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The social media transformation process: curating content into strategy

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media is an engaging area of research that is rapidly evolving. The purpose of this paper is to focus on how corporations should effectively utilize this new media as a marketing channel. The key to any successful communication strategy is matching the message to the target audience and achieving customer engagement. Two important target audience variables were identified as crucial when determining an organization's social media communications strategy: the level of brand relationship, and the level of category involvement.

Design/methodology/approach – Depth interviews were initially employed, followed by questionnaires, and then computer assisted content analysis was performed on 723 online media articles relating to social media marketing to identify semantic and conceptual relationships.

Findings – Research from both a customer and corporate perspective led to insights into how organizations can develop their social media strategies in order to transform their brand message from being perceived as a commercial source of information to a social source – the social media transformation process.

Research limitations/implications – This research suggests a finer level of segmentation of social media users that will lead to content strategies adapted to fit the current levels of brand and category involvement. This could be used by organization to develop a model of best practice to achieve their social media objectives.

Practical implications – It is crucial for organizations to understand how different groups of users influence, receive, curate, and interact via social media. The greater the depth of this knowledge, the greater the effectiveness of content marketing strategies developed by the corporation. Organizations that utilize social media marketing must carefully analyse the large amount of consumer information available to them, listen to consumer conversations, and determine the needs and segments that will be most receptive to different approaches. They must also accept that in a social media environment user generated content and interactive communication processes should be at the heart of successful strategy.

Originality/value – To date, there has been limited analysis of how relationship and involvement factors drive social media content (Cho *et al.*, 2014; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013). More research is needed to understand how key user characteristics lead to content that fully utilizes the social interaction and message diffusion potential of this media. This paper introduces a hierarchy of content marketing based upon the type of relationship between the user and the organization, as well as their level of product category involvement.

Keywords Social media, Communication strategy, Social media strategy, Content marketing, Best practise

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The recent inclusion of social media as a key focal point for an organization's core communication strategy is an area of considerable industry and academic interest (Holm, 2006; Khang *et al.*, 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Social media touches nearly every facet of our personal and business lives, so it is imperative for it to be an integral part of a company's overall strategy (Qualman, 2013; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). For an organization, the integration of the various components of social media's different elements provides the ability to connect and engage directly with consumers beyond what traditional media can achieve. The paid placement mass model of media has changed into a paid, owned, and earned media model, due to social media's prevalence, and consumer behavioural preference (Adams, 2012; Phillips, 2008). As the new model of paid, owned, and earned media gains prominence, managers are often very surprised at how the "earned" social media evolves.

Social media provides the potential to interact with users who are highly involved (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), and to build relationships with individuals (Calder *et al.*, 2009; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013), who will then represent the organization in a positive way to their social media communities (Booth, 2011; De Vries *et al.*, 2012). Social media campaigns, if they are well integrated, provide a synergistic form of interaction and diffusion to large numbers of consumers (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011), and have the potential to change the organization's message from being perceived as a commercial source of information to being perceived as a social source – we call this the social media transformation process.

Over recent years there has been a progression in our understanding of the social media environment. Initially many organizations used it as a broadcast media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), but the nature of social media has evolved beyond this point, enabling consumers, rather than corporations alone, to influence and contribute to the content. In some cases the brand taps consumers as advocates, facilitating the majority of content. For social purposes, it is key to leverage two way and exponential involvement, and this means that broadcast messages are often not the ideal sole use for this media (Taylor *et al.*, 2011). As social media is a participatory interaction media, there is significant value in using it to transform a corporate message into something that is viewed as a social message. To achieve this corporations need to carefully manage what is said, and even more importantly "who that message comes from" (Hsu *et al.*, 2010; Taylor *et al.*, 2011).

Given the importance of what is said, and the fact that consumers play an active role in the shared and earned media space, there has been a growth in interest in what is referred to as content marketing (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Pulizzi and Barrett, 2009). Corporations need to produce and curate content that fits the social environment, contributes to the social media community, and encourages user generated content (Campbell *et al.*, 2011; Muniz and Schau, 2011; Mutum and Wang, 2010). To develop and curate appropriate content it is necessary to understand the target audience (Taylor *et al.*, 2011), in order to gauge their needs and preferences.

