

You've no doubt heard of sites like Facebook and YouTube but how are companies using social media tools to build brands and communicate with their customers?

BRANDING Gets Social

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Many brands are choosing to add a social media strategy to their marketing plans. By actively engaging customers, marketers are building brand loyalty and improving the level of customer interaction. Some of the biggest developments on the web have been as a result of user-generated content - Wikipedia is a good example. The web has given people a platform from which to tell their stories and voice their opinions. A blog is created every second; now everyone is a publisher. It would be fair to say then that it's highly likely that somewhere, someone has something to say about your brand...something you should be hearing and in most cases acknowledging or responding to.

This is where a strategic social media strategy comes in. Social media refers to the activities that integrate online social interaction with technology and the creation of words and pictures. The way the information is presented depends on the construction of shared meaning, as people share their stories and understandings. Social media can take many different forms, including Internet forums, message boards, blogs, social networks, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. >





IN ORDER TO GET THE MOST FAVOURABLE RESULTS IT IS ESSENTIAL TO BE MINDFUL OF A FEW BASIC GUIDELINES.



1. MARKETS ARE CONVERSATIONS

The writers of The Cluetrain Manifesto coined this term; this book was first published in 2000 and is still highly relevant today. It's a must-read for anyone interested in building brands using online media. Brands were originally created to reflect product or service ownership however this has evolved and it now matters much more what brands do for people, how they engage and captivate.

People talk; your customers exchange their experiences and stories and in most cases a lot of people are doing this online, either venting their anger or singing a product's praises. Social media has changed the way that brands and customers communicate, traditional above-the-line advertising in newspapers or on TV or radio is for the most part a one-way conversation. Tools like blogs, Facebook, forums and YouTube allow for user interaction and content creation and the conversation is now a two-way communication that allows for greater interaction. This technology facilitates the conversation, but you mustn't lose sight of the fact that social networking is all about human contact.

A great brand can take years to build, yet it can be destroyed in one second by an angry customer. As a responsible brand custodian, you need to guard your best asset by being aware of what people are saying about your brand. Just as you would utilise a press clippings service to pick up on product mentions, so you should utilise various online 'clipping' tools.

Free mention tracking services include Google or Yahoo e-mail alerts based on specific keyword searches or you can create custom searches or RSS feeds by searching through tags on Google blogsearch, technorati.com, amatomu.com, afrigator.com or blogpulse.com. Local company Quirk eMarketing have just launched BrandsEye (www.brandseye.com) a paid for Online Reputation Management tool – considered essential for large brands where the online conversation is too large to manage and measure manually.

2. SOMEONE LIKE ME

The most trusted brand spokesperson is 'someone like me'. Customers don't want to be told that Brand X is the best by the company's marketing executive or CEO; they want a recommendation from someone who is 'just like me.' Every brand has brand devotees who will try and convert anyone who will listen. Find out



CAMPAIGN EXAMPLE : STANDARD BANK PRO20 SERIES

who your brand devotees are and find a way to harness and channel their collective energy to build your brand message and popularity with their peers.

Listen to your customers, understand their needs and facilitate a space for these brand devotees to share their opinions, network and spread the love. Some of the bigger brands have created their own social networks.

www.pontiacunderground.com is a network for Pontiac owners in the US and locally the www.zoopedup.com social network gives car enthusiasts the ability to create cyber garages alongside like minded individuals.

Customer interaction can also be encouraged by creating a brand/campaign specific group or fan page on Facebook where users can upload applicable photos, videos and comments. It is important to note that the brand representative responsible for these channels needs to ensure that customer feedback is validated and reciprocated.

3. BE AUTHENTIC

A brand's online persona must be the same as its offline or traditional character – don't try to make your brand cool if it's evident that it's not. Be authentic and honest. The internet may be 'inhabited' by millions of brands and people but transparency is an ethical issue. Manage online discussions and places with integrity and an open attitude from the outset. In the 'self-regulatory' world of the web, fake brand representatives or blogs (flogs) are exposed very quickly and the resulting brand damage can take years to fix.

4. EXPECT DIFFERENT RESULTS

It is true that there are a lot of people interacting in the online space, however the naïve '80s 'build it and they will come' approach does not work. A social media strategy needs to fit cohesively with all above-the-line or below-the-line campaigns and shouldn't be viewed as an 'add-on' or 'by the way' marketing item. Cross-pollinate key concepts between the online and offline communication. The inclusion of a basic web or blog address in a print ad is a simple way to marry efforts. When executing a social media campaign, expect different results – it's a relatively new brand communication channel and as such the reporting methods are still being refined. Track website or blog traffic, online mentions, customer feedback, user-content creation and where applicable use the new Facebook fan page visitor stats to monitor campaign success. <

Just as the format of the Pro20 cricket series shook up the world of cricket, this online social media strategy opened up the possibilities as to how a brand communicates with its customers in this case the Pro20 series fans.

The team from social media company Brandsh (www.brandsh.com) conceptualised the campaign on behalf of the Standard Bank Sponsorships division. Social Media brand touch points were created to facilitate conversation and boost user-interaction and original content creation. Eight points of entry were created to widen the target audience and boost a genuine two-way conversation.

Standard Bank Pro20 series website (www.standardbankpro20.co.za) provided match fixtures, player profiles, photos and a link to the blog (http://blog.standardbankpro20.co.za/).

Each fixture was live-blogged by a team of cricket and blogging enthusiasts (even Jonty Rhodes was caught by Supersport blogging a match.) The live-blogging brought the action to the people in a new, dynamic way.

A Facebook Group was created and provided a key point of contact for around 750 people during the series.

A dedicated YouTube channel meant that supporters could upload their own video content after each fixture.

Similarly a Pro20 Flickr (www.flickr.com) photo sharing account provided a collection point for the latest pictures.

The mobile market is growing rapidly in SA so it was essential to include a MXit component.

Twitter (www.twitter.com) a new micro-blogging service was used to feed punchy, action updates to twitter followers as the matches happened.

A social media press release (SMPR) was created, the first one in SA.

(Journalists, bloggers and opinion piece writers are exposed to so much more information than before. The SMPR collects and packages the information neatly and coherently to streamline the process of story creation. It is designed to make information accessibility and retrieval smarter and easier. See (http://standardbank.socialmediarelease.co.za))

The cohesive Standard Bank Pro20 series social media strategy has set a new standard for new media communication. The various online brand touch points ensured a high level of interaction and brand conversation, which created excitement amongst the supporters.

To be successful a social media strategy requires a transparent, 'non-clingy' attitude. Online branding and marketing should not happen in isolation of traditional communication efforts. Assess how new media fit into your existing strategy and develop the concept from there. Above all, always maintain a sense of openness and accountability.

