

Marketing through online social networks

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Social network marketing is the electronic equivalent of grass-roots marketing: Marketing where people live and work, and on a personal level. The Internet has evolved from a relatively static environment to a user-generated content-driven environment, nowadays referred to as Web 2.0. Social networks offer users a platform from which they create their own space, connect with their friends, and share updates and opinions. In the brave new world of real-time Internet, social networks have made themselves the marketing tool of choice for business.

WHY SOCIAL NETWORKS

Aside from key benefits of marketing on the Internet, such as low cost and a large, diverse audience, social network marketing has its own distinct perks. It is a form of direct marketing and, like grass-roots, it reaches the audience while they are in their comfort zone. Social media also allow for customer interaction with the campaign, the product, and the company behind them, and this creates the kind of familiarity marketers want but at a much lower cost and on a more personal level. "It's about building trust, and creating a friendship with the consumer," said *Nadim Sarkis*, managing partner of *Besiders*, an online marketing and search engine optimization company. This friendship results in positive peer reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations, two excellent marketing tools that are very difficult to buy. Social network marketing has a host of secondary benefits as well, including useful feedback for product improvement, easier access to consumers, and easy customer database generation. "Social networks also enjoy high rankings on popular search engines, and we use this for our work. A product that exists on popular social networks sees a great increase in its organic search engine. This is one of the things that place you in the top results in Google," said *Sarkis*. Organic ranking is one based on real people and real activity, and this is exactly what successful social network marketing generates.

VERY LARGE NUMBERS

Social network marketing deals with some very large numbers. "Facebook has something around one million local users now, up from 300 thousand in December 2000. This means that 80 percent of our Internet users are on Facebook, or 24 percent of the country's entire population," said *Marc Dfouni*, CEO of *Eastline Marketing*, an online marketing strategies company. Twitter, another highly popular social network, has an estimated 5,000 local users. This number may seem meager in comparison, but it's an exponential growth from a 2009 report of only 630 users. "LinkedIn will likely cover our official market statistics next year, but I estimate ten to fifteen thousand local users for now," said *Dfouni*. Products intended for the entire Middle East market have even more appealing numbers. *Patrick Attallah*, managing director for the 90:10 marketing-consultancy group, said that 24 percent of the Middle East is online, and 88 percent of



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those are online daily. This gives marketers 46 million consumers to target, directly and by online word-of-mouth, all without leaving their offices or investing in mass-media.

SOCIAL AMBASSADORS

Social marketing places the company under the direct scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of people, or more. For this reason, advisors often start by assigning what Eastline Marketing calls a 'social ambassador' for their clients. While this may be a single employee, larger campaigns will need a team of them, and they all need to be charismatic and knowledgeable, multi-lingual, socially-sensitive, Web savvy, and involved with the products. Many advisors recommend employees with a marketing background, but Attallah suggests that companies aim even higher and build the team from trusted seniors, or at the very least people with a direct line to upper management. "You're talking directly to your consumers. This job doesn't belong only to marketing, it doesn't belong to sales, it doesn't belong to HR, and it doesn't belong to customer service. It belongs to the entire company," he said. Social ambassadors will need to adhere to a company-wide social media policy created by the communications manager or

marketing consultants, a policy that should define the online tone and voice of the company, as well as its position on relevant social and product-related issues. "Each brand needs a social media policy that defines how you want your brand to be represented. A social media policy explains what to say, when to say it, how to communicate, how to engage people in conversation, how to engage them with the product, when to delete posts and when to confront them, and more," said Dfouni.

ADVANCED PLANNING

"The first step in social networking is defining the campaign's objectives: Who does it target, and for what purpose? What is the desired gain from this contact altogether?" said Attallah. Once the goals are defined, marketers should prepare the content they plan on publishing. Many social platforms allow direct advertising via banners and links, and these will require a design budget, or videos or music which will require a production budget. Online marketing also requires an online company presence, and while social mediums can be standalone platforms, they are often used as part of a complete online campaign. In that capacity, social networks become a tool to drive visitors to a company's website or online product page. "If you're inviting

people to your website, it has to be modern and professional, and if you're using coupon codes, you need to actually create the coupon-code system in advance," said Karim Saikali, founder of E-comLebanon.com, an online marketing consultancy. Companies will often have a corporate website, and then create a mini-site for each product they plan to market online. This Web design also requires its own budget.

