

Socialcentricity and the Emergence of Social-Media Marketing

Arguably the most-talked-about trend in the realm of online advertising and branding in recent months is the growth and popularity of social communities and the potential to leverage these communities with social-media marketing techniques. The term “social community” encompasses a broad range of online venues, including forums, online social networks, brand-sponsored virtual worlds, open virtual worlds, social video and photo communities, and social news and bookmarking Web sites. Social-media marketing is a form of online advertising that uses the cultural context of social communities, including social networks (e.g., YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook), virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life, There, and Kaneva), social news sites (e.g., Digg and del.icio.us), and social opinion-sharing sites (e.g., Epinions), to meet branding and communication objectives.

Why use social-media marketing? Social-media marketing offers these primary benefits: It can encourage interaction between consumers and brands. It can enhance perceptions of the “brand as person,” thereby

strengthening a brand's personality, differentiating a brand from its competitors, and setting the stage for a perceived relationship. It can extend the exposure time for a brand's message by encouraging sticky interactions that last far beyond a thirty-second spot and repeat visits to the brand's site. It enhances opportunities for word-of-mouth communication to other friends and influentials about the brand. Assuming the brand's persona is likable and credible, it can facilitate message internalization (the process by which a consumer adopts a brand belief as his or her own) and strengthen the brand's equity. When well designed, a response device can be embedded in the conversation, enabling conversion from message exposure to purchase. Sound promising? It is. Not only does social-media marketing offer many notable benefits, but it does so at price tags far less than a single spot televised on the Super Bowl, and sometimes even less than a spot on a hit television program like *Lost*. Later in this chapter, we'll highlight the objectives appropriate for social-media marketing. For now, though, let's explore the context a bit. What is social media?

■ Social Media

Social media refers to online communities that are participatory, conversational, and fluid. These communities enable members to produce, publish, control, critique, rank, and interact with online content. The term can encompass any online community that promotes the individual while also emphasizing an individual's relationship to the community, the rights of all members to collaborate and be heard within a protective space, which welcomes the opinions and contributions of participants. As noted above, the phrase social media is an umbrella phrase for social-networking sites, virtual worlds, social news and book-marking sites, wikis, and forums and opinion sites.

To some extent, all of these community formats are social networks because all feature the interaction and maintenance of relationships by a collection of participants. However, we will loosely categorize these social-community venues as either virtual worlds (recognizing that virtual worlds do encompass a social network) or social networks.

Social communities (virtual worlds and networks) have evolved, at least in part, to provide "contact comfort" in a society in which many of us spend increasing amounts of time with machines. Contact comfort captures the motive for developing and maintaining relationships online, particularly using social communities as well as with other communication technologies like instant messaging and text messaging. Through

social communities, our need for contact comfort (think of this as a need for affiliation) can be addressed, while we also satisfy our need for entertainment (such as gaming and shopping) and resource acquisition (sharing of information). These social communities have commonalities and distinctions among them, but they all offer opportunities for brand promotion and engagement for those brands that learn to leverage the unique attributes of the community type in question. We'll begin with an overview of social communities. After discussing their commonalities and sources of differentiation, we'll set the stage for assessing and planning for the branding opportunities possible with social communities.

■ Attributes and Distinctions of Social Communities

What do these types of social communities have in common? The key attribute is the social element itself. Every community category identified above is based upon the participation and interaction of the members. Social communities are social! They thrive when the members participate, discuss, share, and interact with others as well as recruit new members to the community. The more active the participation by a critical mass of members, the more healthy the community (note, though, that every community will include lurkers, people who explore the site passively). Each category (e.g., social video community) and specific vehicles (e.g., YouTube) focus on a theme. Examples include sharing, promoting, and commenting on video clips (e.g., YouTube), discussing political issues and candidates (e.g., Decision Virginia), critiquing entertainment programming and celebrities (e.g., Hey! Nielsen), and saving, categorizing, and sharing bookmarks (e.g., del.icio.us). Even within a category such as virtual worlds, content is thematic. For instance, Second Life offers the opportunity for fantasy role playing, while World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (known by the acronym MMORPG), emphasizes gaming. While the mission of each community expresses its theme, content is in large measure created by the members themselves. Thus, we can say that much of the content is consumer generated.