To date there has been limited analysis of how relationship and involvement factors drive social media content (Cho *et al.*, 2014; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013; Jin, 2009). Going beyond including puppies in dating site profiles (which tends to attract greater interest from the opposite sex), or virally sharing YouTube cat videos on newscasts, the assessment of what motivates sharing is quite elusive. More research is needed to understand how key user characteristics lead to content that fully utilizes the social interaction and message diffusion potential of this media. This paper introduces a hierarchy of content marketing based upon the type of relationship between the user and the organization, as well as their level of product category involvement.

Method

For this research social media is defined as the media for interaction (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). While it uses the internet as the primary basis for information transfer, it is a significant sub-segment of the internet. Social media has the additional distinction in that it involves some form of social interaction as part of the process. This may occur in a number of different forms ranging from social media sites such as Facebook, Google+, YouTube, and Twitter, through to online magazine-style content written by corporations or private individuals. This social interaction component has significant implications for how organizations and society engage with this new media. The objective of this research is to analyse what practitioners are currently focused on in the area of social media, and how corporations can best curate and utilize social media content in their marketing campaigns.

To identify best practices for social media marketing, a series of studies including both social media users and corporations were undertaken. These involved a range of highly focused research techniques with each stage informing the research objectives of the subsequent stage. First depth interviews were undertaken with industry leaders, followed by interviews with managers, then surveys of graduate students in executive programmes, and finally textual analysis of online media channels. As a final step industry experts were used to provide feedback and external validation of the research findings.

Initially, unstructured depth interviews were conducted with panel experts and attendees at one of the largest American Advertising Federation professional symposiums focusing on social media advancement, as well as another major advertising media networking event in Michigan. Detroit Michigan was chosen as it ranks as a major advertising market for social media expenditure, with 20 per cent of all advertising investment in the nation emanating from Detroit agencies and client firms (Boe and Sandberg, 2014). The Detroit metropolitan area (DMA) is also in the top ten DMA areas for most categories with over 70 advertising and social media agencies owned by worldwide agency networks and/or privately held. There is also a significant automotive social media presence and sophisticated technology corridor media models, so in some aspects it is much more innovative and entrepreneurial than many other ad markets. Detroit has a large number of social media incubator firms and start-ups, and Google, Yahoo, and Facebook have offices in the Detroit area.

At the early stage, qualitative research consisting of participant observation techniques and depth interviews were chosen as the preferred research techniques. These were chosen cognizant of the research objective, as they facilitate a deep understanding of participants' thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions, while allowing the researchers to integrate into the social media sub-culture and environment in an unobtrusive way (Hair *et al.*, 2008).

This stage involved interviews with a small sample of current US social media experts in order to identify a research framework. Unstructured interviews and feedback forums with senior executives with responsibility for social media strategy were undertaken. Position titles were: Director of Interactive Experience, Vice President Group Director of Digital, Director of Social Media and Interactive Marketing (all from major multinational advertising agencies or emerging social media agencies). In addition, brief and informal discussions, casual interviews, and informational excerpts, were held with senior executives at Facebook, Yahoo, Google, F/X, Hulu, MEDC, and AOL, at professional events, seminars, panels, and symposiums, that provided access to individuals who are typically inaccessible.

In order to shed further light on the initial findings from the depth interviews, qualitative research was conducted using two distinct pilot groups of heavy social media users with at least five years industry experience at a middle management level. They were screened for advanced social media usage behaviour and all were internet and technologically advanced. Findings from this exploratory study were used to develop a set of questions that were then administered to a group of 20 graduate students in the USA and New Zealand. This group was selected as they fit the profile of heavy and informed users of social media (Intelligence SCB, 2009). Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key themes.

Next, a survey was administered to 105 executive graduate MBA and graduate master's students with five years of industry experience in appropriate industries, consisting of open-ended short answer probing questions. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data. This series of studies provided a number of insights. Integrating the key themes, this led to the identification of the social media transformation process.

