

Getting the social media on your side

Marketing specialists must embrace the world of technology

Blogger's revenge

When a US blogger called Vincent Ferrari felt that he had been insulted and patronized by an AOL customer service representative, he knew exactly how to embarrass the company.

Ferrari posted the audio recording of the encounter. As word spread, 300,000 listeners requested downloads of the audio file, the story was picked up by thousands of other bloggers and websites, and eventually made America's newspaper and broadcast media, including NBC.

It is a telling illustration of the power that the social media exert. In their article, Mangold and Faulds tell this story to explain that businesses ignore these forces at their peril, and must learn how to embrace them positively.

The social media are an exceptionally broad church, taking in everything from social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook to business networking sites, Podcasts, news delivery sites and collaborative websites such as Wikipedia. They offer a huge challenge to companies which have been used for so long to coordinating and controlling their promotional efforts through such established, traditional channels as public relations, advertising, personal selling and direct marketing. Social media have brought into the mix a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums which now play a massive part in influencing consumer behavior.

Creating a hybrid

While integrated marketing communications (IMC) have traditionally been used by organizations to communicate with their target markets, Mangold and Faulds argue that they should not be seen in isolation from the "new" social media. Rather, social media should be seen as a hybrid of IMC which must be incorporated into company strategy.

The authors cite Procter & Gamble and General Electric as examples of companies which have embraced social media. It is a policy which enables them to talk to customers, while also allowing customers to talk to one another, through the likes of blogs and Facebook. These can be seen as an extension of word-of-mouth, with a few keystrokes putting one person's thoughts into the homes of hundreds or even thousands of consumers. That provides considerable power to be harnessed by companies who can influence the conversations that consumers have with one another.

Social media have severely eroded the control that marketing managers can exert over the way information enters the public domain. Managers need to recognize this, while also appreciating the parallel diminution in usefulness and practicality of traditional

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communications as a means of developing IMC strategies. The internet, for example, is now the number one source of media for consumers at work, and in second place with consumers at home. Many consumers now see social media as a more trustworthy source of information about products and services than communications which arrive by the corporate route.

Toyota open road

The authors identify numerous methods which can be used by marketing managers to shape consumer-to-consumer conversations. Blogs, as the Vincent Ferrari story illustrates amply, can be as damaging to companies as they can to individuals but they can be brought onside as a positive force. Consumers like to be able to provide feedback and Toyota's "Open Road Blog", offering owners the opportunity to come up with criticism, accolades and suggestions, serves precisely that purpose. It can contribute to a sense of community between supplier and consumer. Other positive uses of the internet include online voting, submitting ideas and, in the case of one recent Procter & Gamble initiative, challenging consumers to create short videos of a product in use.

Websites can be used simply to give people more information about products, and to help them to feel both important and involved. Some companies have brought a playful element to their use of the internet, such as Burger King who suggested that the lead item Whopper was no longer being sold. Customers' reactions – firms must be careful, this could go pear-shaped – were recorded on video, and later formed part of an advertising campaign.

The fact that this could backfire reiterates the point about marketing managers not being able to control the social media; they ignore it at their peril. The key is to make it work for you rather than as writers say, "surrendering the communications process to the vagaries of the marketplace".

There is a story about a Hollywood movie mogul going to see a production of *Hamlet*. "The trouble is," he says afterwards, "it's just a load of clichés." These days the journey, in many people's minds, from fresh to cliché, is a spectacularly fast one. New ideas and expressions lose their sheen very quickly. As Joe Fernandez points out, the marketing industry loves "buzz" words, but the "hot" terms which are used with ever greater frequency can go cold in no time at all. Worse still, terms such as "green" and "healthy" can actually become a liability.

Familiarity can breed contempt. Robert Jones, a strategist at the Wolff Olins consultancy, puts it more strongly still, saying that the term "green" has been poisoned by overuse. He adds: "Green and other poisoned terms are becoming more mainstream, as they gather momentum on government agendas."

These terms make it harder for products to stand out. People become less convinced, too, by the very word "green" and its validity. Charlie Makin, chief executive officer at Arena BLM, identifies a shift in consumer culture as an important factor. He says that consumers do not implicitly trust brands and want more information about why they are good. According to the consultancy firm McKinsey and Co, consumers also have a more changeable approach to decision making, weighing up the options in a far more complex manner.