Social communities are predicated on the creation, cocreation, and sharing of user-generated content by participants, but community members do vary in how they participate. Forrester Research's Social Technographics report by Charlene Li categorizes participants into one of six groups according to the nature of activities in which they are involved.¹ The categories of social participation encompass activities ranging from the generation of original content to simply consuming

content and go by the names (1) creators, (2) critics, (3) collectors, (4) joiners, (5) spectators, and (6) inactives. According to the report, creators (13% of users) are active developers of content, who may publish Web sites, maintain a blog, upload videos to sites like YouTube, and participate in consumer-generated advertising contests. Critics (19% of users) are those who comment on blogs and respond to video posts and contribute to product ratings and other reviews. Collectors (15% of users) consume user-generated content actively by using RSS feeds and tagging sites. They may rely on communities like del.icio.us and Digg to organize, search, and retrieve content. Joiners (19% of users) are participants in one or more social networks. Spectators (33% of users) consume media on a more passive level, simply reading blogs, watching user-generated videos, and listening to podcasts. Inactives (52%) are those Internet users who are not involved in social media.

The spread of content in the community is achieved via networks, enabling information to spread virally. Some of these social-centric communities, though, rely upon established networks of friends and colleagues (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn), while others provide for communication networks to develop without the need to establish formalized links or nodes connecting members. All forms offer some degree of self-expression through the use of profiles, including pictures, preferences, and comments. In summary, social communities, whether virtual worlds, social networks, game communities, or news sites, are participatory, interconnected, thematic, functional, symbolic of self, and experiential, featuring member-generated content.

What of the distinctions between virtual worlds and social networks? There are several distinctions, some of which will likely grow increasingly fuzzy as social networks adopt advances of online technology. The differentiating characteristics of virtual worlds and social networks include the spatial dimensions (two-dimensional [2D] or three-dimensional [3D]) of the site, the degree of immersion possible, one's representation and control of identity in the space, the sense of "presence" with others in the same time and place, and complexity. In addition, it is useful to consider the community's primary mission (entertainment, skill- or career-building programs, information management, communication contact) and the type of sponsor or source of funding for the community.

Virtual worlds are 3D spaces and encourage visitors to immerse themselves in the virtual environment. During the session, the quality of the interface, the colors, sounds, and visual textures enhance the sense of being *in* the space. Participants can move and communicate via visual representations of their identity (which may be an extension of self, an

idealized self, or a fantasy self) called avatars. These avatars can take on many forms, including variations of human or animal form and even representations of nonliving items (like a spoon or chair). Because of the semblance of a physical presence and the capabilities associated with that presence, participants can take part in virtual activities mimicking those possible in a real environment. For instance, virtual worlds have been used to offer skill-building simulations such as doctor-patient interactions or entertainment activities such as gaming, dancing, or attending a concert. The sense of community and pull to immerse one's self in the virtual world is tied to the ability to interact with others in the same place, at the same time. Virtual worlds provide for synchronous communication enhanced with the context of place. Virtual worlds can be complex environments with a steep learning curve for those who wish to participate. The level of complexity varies from community to community with some known for their relative ease of use (e.g., There).

Virtual worlds may also be classified as open or closed. Open worlds are managed and hosted by an organization that offers opportunities for brands to engage in the community. There and Second Life are two prominent examples of open virtual worlds. Closed worlds, in contrast, are branded by a specific commercial entity, which can then control the exclusivity and types of branding found in world. The Coca-Cola Company was one of the early entrants in the virtual-worlds arena, offering MyCoke.com, a branded virtual world, years ago. MyCoke.com still exists (and reportedly boasts about the same number of registered users as Second Life)² but has since developed a partnership for a virtual space within There. This space is known as CC Metro. Wells Fargo, an early corporate entrant in Second Life, now hosts its own branded virtual world, known as Stagecoach Island. Perhaps, one of the most successful closed worlds is MTV's Virtual Laguna Beach, which has truly captured the essence of brand engagement in a virtual environment. We'll be taking a close look at these virtual worlds and what their experiences can teach us in later chapters.

