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Understanding the 'Buzz' Around Social Media

Finding the Right Social Media Mix

WSI White Paper

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Introduction

You might have heard that social media can help build your brand, promote your product and services, help collect feedback from your customers, increase your website traffic and generate conversions – but if it was really that simple and it can do all sorts of magnificent things for your brand, why aren't most businesses today leveraging this medium as part of their online marketing strategy? This white paper will help you understand some of the opportunities and challenges associated with social media, whether you are a small business that services a local town or an international one that works on a global scale.

Before we plunge into social media, you must know that this is not a new concept. Social media has been around for some time – but it is only now that organizations are starting to learn that there is a way to leverage this medium.

But let's take it back a notch and see how the Internet has changed over the last several years and how it eventually gave birth to social media.

How It All Began

Remember the days when we used to 'surf' the web? In today's world, we do not surf; we search. comScore estimates there are about 250 million searches per day conducted in Google. And this number isn't getting any smaller. With smart phones like the iPhone and Blackberry, game consoles like Xbox 360, and mobile Internet sticks you can purchase from your Internet Service Provider, we can now surf online virtually everywhere and anywhere.

Remember when America Online (AOL) first launched in the United States, and with every incoming email you heard the famous 'You've Got Mail' audio clip? Now imagine in today's world, hearing that same 'You've Got Mail' each time you receive an email - how annoying would that be?

The Internet has changed and it is still changing today, faster than ever, and businesses need to keep up with the current trends if they want to survive online.

After the dot com boom in the late 90s, most businesses jumped online and created websites, but websites back then are much different than they are now. Have a look below at how eBay, the online auction website founded back in 1995, has progressed over the years.



1999



2001



2009

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In previous years, web users would be limited to only reading information from a website. Websites were one dimensional and visitors needed to go back frequently to see if anything had changed. But as the Internet started to grow, it opened the door to other types of websites, like forums and newsgroups, which allowed users to post questions, share comments, conduct ratings, and become part of a conversation online.

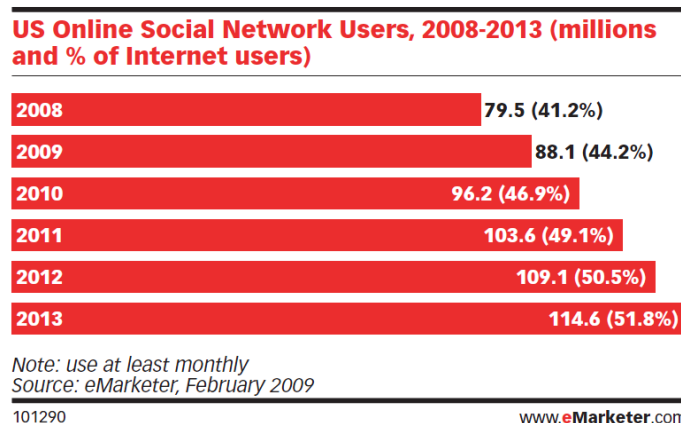
Soon we started hearing about Web 2.0 and sites like Wikipedia that exploded based on user generated content. Websites were no longer just mere pages developed within the organization, but soon became portals of public users generating content for them.

Next thing you know, we have all sorts of Web 2.0 things emerging – like blogs, widgets, and social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube coming into the picture. Businesses no longer had to wait for visitors to come to their website; they could now push information directly to their customers, and in turn customers had the opportunity to contribute and share that information with their network of friends online. Social media opened the door for information to be passed quickly and naturally – leaving the opportunity for viral growth at the fingertips for marketers. But as exciting as it sounds to have raving fans promoting your business, what happens when a group of angry or frustrated customers decided to share their experience online?

Let's take a further look at some of the reasons why it is important to plunge into the social media realm.

The Importance of Going Social

eMarketer predicts that 44.2% of US Internet users will visit social networking sites at least once a month in 2009, and this number is projected to increase to 51.8% in 2013. The table below illustrates and forecasts the percentage of Internet users that are likely to visit social networking sites.



Online businesses today need to look at other alternatives to get in front of their customers as simply having a website may not be enough anymore.

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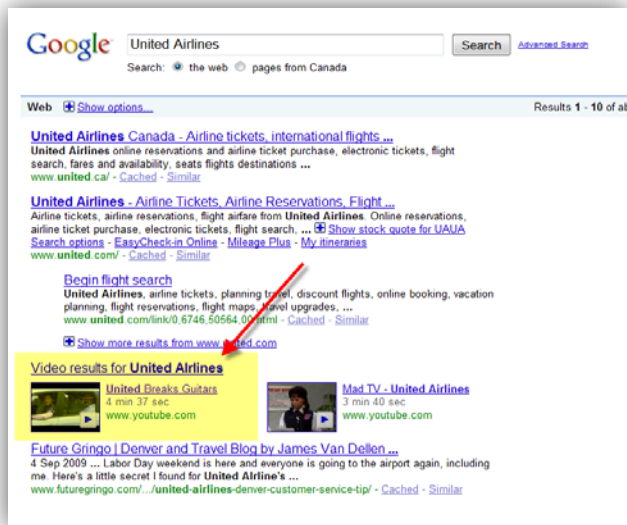
Protecting Your Brand

Have you ever searched for a company name, brand name or product in a search engine before you made a purchase or decided to do business with that organization? Your online brand is extremely important to monitor and manage. Having one negative listing in the top 10 results of a search engine could be enough to have prospects steer away, leave your existing customers in a state of panic, and damage your brand to the point where business starts to go south.

