

Be nice or leave: a guide to being social when all media is social

LET'S START WITH THE PROBLEM OF NAMING. Last year, it was web 2.0. Before that, consumer-generated content. Now it is social media. This is problematic.

Media is inherently social – not just in the obvious sense that it is a conduit for ideas between people, but also because media products have a tendency to function as solidarity goods. This is a class of economic goods that become more valuable the more they are consumed.

When we hear the word 'media', it has a diminished meaning that triggers a set of associations and behaviours. We think of 'something that I can buy space in to place ads', which isn't how social media works at all. The term I prefer is the 'radical decentralisation of the economics of cultural production' – but I don't think it will catch on.

There are now many different social media tools. Whether networking, blogging, tweeting or sharing, they give the average person the ability to create and distribute content without access to studio, printing press or programming skills.

Emerging cultural practices

When looking at this emerging mediascape, the tendency is to catalogue platforms. This isn't entirely helpful. Technologies are superseded: Friendster begat MySpace, begat Facebook. As Henry Jenkins, professor of media at MIT, points out: "Our focus should not be on emerging technologies but on emerging cultural practices."

The ability to create and share has engendered two related behaviours – conversations and relationships. Social media is centred on people talking to each other, one to one and one to many, establishing and reinforcing different kinds of relationships.

Advertising has clung to the idea that communication is about the transmission of messages, but most communication transmits little semantically. The function of the interaction is phatic – it establishes and reinforces relationships. Status updates don't transmit data – they keep relationships alive.

Brands need to find a way to be relevant in social media. Research from Universal McCann has found that people are more likely to believe a random blog post than a TV commercial. As consumers spend more time consuming each other's content, share of mainstream media will erode.

Understanding how to behave in social media is easy: be nice or leave. This is not to sound trite – it is an entirely different behavioural grammar for marketers.

Economics has espoused the myth of *homo economicus* – a rational being, who makes cost-benefit analyses in every situation and will respond to a monetary incentive with an increased propensity to perform an action. This is nonsense. You can test this: next time someone cooks you a meal, to show your appreciation and encourage this behaviour, leave a tip.

Social and commercial behaviour don't mix. Acting commercially in social spaces can seem insulting, which is perhaps why corporations have found it difficult to act socially.

I have outlined an approach for brands looking to interact with the social world, with two *caveats*. First, being social needs dedicated resources – the media may be free, but building relationships takes huge amounts of time and attention. Second, you can't control what people say. You must trade control for influence or you can't play in social spaces.

1) Listen. People are talking about your brand. Simple monitoring tools, such as Google Alerts and Twitter searches, can show you what they are saying. Paid-for services, such as radian6, provide more functionality. Like any conversation, it begins with listening.

2) Respond. Internet conversations about you are often directed to you. It is expected that you are listening and reacting. Someone should be responding to complaints and questions.

3) Nurture. The first corporate response to social media was: get me one. Wal-Mart tried to build its own social network. It didn't work because there was no social object tying the network together – no reason for it to exist. As Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said: "Communities already exist. Instead, think about how you can help that community do what it wants to do."

4) Create social objects. The highest hope for a social marketing effort is that it becomes a social object itself. When launching the Nikon D40, we gave 200 cameras to people in a small town and let them find out how easy they were to use, creating large quantities of social content.

5) Be transparent. Let's be clear – lying is wrong. In the early days of the social web, there was a lot of shady work that faked grassroots movements – we called it astroturfing. I assumed this was a thing of the past. However, last January, a marketing person from router manufacturer Belkin was caught offering to pay people to write positive product reviews on Amazon. This is staggeringly foolish. On the social web, when someone knows something, everyone knows something.

6) Join the conversation. This is the final, and hardest, step. This can take innumerable forms, from employee blogs to Twitter offers, web films and beyond. This is when the brand makes the transition from acting like a faceless corporation to adopting an appropriate grammar for the space – acting more like a person.

Social communication is fundamentally different. It requires a different behavioural grammar, different skills, and different staffing. It is a channel for market research, customer service and marketing.

As Scott Monty, head of social media at Ford, says: "It's not about campaigns; it's about commitment."



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