The premise is that the social media transformation process is developing as a core marketing strategy. There are numerous individual cases of such campaigns, including many that are recognized as award winning, such as the Metro Trains "Dumb Ways to Die" campaign that won an unprecedented 18 Gold's Lions at the 2013 Cannes Advertising Festival. Social media has been incorporated into so many promotional campaigns, with varying degrees of complexity and strategic intent, that it is becoming ubiquitous. Curation, engagement, and co-creation of content are common themes of such campaigns.

This growth in social media utilization is also facilitated by the exponential scalability of platforms like Facebook, where with permission, a customer is reached who has an average of 130 friends (Adams, 2012). Hence, by reaching one person and their friends, you now have a potential spread of 10,000 friends of friends (assuming limited overlap: Adams, 2012). This evolution was evidenced by key themes that surfaced in the exploratory analysis with graduate students and practitioners. Further interviews with another separate group of expert industry social media practitioners confirmed these findings and led to the exploration of social media content creation. To further understand the state of development and interest in these areas, additional practitioner-based analysis was then undertaken.

In order to understand application aspects of corporate led contention provision of social media channels, a series of 150 online media channels relating to social media marketing were identified. These 150 channels were then refined based upon their access frequency, output frequency, and global access ranking using Alexa (alexa.com), as well as reader subscription numbers through RSS feeds from these channels. Media channels with low-circulation numbers and infrequent output were removed from the analysis and articles were collected from the remaining 83 over a six-month period, September 2013 to March 2014. Within this list, relevant articles were identified based upon keyword search. This resulted in 723 articles consisting of 615,824 words that were then analysed using Leximancer content analysis software.

The aim of the analysis was to identify the existence of themes being discussed across a broad range of prominent online media platforms, and to determine their relational structure (Scott, 2012). Leximancer provides a valid and reliable (Rooney, 2005; Smith and Humphreys, 2006; Stockwell *et al.*, 2009), machine learning-based concept mapping tool, suitable for analysing large data sets while minimizing expectation bias or coder reliability issues.

Leximancer uses a two-step machine learning technique that provides both conceptual and relational analysis of the concepts in the corpus. The first step involves analysis using frequency data and co-occurrence counts and once concepts are identified a thesaurus is built of related words to add semantic content. These concepts and their relationships are presented as concept maps.

Figure 1 shows the cluster map and Table I the frequency table of concept terms, which illustrates the relational extraction of concepts. The concept map illustrates concept points, the size of which is determined by summation of the co-occurrence counts. Themes are shown by grouping of concepts clusters, and these are presented on a planar geometry indicating the relative closeness of the relationship of different themes and concepts.

Results: themes

The thematic cluster map (Figure 1) shows the 11 primary themes and their related concepts. In order of frequency the top ten are shown in Table I.

The results demonstrate the strong interest and application of content marketing in social media marketing as a means to engage with customers. It also indicates how through these links, the content marketing area enables companies to build business and sales through appropriate curation. This result was expected given that the original

