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David Wiesenfeld
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SOCIAL MEDIA

5 social media strategies you need



By **Bob Wheatley**
July 27, 2009

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ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS:

Social media seems counterintuitive to marketers who see consumers as masses to be persuaded
One way or the other, brands will play in the social media arena
Implementing programs in these five social media categories will help boost brand relevance

[Next in Social Media](#)

Old habits die hard -- even harder, at times, for brand communications. Not a day goes by without at least one or two articles appearing in marketing and PR literature about the importance of social media platforms, alongside calls for brands to get out there and participate.

But for the most part, while some more adventurous businesses have authentically made the leap, in many instances brands attempt to sneak in the back door by employing traditional "push" communications techniques that are re-tooled for the digital media space.

While certainly clever in some cases, this kind of communication remains true to itself -- interruptive and one-way -- and does not work as effectively in a media environment meant to be about conversation. Still, it's hard to break with the past when there's so much momentum going to produce forms of communications that retain the vestiges of rigid control.

It may be the control thing that lies at the root of a reluctance to dive in. It simply feels more like we're running the railroad when we create and supply communications that push messages outward. Participating in the uncontrolled virtual communities of people who share common interests and passions requires we admit the consumer is both conductor and engineer.

"Scalejacking" -- the quest for size at all costs

Additionally, for some marketers, there is an equally compelling tradition to always hunt for the scale of mass media (TV, radio, print). In a recent blog column, Seth Godin describes it as a sort of "churn and burn mentality" that sees consumer relationships as entirely transactional. Ironically, the internet functions to turn this on its head. Rather than aim for millions who aren't listening, web communities aggregate smaller tribes of those who are engaged. The entire proposition can feel counterintuitive to those who see consumers only as masses to be persuaded.

Inevitable change

One way or the other, brands will play in the social media arena. Some will go there with the correct unselfish (i.e., not treating consumers simply as objects to sell to) approach. Others will arrive through the sheer inertia of an unstoppable media evolution.

Social media is no longer a horizon opportunity, employed by a handful of risk-taker brands. New research recently released by Aberdeen Group profiles the new era of social media as a core element of a brand marketing communications strategy:

- 58 percent of companies have dedicated resources to social media marketing.
- 61 percent of companies have online community platforms (e.g., discussion forums, ratings and reviews, etc.).

While it may feel more comfortable to push at rather than participate in, these sacrifices in the present can get you to a better place. It can happen by acquiring a zealous resolve and commitment to "humanize" the relationship between your brand and its user. It is this dynamic that drives brand preference in the age of consumer control.

What does this media environment look like?

As defined by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, here are the general categories of social media communication and their basic functions:

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1. **Viral marketing:** Messages and communication designed deliberately to achieve pass-along distribution.
2. **Community marketing:** Creating and supporting special interest communities (user groups, fan clubs, discussion forums) by providing interactive tools, content, and information.
3. **Evangelist marketing:** Coalescing and cultivating brand ambassadors, advocates, and volunteers to help spread brand messages.
4. **Influencer marketing:** Engaging experts, opinion leaders, and people in positions of respect and authority to help educate and influence the views and attitudes of others.
5. **Referral programs:** Tools intended to help enable current happy brand fans to recommend and refer brands to their social circles and family.

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These categories ladder up to new ways of interacting with current and potential customers. Rather than wait another year, maybe now is the time to sit down and plan how these tools can be put to use in helping build brand relevance and a relationship with consumers. People now expect a tangible, meaningful connection between their lifestyle interests and brands that will matter to them. Brands should be actively participating in the same environment where consumers are engaging each other.

Bob Wheatley is CEO of Wheatley & Timmons.

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