

Social Media Optimization

Social media optimization (SMO) is the strategic use of interactive web-based and mobile technologies to make information highly visible and easily disseminated across social networking sites. These technologies, also called Web 2.0, encompass a combination of user-generated content on wikis and blogs, social news and social bookmarking sites as well as RSS feeds and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram that re-use, remix and re-purpose content with the intention to generate viral publicity, or become widely circulated.

In the past decade, social media has changed not only how individuals communicate with one another but also how political campaigns are conducted. These technologies have fundamentally shifted the balance of power between candidates and voters as well as the relationship between governments and citizens. For example, many scholars have extolled the virtues of tools like Twitter and Facebook and their use in helping to give birth to the Arab spring movement, which ignited rebellions that resulted in the overthrow of governments in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia by people newly empowered through social media. Social media has revolutionized a voter's or citizen's ability to impact political discourse and decision-making and has given rise to such efforts being called Open Politics, Politics 2.0 or participatory politics. Politics 2.0 is the idea that participatory technologies will transform an individual's ability to follow, support and influence political campaigns.

Previously content producers created websites or blogs and used search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to improve the chances of their sites rising to the top of search engines like Google, Yahoo or Bing. Today those same producers rely on users of Twitter, Facebook, Stumbleupon or Digg, and other social media to repost their content and send users back to their sites. According to social media expert Brian Solis, the metadata -- or data about data -- that users organize using keywords, tags and categories to classify user-generated content is uploaded to social networks. This creates an index of online content -- text, images or video -- that allows others to discover it.

Like search engine optimization, SMO can drive traffic to a website. However SMO differs from SEO in a few significant ways. Search engine optimization makes use of strategically placed HTML code, keywords and tags to drive traffic to a particular website; Social media optimization takes content to where users are. While SEO may penalize a site that repeats its message, SMO rewards those whose messages are repeated across multiple platforms. In fact, SMO gave rise to use of share icons that make it easier to forward an item across channels. SEO draws users to content on the site that created it, while SMO facilitates the flow of that content to where the influential people are. With the increase in "walled-garden" social media communities such as Facebook and Twitter, more users distribute information to their personal connections through links and retweets. Consequently, people doing the linking have become influential arbiters of relevance and that relevance can also mean that content surfaces high on search engine results pages thus making it easier for others to find. As a result, social media optimization becomes the online version of valuable word of mouth promotion. Social media upends the gatekeeping barrier created by editors and writers and permit citizens to tailor the

conversation, which has sparked the erosion of mass media authority. Social media differs from the traditional mass media model -- source-message-channel-receiver (SMCR) -- in which a sender transmits a message through a given channel, which is then translated and distributed with limited opportunity for feedback from the intended receiver. According to scholars Emily Metzgar and Albert Maruggi this top-down, one-way model of mass media is ceding to interactive media technologies that give the audience more influence.

Term first used

The term social media optimization was first coined in 2006 by blogger Rohit Bhargava, who outlined five rules for social media optimization that were created to distinguish SMO from the concepts of search engine optimization, which was then the main criteria for increasing online visibility and measuring successful online currency. They have evolved to reflect the prevailing use of the technique:

1. Create shareable content. Previously, linkability was the measure by which content was deemed valuable. Inbound links to a specific site implied reliable and useful content. In social media, sharing may take the form of likes in Facebook, tweets in Twitter or plus one in Google Plus, each of which include links back to the source of the information. Creating content that others find useful and informative increases its ability to surface in search engines and to build a brand. It also helps the site owner or content producer to earn social authority or perceived authenticity.

2. Make sharing easy. Use of share icons can encourage linking within social media tools like Digg or Diigo, or to Facebook, Google Plus or Twitter. Such sharing includes creating an RSS feed to distribute content throughout social media and the Internet at large.

3. Reward engagement. Responding to those who engage in the conversation by posting comments, retweeting, or other social sharing, can help improve the performance of content. Such efforts can build a dedicated user base that proactively disseminates content.

4. Proactively share content. This encompasses such activities as syndicating content using social tools such as RSS feeds, Slideshare, Scribd, posting to profiles or sharing video on YouTube, which can extend the visibility of content. It's not enough to have content in one place. For social media optimization, content must be where the users all.

5. Encourage the mashup. The mashup encourages other to others take ownership and to revise posted content to optimize it for the social web. This is a key to optimizing content on the social web.

Election of 2004

In every era, the transformation of media has impacted the political campaigns of those who have been able to best exploit them. For example, in the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the rising popularity of radio to conduct his well-received fireside chats. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy mastered television to politically devastating effect against his presidential rival Richard Nixon in series of televised debates. In 1994, Democratic Sen. Diane Feinstein of California was credited with launching the first campaign website. John McCain was among the first to disseminate

political news and information in 2000 and used the Internet to raise \$500,000 in online donations. By 2002, more voters turned to the Internet to get political information.