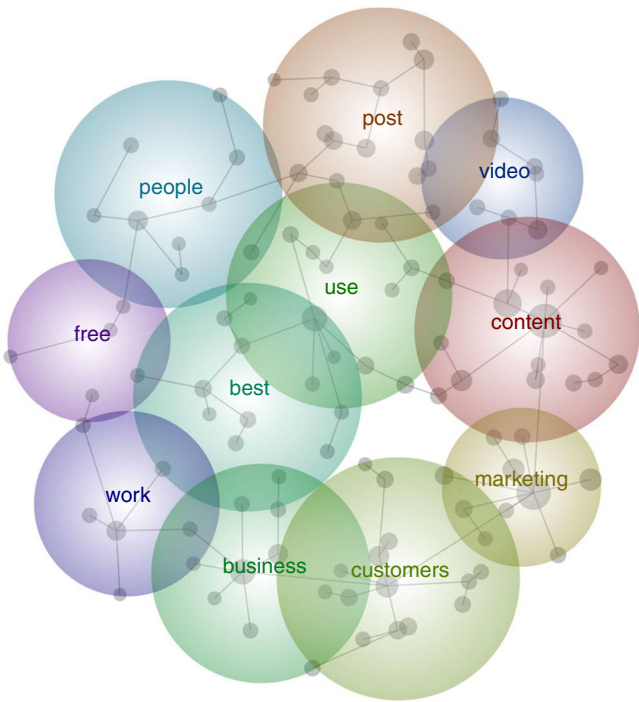


Figure 1.
Cluster map
of key themes

Note: Derived from sample of 723 articles related to content marketing published online between September 2013 and March 2014

The social media transformation process

Table I.
Key themes and
related concepts

There is a strong co-occurrence link between the theme “content” and “social media”, as well as “share”, “create”, “audience”, and “engagement”, which then intersects with the various “platform” concepts (network, Facebook, video, mobile, Twitter) on one

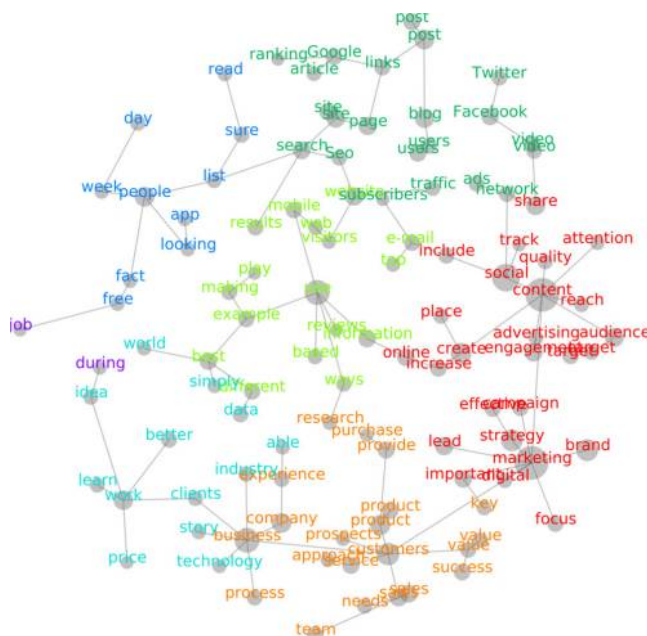


Figure 2.
Concept map

branch, and the actual users/subscribers on another. "Post" appears as the most generic and common form of content delivery through online posts on blogs or other digital content channels, although "video" appears as a high-frequency word that, by drilling down, forms the main link to both Twitter and Facebook in terms of how content is most effectively shared by professional marketers.

The key concepts in the "marketing" theme are related to the "brand", "strategy", "digital", and "effective". This leads directly to the "customers" theme, which relates to "sales", "value", "service", and "product", and then into the "business" theme, which intersects the "customer" theme, and contains the key concepts of "company", process and "experience".

These four concepts of "content", "marketing", "customers", and "business" form the core of the results with the highest relevance as shown on the right hand side of Figure 2. They interface with a second-tier of concepts, namely, "best" and "use" in the centre of the map, two concepts which overlap strongly, sharing terms "example", "making", "play", "use", "information", and "reviews". "Best" relates to business performance, also overlapping with the "business" concept as well as minor concepts of "work" and "free".

These areas of overlap extend our understanding of the previous research. Strategy's foremost relationship is to marketing, with specifics such as branding and market. Social media was strongly related with content, and content was about "quality", "sharing", and "audience", as well as "attention" and "engagement". Content was linked to the various platforms and media formats used to share with the audience and in turn with use. However, it was also linked with video appearing as a format with particular importance for curation. Marketing is the intermediary function connecting content to customers and beyond that business.

