

Social media explained

Rachel Hawkes and **Tim Gibbon**, Elemental Communications, take a hard look at how social media should influence your marketing plans

SOCIAL MEDIA ARE not the new phenomena that the hype would have you believe. We have always formed social groups specific to our commonalities; whether they be race, religion, sexuality, hobbies, interests, abilities, location, etc. What is new is how these social networks are evolving with the internet. Evolving is a key word here, as they have existed online in the form of email, discussion boards, and so on, since the beginning.

Social media are not a sub-form on top of the internet, but have rather become an integral component of it. Broadband saturation, combined with increased speeds, lower running costs and a generation that has grown up with the 'net' has seen social networking (and, thus, social media) take on a bigger and more vocal life, and have naturally changed consumers' attitudes to media as a whole.

It's not about 'us' (the brand, the media planner and buyer, the marketer, the product, the service) and 'them' (the consumer, the target audience) any longer - it's about how we work together to meet our very different needs and objectives. Online users today do not want to be told what media and content they should digest, or when and how they should digest it. They, rightly, want to (and do) decide this for themselves. Users increasingly ignore messages pushed to them in heavily censored traditional media, and turn instead to their peers, with whom they have a natural, pre-established sense of trust.

What are social media?

It is human nature to want to feel part of something bigger; to feel important - that we as individuals have a voice to be heard and a contribution to make. This is the essence of social media.

What makes media social? Traditionally we understand 'media' to be print, radio and television, and 'new media' as media content available online. So where and when do these media become social? To us, it's when the 'audience' are allowed to express themselves freely, are no longer passive consumers, and can help shape and share the media they decide to



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consume. Consequently, and most importantly, social media are about the breakdown of the 'us and them' mentality.

Social media are about the following:

1. Content

Social media are nothing without content; creating it, distributing it or consuming it. You only have to look at the popularity of user-generated content (UGC) sites like YouTube, Flickr, Meta-Cafe and community-interest sites like Bebo, Facebook and MySpace to understand how this works (see Figure 1). There are even online businesses that exist solely to help users become more creative in their own social network, or create applications to increase interaction with friends and family.

A lot of creativity on these sites comes off the back of someone else's creativity - or, as is far too common, they have bypassed the creative route and just distribute other people's (copyrighted)

content. We heard this described as 'user-appropriated-content' which seems apt and amusing.

2. Sharing

Our desire to share is a massive part of our make-up. It fuels the 'need to feel important' tank, and we get a buzz about being part of a collective working towards common goals. The millions of hours of video content available online are there because of an inherent desire to share and be social. It's about seeking acknowledgement and appraisal for our 'look how talented I am', 'look what I found', 'look how smart/witty/creative I am' calls.

3. Conversation

Effective social-media marketing involves conversation. What many marketers are afraid of when it comes to getting involved with social media is that they can't control what happens. But what is

said online is said offline - the difference with online is that you can make yourself aware of it and you have an incredible opportunity to get involved in the discussion.

4. Openness

There are no barriers (with the obvious exception of copyrighted content). Anyone and everyone can have their say; anyone can be a citizen journalist, a critic, an expert, an amateur photographer. Even brands can get involved, so long as they come as individuals and not as a corporate mouthpiece.

A company is made up of individuals, and it is these individuals with their own opinions, thoughts and ideas that can make the crossover to social media most effectively. People do not want to be spoken at, but rather spoken to - and this is the biggest shift from traditional media.

5. Interaction

If you were reading this on our blog, we would insert links here, so you could read other blogs and articles on social media; you could interact with us and other readers by adding your comment at the end, or take bits and pieces of it to your own blog to discuss in more depth.

How do I get involved?

Marketers wanting to get involved in social media must do so thoughtfully and with respect for today's advertising-sensitive audience. Social media hold massive potential for brands, but they must understand that they cannot control them. Influence, create awareness to lack-start and steer debate and drive interest to engage audiences, yes. Control, no.

Social media are about redefining how you engage with your peers and your target audience, re-examining your communication strategies as a whole and taking steps to be actively involved all the time, and not just at the height of a campaign.

