

What's wrong with social media marketing?

Don't think of social media marketing in terms of broadcasting to an audience; learn to build a lasting relationship with consumers, says **Steve Taylor, CMW**

SOCIAL MEDIA marketing is an oxymoron. Marketing, as we have come to understand it, means persuading people to buy our stuff against a competitor's. It is 'us and them' thinking, while social media spaces are about facilitating social connections, building relationships and removing friction from communication and collaboration.

Social media is about participation and conversation. Social media is 'we' thinking and presents a golden opportunity for brands to build engagement and commitment with an involved audience, thereby going some way to future-proofing brands. But to succeed requires a shift in mentality from 'us' to 'we', a commitment to participation, a change in focus from 'messages' to 'conversation' and forgetting everything we thought we knew about 'marketing'. In social media, marketing does not work.

Marketing to social media audiences is doomed. A marketing-based social media strategy starts in the wrong place and leads to us doing the wrong things with the wrong people in the wrong context. It leads to setting the wrong campaign objectives and therefore measuring the wrong outcomes, which only serve to obscure where everything went wrong and often leads to the conclusion that, to correct it, requires doing more wrong stuff.

Redefine your objectives

Picture the scene: post-campaign, client and agency consider the interactions that happened: so many followers here, so many fans there, a number of blogposts mentioning the new widget, some videos and a number of images created, and 'Oh, by the way, someone's written a poem.'

There's a brief 'hurrah!' with a 'but so what?' in hot pursuit. There may be a lot of interactions generated, but is that success? What do they mean? The brand's effort was well intentioned, the budget generous and the agency committed. Nevertheless, more people would probably have been reached by spending the money on a poster campaign, and while the interactions seem reassuringly deep and meaningful at first, exactly how much deeper, and what they mean,

proves very hard to say. Maybe they're no deeper and no more meaningful after all - just in a trendier environment.

The villain at the centre of this all-too-familiar vignette is a failure to properly understand the opportunity offered by social media and to take advantage of it. Our instinctive reaction is to define the objectives as marketing goals, but that's completely the wrong approach. Better objectives look more like those of a research brief than a marketing brief. For example, to understand what people think of us, what people are saying about what we do, who we are, what we make and how they feel about all of that, within their own social contexts.

A good social media objective might be anchored in discovering what can be learnt from the community - what people would like to see more or less of. These objectives are not about propagating a message, but about unravelling a story, listening and joining a conversation, collaboration and discussion. The objectives start to look like they're properly grounded in a social media strategy, when achieving these feeds directly into business engineering, not just the comms plan. In other words, the outcomes change not just what a brand will say, but what a company will do.

The shift is this: 'I'm speaking to them... I'm listening to them... we're talking... we're working together.' This is brave. Many companies' underlying business philosophies are at odds with the pro-social behaviour required to partici-

pate in social network contexts. They exist to maximise profits, not to collaborate with the public on refining their corporate values and the stuff they make. It takes quite a bit of standing back to see the big picture before the power of joining up and joining in starts to emerge.

The secret to social media nirvana lies in understanding this: social media spaces are poor commercial relationship marketing platforms, but they are excellent commercial collaboration platforms.

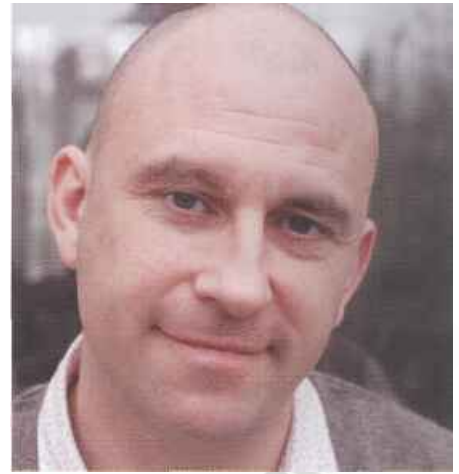
When it emerged that Nestle was buying milk from a farm owned by Robert Mugabe's wife, Grace, the Nestle Facebook fan page ignited with fans criticising the company for its actions. Nestle says that, in reality, the choices it has to make are not as clear-cut as they are presented in the media. Perhaps those Facebook fans (there's a surprising number of them) could have been consulted on what was the right thing to do about buying the milk before Nestle made its decision. The company could now be revelling in a tremendous PR success story, instead of managing a PR crisis.