Webkinz, Club Penguin, and Barbie iDesign are examples of closed, branded spaces that target children. Importantly, these closed worlds, offered, promoted, and managed by major corporations targeting children, vary from open worlds like Second Life and closed worlds like Stagecoach Island on another point—membership rights are gained through the purchase of a hard good rather than simple registration or fees.

In contrast, social networks are primarily 2D spaces with no sense of physical movement of self in the space. One is unlikely to feel immersed in a social-network site. One's senses are not sufficiently stimulated

through context in the environment using color, movement, sound, or simulated touch to promote immersion. The feeling of sharing space in place and time with others can be enhanced with the use of “online now” notifiers for those in one’s network, but without the virtual impression of tangibility this experience is largely missing from social-networking communities.

Despite this, social networks have grown in popularity due to their ability to provide a platform for information sharing, communication, and relationship development and maintenance. For example, YouTube provides for sharing and promotion of videos and related opinions; Flickr enables photo sharing and reviewing; MySpace and Facebook support relationship building and maintenance; Facebook, in particular, serves to provide “contact comfort” for its users; LinkedIn provides a form of self-promotion and career networking; Dogster offers tips and information on caring for one’s canine companion with the added benefit of being able to talk with others who are just as crazy about their dogs. These examples reflect the two types of social networks: (1) egocentric and (2) object-centric. An egocentric social network places the individual at the core of the network experience, while the object-centric network places a non-ego element at the center of the network. Orkut, Facebook, and LinkedIn are egocentric examples, while examples of object-centric networks include Flickr (object: photograph) and Digg (object: news item).

Social networks feature a relatively flat learning curve. Though there are advanced features for most sites, it is fairly simple to join and interact in the site. Consequently, the rate of adoption for social networking has been faster than that for participating in virtual worlds.

Identity construction is also substantially different for social networks than for virtual worlds. For both, identities can be based on the real, the enhanced or idealized self, or a fantasy version of one’s self. But the construction of identity is based on vastly different components. In virtual worlds, one’s self is depicted visually in the form of the avatar. The avatar is highly customizable and uses the inferences associated with visual clues to relay identity details. For instance, my avatar looks a lot like me (albeit with a more fashionable hair style and better selection of shoes). She mostly wears a business suit. Other avatars who interact with my avatar will know from the visual cues that I have chosen to present a professional persona “in world.” They know the ethnicity and gender I have chosen to display. They can see whether I have chosen to stick with traditional social norms about dress and image management or decided to push the boundaries (or explode the boundaries) for what would be considered acceptable in the real world. Further, they can see how I behave in

world and use my behavior as a source of information about who I am. (Am I attending a meeting at GSD&M's Idea City virtual office, dancing at a jazz club, touring the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or playing in a sandbox?)

But in a social network, one's identity cues are built using a profile. A primary identity building block in one's social-network profile is the picture one uses as their default representation on the site. This is the image that others in the network will see as they explore and communicate with members. Profiles might contain other pictures. They often contain demographic information like marital status, age, gender, political affiliations, educational levels achieved, and geographic locale. Psychographic information, including attitudes, interests, and opinions on a variety of topics from favorite hobbies to movies, books, and musical artists, is frequently revealed in social-network profiles. Increasingly, profiles include behavioral information like recent online shopping activities, communications with others in the network, and most anything a user chooses to share. Importantly, identity in social networks is in part constructed as a collaborative process. One's identity includes one's networked friends, comments from friends (like those posted on The Wall on Facebook), one's comments to others, and the groups and affiliations noted on the profile. Social-network identity is just that—it is one's identity in the context of the network itself. While virtual worlds may be supported by sales of goods and services, fees for virtual land and property rentals, sales of tangible goods, and advertising revenue, ad revenue is the primary source of financial support for social networks.