The "people" theme warrants further investigation. The "use" theme links both to "content" and "customers" directly, although both the platform used for content delivery and the actual content itself (i.e. "posts") act as conduits in terms of the relationship between "content" and "use". The concept of "people", however, only links to "posts" and not with "use" or the more managerial aspects of "best" and "work". "People" led to facts, free, and job, however, suggesting that these are key areas that are related to wants. The themes "people" and "customers" are at the opposite ends of the relevance spectrum within the 11 highest frequency themes, possibly suggesting a true differentiation between use-specific readers of content (for facts, free, and jobs) and people who access content as potential customers.

This analysis provides insight into the various strands that informed practitioners are discussing in relation to content marketing in social media. Marketing is viewed as the means to create and communicate brand messages, and there is a need to understand the various platforms and devices in order to develop suitable content. Business issues relate to the team and processes that are developed, and customers are discussed primarily in relation to products and services. Social media was related to sharing and the audience, and the theme of time was a prominent one across all areas.

This textual analysis section of the research demonstrates the concepts practitioner are currently associating with social media marketing, and in particular the role that content has in marketing to consumers. Integration of results from all of the above studies provided a number of key insights. Given the amount of data generated and limited space, this paper focuses on a limited number of key themes. These themes were categorized under the broad headings: "The social media context", "The user's motivation", and "The corporation".

The social media context

Social media is an important and growing social source of information. The high usage and ease of access allows consumers to rely more on social sources rather than commercial sources of information to inform their consideration sets (Pavlou and Stewart, 2000). Moreover, its pervasiveness in the lives of younger people causes social media to crowd out cognitive capacity towards traditional media sources, such as television and radio, especially as simultaneous viewing habits increase (Boyd, 2007, 2014). Media multi-tasking has also become more pronounced (Boyd, 2007, 2014; Brasel and Gips, 2011; Pilotta and Schultz, 2005).

The information context is an interactive social environment that is extremely data rich but one where the organization has limited control over the content. Unlike traditional media, social media is seen primarily by the users as an environment for consumer to consumer interaction (Colleoni, 2013; Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Ridings *et al.*, 2006), not corporation to consumer interactions (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Hsu *et al.*, 2010; Kelly *et al.*, 2010). Corporations need to produce or curate content that fits this perception, with material that contributes to the community, and stimulates users to diffuse the message to their social networks, either in its original state or adapted in some form of user generated content (Smith *et al.*, 2012). It should not be a commercial.

From a corporate perspective social media has huge potential value as a diffusion network. If corporations can stimulate consumers to diffuse their message, then this message is not only likely to be perceived as a more credible source of information (a social rather than a commercial source), but the relationship status of the sender passes to the message. The key questions are: “how do you stimulate customers to distribute your message?”, and, “who should you get to distribute your message?”. Consequently, it is necessary for an organization to understand the motives of different social media users, and use this knowledge to provide them with content that they want to distribute to their social networks.

The users' motivation

For most users the primary motives in using social media are to communicate and connect with other people, and in doing so improve their feelings of self-esteem (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Kang *et al.*, 2014; Lin and Lu, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it would seem that messages developed for social media channels need to be designed to allow users to enhance their self-esteem through sharing, embellishment, and/or content expansion (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, the information richness of the social media environment enables a more targeted approach, whereby users are more likely to respond to social media messages that provide an individualized message. The rapid growth of content marketing as a focus of social media strategy reflects this premise.

The greatest value or benefit of the social diffusion of a corporate message is achieved when key social media community influencers endorse and diffuse it (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Kim and Ko, 2012; Pöyry *et al.*, 2013). These key influencers have large networks and their standing within the community means that the message is likely to be looked at, and their relationship status will reflect positively on the message. The ability to data mine social media user information allows for these key influencers to be identified (Bello *et al.*, 2013).

The motivation of these key influencers needs to be determined in order to develop targeted content that will increase the likelihood of social diffusion. The key organizational consideration should be the identification of why a social media influencer would want to have a conversation with a brand rather than their friends, family, or network community.

In attempting to identify what it is that influencers value, there is a need to also identify the social dynamics of the community that an organization is trying to communicate with, in order to determine common threads and touch points for relevancy and engagement.

