

Millward Brown Lansdowne Focuses on... Social Networking

How do marketers position their brands in the socially networked world?

James MacCarthy-Morrogh of Millward Brown Lansdowne considers the options.

What goes from zero to five hundred million users in just six years? Facebook of course. The recently reached milestone of the world's most iconic and influential social networking site is clear proof of the power of the medium and its extraordinary ability to link people, conversations, pictures, applications and any myriad of forms of human interaction and relationship. Facebook and YouTube are the second and third most popular websites in the world, and more than a billion people reportedly use social network sites of any sort around the world today; the power of the individual in making their own media content is self evident.

Every marketer knows that the media landscape is fragmenting in such a way that makes target audiences harder and harder to reach via traditional above the line channels. Social networks are the perfect storm of fragmentation: each user creating their own content and linkages, their own communities and feedback loops. It is an age of perfect information from the consumers' perspective: perfect sharing of information, with whom they choose, in a format they choose, on topics that they choose, at a time that they choose. Every marketer, every brand, needs to learn to harness this phenomenon, needs to find its place in the world of the social network – Right?

Not necessarily. Just because a medium is powerful and ever more ubiquitous does not mean that it is right for every brand and every product. Let's back-up a minute, social networks are just that – social – they are not selling networks, or advertising networks, or product placement networks. Brands that plunge headlong into this pool without thought to a wider strategy as to how they will harness a network, or sit comfortably within it, may do long term damage to their reputations and face the wrath that only a social network and its galaxies of orbiting bloggers can unleash. After all, it is much easier (and probably much more the natural inclination) for networks to destroy the reputation of a brand rather than enhance it.

Does Barack Obama have the most friends on Facebook? Probably, and his campaign is a classic example of how a mass democratic movement can be mobilised in a highly interactive way to deliver stunning success for the brand (in this case the candidate) in both forms of currency that mattered: small donations - repeatedly given – and, of course, votes. This is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of 'pull' advertising, the magnetic brand that was able to attract millions of people to his site and his message.

Alas few brands enjoy anything like this kind of pull. There are some of course, global icons like Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Apple that have all successfully become 'sociable brands' with their own hugely popular pages on Facebook; Starbucks claims as many as 10 million Facebook fans. Iconic brands have the luxury of being able to pull people towards them, and when they do they can then interact with them on multiple platforms be it blog, video, application, games, viral advertising and so on. But of course the reality is they can only do this because they are already global giants.

For mere mortal brands the rush to social media cannot replace traditional forms of advertising or brand building. Mass advertising is for a mass audience and most social networks will, by definition be niche. The social network is for communicating with committed customers; clumsy attempts by

brands to intrude are more likely to be counterproductive than they are to yield any kind of positive brand equity effect.

So what is required of brands when they seek to talk to their 'friends' and maybe find new ones on the web?

According to Nigel Hollis, Millward Brown's Chief Global Analyst, a successful social strategy needs to cover the following requirements:

Understand the Environment:

People don't come to social networks to buy stuff, so blatant 'sells' won't work. The brand needs to fit the type of network it is on and offer people something that they will find value in – and hopefully something to talk about. Furthermore depending on the power of 'friends' is unlikely to be enough, significant media spend is usually required to drive traffic to the relevant pages.

Listen, Learn and Respond

Social networking is all about conversation. Listen to what people might already be saying about you, can this help you refine your strategy better? How can the message be more enjoyable, more relevant? Once the conversation starts the brand must engage fully and react to comments and postings appropriately and quickly.

Create a sense of Community and keep it Alive

Social networks give people a sense of belonging and a means of expression that was heretofore unavailable to them. An on-line presence for a brand must reflect these core elements and facilitate bringing people together around a shared interest. If the strategy falls short of this then it has failed to engage in the way a social network is designed to and is more likely to do harm to the brand than build loyalty or franchise.

