

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUR BRAND

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1 What is social media?

In simple terms, social media is the collective term for online communication tools, services and techniques which have exploded in popularity over recent years.

As well as blogs, forums and podcasts, there are networks like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, facilitating websites like Digg, Technorati and del.icio.us and image and photo sharing services like YouTube, Flickr and Google Video.

What do they have in common? They have the power to influence the way people perceive your brand.

2 Growth

Usage of social media in all its forms has risen rapidly over recent years. The most notable growth has occurred among social networking websites of which the biggest success story is Facebook. Since being set up in 2005, the network has attracted 175 million members who each month upload 850 million photos and 5 million videos, share 24 million pieces of content and create 2 million events.

Microblogging site Twitter also boasts impressive growth statistics and it is in the UK where it has achieved the greatest penetration. According to Hitwise, UK traffic to the site rocketed by 974% in the 12 months to January 2009 with the site the 291st most visited compared to its rank of 2,953 in January 2008.

In other areas, Technorati has indexed more than 133 million blogs since 2002, YouTube boasts 258 million users who watch 100 million videos a day and professional network LinkedIn has 35 million members.

3 Impact

With such impressive statistics, it is clear that social media has the power to influence the way people perceive a brand and its values.

It wasn't that long ago that offline word-of-mouth was the biggest influencer on brand understanding but nowadays people can post their opinions of a company online and within seconds expose it to an audience of millions. According to a study by UK search agency Tamar in 2007, 80% of those that access social networks or online forums use them to comment on or review a brand or product.

In many sectors, specific individuals hold significant power to influence perception. Certain bloggers can sway the public's attitude towards a particular product or service.

Dell experienced this in 2005. A single post from blogger Jeff Jarvis complaining about poor customer service coined the infamous phrase 'Dell Hell'. Combined with problems with overheating laptop batteries, it provoked a massive wave of negative comments on social media websites which the company initially struggled to control.

4 Engage

Social media means companies need to think differently about how they get attention for their brand. In the old days it was pretty straightforward. You bought advertising space with magazines, newspapers and broadcasters and if your target market was reading, listening or watching it was hard for them to avoid what you wanted them to know. But in the world of Web 2.0, it is different which makes engaging through social media essential.

Top tips for successful engagement are:

- It's a conversation: No-one likes the hard sell so get involved in a community, listen and respond
- Be useful: Move away from thinking social media is all about selling and promotion. Instead, think about how you can add value to the community
- Think long term: Social media isn't a one-off marketing campaign; it should form part of your overall approach towards how you encourage people to interact with your brand. Don't post and leave but stay involved
- Be a smart employer: Social media isn't only about customers and clients; you can also use it to engage with your workforce. Think about creating internal forums or networks. Do it right and you'll create brand advocates
- Acknowledge your mistakes: Not all comments will be positive but it's important that you acknowledge the negative ones. Bad feedback can often be more useful than good feedback so accept it and use it to help you improve.
- Make friends and influence people: Build a good relationship with key influencers and you'll reap the rewards. If leading bloggers, podcasters and video casters become advocates of your brand, the opportunities are endless.

5 Best practice

Examples of companies which have used social media to great effect include:

Company: Wiggly Wigglers

Location: UK

Sector: Farming and gardening retail

Size: 18 employees

Website: www.wigglywagglers.co.uk

Although operating in a traditional market, Wiggly Wigglers has harnessed the power of social media. Building on its mission for the public to embrace sustainable gardening practices, the company produces weekly podcasts which have led to press coverage around the world, increased sales and an 80% reduction in advertising costs. The company also posts 'how to' videos on its website and on YouTube, while Wiggly Wigglers' pages on Facebook and Twitter are followed by more than 1,600 people.

Company: Dell
Location: Global
Sector: IT
Size: 50,000+ employees
Website: www.dell.com/community

A wave of negative comments about Dell's customer service sparked by blogger Jeff Jarvis led to the creation of Direct2Dell, a platform through which Dell interacts with customers and other interested parties.

It also employs a team of 'customer advocates' who monitor social media mentions of the company and runs IdeaStorm, a platform allowing users to post suggestions for Dell products and services which the community discusses and votes on.

Dell has also embraced Twitter and runs more than 80 feeds. While some are corporate branded, many are personal to particular employees. Through its DellOutlet Twitter page alone, the company claims it has generated sales of \$1m.

Dell's social media activity has reduced the proportion of negative comments about the business from 40% to under 20%.

Writing on his blog in 2007, Jeff Jarvis, the blogger who sparked Dell's jump into social media, said: "Dell realized that engaging in the conversation wasn't just a way to stop blogging customers like me from harming the brand. We, the customers, bring them great value besides our money: We alert them to problems. We will tell them what products we want. We share our knowledge about their products. We help fellow customers solve problems. We will sell their products. But this happens only if you have a decent product and service and only if you listen to us."

Others:

- Starbucks' My Starbucks Idea is an online community which allows customers to share and discuss ideas which the coffee shop chain could implement
- Clothing retailer H&M has a page on Facebook where it posts new collections and shares content with an audience of 25,000+ members
- Nuts About Southwest is a website which brings together blogs and content about Southwest Airlines from across its social media activity including Facebook, YouTube and Flickr

"The phenomenon of social media changes everything. Since mass marketing has been built around mass media, it follows that sociality changes everything about how brands can be successful. This is true right now and will be even more so in years to come."

Anthony Mayfield, iCrossing

“Those organisations able to grasp the changes in customers’ behaviour and psychology, while placing an emphasis on delivering increased value, will be able to reap the rewards of customer engagement and will be best placed to emerge winners from the current economic situation. Those that can’t have a lot to lose.”

Richard Sedley, cScape

Hopefully this guide will have answered a few questions as well as highlighting some useful case studies when it comes to engagement through social media. If there are further issues you would like to discuss around this topic why not take things online and visit the [Sift Media forum pages](#) ?

If you’d like to discover how to engage with Sift Media’s business communities go to www.siftmedia.co.uk or call Ed Martin on 0117 915 0423.