Let's take a look at United Airlines, a major United States airline that faced a public relations nightmare after an angry passenger created a music video about his guitar being broken during a trip using the airline. The passenger, Dave Carroll, a Canadian musician spent a year trying to get compensation from United Airlines, and when he received no response, he proceeded to take his own actions by creating a song about how United Airlines broke his guitar. The music video became an instant hit, and has almost 6 million views on YouTube today.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>



Search conducted in Google.com as of October 29, 2009

Not only did this video go viral in nature, but even doing a search in Google for United Airlines shows the video on page one of the search engine results page. So with 5,752,254 views, 22,614 comments, 36,357 ratings, 27,567 users adding this video to their favorites, and 2,240,000 monthly searches in Google for the term United Airlines, you be the judge if this simple 4-minute, 36-second video clip did any damage to the United Airlines brand.

Reserving Your Brand

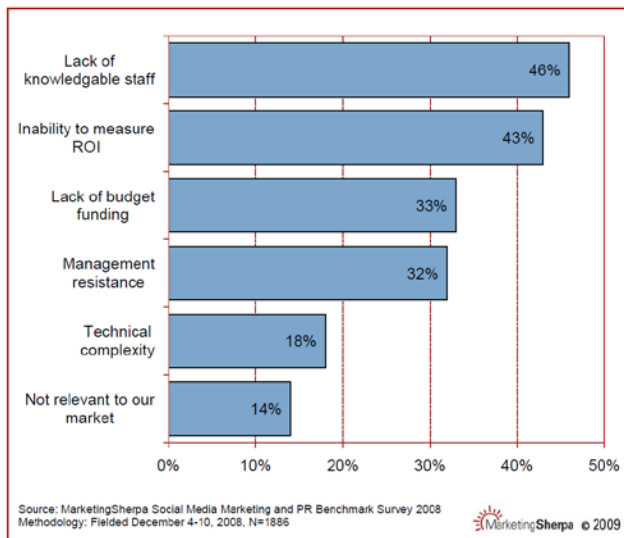
Much like purchasing a branded domain name, it is important that companies also register their branded names on social channels. Each social site has their own rules on registering trademark or branded names, but there are a number of companies that have become victims of users stealing their branded channel because the companies were not quick enough to act.

For example, Microsoft does not own <http://www.youtube.com/Microsoft>, a channel which has almost 20,000 views. You would think that McDonalds owns <http://www.youtube.com/McDonalds>, but they are another victim of a company that had their channel name taken. The owner is in fact using the channel to promote their own line of burgers.

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The Dangers of Social Media

According to a survey conducted by MarketingSherpa, lack of knowledge is the number one barrier to social media adoption. This means the organizations that do try to play in the social media realm are at the risk of creating an atmosphere that can backfire on their marketing strategy if not done correctly.



You might have heard starting a conversation online is important – but listening to what users are saying is not something that should be overlooked.

Social media is not one of those 'set it and forget it' strategies. You need to monitor, listen to and participate in what users are saying about your brand, product or service.

The challenge for most organizations is finding the time to respond to every thread, every comment and every tweet. The more social networks you are on, the more resources are required for tracking the activity on those channels.

A lot of organizations fear opening this channel of conversation also calls for opening a can of worms for users to post their frustrations, complaints, and bad experiences. What most organizations fail to realize is if they do not start that conversation in the first place, where they do have control over what is being said, that is not going to stop anyone from creating that Facebook Group, or YouTube Channel, or blog that focuses on the negative experience with your brand.



The image on the left is a Facebook Page that is dedicated to those users who hate Microsoft. There are over 50,000 websites, 5500 blogs, 200 Facebook groups, and 500 videos online, and dozens of tweets on Twitter hourly that have some reference to 'Microsoft Sucks'.

Now most small to medium sized businesses do not have to worry at such a large scale about brand protection, but remember even 1 website, 1 video, 1 Facebook page or 1 tweet can be enough to do some serious brand damage.

Don't Believe These 5 Social Media Myths

There is a lot of information floating online that raves just about everything from how great social media is to how much of a waste of time it is. I have put together a list of common misconceptions around this topic that I often encounter when educating businesses about social media.

