



Crafting Social Media Strategies for Success

by Mike Bawden; President & CEO of Brand Central Station

To many business people, the maze of social media options and mobs of pundits create an unsettling feeling in the pit of their stomach. They know, intuitively, that there's something to all of it – after all, 400 million people on Facebook can't all be wrong, can they?

What does it all mean? And, more importantly, the question that lingers in the back of most people's minds boils down to one simple thing ...

“How on Earth can we take advantage of all this and not have to bet everything we have in the process?”

Remember one thing above all others: it works to the advantage of the online services, consultants, bloggers, media companies and everyone else if things are as confused (and confusing) as possible. Sanity, after all, would mean order. And order, eventually, would mean process. And process would, eventually, mean economies.

I'm telling you now that there is a process out there that works and, as a result, there is an economically prudent way to approach social networks and online marketing. Sanity can prevail and, more importantly, your company or brand persona doesn't have to live apart from your real-world identity. You can be consistent – and true – to who you are and why you matter to people by following a rational and consistent methodology for brand positioning and profitable operation.

The Secret to Social Media Success

The real secret to successfully marketing through social media and online networks depends on your ability to understand, acknowledge and communicate the fundamental value you bring to the people who matter most to your success – whether they're customers, employees, owners or business partners. In short, you need to take a deep breath, divorce yourself from the clutter and noise caused by all the technology and get back to the basics of telling people why you matter.

And then listen.

Because the secret to social media is recognizing the value brought about by the “social” nature of the technology. This isn't just an opportunity to tell and sell, you have to shut up and listen as well.

I try to explain to people that managing a blog or a social network or a Facebook page is a lot like hosting a successful cocktail party. You remember those? Not a teenage, loud-music-with-pizza party where people don't talk to each other but more like one of those parties where you invite a diverse group of friends and spend the whole night introducing people to each other and starting conversations before moving on to the next group.

If that sounds like work, it is. But listening and engaging customers, employees and other people who are important to your success **is** work. And that is, essentially, what a good social media program should do for you and your brand.

If marketing is nothing more than the exchange of goods, services or ideas for another item perceived to be of equal value, social media and marketing through the social web is nothing more than another “environment” in which that exchange can take place. But to be comfortable with transacting your marketing business, it may be helpful to present you with a framework in which to operate – and that’s the purpose of this white paper.

A Practical Framework for Social Media Marketing

The world of online media is constantly changing. What’s hot one month may lose its appeal almost overnight. Those trends are covered by the marketing press on a daily basis (we receive over 20 email digests from different sources every day and that’s just a fraction of the news-stream that’s covering social media). So how do you keep up on what’s hot and what’s not?

The short answer is that you don’t have to. In fact, what’s often covered in the media is the “bleeding edge” of the online world – and while early adopters may receive an occasional “first-mover advantage” from being on the edge 24/7, we’ve taken a decidedly more conservative approach that draws a distinction between “social media marketing” and “online marketing.”

The two are not necessarily the same thing.

While the web makes social marketing easier to do, it’s important to understand that social marketing – and, to a degree, social media – is not exclusive to the Internet. “Social marketing” is really nothing more than a label of a more personal, interactive exchange of ideas and opinions on the way to making a purchase decision.

Let’s take the technology out for a moment to understand the distinction: “Traditional” marketing would place an ad in front of a consumer. The ad would provide a series of features and implied benefits, allowing the consumer to form an opinion about the quality and value of the product being advertised. Once the consumer finds himself (or herself) presented with a purchase opportunity, there may be additional opportunities for the brand to make its case for purchase (e.g. packaging, promotional offers or coupons). If the argument is persuasive and the price is right, the consumer takes the item off the shelf and makes the purchase.

A “Social” marketing example could start much the same way – with an advertising exposure. But then the consumer does something not entirely expected, he (or she) makes a phone call to a friend and asks that friend about the product or brand. The opinion provided by the friend has as much (or in most cases, more) influence over the consumer as the ad. Using that additional information, the consumer may look for articles or product reviews that provide more insights on particular features or claims made by the product that are of interest. Once at the store, the consumer may ask a sales person more questions about the product or the “deal” offered to stimulate a sale. If the brand/product passes all of these tests – if it’s responsive to the needs and concerns of the customer – the purchase is made.

Failure to respond appropriately or in a timely manner, though, may result in the consumer choosing another product even if the price is higher. The important thing to learn here is that the social interaction between consumer and brand can influence perceived value and, as a result, affect both sales volume and profit margins. Therefore, taking a consistent approach to managing those social interactions is imperative in an increasingly competitive business environment.

In fact, many brands take the daily discipline of a social media marketing campaign and transfer much of the knowledge gained to their more “traditional” marketing programs. The result can be more “relevant” advertising and publicity programs, higher-powered sales promotions and internal/external communications programs that make sense and create measurable impact on the balance sheet.

Our recommendations for a pragmatic social media program includes the following steps:

- Square your market research for both online and offline efforts
- Set clear business objectives for your social media marketing program
- Define your key audiences and the messages they need to hear
- Carefully select appropriate venues for each audience
- Set your agenda, know what you're going to say and when you're going to say it
- Stay at it daily
- Measure your results and re-evaluate your plan
- Adapt

Convergence and the Power of Marketing Congruence

It is of the utmost importance that your social media marketing program work in congruence with your more traditional forms of marketing.

Branding and identity elements need to be used consistently across media platforms, of course, but it's also vitally important that there is continuity in messaging. If a key message about your brand or a product changes in one place, then those changes need to be reflected throughout the marketing mix (from brochures to web site to news releases to ads). Failure to do so makes brands appear disorganized and weak.

Weak brands command less value (and lower prices) than strong brands. Disorganization, inconsistency and unresponsiveness are ways to weaken brands. Social media marketing programs provide more opportunities for those weaknesses to present themselves. That's the downside.

On the upside, though, are the myriad of opportunities to strengthen the brand quickly and inexpensively. Sometimes, one great customer interaction will be picked up and circulated virally among that consumer's friends and peers. The resulting business can come back ten-fold.

How We Make a Difference

So, how does Brand Central Station help clients create and manage their social media marketing programs?

First, we have experience setting up social media marketing programs for companies. We've done everything from working out the strategic and messaging issues through providing day-to-day support on a variety of social media platforms in support of brands ranging from healthcare to food to media to technology.

Second, we live and write about life on the "bleeding edge" of online marketing technology. We know how and where to find the right social media opportunities for clients among the tens of thousands of social networking sites, the millions of blogs and discussion boards and the hundreds of "breakthrough" services like Twitter, Foursquare, Conduit and more.

Finally, we have relationships with dozens of firms who can help provide both the discipline and the talent to tell your story time and again in honest and compelling ways. One of those companies is my own PR firm, Bawden & Lareau Public Relations – but we also have the ability to put clients in touch with marketing experts located in over forty countries around the world, touching almost every specialty area and industrial sector imaginable.

If this sounds like something you or your brand could use, please give us a call or drop us a line via email. The initial consultation (via phone or online) is free and intended to help us show you the opportunities a social media marketing program might bring forward.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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