There are numerous ways to get involved in social media:

- ^ creating a blog for your organisation and target audience to interact

- ^ interacting with other related blogs, networks, forums, and so on

- ^ making content available to download from your website

- > producing UGC content specifically for social-media use

- ^ creating 'channels' on popular user-generated sites

- ^ creating applications or widgets for popular community sites

- > adding tags and 'share this' options for relevant pages on your site

- ^ treating influential blogs as another valid media channel

- ^ creating your own independent community

- ^ creating a presence on a relevant community site

- ^ advertising on relevant and influential social media sites.

Any (or many) of these are valid and valuable ways of getting involved with your audience online. With the incredible amount of possible sites (blogs, UGC sites and communities) available, it is not about getting your message out to as many of them as possible as quickly as you can. More beneficial (both in terms of time and short/long-term results), is identifying the most influential sites and the people that use them. It is a skill in connecting with them in ways that are ^

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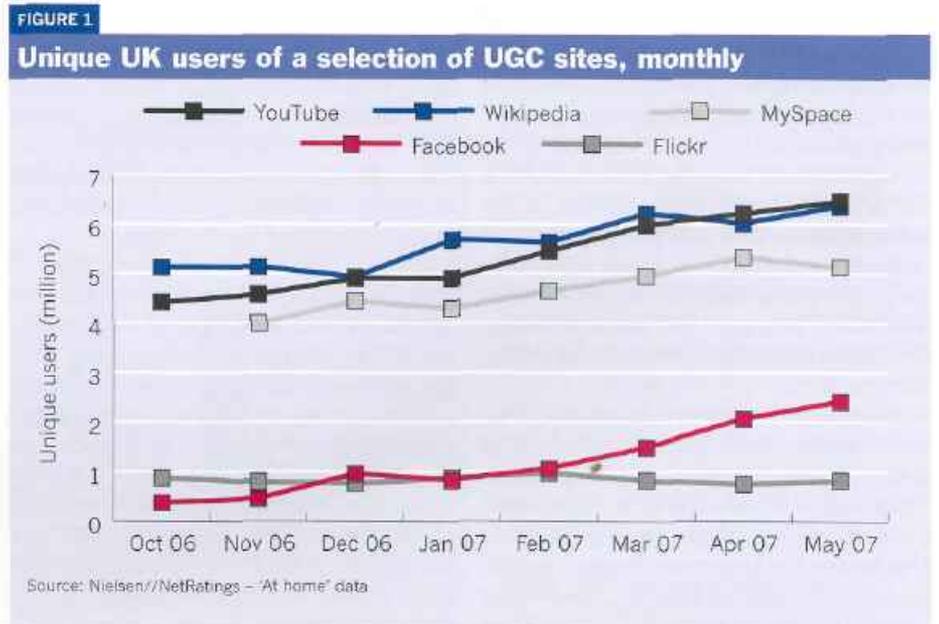


TABLE 1

Users and video streams taken from video sharing sites

Video sharing site	Unique users	Monthly video streams	User streams per month	Implied daily viewing
YouTube	37m	2,500m	68	3.4 mins
MySpace video	56m	1,500m	27	1.3 mins
Google video	7.5m	60m	8	0.4 mins

Source: Screen Digest/cornScore

appropriate to them as individuals and having your brand, products and/or service resonate with them.

Think about your target audience; where do they live online? Yes, they may visit YouTube, and they may very well detail their exploits on their MySpace page - but where are the 'hot spots' (as we call them), where, if you connected with them there, they would be able to carry your message and potentially become a 'brand ambassador'?

It can often be incredibly time-consuming and very much a manual process to locate these hot spots - but when you do (providing you then engage with them in an appropriate manner) the reward is very much worth the effort. We recently created the Social Media Portal (<http://www.socialmedia-portal.com>), which maps social networks (and their owners) globally; it allows brands, media planners and buyers, advertisers, marketers and PROs to drill down and find those hot spots (see images at http://snipurl.com/smp_images).

Get to know the sites, read them, sign up to them and understand them before you jump in and start engaging. You wouldn't necessarily turn up at a party and just shout out to the world that you have 'arrived'. The same common courtesies should be carried to an online environment.