“Sites Like Twitter And Facebook Are For Kids”

Fear: Businesses have a difficult time grasping the concept that the same network their children use to gossip to their friends about the party they went to over the weekend is the same channel that is going to connect businesses with their customers.

Fact: Yes, it is true that there are a lot of teenagers and college students that are on social networking sites. However the fastest growing demographics on Facebook are those 35 years and older (Facebook). On Twitter, 45 to 54 year olds make up the highest indexing age group (eMetrics) and Internet users between the ages of 35-54 now account for 40.6% of MySpace visitors (comScore). So, social media is not just for kids, but a way for organizations to reach out and connect with the right people to grow their business.

“Building Online Relationships Is A Waste of Time”

Fear: There is no point of networking with people you are never going to meet. It is simply a waste of time as it will not drive me any more business.

Fact: This is far from true - social media has opened the doors where it is possible to network with your customers, clients, prospects at ease. Not all of them are going to turn into customers, but that does not mean you cannot collect valuable feedback on your product or service. In addition, building your online fan base is another way for you to promote your products and services and help keep people informed about what is happening in your organization. There is no such thing as time being wasted when it comes to networking with your target audience.

“You Cannot Measure Social Media”

Fear: It is not possible to measure an ROI on social media.

Fact: The very fact that social media is Internet based means it can be measured. When it comes to measuring social, there are typically different Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) businesses look at when determining ROI. For example, the goal of your website may be to measure the number of completed downloads, the number of items added to the shopping cart, or the number of newsletter sign-ups you receive. However, on your social media campaign, you might look at the number of fans that increased over time, the number of comments posted on your channel, the number of discussion threads on your forum, or the number of ratings your video received. All these Key Performance Indicators can be measured and analyzed to determine if the campaign was indeed successful.

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There are several tools available that allow you to measure the traffic you receive from social sites and analytic software such as Google Analytics can be used to determine which social sites brought the most conversions for your product / service. So yes, considering all this, social media can be measured.

“Social Media Is Free”

Fear: I can create my own YouTube channel, or LinkedIn page, or Twitter account. There is no cost for me to set up my network on those portals, so why am I being told it is going to cost me money to implement a social media campaign?

Fact: A lot of the technology is free, but simply creating an account on Facebook or registering your product name on Twitter is not a social media campaign. You need to ask yourself:

- How do I increase the number of fans I have on my Facebook page?
- How do I get users to subscribe to my YouTube channel?
- How do I get people to retweet my message to their followers on Twitter?
- How do I get users to subscribe to my blog?

You still need the campaign, the creative, and the drive to get your social media plan working for you.

“This Is Something I Can Probably Do In-House”

Fear: We have employees that use social networking sites on a regular basis, and they are familiar with the technology, so why not use them to grow our business online?

Fact: In most cases, employees are using social media for personal reasons, and use it to connect with their friends, share photos, and find out what’s happening and where. But when it comes to leveraging and monetizing social media for business purposes, it is a completely different ball game. This is where creativity, campaign ideas, and of course experience is key, and organizations need to turn to the experts in this field to help them put that plan in place. There is no pre-defined process for social media. Depending on your target audience and your product or service, the networks you participate in, the message you decide to deliver and the way you deliver it are crucial to the success of the overall campaign.

Finding The Right Social Media Mix

Social media might be the question that is being discussed at the meetings in your organization, but it is not always the answer. You need to look at what the objective of the campaign is, what you consider a success, and then determine if social media is a mechanism that is going to help fulfill that plan. Social media should not be a replacement for a marketing strategy you are implementing, but should be part of the mix of activities you are executing.



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Twenty-six percent of Fortune 500 companies have already started and feel that social media is an important aspect to their business strategy. So whether it is a large portion or small percentage of your overall campaign, success comes with testing, measuring and analyzing results.

Conclusion

So where do businesses start? Should they create a page on LinkedIn or MySpace? Should they start a blog or start a Twitter campaign? To answer these questions, it is important to understand that different social networks attract different types of people – so you need to match the users of your product and service to the network they are most likely to engage in. For example, if you are selling consumer goods, Facebook might be the better area to start promoting opposed to LinkedIn, which is a more B2B environment. Your local WSI Consultant can help put the pieces of the social media puzzle together and recommend a plan that is right for your business. Social media can be fun, drive a lot of targeted traffic, increase visibility, and generate more business, but without the knowledge and experience of executing the campaign, your social strategy is going to turn, well... very unsocial.

About the Author



Baltej Gill is the Search Engine Marketing Specialist at WSI. Graduating from a technical background in Computer Science, Baltej has over 5 years experience in training and educating consultants and organizations on how to leverage Internet marketing in their business. He has held several Internet marketing workshops internationally and trained Internet marketing consultants on subjects such as search engine optimization, conversion architecture, social media and web analytics.

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