Influencers provide social information to the community (Ahrens and Coyle, 2011), and some of this social information may be related to products and services. Some of these influencers may have an existing relationship with the organization and/or their brand(s). For some companies certain advocates have such a strong brand relationship that they actively and voluntarily become part of the communication process themselves; passing on information and/or events to their social media networks.

These passionate advocates' self-concept and self-esteem are related to their expert status, which in turn is linked to their relationships with the brand. So if corporations are able to connect with the social/esteem needs generated by this brand relationship, then a corporation can use social media to change their brand from being one that provides primarily functional value to one that also provides social value (Chatterjee, 2011). In other words, social media strategy should aim to make their brand a "friend" in the online social context, building trust, commitment, and loyalty (Cho *et al.*, 2014; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Parreño *et al.*, 2013). To achieve this goal, it is important to identify brand advocates that also act as key influencers in social media, in order to avoid trust issues that arise when a corporate message is delivered through a socially focused environment. Of course this is precisely what Facebook groups and pages, Google+ communities, and LinkedIn groups and pages all seek to achieve.

The corporation

If the corporation can develop relationships with brand advocates who are also social media influencers then this provides a significant return on investment (Booth, 2011; Muñiz and Schau, 2011; Watts and Dodds, 2007). Such behaviour is viewed as more organic and trustworthy when received through e-word of mouth. In an environment where more and more people are using the internet to find reliable social sources of information to assist them in reducing their purchase risk, influencing the influencers can generate significant returns.

The understanding that such a strategy is necessary is evident from the data collected for this paper, the next question is how such a strategy can be best achieved? In principle, providing influencers with information that they then pass on to their network community enables them to maintain their expert status in their community. As the message comes from the influencer, and not the corporation, it is viewed by the community as a social message rather than a corporate source of information – the social media transformation process. Given that influencers are identifiable through their activities, and that motives can also be determined through analysis of their social media behaviour, highly targeted activities can be achieved.

As social sources of information are more likely to be both viewed and seen as credible, having influencers pass on your corporate message should significantly increase the likelihood that the related brand becomes part of the message audience's consideration set. Once you are in the customer's consideration set, companies still require a "landing site" for potential customers to further evaluate and purchase the brand, and technical evaluation of landing sites has become an integral part of the application of Google Ad Rank. Social media provides the basis for organizations to position their brands as the consumer's friend, but unless this effort is managed in an integrated process of achieving cognition, affective response, and action, then it is ineffective. This is why it is important to understand the dynamics between the paid,

earned, and owned new media model, since increasing the frequency of media message does not have the same effect as in the past (Adams, 2012; Stephen and Galak, 2012).

Finally, social media is both an enabler and facilitator, as well as an interactive feedback benchmarking tool. In this dual role, it provides the basis for attaining a social media transformation process, while stimulating evaluation and improvement of the process. In such a scheme, dispersion is an important metric, as an indicator of whether or not the message is correct. There are numerous examples of how social media sites such as Twitter are currently being used to evaluate existing campaigns for content curation (Barnes and Böhringer, 2011; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013; Crimsonhexagon.com, 2014; Hale, 2014; Gayo-Avello *et al.*, 2011; Neiger *et al.*, 2013). This allows corporations to determine if they seeded the right message and to assess if it led people down the right pathways.

Managerial implications

It is crucial for organizations to understand how different groups of users influence, receive, curate, and interact via social media. The greater the depth of this knowledge, the greater the effectiveness of content marketing strategies developed by the corporation. Organizations that utilize social media marketing must carefully analyze the large amount of consumer information available to them, listen to consumer conversations, and determine the needs and segments that will be most receptive to different approaches. They must also accept that in a social media environment user generated content and interactive communication processes should be at the heart of successful strategy.

This research highlighted the nature of the social media environment, and two key variables surfaced that are central to social media segmentation: first, the level of product category involvement; and second, the current level of relationship between the social media user and the brand. These two variables are not new to the advertising domain (Rossiter *et al.*, 1991; Wu, 2007), although the social media environment greatly enhances and influences their potential strategic application.