FACEBOOK

"For Business-to-Consumer (B2C) objectives Facebook is definitely the leading platform," said Dfouni. Facebook is the undisputed market-share leader of online social networking and marketing on Facebook starts with creating a 'page'. The platform's user interface makes this as simple as a click of the mouse and once a page is up and running the company's next step is to populate it with content. "Content, content, content. You need to give them something to talk about or you're wasting their time," said Dfouni. A Facebook page can display images, videos, and information and marketers should make these as attractive and as concise as possible, keeping in mind the limitations on local Internet usage and the users' preference for quick-loading material. Once the content is in place, marketers should make use of the multiple applications available on Facebook, including user polls, video feeds, slideshow applications, and event-management

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software, all of which require little-to-no technical expertise to install. The most important of these, a space for interacting with users, is installed by default. This is called the 'wall', and it is where most of the direct interaction happens. Facebook also offers targeted pay-per-click advertising to which companies can assign periodical budgets, and an online marketplace to announce and directly sell products and services. "Never spam your users with frequent emails – that is the reason I never use 'groups' anymore, only 'pages'. Check your page daily, listen to feedback, and learn from it," said Saikali.

LINKEDIN

Facebook suffers from a less-than-ideal reputation in some corporate circles, according to Sarkis. "Sometimes when we mention Facebook to a client, they ask whether we're talking about the online toy that their children use," he said. This reputation is steadily improving but its existence makes room for platforms like LinkedIn. LinkedIn advertises itself as a discriminating resource for professionals, rather than a gathering of online users, and marketers who want to emphasize Business-to-Business (B2B) communications will ensure they have a presence on it. "For Business to Business objectives LinkedIn has proved to be very efficient," said Dfouni. LinkedIn also offers advertising services but these are priced significantly higher than their Facebook counterparts and address a smaller market. "Success on LinkedIn requires using the platform to its fullest extent: Use descriptive headlines, meet new people, join relevant groups, post helpful information and answer questions promptly," said Dfouni.

TWITTER TO YOUTUBE

Many other social platforms exist and cater to different needs. Twitter allows users to post 'tweets', or short status messages that may or may not include links to media and other online content. Advertising on Twitter is as simple as creating a page and typing in a company's status, after which all 'followers' of that company's channel will receive instant updates. The marketer's job then becomes to drive fans to his page and make sure the content is interesting and accurate and comments are quickly responded to. "Twitter has expanded considerably in the region and can benefit both B2C and B2B," said Dfouni. For video



content, YouTube is often the platform of choice. Flickr is a great place to share still images in bulk and MySpace is popular for edgy bands and singers. These platforms are rarely used alone and instead offer complementary features to campaigns on mainstream social networks. "There are also plenty of 'hidden' social networks that a marketer shouldn't overlook: Dailymotion.com's activity has reached 1,500 video posts per day and Jeeran.com is relatively unknown but has a community of 1.3 million Middle Eastern users," said Atallah. The multitude of platforms does not dilute a campaign as most users have accounts on at least the big three (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter) and these are not designed to be mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite, they are designed for almost seamless interactivity: Twitter can get its updates automatically from a Facebook page, which in turn can use freely available add-ons like Eastline Marketing's Feedyo to play YouTube videos within its own tabs.

CREATE AN AUDIENCE

Once the space is created and the content is uploaded the social network marketing ambassadors should work to drive consumers to your page, keeping in mind

the campaigns objectives. To do this ambassadors can join groups, interact with other users and slowly raise awareness for the campaign while inviting suitable candidates to the product page. "When it comes to followers, it's about quality not quantity," said Dfouni. The company may also engage in mass-marketing on the medium of its choice, using the platform's advertising services, or external blogs, mini-sites, and offline campaigns. The idea is to create awareness, create an online buzz, and, once people join the page, the idea is to keep them there and keep them engaged and happy. "Meaningful results will at the very least take three months to show up, usually more. Over the long term it is well worth it," said Dfouni. Marketers should track their audience numbers vigilantly using available tracking tools. For independent blogs and mini-sites the tool of choice is the free Google Analytics and most social networks make built-in tracking tools available to the administrator as soon as a page is created.

STAYING VIGILANT

"Being on social networks might not be a choice for very long. You might have to go online just to defend yourself" said Sarkis. Supermarket chain TSC recently came under fire on Facebook following a rumor that it was about to stop sales of alcoholic beverages. In a matter of days 5,000 Facebook users had formed a group online and were boycotting the supermarket. "I think they hadn't even noticed before we warned them, but they dealt with it quickly and denied the rumors," said Sarkis. Atallah believes that companies have to be transparent and honest, even if it's frightening: "If you make a mistake, tell your fans you made a mistake. The Internet population is very forgiving."

Reported by Karl Baz

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