The success of brand-driven communities varies, with no real evidence of longevity and influential impact on audiences. Based on this, the most prudent course of action is to provide the means for audiences to receive content polished or raw, and let them take it where they wish. Let social networking

do what it does best: allow audiences to be creative in their environments and dictate the methods by which it is shared.

At this point, brands are most likely to run a campaign with dedicated web pages on social-media sites like Facebook and YouTube. This can include advertising and page-specific hooks, using the elements of the social media site, endeavouring to connect with their target audiences through blogs, forums, video, and so on. However, there is still much trepidation and 'toe dipping'. We are also seeing lots of tweaks to websites to add blogs, RSS feeds, social bookmarking buttons and tags - which is a great start, though we wonder if a lot of this is done in a mad panic to join the race, without giving proper consideration to the usability and accessibility of the audience.

We also see many brands thinking they can build the next YouTube to connect with their audience in a 'cool' and 'fashionable' way - but it's not working very well. As with all marketing endeavours, the proposition should fit both brand and audience - this is crucial, and being overlooked in a big way.

Brands seem to be in such a panic to join the social-media 'race' that they look for quick solutions instead of focusing on what's important - connecting with the audience. There are some successful brands doing this, such as Cadbury bringing back Wispa due to 'demand' on Facebook, and Dove's 'Real Beauty'; while Carphone Warehouse has dedicated staff monitoring relevant blogs and forums to interact and engage when appropriate, and it is working well for the company.

How do I measure its effectiveness?

Before you even think of getting involved in social media, are you tracking what is being said online about you and your peers? Rest assured that this conversation is also taking place offline as well, so it would help to be actively monitoring those conversations. At the very minimum you should be signed up to services like Google News Alerts and Technorati, and have a robust analytics system employed so you can see what traffic is coming to your website, how it got there, and so on.

There are some amazing (and some really underwhelming) tools available, if you have the budget available, to give you insight into the hottest and most remarkable social media sites that relate to individual keywords and phrases. They don't all do what they say on the tin, so if you want to go down this path and make the investment, do your homework thoroughly. From our experience, some don't at present deliver anything substantially more than you yourself can as a search-savvy marketer.

What you learn from your online audience will amaze you: you can guarantee that it will be more open and forthright than any feedback group or customer survey.

You need to stop measuring success and return on investment (ROI) in terms of column inches, hits and sales - but instead by whether or not you have built and are maintaining a sustainable relationship with your audience.

Are social media just a fad?

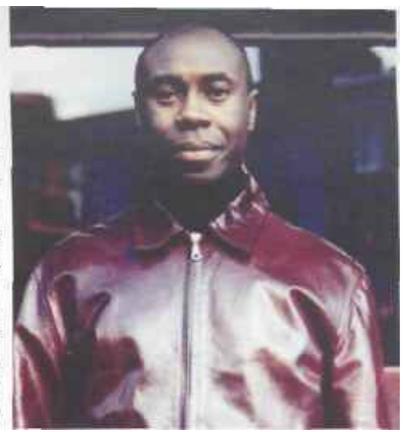
Social media will continue to be important through the rest of 2008 and beyond, and will set the digital community landscape for the next five years (at least). The last 12-18 months have seen the acquisition and development of social networks by powerful traditional and digital media organisations; examples are News Corporation buying MySpace, Google buying YouTube, Yahoo! buying Flickr (see images at http://snipurl.com/smp_images), CBS buying Lastfm.

There are also many examples of such organisations starting social networking

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sites such as a joint collaboration between NBC Universal and News Corporation in creating Hulu, a UGC that is aimed to rival YouTube. These media companies realise that to continue being serious players in the traditional and digital media environment, they must move with the landscape and not be pushed along by it. This is further evidence to brands that social media are and will continue to be important.

Social media as we have come to know them are here to stay - though thinking they will stay as they are indefinitely is unrealistic and impractical. We do not know what technologies and developments are around the corner, and can only imagine that as they come into play, the nature of how we interact online will change too. If anything, this will be more engaging and more personal.

