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“Best Practice: Social Media Marketing”

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Best practice: Social media marketing

Emma K. Macdonald and Hugh Wilson

This month, Dr Emma Macdonald and Prof Hugh Wilson of Cranfield School of Management discuss embedding social media into marketing practice.

Marketers know that social media are important. Recent IBM figures show that the average European spends eleven hours per week on social media. And they're not just teenagers! - fifty percent of that number are aged over 35 years. While social media have made their way into our everyday lives as individuals, it is still a challenge for marketers to work out how to plan, organise and resource social media into business practice. A recent workshop of Cranfield's Customer Management Forum with managers from twenty UK businesses identified some of the ways in which social media are being embedded into marketing practice, and some of the ongoing challenges. We are some way short of being able to write a best practice 'bible', but here are some common themes about what works.

Be social in the ways that matter

It is easy for organisations to feel pressured into having a presence on every social media channel. Charlie Osmond, co-founder of social media agency Fresh Networks, observes that with an ocean of social media communication opportunities, there is a greater risk than ever of over-stretching the communications budget. So as always, organisations need to work out who their target audience is and then fish where the fish are. Three years ago, RS Components, the world's largest distributor of electronics and maintenance products, was facing a difficult challenge in engaging with its customers. Its customer base of design engineers valued the **RS-Components.com** website, as a quick and efficient catalogue for picking up the parts they needed, but not as a place to commune with others. In fact, they reported they were largely 'anti-social' with little interest in Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Yet RS Components understood that it was vital to connect with these engineers early in the design process, as it is often too late to change a component once a design is well advanced. Further investigation showed that these 'anti-social' individuals could indeed be social but this was most likely in forums where they could swap ideas with peers and trusted experts.

Help people to help each other

With the social needs of their customers in mind, RS Components created the DesignSpark online community for design engineers 'brought to you by RS Components'. The forums are moderated but posts are live, and may include praise and criticisms, as well as references to competitors' products. Created initially with the input of 200 engineers, within 18 months the DesignSpark community boasted 72,000 members. As inherently social creatures, human beings like to connect with others. And one of the ways in which we connect is by helping each other. The DesignSpark community taps into this need. For instance, one engineer posted a design problem with which he was grappling and within a few hours had received six different yet feasible solutions from peers, suppliers and experts. The result isn't just

deeper relationships with existing customers: the community is introducing many younger engineers to RS Components.

Don't blindly assume that social is better

A number of assumptions appear to have risen up around social media. These include that social has longer-lasting impacts and wider reach than other communications media, such as television and direct mail. Social media alone can indeed have massive impact, for instance when a campaign becomes viral. However, social media insight specialists Spectrum Consulting have demonstrated that the impact of social may be relatively short term, unless it is cleverly coordinated with other campaign elements. An integrated communications campaign for a premium branded product recently tracked by Spectrum had a large and provable impact on engagement. Centred around a campaign micro-site, which included short films directed by an Academy Award winning director that reinforced the core brand values, the campaign also included TV, PR and localised contests and events. Research demonstrated that the campaign had significantly increased the rate of new FB fans, but more importantly benchmarking it against others in the category revealed that it was also one of the top two based on effectiveness.

Make social 'boring'

Many companies commenced their engagement in social media by allowing a few enthusiasts in a corner, as it were, to get busy on Facebook and Twitter and in response to customer demand. However, some organisations such as Virgin Media have developed a more strategic approach to their social positioning. This was achieved by identifying champions from key functional areas including customer service, corporate PR and product development. This cross-functional team agreed a social media mission and tackled the implementation challenge. They defined a framework for classifying activity, an action plan per key audience, 'how to' guidelines for each major social medium, a fit-for-purpose online listening solution, and a view on how to measure impact going forwards. In so doing, Virgin Media has gone some way to achieving something that IBM says should be the objective of all organisations. That is, to 'make social boring', an everyday feature of business. However, while not quite at that point, businesses need to be working through and planning for changes to their marketing and operations plans in order to effectively implement social media across the functions of their business.

Find the white spaces to create value

Along with the rise in social media, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social currency. Social currency is what encourages people to engage with and talk about your brand. Some brands such as Great Ormond Street Hospital have an inherent social currency as people want to help this charity which does such great work for ill children. The charity has been very effective at harnessing that goodwill through a range of social media, to generate funds and support. However, when you operate in a field such as banking or insurance, then it can be more difficult to identify sources of social currency, particularly when in a competitive category. Citibank has recently announced a new app which allows credit card customers to share their rewards via Facebook. However, a challenge for brands in these sectors is

to work out how far to reach beyond your core category to ‘white space’ that is not currently encroached on by your competitors. Volkswagen effectively created social currency beyond their category of ‘cute cars’ with their funtheory.com website: a site devoted to showing ways that human behaviour can be changed by making activities enjoyable. They produced three YouTube videos of behaviour change (none of which involved a VW car) and then encouraged people to make their own suggestions. The videos rapidly went viral with over 23 million people viewing the YouTube films.

Provide opportunities to play

People like to play sport because we enjoy playing with others and because of the thrill of winning. These needs are as true in the online as the offline world. The global gaming industry taps into this need through a range hugely popular games, including Sims Social, Cityville, and Words with Friends, amongst the top ten Facebook games in 2011. While it has its downsides when money and addiction are involved, the prize in many of the most successful social games involves virtual currency only. This insight would indicate that enjoying time with others –and not just financial gain - is also an important driver of participation. The next generation of social media engagement by mainstream brands will borrow techniques from the gaming world not as a frivolous sideline but as a fun way of having relevant conversations, such as in designing new products and crowd-sourcing advertising content.

Be social within as well as outside our business

As well as looking without, managers can also harness the power of social within their own organisations. IBM has been practising what it preaches for several years. The company’s blogging policy was developed by IBM bloggers themselves via a wiki. The bloggers agreed principles with which they felt comfortable, had these approved by the legal department and then produced what became known as the Social Computing Guidelines. IBM’s programme has been hugely successful with estimates of 15 million downloads of employee-generated content over the past three years.

When it comes to social media, we are all undoubtedly still learning and our guidelines will need updating as frequently as our social media strategy. The themes presented here are not *our* principles but a synthesis from the members and guests of the Cranfield Customer Management Forum including IBM, Barclays, BP, British Gas, Cooperative Banking Group, HSBC, Invesco, London Symphony Orchestra, RBS, and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

FURTHER READING ON WARC.COM

Friends, Fans, and Followers: Do Ads Work on Social Networks? How Gender and Age Shape Receptivity, David G. Taylor, Jeffrey E. Lewin and David Strutton, *Journal of Advertising Research*: Vol. 51, No. 1, 2011

Lowdown: Gamification, Chris Jefford, *Admap*, September 2011, pp. 8-8

Marketing in a Hyper-Social World: The Tribalization of Business Study and Characteristics of Successful Online Communities, Edward Moran and Francois Gossieaux, *Journal of Advertising Research*: Vol. 50, No. 3, 2010

Web 2.0's Marketing Impact on Low-Involvement Consumers, Asle Fagerstrøm and Gheorghita Ghinea, *The Journal of Interactive Advertising*: Vol. 10, Issue 2, Spring 2010

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

Traudt, Erin and Vancil, Richard (2012), *Becoming a social business: The IBM story*, An IDC White Paper, 13 Feb 2012, [ftp://aix.software.ibm.com/ftp/demos/226706-
IDC-Whitepaper-Becoming-a-Social-Business-IBM-Story.pdf](ftp://aix.software.ibm.com/ftp/demos/226706-
IDC-Whitepaper-Becoming-a-Social-Business-IBM-Story.pdf)

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