

Community beyond facebook: Making every brand social

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In just eight years, Facebook went from concept to one of the world's largest companies. While it's by far the largest social network, the company's rise to its current valuation is directly correlated with how it has become a media powerhouse. Instead of having to pay for content, users are the content. That's great for Facebook, but where does it leave brands?

While Facebook offers "free" pages to businesses, where they can connect with their fans, the page model never scaled. A new report finds that only 1% of users who "like" pages ever return to those pages, according to market research firm Ehrenberg-Bass Institute. Sure, page content may show up in a users' stream if Facebook's algorithm determines it relevant to the user and they happen to be watching their stream at the right time, but ultimately Facebook's entire business model is built around you having to advertise to adequately reach your audience.

That's not to say Facebook is a bad business; they're just a media company. In fact, Facebook just announced it's first-ever event for marketers – a half-day meeting in New York – to discuss innovative advertising opportunities. Facebook's IPO means the company will soon be forced to focus on quarterly earnings, and its product focus will turn towards ways to make more money. Brands and marketers who foot the bill.

The advertising bill alone for social media is not what should be a great concern. Advertising dollars that were once allocated to traditional media should shift online if that's where your audience is. The larger concern is that enterprises and brands are focused on sending their brand's most loyal users to Facebook, and giving up access to their own audience data. Once Facebook sees that users like your brand, its team of data-analyzing Ph.D.s can carefully figure out how to extract the most money out of that information. The kicker is they don't care if that money comes from you, or your direct competitor.

Brands: It's Time for a Status Update

As Facebook matures into a public media behemoth, marketers are starting to realize that they need to be careful to define their relationship status with the social network. Brands and online communities are faced with the question of whether to build out their social functionality around Facebook only, or, instead, begin to add social elements to their own experiences that democratize the power of Facebook, on their own terms.

Nearly every business, from Fortune 1000 enterprises to startups, are examining how they can both replicate and improve the social community experience on their own site. These experiences, such as activity streams, notifications and alerts, drive social engagement on any site that isn't a traditional social network. This keeps users on your site longer, increases total number of registered users, and ultimately provides businesses with valuable audience data that would otherwise be inaccessible via social channels.

Social networking sites like Facebook also provide minimal opportunity and resources to adequately identify your most influential and social advocates. Owning your own social experience, and being able to tap into your community of loyalists, can add great value to your business. As you spend time and valuable resources creating content and campaigns to drive engagement, it's important to first understand your business objectives and how these translate to real business benefits. Surfacing advocates in your own community, for instance, helps increase your viral marketing to drive traffic back to your site, where you have much more control over that user experience than if they landed on your Facebook page.

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