

When Skittles met Twitter

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A bold social media marketing experiment on the Mars brand's home page prompted a lively debate at the fourth annual Social Media Conference.

On Mar. 2, Skittles, the colorful candy brand owned by Mars, transformed its home page into an online portal featuring a live Twitter feed alongside Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube content.

Instead of the usual corporate propaganda, the home page and "chatter" section became the brand's Twitter page, the video media and images pages became the brand's YouTube page and Flickr stream, respectively. Meanwhile, the "friends" section morphed into a Skittles Facebook fan page. According to Andy Hobsbawm, European chairman of online ad firm agency.com, which came up with the idea, the site received so many hits the first day it brought down Twitter.

But just two days after its launch, Skittles was forced to rethink its social media strategy after users deluged the site with inane and often profane "tweets," the messages sent by Twitter users. The Twitter feed, once prominently displayed as the home page, is now harder to find—just a small link in the corner of the screen.

Social media still stump the experts

Is this a bold experiment in the potential of social media or evidence that allowing consumers, not brands, to control content is fraught with reputational risk? The jury is still out but the question was at the center of a lively debate at the fourth annual Social Media Conference held in London on Mar. 2. Much of the discussion centered on the growing popularity of Twitter as a marketing tool. While other social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, were mentioned, the one noticeable omission from the discussion was Second Life, hailed as the next big thing two years ago.

Indeed, there was no consensus on which of the social media tools were likely to remain important—or how companies should use them. Despite the fact that many businesses are using social media, plenty are still uncomfortable with the loss of total control over their marketing messages.

"Smart companies are grappling with how to engage and influence the discussion, but many are scared of doing so for fear it will open up the floodgates," says Niall Cook, Hill & Knowlton's worldwide director of marketing technology.

More than 1,000 companies are social

Still, businesses know that they need to tap the power of social media. British companies such as mobile-phone retailer Carphone Warehouse (CPW.L) and Virgin Media (VMED.O)—a provider of broadband, digital TV, mobile, and phone services—use micro-blogging site Twitter to answer customer service queries, as does Comcast. Computer maker Dell (DELL) offers its followers on Twitter special discounts while footwear retailer Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh's tweets have achieved near cult-like status with more than 130,000 followers. Nokia (NOK) used networking site LinkedIn to help market its 5300 phones to professionals, the product's targeted customer base.

Others such as Swedish clothing retailer H&M HMB.ST, Victoria's Secret, and Reebok are using Facebook. And according to social technology entrepreneur Peter Kim, the list is growing longer each day. His Wiki lists more than 1,000 companies using social media.

It's easy to see why. Take video-sharing Web site YouTube. The four-year-old site boasts 350 million unique viewers each month and is now the second-largest search engine on the web after Google (GOOG), according to Benjamin Faes, head of YouTube for Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. He points to a recent study YouTube did with General Motors (GM) that found that the use of YouTube has given the brand a cooler edge with consumers. Faes, perhaps not surprisingly, believes that online video is becoming the media mode of choice because consumers prefer visual storytelling to written text.

Philips: Too much static on Twitter

A new study from San Francisco marketing firm Netpop Research reveals a shift in consumer Internet usage from entertainment toward communication that's being driven by social media and networking sites. According to Netpop, 105 million Americans use social media sites, spurring a 93% increase in social networking since 2006. Increasingly, consumers are using these sites to comment—sometimes positively and frequently negatively—about brand experiences, products, and services.

That means companies need to find new ways to engage customers via social networking, attendees at the Social Media Influence confab agreed. But participants were divided about the best way to do it. According to Hubert Grealish, senior product marketing manager for Philips consumer and lifestyle unit, Twitter is "an inaccurate information medium." He believes that for major corporations such as Philips (PHG), the big issue is quality control. With potentially thousands of users tweeting real time, he says, companies will find it difficult to quickly and accurately respond to users.

"Twitter is useful for feedback but we'd need a small army of people to jump on every comment or complaint," he says. Instead, Grealish thinks it's better for companies to internalize the insights they glean from social media and use them to make any changes needed to improve products or services.

Assessing a campaign's effectiveness

Many companies see social media as a relatively inexpensive new marketing tool. Companies can reach new consumers and build brand loyalty at a fraction of the price of a traditional TV or print ad campaign, says Matthew Yeomans, managing director of social media agency Radar DDB. Many traditional ad agencies attending the conference reported a growing interest among their corporate customers in developing social media marketing campaigns. "A lot of our clients see social media as an opportunity to spread their message more cost-effectively," says Lucy Jameson, the London-based executive strategy director for ad agency DDB.

But if companies are going to invest in building a social media presence they need to be able to better measure the effectiveness of such campaigns. Many of those attending the social media conference complained that the tools currently available to measure the return on investment from social media aren't very sophisticated. Kris Hoet, marketing manager for Europe, the Middle East, and Asia for Microsoft's (MSFT) MSN online services group, says blog monitoring technology is "rudimentary and not that useful." Guillaume du Gardier, new media director for chocolate maker Ferrero France, complained about the challenge of having—and measuring—a conversation with his 11 million consumers.

Meet the Chief Community Officer

Successfully tapping into the power of social media may require companies to change their corporate culture, says Lee Bryan, co-founder of social computing consultancy Headshift. "You can't just throw tweets at users. Companies need to create an internal organization," he says.

DDB Worldwide President and CEO Chuck Brymer agrees. In his recently published book, *The Nature of Marketing*, he suggests that the time has come for companies and agencies to appoint a Chief Community Officer, or CCO, whose role would be to "oversee the relationship between brands and their communities, not just in the narrow confines of how a consumer interacts with a product at point of purchase but also in how consumers interact with each other."

With social media constantly evolving, it will be some time before companies figure out how to fully exploit its potential. Early adopters such as Guy Stephens, knowledge engineer for Carphone Warehouse, describe it as just another tool that a brand might use to engage with customers. "Understanding what motivates your customer and trying to meet that need is still key, regardless of whether you use Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, or pick up the phone," he blogs.

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