Recent Ofcom research (August 2007) shows that social networking sites Bebo, Facebook, MySpace and YouTube are in the top ten list of sites according to duration spent on them (see Table i). It also points out that 1,845^{new} articles are added to Wikipedia, 3,744,000 new photos are uploaded to Flickr and 65,000 new video clips are uploaded to YouTube daily.

What next?

As long as there are people and conversation offline and online, social networks will be a part of our lives.

Gaming and mobile as separate entities, and even working together, currently offer great interest, but have not quite achieved their potential for engaging the masses. Social networks will be important for this, as we see convergence playing a huge role in enabling online activity to become more portable and personal - this interaction and engagement will be undertaken on the go, where individuals need not be hooked up to the internet to connect with their peers.

It would be safe to say that a key driver of the internet increase is the social networking phenomenon, and as mobile becomes continually more personal it is only natural that the 'me media' culture will move what is currently an online hub into their offline lives - we have already witnessed the rise of mobile blogging.

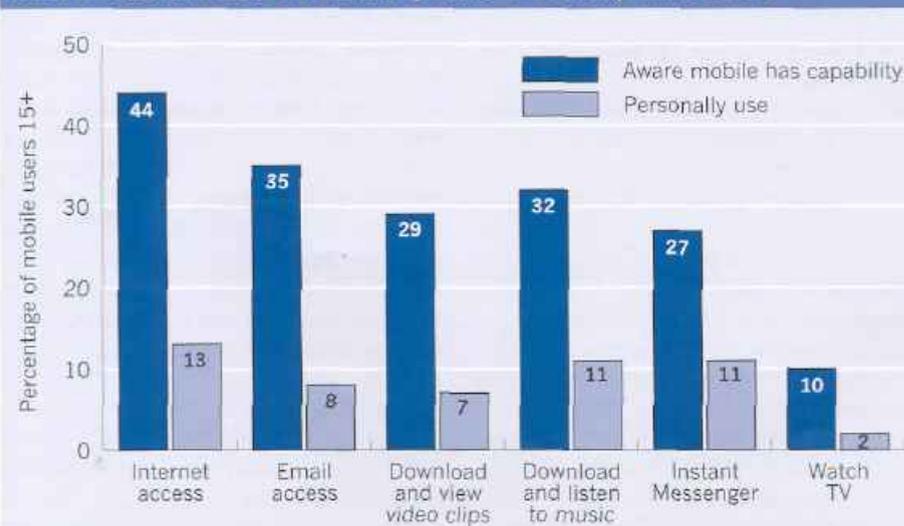
Although, at present, only 13% of mobile users are accessing the internet from their handset (see Figure 2), with increased functionality and capability by manufacture's and more competitive prices introduced by networks, this percentage will rise quickly (phones like the

iPhone, released in early November 2007 in the UK, will drive the market).

Top ten tips

1. Is your organisation ready for social media? Has their impact on communications, media and the everyday running of the business been considered?
2. Has thorough research been done to ascertain whether your audiences and sector are ready for social media? Do you know how to promote your social media efforts via your channels and social media search engines and the like?
3. Remember the global culture and implications of social media. They are published online and as accessible as web pages are, with the potential to reach wider audiences more quickly.
4. Be prepared to keep your social media content interesting, up to date and vibrant. No one visits and interacts with boring social media, so make sure they are well looked after.
5. Be aware of the effort required to maintain social media and address the points above. If you are not creating the content, how are you moderating it?
6. Interact and engage with the target audience, and do not preach to them or control natural and free-flowing behaviour.
7. Internet users have been savvy for a while - do not patronise them. Be creative in stirring and maintaining debate, including them.
8. Be aware of both the technical implications and advances of social media software. Is what you are proposing flexible and expandable enough to converge with other media? Will your plans and technology be redundant in six months' time?
9. Treat social media as a communications conduit to your audience and a very important extension of the business; do not keep up with the Joneses, because that is not a scalable endeavour.
10. Enjoy and be enthusiastic about what social media you have included (if deemed relevant), be clear why they have been created, and focus on and adhere to their purpose.

FIGURE 2
Awareness and use of mobile phone features, June 2007



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