

# Social media: friend or foe?

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Brands that leap headfirst into social media, assuming users will want to share information, may find these platforms are not the mass-marketing tool they hoped for, according to a 10-year US behavioural study

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**M**any marketers see social media as the 'next big new thing' to help build brands. Those advocates seem to view all the shiny new toys such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest and the host of other social media tools and techniques as new, exciting and innovative channels; perfect for building customer engagement which somehow leads to brand preference, and, even better, brand loyalty... the continuing Holy Grail of all marketing and branding.

The result? The trade press, conferences, seminars, academic and professional meetings and so on are filled with bright-eyed, eager, enthusiastic social media advocates. They extol the virtues, veracity and value of building a 'strong, viable, social media strategy for the brand'. And, as you might expect, the most useful and valuable tools to do that with is the specific tool, technique, platform or whatever they represent. Their presentations all seem like manna sent from heaven or nirvana or Olympus or Cannes, or wherever the marketing Gods gather these days. Employ our new social media tool and watch your brand soar!

It all sounds so good. So reasonable.

So easy to do. Just take a few bucks from the traditional media budget or the sales promotion allocation or maybe even the salaries of the lower-level marketing people. Plug it into the new social media system and *voila!* You have a social media strategy. A billion Facebook users, or a half-million Tweepers or multi-million YouTube Google-eyed viewers. All will build, enhance or maintain your brand in an instant.

It all sounds so good. So definite. Toss out the old. Bring in the new. Get pundit accolades. Appear on speaker platforms. Get awards. All the things that really mean something to brand builders.

Never mind the financial returns. Those will come in time. We all know new stuff takes a while to show up on the bottom line.

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And the best rationale of all... our competitors have already committed to a social media strategy. If we don't do something, we'll be left behind. And, we all know the CEO has an ego the size of Rhode Island and needs to have an answer to analyst's questions about 'What are you doing in social media?' God forbid there should be some blank airtime during the earnings call.

But what if none of this hype is true? What if social media really is 'social', involving people primarily engaged in social discussions, i.e. 'what did you do last night?' 'Did you go to the concert?' 'Are you still dating that cute boy?' Or other burning personal issues in the lives of people.

What if they don't discuss products and brands on an ongoing basis? What if their priority isn't being able to connect and share the latest research findings on how well your new shampoo 'creates natural-looking highlights' in your hair? What if they ignore all your 'insightful' views into their lives, all of which are embedded in their emails and tweets and engagement offers? Don't they understand it costs us, the marketer, practically nothing to send them? So, you should expect an onslaught.

But, what if your brand isn't the most important thing in their life? Oh my! What's really behind the Oz curtain?

Unfortunately, that's what we seem to be finding in, the research currently being conducted at Northwestern University at The Medill School in the US. One of my colleagues, Martin Block and I have been investigating consumers, consumer behaviours, media use, brand preferences and the like for nearly 10 years using the same data source. Prosper International, the global data analytic company in Worthington, Ohio has been sharing the results of its ongoing, monthly and twice-annual, online surveys of US customer marketing and media use data and allowed us to analyse and try to make some sense of the constantly shifting media scene.

We've now aggregated the 10 years' of questionnaire responses, media use, brand preferences, self-reported use and impact of various media and sales promotion forms and activities. While we're in the early stages of the analysis, we have found some things which have caused us to raise questions and

FIGURE 1

## NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY STUDY INTO CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND MEDIA USAGE

### SOCIAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

- Only 11% of all respondents say they 'regularly get or give advice' of any sort no matter how shared (19% say they never do.) The rest are occasional sharers. The percentage of those that mention products or services to others is much lower and varies greatly by product category. That percentage has not increased over the past few years.
- The fastest-growing brand mention in every category, when consumers are asked which brands they prefer, in the 73 product categories is 'No Product Brand Preference'. That accounts for roughly 30-35% of all responses in almost all categories. That means typical brands have preference rates in the single digits.
- While reported use of, and influence of traditional media forms (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.) have been declining during the 10-year period, internet-based media (e-mail, search, social media and the like) have been increasing. The trend lines crossed in mid-2008.
- When consumers who say their brand preference choice is 'No Product Brand Preference' are matched with their reported media use, they are generally heavy social media users, i.e. correlations are extremely high, but, at this point, we can't claim causality.

### SOCIAL MEDIA RED FLAGS

- If 'give and get advice' consumers comprise only a small portion of the overall social media audience, and the number of those brand recommenders vary greatly by product category, is social media really a powerful mass media form which can be leveraged to build and maintain brands or just another niche media form which specifically appeals to a limited audience?
- Is social media, by providing extensive information on brands, helping to build preference and loyalty, or, simply commoditising the brand through broad-scale information access and distribution?
- Is the decline in consumer use of mass media, particularly television, taking away the social value brands have created in the past? For example, if brands are essentially cultural icons, with broad consumer understanding, is that being splintered by the increased consumer use of social media?
- Is social media building broad appeal for the brand – increasing the brand's preference and use among a national or global audience, or is it making the brand more exclusive and restricted, based on diffusion of brand information only to a limited audience of social brand aficionados?

concerns about whether or not social media is the 'brand saviour' it has been portrayed to be by the shiny new toy promoters.

First, what's the data source? It consists of more than 1.1 million consumer responses gathered in the US between 2002 and 2012. The data analysed so far is primarily for FMCG products, i.e. those sold in grocery stores and mass merchandisers. (We also have data on seven other broad categories such as apparel, eating out, automobiles and trucks among others. We just haven't had time to do the analysis.) The data set covers 73 store categories and more than 1,500 individual brands.

We also have data on use and purchase influence of 31 external-to-the-store media forms and 23 in-store promotional methods. And, most important, respondents also identify whether or not they give or get

advice from others. That makes it possible to calculate Net Promoter-type scores, a key element in whether or not social media really is passed on to others.

Figure 1 shows some highlights of the findings. And while these are preliminary results from what is an ongoing analysis, they are enough to raise some red flags about social media. These are just a few of the findings and the issues this type of longitudinal data analysis raise.

Obviously, there will be more as we plough through this extensive database.

What this research does confirm, however, is that the 'snapshot research' approach being used today, that is trying to use specific examples, incidents and even campaigns to explain and build an understanding of how social media 'works', is likely not the best way to go forward.

Marketers need to take a longer view, bringing in both the good and the bad of social media. That would seem much better than what seems to be happening today...i.e. racing off willy-nilly to build instant social media strategies and then re-allocating resources to support those concepts and approaches. So, while social media may be interesting, involving and, in some cases, engaging, the value of the tools based on this consumer research, is still to be proven.

Trial and test, rather than wholesale conversion, may be the best approach for brands in social media now and for the immediate future. At least that's what our data says.

 more on social  
media at  
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