Table II illustrates the four groups based upon their current level of brand relationship, and their level of involvement with the product or service category. Different content and curation marketing strategies need to be developed for these four different segments, although they will need to be integrated and properly implemented. Ideally consumers should move from the less engaged to the more engaged segments, where consumer motivations and appropriate category needs permit.

For those with low levels of interest in the product category, subsequent low levels of motivation to process will mean social media messages are likely to be seen as intrusive and they will most likely be ignored, unless the message comes via a social network connection. Subsequently, organizations should focus their social media strategy on those segments exhibiting a current interest in the product category. This targeting strategy has more potential to generate affective brand responses and greater social network diffusion.

Table II.
Social
segmentation matrix

		Category Involvement	
		High	Low
Brand relationship	Strong	Knowledgeable advocates	Disinterested supporters
	Weak	Interested potentials	Disinterested prospects

The greatest return on an organization's corporate social media investment will be realized if the key influencers within the knowledgeable advocates segment are identified and properly stimulated to repackage and curate the brand message into what is seen as a social (non-corporate) message by their networks. This utilizes the existing relationship, involvement, and expert status of key users, and encourages them to expand and diffuse the message through their social media communities (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Edelman, 2010; Holtz *et al.*, 2008; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The ultimate aim is to design messages and campaigns that enhance influencer relationships as "friends" rather than "customers", meaning that subsequent user generated content also disperses in a social manner. Although a brand loses some control, it is ultimately designed to be viral (Chu, 2011).

It becomes, therefore, vital to identify the key influencers and their behaviour characteristics to establish the level of involvement and level of brand relationship, and to design messages that allow these influencers to enhance their self-concept and self-worth through curated message dispersion. However, the number of key influencers in any product category may be relatively small, and those that are current brand advocates even smaller (or non-existent for new brands). This, combined with the issue that these influencers are already highly sought after, means organizations need to also target the interested potentials.

For consumers with high involvement in the product category, they may actively seek out company information and are more likely to become brand advocates if their needs are met – both functional and social (D'Silva *et al.*, 2011; Fullerton, 2011; Okazaki *et al.*, 2013). Data mining of social media information allows these highly category involved consumers to be identified and targeted using promotional methods such as broadcast advertising, sales promotions, and events, in order to initiate communication. These promotions can be adapted based upon the full range of demographic, psychological, and behavioural information, available through social media sites.

If this targeted promotional campaign results in a response, then future social media content can be generated in order to engage them in a conversation. The subsequent investment in the relationship by an organization may be partially dependent upon the degree of influence, and the size of network community, of the consumer. Given positive responses and increases in affective brand response, future content can be generated based upon its ability and likelihood to be diffused to their social networks. Essentially, if successful, the interested potentials are moved into the knowledgeable advocates group, some of whom will be influencers. With these groups of highly involved consumers, while the company may try to steer the message in a certain direction, the interactive nature of this medium means it is ultimately the key influencers who will have most influence over their network perceptions.

In terms of the two groups not currently interested in the product category, the targeting of influencers is also a means of generating cognition amongst these segments. Social diffusion of the message may result in people who are currently not interested in the product category gaining interest, and subsequently providing a response basis for targeted advertising. In other words, moving these groups toward the left side of the matrix would be an objective of the brand. For disinterested supporters this should be an easier process than for disinterested prospects, given their current brand relationships. Hence, if these different strategies are properly integrated and properly implemented, consumers should move from lower levels of engagement to higher levels.

This can be achieved through a range of different social media content strategies from medium weight content that provides short topic content focused on generating

interest amongst interested potentials, to more detailed context heavy material that will suit the knowledgeable advocates. Essentially this research suggests a finer level of segmentation of social media users that will lead to content strategies adapted to fit the current levels of brand and category involvement. This could be used by organization to develop a model of best practice to achieve their social media objectives. Each of these processes would need to be adapted to suit each of the four segments identified, although the process would begin with determining the objectives and the final target audience(s).

