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The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web

Brian Solis
Wiley, 2010

Recommendation

Digital analyst and sociologist Brian Solis steps from the virtual world into the real world to teach companies how best to exploit social media to engage consumers, build brand equity and compete. Solis backs up his comprehensive, detailed report with exhaustive research. He does occasionally fall prey to indecipherable phrasing such as, “Inward focus now must include outward contribution.” Despite these minor problems, *BooksInShort* recommends this definitive social media guide to executives who want to stake their firms’ claim in the web’s vast territory.

Take-Aways

- The immense, global social web is rife with opportunity.
- Companies need a comprehensive communications strategy for new media.
- What counts online is quality content, not self-promotion.
- Masterful social marketing never shouts; it whispers.
- Turn away from traditional mass marketing in favor of reaching key online influencers and tastemakers.
- The most effective online communication is having person-to-person conversations with your consumers.
- Marketing departments should organize a “new media board of advisors” to assist with social media strategy.
- Your online presence and communication must be sincere, consistent and empathetic.
- Develop compelling information for prospective customers in the formats and on the networks they prefer.
- Encourage all your employees to engage daily with customers and prospects online.

Summary

Social Media Worldwide

As of late 2009, Facebook had 350 million registered users, 67 million people were members of Google’s Orkut social network, 90 million used Friendster and 35 million used Bebo. Seven billion YouTube videos streamed monthly, and Technorati tracked 100 million blogs. Twitter had upward of 30 million users, and projections estimate that it will have one billion by 2013. YouTube is now the second-most-popular web search engine, and Twitter has become an accepted alternative.

“True social marketing is not marketing at all.”

The social web explosion is global: China’s QQ social network already has 300 million users, and V Kontakte, Russia’s version of Facebook, has 38 million users. New people are piling onto Japan’s Mixi, Germany’s Studiverzeichnis, Taiwan’s Wretch and South Korea’s Cyworld.

This wave of activity affects every business. Already, more than 50% of business-to-business companies plan to increase their social media investment, and for good reason: Some 70% of consumers use social networks as their primary source of brand information. And, by 2014, spending on social media will hit \$3.1 billion compared to \$716 million in 2009.

“You’re a purveyor of new media, but, then again, so is everyone else.”

Given this traffic, sensible companies want to engage in the social media, but the infinite possibilities facing them prove almost impossible to chart. Options include blogs, microblogs, blog communities, microcommunities, micromedia, livestreams, forums, business networks, niche-working, reviews, videos, customer service, documents, wikis, photographs, social bookmarks, “wisdom of the crowds” sites, crowdsourcing, podcasting, “social inbox,” social CRM and dashboards.

“Producing and posting updates that people find invigorating, insightful, entertaining and enriching is how you build a meaningful foundation for which people follow, admire and trust you.”

Faced with this daunting complexity, many companies don’t know where to start. Few corporate marketers know how to strategize what they want to achieve online. They fail to examine their social media options, set clear goals or make comprehensive plans. Research indicates that 49% of companies have no specific plans for leveraging social media. Many marketers mistakenly apply outdated methods in the social media scrum.

Ready, Fire, Aim

So far, most corporate marketing departments haven’t deduced what social media participants seek to accomplish. These marketers don’t understand why people communicate online. Many brand managers don’t know where their prospects congregate or how to present their brands online. And, as they stand confused, the social media landscape changes daily and intensifies into a wide-open, dog-eat-dog world of “digital Darwinism.” Companies that cannot engage intelligently with social media users and influencers suffer a daunting competitive disadvantage.

“People do not create accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or any other social network to hear from brands.”

Ill-prepared marketers tend to “leap before looking or fire before aiming.” They take a hasty ready-fire-aim approach. They fail to recognize the democratic nature of social media’s influence. They haven’t come to grips with the fact that social media can be a remarkable equalizer, even for the smallest companies.

“You...earn the social capital that’s commensurate with your company’s investment of time, resources and money.”

Cutting-edge competitors remain aware that “social media is a means, not an end.” They have already learned that quality content, not self-promotion, counts online. Smart marketers use blog postings, YouTube videos, Flickr photos, shared comments, and so on, as their calling cards to introduce themselves to consumers. Their compelling content engages customers and prospects, builds sustainable relationships, and enables one-on-one conversations, which means “speaking with, not ‘at’, people.” Organize your online content in a “social media dashboard” – a microsite that accumulates your material into an easily accessible, navigable “digital menu.”

Digital Detective

To succeed in social media, marketers must become digital detectives uncovering the specific data that serve their firms best. “Everything starts with unlearning what you think you know and embracing everything you need to know.” To optimize your company’s use of social media, investigate social networks – especially the ones that are most influential within your industry sector. Identify people online who are relevant to your particular business, including influential opinion-shapers. Discover the keywords these pivotal participants use when they search online; learn their terminology and jargon.

“Productive and mutually beneficial engagement is powered by effective listening and productive participation that results in measurable and favorable actions.”

Work to become familiar with these decisive individuals’ communication tools and the meaning of their online “threads, memes and associated sentiment.” Constantly updated online participation draws out and builds on threads of discussion, and memes are “discussion threads related to a brand” that emerge “without direct influence from the brand.” A meme can be any online moment – a video, a photograph, a page from someone’s website, a parody of an advertisement – that gains viral status and draws repeat or widespread viewers. Sentiment refers to how the online community perceives your brand – what emotions it evokes. You must keep tabs on the online community’s feelings about your brand and try to shape members’ reactions in a positive direction by directing your online content. Use keywords, or terms participants use most often in connection to your brand’s identity or its nature, to locate relevant online threads.

“The science of procuring attention is complemented by the delicate art of earning and cultivating relationships.”

