



Use social media to build brand buzz

Dan O'Connor, Ryan*MacMillan, explains how social media can add to product and customer research and the bottom line

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS been hailed as the communication tool of the moment by some but dismissed as little more than a fad by others. In reality, it is about much more than you may think.

Too often, when we think of social media, what comes to mind are corporate blogs that never get updated and that awful moment when your boss asks you to "take a look at this MySpace thing" they have been hearing so much about. There's a lot of social media dross out there. But in the past couple of years, it has become clear that the opportunities presented by social media far exceed the lame stereotype of half-heartedly giving your brand a Facebook account that no one ever visits, or spending a small fortune on a video which you hope will go 'Viral', even though nobody can tell it's about your company and your products.

Social media activities, done well, can vastly improve your brand's marketing, research, customer service and communications. In a broad sense, 'social media' refers to all those activities, platforms and practices that allow users to create, modify and share knowledge, opinions and content. Those 'users' are you, your co-workers and - most importantly - your customers.

Digital universe

The platforms are myriad: blogs (180 million of them) and networking tools (such as Facebook, with no million users, and LinkedIn, with its extraordinary web of professional contacts) have now been joined by 57% of online users. Then there are video sharing sites, such as YouTube and Vimeo, dedicated discussion spaces and message boards such as Mumsnet and FootballForums, and exercises in collective intelligence such as Digg and Wikipedia, the latter of which features around two million articles in almost every language on Earth.

Alongside these go aggregated news sources such as the Huffington Post and the Daily Beast, fundraising campaigns at fust Giving and Red to Blue, and crowd-sourced recommendations for your next purchase or rental at Amazon or Netflix - which 40% of UK customers say they read



JetBlue chief executive David Neeleman apologised on YouTube for service failures; Doritos invited consumers to make an ad to air in the Superbowl; sales of Nissan's Pathfinder soared as a result of online buzz; new media platforms such as Joost have a friendly, 'human' voice

before making a purchase. In each case, brands and customers come together to create content and share it with stakeholders and friends.

Social media presents a number of opportunities for your brand. Well-executed social media activities can be an excellent way to market your brand to potential and existing consumers. For example, new media content platforms Joost (www.ioost.com) and lastfm (www.last-fm) use informal, regularly updated blogs to promote new projects, while establishing a friendly, human voice for their brands. Social media is the ideal way to foster ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships with your customers, as with the discussion forums at the 'Apple Developer' site, or the Doritos competition in which a user-created commercial was chosen by consumers to air during the Superbowl.

The platforms those relationships are built on can be powerful tools when launching new products, as British singer Sandi Thorn showed by giving free online concerts before releasing her album.

Social media can be equally useful when dealing with emergent crises relating to your brand. JetBlue chief executive David Neeleman garnered much praise for promptly issuing a *mea culpa* video on

YouTube after his airline left thousands stranded in 2007 (tinyurl.com/JetBlue-Neeleman), and toy manufacturer Hasbro dodged a bullet by carefully monitoring Amazon reviews of its products and finding out that one of its products was potentially dangerous.

Social media activities can also be of benefit in your company, enabling internal communications and supporting research and development projects by providing a real-time space for conversation, idea-swapping and debate.

Marketing has always been about a process of exchange. The power of social media is that it enables your customers to be an active, involved part of that exchange: it lets them dictate the terms of the conversation. It's the brand's job to fuel that conversation and keep it going, as the producers of popular TV show *Lost* do between televised seasons. *Lost* provides its fans with branded interactive games and puzzles, ensuring that viewer interest remains at fever pitch even when the show is not on the air.

Starbucks fuels the conversation with MyStarbucksIdea (www.mystarbucks-idea.com), an online campaign in which consumers can post, rate and debate each others' ideas for new Starbucks products and services, with the best ones being put

into practice by the brand. Dell computers has done something similar with Idea Storm (www.ideastorm.com), encouraging consumers to participate and innovate in substantive discussion about new directions for the brand. Keeping conversations about your brand going in this way means talking to the right people in the right social spaces and becoming knowledgeable about the subjects they're interested in, as the scissors brand Fiskars did by creating a popular online space for consumers to talk about arts and crafts (fiskateers.com/blog).