Create Unique Content

Going viral is of course the holy grail of any Internet marketing strategy – creating a message that spreads exponentially beyond your initial group. Risqué advertising clips are probably the favourite route to success in this vein, however there are others factors to consider as well: useful applications are one feature that can be passed on to friends and that the brand can embed itself into; people also value advice from trusted brands in order to help in their own purchase or usage decision making.

Authenticity

Openness and authenticity are essential for a brand to be accepted and succeed in any social networking context. Honest communication and interaction is the only way to proceed. Any attempts to buy affection or praise, or make blatant sales pitches couched in the guise of testimonial will not succeed. The social network is the ultimate vehicle of transparency – any attempt to subvert it will be swiftly uncovered.

Overall then the purpose of a brand's Facebook or MySpace page is not to somehow transplant its traditional advertising platforms. Instead the social network allows the brand to speak with its loyal followers and hopefully the 'friends' of its loyal followers in ways that will reinforce the messages of its brand architecture. Through the social network all sorts of brand attributes can be propagated and enhanced above and beyond their above-the-line manifestations— humour, subversion, helpfulness, style, street-cred, to name but a few. These in turn can be built upon by using the network feedback – postings, blogs, just as a CRM or customer satisfaction programme would be used. It is in this interaction that a brand can truly become sociable, rather than just being another web page.

But don't think that social networking is only for the big brands. Far from it; while big global brands can use social networking sites despite their niche nature, small local brands and businesses can harness social networks exactly *because* of their niche and potentially highly targeted nature. Such an approach could be based on a particular locality, demographic or interest group allowing a small business to accrue a large following in proportion to its potential customer base. Foodies can follow their local farmer's market, rugby fans their local club or province; tweets can be issued by any business to inform its followers of latest offers or information. The social network allows for the full potential of word of mouth endorsement to be harnessed – acting both as a customer relationship vehicle for the small brand or business, as well as a brand building platform in the absence of traditional media spend.

Still, following a brand or company via social media remains a minority pursuit for those who are connected. According to Millward Brown Dynamic Logic research in 4 European countries this year (**chart 1**) 13% of UK users follow a brand; with the highest measured incidence being in Italy where it reached 18%. In the UK the main type of brand followed was retail (76%), followed by FMCG (45%) (**Chart 2**).

Further probed as to their motivation for following these brands via a network, the majority of UK users indicated that product information or discounts were the main reasons (**chart 3**), however the interactive nature of the exchange is also apparent from the range of answers given: e.g. reading people's responses, sharing my thoughts and ideas. Clearly even big brands have a long way to go before they become fully 'social' but the incredible growth of the network medium can only mean that, effectively used, they will become an increasingly more important part of the marketing mix.

Finally it is worth noting that the consumer, empowered as he or she now is via the social network, can be a very dangerous thing to a brand. The recent on-line mugging of Nestle and BP by Greenpeace are testament to people power. Professor John Deighton of Harvard Business school suggests that the big brand is more vulnerable than ever to the on-line critic and that the default mode of many is negative; he says: 'Now everybody has a say in deciding what gets disseminated, and everybody seems to like passing along the put-down more than the uplift'. In the face of this cynical tendency he suggests a number of tactics for brand self defense in the network world.

First, be aware that the bigger you are the more vulnerable you are to attack. Any slip ups and the parodists will be waiting in the ether.

Second, think authenticity over brand positioning – don't have it forced upon you.

Third, it is easier to be the insurgent than the incumbent. We all know the challenger brand has always had more room to maneuver than its established rival. Think Ryanair over the years. But then think of Sir Stelios' victory over Michael O'Leary in July - now the insurgent Irishman is the incumbent!

Fourth, maybe social networking media just aren't for your brand – in this mean-spirited world it could be that value is destroyed not created on social sites.

Well there you have it, if the man from Harvard says it's an option to opt out, who am I to disagree? But in the meantime, by the time this article is printed, Facebook will be hurtling towards its billionth user – so you decide!

James MacCarthy-Morrogh is an Account Director with Millward Brown Lansdowne