As an example, social media information sources could be used to identify the key influencers of the target audience who have a strong and positive relationship with a brand/organization. From there consumer research would be used to determine the value those influencers get from their social media community and how a firm could assist them in attaining this. Next the organization would need to integrate this value for the influencers into their communication processes. An integrated landing point to support the social media transformation process would be required. Next scanning the social media environment to identify opportunities for implementation would occur, and finally the organization would evaluate and refine the message based upon the outcome of the target's social media interactions in relation to their user generated content and its network effects.

Limitations and areas for further research

The focus of this research was not to quantifiably test the relationship between variables, but to provide insight into social media marketing strategy. The exploratory nature of the findings requires significant research validation. Ideally experimental research would be conducted in a field experiment, manipulating various content components on a sample of social media users with varying degrees of influencer status, curation potential, and category involvement. While the design of such an experiment would be relatively straight forward, overcoming the implementation obstacles may prove difficult.

Additionally, the fast paced nature of the social media environment means that while the underlying premise of the findings may remain valid, the environment itself may create changes to the relative importance of the variables. Issues such as increased awareness of privacy issues and increased regulation may mean that key influencers decide to play a lesser role on some social media platforms. New devices may also change the content dynamics.

An additional limitation was the use of graduate students in one of the stages of the research. Students pose a number of issues in relation to external validity. While the research design tried to mitigate this problem by also using a range of industry experts, working executives, textual analysis, and industry validation, the largest data set was from these students and hence replication of the studies across a wider range of different groups is needed.

From a corporate application perspective there are still many questions that need to be answered. In particular, how to most effectively identify key influencers as well as levels of brand relationship in a dynamic environment of paid, earned, and owned media. Crucially important will be accurate measures of diffusion, coupled with measures of attitudinal change over different periods of time.

From the concept map, it was evident that there are significant conversations pertaining to the devices and platforms that are used to disperse content. Given the rapid changes in the technologies, the software applications, and the device capabilities, executional elements, and the potential scope of content will be an ongoing

area of research interest and change. Brands must stay apprised of such trends and usage in order to remain relevant and be able to act quickly.

As always there are plenty of insights to be learned from the past, when we look into the future. The rapid pace of change in social media means that related marketing research is becoming a fast moving target. Some elements, such as relationship variables and product category involvement, are fundamentals that will always influence human behaviour. However, the size and direction of their effect differs across different media and content marketing strategies must be based upon understanding their relative contextual effects.

Industry validation

Given the dynamic pace of the industry and to verify the relevance of the findings, a practitioner-based validation of the research was undertaken. The full paper with the method and results sections removed, but including the concept maps, was sent to five senior social media practitioners. The method and results sections were removed for sake of brevity as well as assessment relevance, as industry practitioners are time poor and the primary focus of this assessment was on the article findings.

Five senior practitioners were selected based upon a judgement sampling method; a founder of a multinational mobile solutions organization, a former senior account executive now involved in industry consultancy, a senior executive at the world's leading internet products and service firm, a senior executive in an interactive marketing service design agency and a senior executive at Silicon Valley technology content marketing company. These five were chosen to provide a range of relevant media, platform, devices, and agency perspectives. Each person had at least a decade of experience in industry. Along with the nine pages of script, two questions were provided:

- (1) How valid, reasonable, or justified, do you find the article?
- (2) Are there any areas where you would suggest improvement, or areas that were overlooked?

Responses were categorized as: general comments, content, and examples, and limitations and areas for further research. Responses were received in written format via e-mail and where there was any ambiguity one of the researchers spoke with the respondent verbally to clarify meaning.

Results indicated all respondents viewed the article as valid and reasonable. Most of the respondents indicated that they would like to see detailed illustrations of how to apply the theory in an industry setting. Respondents provided examples under each of the three content headings and expanded upon concepts in the report. While detailed a detailed illustration of how to apply the theory is beyond the scope of the article, format changes, as well as concepts and examples provided by these senior practitioners, were incorporated into the relevant sections of the article, or in the limitations and areas for further research section.

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Further reading

- Seung-A, A.J. (2009), "Modality effects in second life: the mediating role of social presence and the moderating role of product involvement", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 12 No. 6, pp. 717-721.

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