The result is marketing that is not just more accurately targeted, but positively welcomed. When marketing is welcomed, people tend to pass it on to other like-minded folk, as the extraordinary fund-raising efforts of MyBarackObama.com proved.

Word-of-mouth advantage

Another great strength of social media is that it encourages word-of-mouth marketing of your brand. In an environment in which potential customers trust the recommendations of friends far more than those from the media, good word-of-mouth buzz about your brand can be invaluable. The producers of *Cloverfield* fostered great word-of-mouth by drip-feeding mysterious clips on to YouTube before the movie's release date, online developers' community DivXLabs brings members of its beta test panels to industry events to act as consumer advocates, while other brands seek out consumer advocates to spread word-of-mouth, whether it's to post reviews on Amazon or share exclusive content with their friends.

The two keys to measuring the impact of your social media activities are the quantity and quality of the online conversation about your brand. So the most blogged-about movies are the most likely to be number-one at the box office, and positive forum discussions of a new piece of consumer electronics kit can lead to increased consumer interest and higher sales. The bigger your brand's share of the online conversation, the bigger its share of the market is likely to be - as we saw in the first half of 2007, when online buzz

Get KUDOS in your social media communications

To ensure your social media activities are successful, it is helpful to bear in mind the KUDOS acronym. All your social media activities should revolve around a piece of Knowledge which is Useful, Desirable, Open and Shareable.

The **Knowledge** could be any piece of content relating to your brand, from dynamic, up-to-date information about flight times, as with Travelocity's mobile updates, to financial tips, such as the Halifax bank's 'Share Price Alert' service. It could be podcasts with your product development crew, as in the case of General Electric's series on the brand's emerging technologies, or the sort of branded content seen in BMW's The Hire videos (pictured right) or in Trip Advisor's 'Places I've Visited' Facebook widget.

These pieces of knowledge should always be **Useful** to your audience. This is not simply a case of ensuring they get the best price for a hotel room. It also means helping them to understand changes you've made to your products - as Sky Movies did so well by explaining some changes in its channels on an online forum, assuaging the anger and confusion of its customers.

Equally, your social media activities should be **Desirable** to your audience. So music recommendations from online music engine Mufin (mufin.com) can keep them ahead of the trend, exclusive webcasts let them chat with their favourite authors, and discussion forums can let them demonstrate their own expertise in topics from computing to cookery.

Social media activities should also always be **Open** about where the useful and



desirable knowledge is coming from. Failure to disclose conflicts of interest never works well in the social media world, as Whole Foods chief executive John Mackey found out when he used a pseudonym to disparage a rival brand.

Your activities should also be open to your audience getting involved. This can be as simple and explicit as encouraging consumers to leave comments on a blog (and always responding to them), or the more complicated implicit algorithmic ratings system for movie review scores at internet movie database IMDB.

Finally, any social media activity should be **Shareable** - your customers must be able to pass it on, either through their preferred networking site or aggregator (such as Facebook, Reddit, StumbleUpon or Digg) or just through word of mouth, by being able to link to it or download and email it.

surrounding the new Nissan Pathfinder car soared, triggering a similar increase in 'real-world' sales.

However, size isn't everything: quality counts. There are now numerous sentiment analysis tools that can help you to keep track of the tone of the online conversation about your brand. Positive conversations inevitably mean positive sales results, and even the discovery of negative sentiment presents an opportunity for a brand advocate to step in and try to change the tone of the conversation.

Online conversations are happening about your brand right now. A well-planned and well-executed social media

campaign - one which follows the KUDOS framework (see panel, above) and which measures the quantity and quality of the results - will help you to greatly improve your marketing, research, communications and, ultimately, sales.

Well-executed social media activities following these guidelines are sure to be good for your brand's bottom line. ■

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