Taste first, fair trade second

The food and drink sector provides some interesting examples of changing attitudes. While the UK Government's Change4Life initiative has made brands more aware of highlighting health benefits, terms such as "healthy" and "organic" are seen increasingly as too generic. So Diet Coke has become Coke Zero, and while Cadbury is entitled to trumpet the Fairtrade certification on its Green & Black's brand, the company has chosen to play this down in favor of emphasizing taste benefits. In the same way that a defendant needs a lawyer to plead his case in court, firms are increasingly taking the view that it will look better if they can get a third party to push their positive credentials for them.

Other terms that appear to be past their sell-by date include 4x4, with Lance Bradley, managing director of Mitsubishi Motos admitting that there is a "negativity" around the term – because they are perceived as gas guzzlers – which explains the increasing number of references to the likes of "crossover" vehicles.

Curiously, social media itself has become an accepted term for giving technology a human face, as it conjures up Twitter or Facebook, whereas the term Web 2.0 says very little. In fact, "people turn off", as an executive at Hewlett-Packard admits.

Bridges to cross

Turning off is precisely what people do when faced with a poor marketing or advertising campaign. However, when practitioners are faced with cross-cultural advertising, they have another bridge to cross. What works with one culture might have a lesser impact elsewhere.

Mikhailitchenko *et al.* examine the effectiveness or otherwise of visual imagery in cross-cultural advertising through research involving students in Russia and America. They wanted to establish the relationships between the brand familiarity, visual imagery and brand claim recall.

Two studies dealt with five hypotheses relating to these issues. One of the most interesting was the theory that "the effect of visual imagery on brand claim recall is higher for the low level of brand familiarity, and lower for the high level of brand familiarity". There is an interesting parallel here with Fernandez's view that expressions or phrases can become stale or even "poisonous". With images, familiarity can also breed a certain kind of contempt. They make less impact with the brands that are already well-known.

Another hypothesis floated the idea that "the relationship between brand familiarity and brand information recall will be stronger for the USA than for Russia". This would be because, as the authors suggested, in the more mature, longer-established capitalist markets, the "advertised information is based on established brand schemata, while in non-mature markets these schemata are usually absent". The logic would seem to be that Americans have better-established terms of reference in relating to the world of advertising and marketing, because they have been embedded for so much longer in their national culture. Data samples were drawn from students representing business schools which were largely similar in terms of size and academic reputation.

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Consumer responses

A complex set of formulae were applied and the results largely supported most hypotheses. The findings did not support the view that brand familiarity's impact on recall differed significantly across the two cultures. The study demonstrated amply, however, that a cultural disposition to the written word or visual images has a significant effect on consumers' ability to respond to different kinds of stimulation. In the USA, there were "higher attributive recalling abilities" from image-intensive media. Russians read more, and deal more comfortably with written information in advertisements.

Perhaps the most important part of this research lies in demonstrating the way the image-intensive tools generate different returns, depending on both brand familiarity and cultural media. A wider study, taking in more countries, would help to establish whether these findings hold true across all diverse cultural, political and economic backgrounds.

This review is based on "Social media: the new hybrid element of the promotion mix," by Mangold and Faulds, "The poisons that pollute your marketing (product claims)" by Fernandez, and "Cross-cultural advertising communication: visual imagery, brand familiarity, and brand recall," by Mikhailitchenko *et al.*

Every technological development brings positive and negative baggage for both society and industry. Mangold and Faulds make some valid points about the way companies must become "savvy" about exploiting social media, rather than allowing them to use them.

Fernandez offers an unusual and fresh angle to the world of marketing in examining the way certain terms, usually dreamed up or promoted, have taken on a pejorative slant. To return to Hamlet, it is tempting to suggest that in overusing some terms, many marketing experts, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, have been hoist by their own petard.

Mikhailitchenko *et al.* uncover some interesting points about the way advertising and marketing will never be able to rise entirely above cultural differences. For the layman, the hypotheses are more interesting than the somewhat impenetrable details of how they were proved or otherwise.

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