The same is true of food chain Pret a Manger and the negative PR it has suffered over the Brazilian chicken it imports. Pret could have used social media to spark the debate; it could have been open and frank about what the issues are, and what its strategy is for dealing with them. The company could have had that debate among people who care and are, ostensibly, on the brand's side.

Best Buy took advantage of social



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Clockwise from above left: Nestle has faced boycott calls on social media for sourcing milk from Robert Mugabe's wife; Pret a Manger has been attacked for importing Brazilian chicken; but airline JetBlue has successfully made use of social media opportunities

media fandom by asking its fans what their favourite vampire themed movies were, and then stocking them for the Halloween period. Earlier this year, Cadbury Creme Egg polled its fans on what their favourite Creme Egg ad was and then ran it in a specially commissioned TV spot. These actions don't represent revolution, but they're the first steps in a long process of building more collaborative customer relationships.

Other brands already go much further. There are well publicised examples, such as JetBlue and Zappos, but there are many other brands quietly taking advantage of the opportunities social media presents.

Southern Railway has a keen station manager posting on lots of south-east London local discussion forums, soliciting opinion, working with the public to prioritise work and involving people in some decisions about what happens to their local railway station. But it doesn't have to be as labour intensive.

Consider the use of feedback tools, such as UserVoice. These provide a simple way for brands to talk to people about how they feel about the brand, the product and the services. These are the people who care enough to want to make the brand, product or service better. They can



help brands to navigate public opinion and behavioural trends, and build for the future. For example, consider how Dell uses its IdeaStorm, or the impact of Starbucks' MyStarbucksIdea, which are among the best examples so far of this approach.

It can be productive for brands to be in social media spaces and simply seek to build a fan base by being entertaining or useful. Consider the Burger King Whopper Sacrifice campaign. It's immensely entertaining to tell a 'friend' that they're worth exactly one tenth of a Whopper, but it doesn't build the kind of long-term involvement and commitment to the brand that can be achieved in social media, when the real opportunities are identified and taken to build brands collaboratively, with an engaged audience of those who care about what the brand stands for, and does, and want to help make it stronger.

To return to the fictitious post-campaign analysis outlined earlier, it's possible to build up very large fan bases on social media platforms without any of the

connections made being meaningful or helpful for the brand's future. Often, people's association with brands is simple badge-wearing to flesh out their online identities. Those connections are very shallow and the impact of having them is trivial against what can be achieved by really engaging with a handful of committed brand advocates.

Similarly, display advertising can work extremely well in social media spaces, but that's no more than to say display works well in environments where a relevant message is creatively presented. And it misses the point. It's like thinking of London's Wembley Stadium as a place where people go to see ads. The fact that they don't seek out the advertising doesn't make it ineffective.

Many-to-many platform

Social media spaces are not well suited to marketing as we have come to think of it - that is, based on persuasion, storytelling and with a broadcast mentality, where we talk and the audience listens. It's possible to generate a lot of very light touch interactions with brands in social media, but these connections are trivial and do not build the long-term meaningful connections which, at face value, they appear to. Social media is not a one-to-one channel, it's a many-to-many platform.

So, while trivial brand connections can be easily severed, social media does provide all the tools needed to easily involve people and engage with them to build meaningful co-ownership of brands and build productive partnerships with those brands. But doing so requires a willingness to listen, to talk with, not just to, and it requires bravery and a commitment to wanting to be the brand that people want you to be.

In short, what's wrong with social media marketing is that it distracts us from the real opportunities offered by social media platforms. We should be engaging, not in social media marketing, but in social media brand collaboration.