■ Social-Community Campaigns: Promotional Possibilities

Social-media marketing is rich with potential branding opportunities. Social media is touted for its engagement potential, but brands with many objectives can find social-media marketing appropriate. What objectives can be met with social-media marketing? Consider this list:

- Build brand awareness
- Maximize cross- and within-media integration
- Research consumer behavior
- Develop ideas for new marketing strategies
- Drive traffic to corporate Web sites
- Increase site stickiness, extending the brand message's exposure time

- Garner publicity from news coverage of social-media tactics
- Improve search engine rankings (due to organic links)
- Build awareness of the brand
- Enhance the brand's reputation and image
- Encourage message internalization
- Increase product sales
- Accomplish marketing goals with efficiency
- Engage consumers in a brand experience

Indeed, social-media marketing can serve as a tool for building brand awareness, researching consumer opinions and crowdsourcing, identifying opinion leaders (known in social media as influentials), driving traffic to brand Web sites, spreading specific messages virally, developing customer databases, instilling credibility and trust in a brand, and enhancing a brand's image, among others. Crowdsourcing is a great example of the unique benefits that can accrue to brands that think creatively about the social-media landscape. Crowdsourcing refers to mining a group of customers for product development ideas. For example, IBM invited 300,000 people to participate in a product development brainstorming session in Second Life. Starwood Hotels developed a hotel prototype (called Aloft) in Second Life and garnered feedback, reactions, and ideas from avatar guests.

But it is its potential for brand engagement that makes it a core topic here. Joe Plummer, the Advertising Research Foundation's Chief Research Officer, offered this definition of engagement: "Engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context."³ Given the context of community, Plummer's view of engagement serves to define a critical characteristic of social-media marketing. Certainly, social-media marketing has developed at least in part because of an industry recognition of the value of customer-brand engagement. If we seek to engage consumers with our brand, what is it really that we are trying to accomplish? Engagement tactics (whether launched using social media or any other media) should provide action-oriented experiences that enable consumers to interact with the brand. Engagement tactics should be aligned with the brand's promise. Above all, engagement seeks to develop and maintain brand-consumer relationships. When is engagement a success? When consumers perceive a meaningful, memorable, favorable, and ongoing relationship with the brand in question. Social media is an ideal brand engagement platform because its heart is made of relationships.

The menu of social-media marketing tactics includes traditional display and broadcast advertising (e.g., bill boards in a virtual world and video clip of an advertisement posted on a social network) offered within the online environment, sponsored groups (e.g., the Virtual Thirst MySpace group), sponsored events (e.g., U2's Second Life concert), branded spaces (e.g., the CC Metro space in There), and identity building (through the brand's identity profile, persona, and visual and aural cues). Importantly, multilayer brand experiences are a critical success factor.

Should your brand plan a social-media campaign? Answers to these questions can help guide your decision:

- Does the culture of social media fit your brand's positioning or fit with how your brand wishes to be perceived?
- Do you know where online your customers and prospects are? There are many social-media communities. Certainly, there is duplication in the membership from one to the next, but a brand must be able to locate its target audience in the social-media landscape.
- Are the relevant communities open and welcoming to brand participation? What opportunities exist within each community for brand promotion?
- Do you have the resources of time and money to commit to the campaign?
- Do you have a hook, a conversation starter, a point of engagement—something that will inspire interaction with your brand?
- Are you willing to take risks?

Did you answer yes to these questions? Excellent! In the next section, we'll review the steps in planning a campaign before ending this chapter with a list of social-media best practices.

■ Campaign Planning: The Process

The list below contains the ten steps in the social-media marketing campaign planning process:

- Step 1: Identify the overarching objective for the campaign and establish whether social media is appropriate for this purpose;
- Step 2: Conduct a situation analysis, which highlights the brand's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the social-media environment and beyond;
- Step 3: Specify the target audience and the characteristics of the audience;

- Step 4: Elaborate on the individual goals the brand wishes to achieve over the course of the campaign, taking care to state these goals such that they are specific, measurable, realistic, and time-lined;
- Step 5: Allocate a budget for the campaign, ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated to accomplish the goals set out in step 4;
- Step 6: Choose a social-media marketing strategy, including the mix of social media to be used and the plot or story line that will be the basis for content;
- Step 7: Specify tactics, including the specific social-media vehicles within each channel (e.g., if social networking is selected, which sites will be featured), the brand's positioning for each site, and the tie-ins throughout the campaign;
- Step 8: Identify methods for activating the social-media campaign via other media (i.e., how can the brand's presence in a community be promoted outside that community?);
- Step 9: Execute the campaign strategy and tactics, according to the social-media plan taking care to make adjustments based on community responsiveness and momentum; and
- Step 10: Measure and evaluate the campaign's effectiveness to enable ongoing campaign revisions and insight for future social-media campaigns.