Listen to online conversations and educate yourself about the community’s perception of your brand. Online conversations involve “direct exchanges tied to the brand, represented through comments, blog posts, tweets and re-tweets, wall posts, and shares.” Engage in active listening to connect with users and influencers. Listening is not an afterthought; it is an integral part of any social media effort. Set up a “dedicated infrastructure” to support an active listening program and to track your company’s existing and potential online audience. This infrastructure can include search engines, such as Collecta, that actively seek any mention of your brand across news sites, various blogs and the social media universe of Twitter, MySpace, Digg, YouTube and Flickr.

“The Conversation Prism”

Digital analyst and author Brian Solis and designer Jesse Thomas mapped the social media world as a graphic. They called their depiction the Conversation Prism. It displays “the dynamics of conversations” within social media communities. The Prism categorizes social networks according to their “subject, intent and capabilities,” breaking them down into subsets that include social bookmarks, crowdsourced news, blogs, mobile devices, virtual worlds, customer service, livecasting and question-and-answer networks. The Prism offers a framework that can help you decide where and how to enter the social media discussion and engage online citizens.

“Twitter and social network searches are well on their way to becoming strong alternatives to traditional search engines.”

The Conversation Prism is a “hub-and-spoke model,” with your organization at the center. The innermost ring of the hub shows your system. It is where you listen and observe, identify consumers, and sort and evaluate the information you accumulate. The next ring around the hub concerns the employees and departments within your

organization that listen, observe and respond, under the direction of a “listening manager.” The outer ring concerns the “continual rotation of listening, responding and edification” in relationship to the online activity along the spokes. The Conversation Prism helps you develop a “conversation index” – that is, a guide to identifying where your targeted consumers converse online and how to engage with them.

“We live in an increasingly thinning state of focus resulting from the overwhelming volume of information flying at us simultaneously within our networks of interest.”

Relationship building is crucial in social media outreach. Marketers who engage the online community can reach those crucial influencers who affect everyone else’s opinions. Skilled promoters upend conventional marketing with a bottoms-up “unmarketing” approach. This mode of conversation is the most effective social media strategy. It requires careful research, including ethnography – or cultural study – and active listening over as broad a range as possible. Searching for the right keywords can lead you to the online conversations you want to follow. Use search boxes for each social media website you monitor to develop a map of your brand’s online life.

Your Social Media Plan

Success on the social media playing field requires creating an organized plan for shaping the way the online audience will see your firm and how you will contribute to forming their impressions. Consider which values shape and identify your company. If you are a spokesperson or online representative, figure out how your personal brand relates to the brand you represent. Before you develop your plan, audit the social web for relevant content such as videos and blogs that reach the influencers who already connect to your brand. Monitor what your competitors do online. Make sure that none of your content – old or new – dilutes your brand image. Online, as elsewhere, your brand message and brand outreach must be consistent.

“It’s not what you say about your brand that reverberates and resonates as much as it is what your audience hears, how they share the story and how you weave that insight into future conversations.”

Visualize a “social marketing compass” to orient your planning. Your brand sits at dead center, and everything in your plan orbits around your brand. Factor in your stakeholders, your brand champions – who provide data and informed insights – as well as relevant bloggers, tastemakers and influencers. Identify the ideal platforms on which to feature your brand. Choose the most effective aggregators and syndications. Also pursue the best opportunities for igniting user-generated content and optimizing your material for search engines and social media interaction.

“In the era of the social web, we are all brand advocates and managers.”

Your marketing department should organize a “new media board of advisors” to help with social media strategy, content development and program implementation. Invite representatives from your company. To achieve maximum in-house buy-in for your social media program, include all your departments in your planning and strategizing.

Program Metrics

Online engagement has little commercial value without accurate measurement and analysis. To obtain reliable metrics, work with people in your organization who are already familiar with such tools as Google Analytics to evaluate the effectiveness of your website and other online activities. Decide which indicators to measure based on your organization’s goals. For example, Best Buy conducts return on investment measurements of its Blue Shirts Nation internal online community to gain a greater understanding of its product turnover rates. Dell evaluates the influence of its IdeaStorm online community as it pursues lower support costs and new ideas. In the US, the National Association of Manufacturers measures the success of its blogging activities in terms of increased access to members of Congress.

“Social media’s practices and benefits are indisputable, sustainable and enduring.”

You may want to measure how many fans or followers you develop online, the number of positive online conversations you find about your brand, the number of people who register with your company, the number of bookmarks you achieve, your online traffic, and the amount of your content that others share. The most significant measurement is the number of online users who become paying customers and enthusiastic online champions for your brand.

Never Yell Online

Many companies seeking favorable online attention communicate as if they “were standing on top of a table during a cocktail party and obnoxiously yelling out messages at the crowd.” The best practice is to be quietly sincere as you engage with influencers and prospects. Starbucks, Dell, SAP and Toyota – companies that excel at engaging with customers via social media – do the following:

- **“Emphasize quality, not just quantity”** – Connecting online with others is not a numbers game about how many blogs you create or how many YouTube videos you upload. Success emerges from genuine engagement and the quality of your communications and content.
- **“To scale engagement, make social media part of everyone’s job”** – Every employee can and should spend a couple of minutes every day engaging with prospects and customers online.
- **“Doing it all may not be for you – but you must do something”** – Choose one online presence that best suits your company and follow the resulting metrics.
- **“Find your sweet spot”** – Research and find the social media channels that work best for you. When you identify where your efforts are most effective, invest all the resources you can afford to leverage these productive social media opportunities.

“Engage or die.”

About the Author

Brian Solis, a principal at the research-based advisory firm Altimeter Group, is a digital analyst and sociologist. He leads interactive programs for *Fortune* 500 companies.