In 2004 many social networking sites were just launching and political campaigns began to recognize the growing clout of bloggers and many were issued credentials to cover the Democratic and Republican conventions for the first time that year.

Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's 2004 Democratic presidential bid was one of the earliest examples of social media optimization. Even as his supporters used Meetup.com to fuel his insurgent run, Dean used blogs to generate voter interest, to recruit and to motivate volunteers. There was also an evident shift from an era of top-down politics that foretold the potential of participatory politics. Despite a lack of sufficient funding, Dean's strategy of Internet-based fundraising and grassroots organizing set the stage for the strategies adopted by the presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama.

Dean's political web strategy focused on the use of search engine optimization to get supporters to his candidate website. In the old order of top-down politics, candidates and their consultants and advisers and the media controlled the message. In the evolving era of participatory politics, citizens increasingly have and wield more clout. Dean took advantage of those who wanted to engage with him by enlisting them to canvas for supporters, organize events and reach out to undecided voters.

Dean was successful in creating an online presence that supporters used to carry his message to other social networks. His use of Blog for America and Meetup.com, helped him raise \$20 million online, 40 percent of his campaign contributions. At one point, he had nearly 140,000 supporters on Meetup.com. Dean's campaign was all the more unusual because in 2004 only 31 percent of Americans used the Internet to access political news and information, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. In that pre-Facebook era, the Dean campaign relied on MeetUp.com, a website that allows users to arrange meetings around common interests. Ultimately, the supporters in his online network did not translate into votes and he lost in the Democratic primary.

SMO and Election 2008

By 2008, social media optimization was becoming the coin of the political realm. The number of people getting their news and information from social media more than doubled, according to the Pew study. Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards declared their candidacies online for the first time.

More politicians began incorporating the use of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels and blogs to connect with their constituents and to challenge opponents. But Barack Obama, a former community organizer, is credited with taking advantage of self-organized grassroots efforts to lower the cost of building a political brand as well as to create a sense of connection and engagement.

Obama utilized social media to build a cost-effective campaign tool that went beyond traditional political networks. He optimized information by maintaining a profile in 15 strategic online communities, including AsianAve.com, MiGente.com and BlackPlanet.com, MySpace, Facebook and Eons, a site for Baby Boomers, LinkedIn and Twitter. Chris Hughes, a cofounder of Facebook, created a site for Obama called MyBarackObama.com, which mimicked some Facebook features. The campaign also created an iPhone app and used text message reminders to get voters to the polls. The

campaign also carefully monitored the traffic and data from the social networks. Obama's social media efforts allowed him to beat overwhelming odds, first against strong primary opponent Democrat Hillary Clinton, and then presidential challenger Republican John McCain.

The Obama campaign bypassed traditional means of communications to amass a database with millions of names, email addresses and phone numbers of people who could be engaged instantaneously. At the time, Obama had nearly 2.4 million supporters in Facebook. McCain had 620,000. On Twitter, Obama had about 112,000 followers to McCain's 4,600. On YouTube, there were more than 18 million channel views for Obama, compared to 2 million channel views for McCain, according Pew.

These networks can be the perfect tools for politicians who zealously guard their reputations by monitoring social networks through use of the analytics in tools like Hootsuite or Tweetdeck. Although politicians have been making use of the Internet for more than a decade, their skill in optimizing social networks is relatively new.

Although Obama's efforts highlight the upside of successful social media optimization, some politicians have experienced its negative impact. Social media optimization also ensures that negative messages are easily disseminated far and wide. Such widespread distribution can have disastrous impact on political careers.

For example, when Sen. George Allen of Virginia used a slur to refer to a man of Indian descent during the 2006 U.S. midterm elections, it was caught on camera phone and went viral on YouTube. Subsequently, Allen was defeated at the polls. Similarly, N.Y. Democratic Congressman Anthony Weiner's political career was destroyed when sexually explicit photos and messages that he texted to several women went viral. Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards' secret extramarital affair and love child found traction in social media before it reached the mainstream press. Even candidate Obama experienced the sting of social media when Midwestern voters became outraged by a comment he made about their "clinging to guns and the Bible" that was recorded and posted by a blogger for Huffington Post.

On the other hand, political organizations like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street have successfully exploited social media optimization techniques to fuel growth in their respective organizations. For example, in 2009, citizens angered primarily by the bank bailout formed Tea Party groups. These group underwent new media training to learn to use blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Digg and other social media tools to reach like-minded individuals. Their influence in the 2010 midterm election helped sweep Tea Party-affiliated candidates into office. Similarly, the Occupy Wall Street movement sprang up using Facebook, Twitter, and Meetup to coordinate events nationally and internationally. The group conducted conference calls on Skype, ultimately giving voice to what they termed the 99% who felt excluded from the political discourse.

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Cross References

Search Engine Optimization

2012 Campaigns

Campaigns, Grassroots

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