social networks via online scams or hacking. The more information you post on online the more vulnerable you are to cyber-crime. A company should have a social media policy for your employees to make them aware of the risks tell them how best to avoid them. This policy should be reviewed regularly to determine if new risks have developed that need to be addressed. Pullen, J. (2013)

Conclusion

While the list of social media networks changes daily the principles that a business or organization utilizes to take advantage of the marketing potential they offer stays the same. When the cell phone disappears and the industry moves into thought-controlled computer interaction with holographic displays the same fundamental policies and procedures that lead to success today will still apply. Companies that wait until things shake out will be left behind the businesses that use social media to shake things up!

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