

What is marketers' biggest challenge when it comes to social networks?

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WHAT MARKETING DISCIPLINE IS BEST SUITED TO HANDLE THESE TYPES OF CAMPAIGNS?

It's no secret that marketers have yet to completely figure out how to maneuver inside social networks, but most marketing disciplines haven't figured out how to expertly guide marketers either. Each discipline will lay claim to having figured it out, but that's simply not true. Social networking is all about relationship building, and while that may be in the DNA of the public-relations industry, it has done a poor job of claiming that birthright. "I don't think it's discipline-specific," said Rick Murray, president Edelman digital. "Any agency that understands it's all based on conversation and not on messaging is going to be more than entitled to and welcome in the environment."

WHAT'S THE BEST APPROACH FOR MARKETERS TO TAKE WHEN ENTERING THIS SPACE?

If ever there was a place in the world of marketing where the motto of 'look before you leap' held much credence, it's here. Any marketer worth its salt is going to spend a good deal of time studying the dynamics, rules and language of any social network before attempting to establish a presence there. To think you can just waltz in and begin spouting off about your product is totally wrong. Edelman's Mr. Murray likens it to a cocktail party. "If you walk in with the loudest clothes, you're going to get kicked out, and no one is going to pay attention to you," he said. "Blend in, and once you do, make sure you add value."

AREN'T SOCIAL NETWORKS STILL JUST PLAYGROUNDS FOR YOUNG KIDS AND TEENS?

If there are any marketers out there who still believe the world of social networks is filled only with young nerdy types and weirdos looking to hook up, they need to take a good second look. Not only is it a prime target for marketers looking to reach moms-the all-important gatekeeper of the household-but within some of the most popular networks, such as Facebook, a significant percentage of users are over the age of 35.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS MARKETERS HAVE ABOUT SOCIAL NETWORKS?

Most analysts who watch this space will tell you the same thing: Most marketers think they can simply take their mainstream advertising efforts and activate them on these networks under the assumption that they will flourish. Not only does that completely miss the boat, it also completely misses the driving concept behind an effective existence within social networks. "Frequency of message is not the idea here," Mr. Murray said. "Frequency of contact is."

Charlene Li, VP and principal analyst at Forrester Research, also said marketers haven't seemed to figure out that this is a channel where consumers actually want to be spoken to. "[Consumers] are asking questions on these sites that go unanswered," she said. "You can't ask for a better environment. And what do marketers do? They say nothing and put up another ad."

CAN THIS SPACE BE MEASURED?

While everyone hasn't agreed on one specific metric yet, marketers can measure the effectiveness of their campaigns through a variety of factors, such as time spent on sites, their friend bases and how many times their brands are mentioned in conversation.

HAVE ANY MARKETERS FOUND SUCCESS IN THIS SPACE?

A number of big-name brands immediately come to mind as probable movers and shakers within social networks. Nike, Coke, Axe and Proctor & Gamble already have found some success in the space. But Forrester's Ms. Li said there's one company using social networks

effectively that probably isn't obvious: Ernst & Young. "Ernst & Young does a good job in recruitment on Facebook," Ms. Li said. "They put up a schedule and provide all the recruitment information, and when people write questions, recruiters are there to write them back."

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