■ Lessons in Social-Media Marketing

Ready to enter the social-media space? Take the time to learn from those who have gone before. The following seven lessons are success factors in social-media marketing: (1) set appropriate objectives, (2) embrace engagement, (3) make it relevant, (4) staff it, (5) integrate multiple social-media outlets, (6) build on the socialcentricity inherent in the communities, and (7) invest the time.

Set Appropriate Objectives

If the brand can benefit from social-media marketing, the next step in the process is to set objectives for the campaign. Setting objectives is a critical step in any communications and marketing planning process, but the objectives set must be appropriate for the arena. In traditional advertising circles, reach and frequency goals represent the bedrock of media objectives. Social media are not easily measured in terms of reach and frequency. There are no standardized definitions for gross rating points in the world of social media. Even when exposure occurs and can be counted, reach figures are typically low, compared to broadcast.⁴

Joseph Jaffe, a marketing consultant who advises clients on virtual opportunities, had this to say about objectives for social-media

marketing, “This is not about reach anymore. This is about connecting. It’s about establishing meaningful, impactful conversations.”⁵ His belief is reiterated in a comment made by Mike Donnelly, the Director of Global Interactive Marketing for Coke. Donnelly emphasized that the objective for Coke’s Virtual Thirst social-media marketing campaign was not to sell more cans of Coke. Donnelly’s goal was to “create a great brand experience.”⁶

Of course, objectives will vary depending upon the brand and the brand’s situation. Some brands may wish to improve brand awareness, others may wish to instill likability, and yet another may seek to find new direct-response devices. For Coke, awareness is not an appropriate goal. Reminder advertising is accomplished with Coke’s broadcast and print media buy. For Coke, the objective for its social-media campaign was to provide an opportunity for customers to have a shared experience with the brand. Secondary objectives probably included the desire to experiment with social media and garner first-mover advantages in the social-media market.

Embrace Engagement

MTV’s Virtual Laguna Beach is a star example of designing opportunities for customers to engage and interact with a brand. In fact, VLB won an Emmy from the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences for Outstanding Achievement in Advanced Media Technology for Creation of Nontraditional Programs or Platforms due to its success in shifting fans of its programming from passive viewers to active participants in the virtual world.⁷ What did MTV do with its Virtual Laguna Beach? Working with Makena Technologies (the noted developer for the virtual worlds There and Kaneva.com), MTV Networks created several 3D experiences, including Virtual Hills, Virtual Pimp My Ride, Virtual Real World, Virtual Newport Harbor, and Virtual Skatepark. Participants can shop, club-hop, attend events, visit with cast members and more, all virtually. Many of the activities offered in world mirror those of the story characters, enabling fans to live the dream.

Make It Relevant

Social-media marketing is not passive. It relies on the social elements of the communities in which it resides. It thrives when the community decides it should thrive. That means figuring out what the community wants; what will resonate with the community is the key. This principle

is based on the same rule of thumb as for event sponsorship marketing. Charmin's placement of luxurious, clean, portable toilets at major concert and sporting events is a brilliant example of making a brand relevant to a social community (even a temporary community like that of sporting event attendees). Charmin recognized that event attendees enjoyed many aspects of the event but were universally frustrated by a shortage of bathroom facilities as well as the less-than-desirable conditions of those facilities. The brand received a negative and addressed it by making itself relevant to the audience in a memorable and meaningful way. Can a brand create memorable and meaningful relevance in a virtual world or on a social network? Absolutely—if the brand understands the culture of the community and the needs and wants of the audience, and thinks beyond brand placement within the social-media platform.

Consider Dell Computers' entry into Second Life. It built a facility (a typical step for brands entering a virtual world) but it also designed experiences in the facility with relevance to customers and prospects. Visitors to Dell's Second Life facility can tour the factory (interesting and educational given its reflection of real computing manufacturing facilities), explore the insides of a computer with a tutorial on computer functions, and order virtual computers as well as real-life computers (this is another best practice—link the social-media strategy to a direct-response device). All of these aspects promote a sense of relevance and make the Dell site more than a simple but flashy build in world. But Dell also added a benefit of relevance to Second Lifers. Second Life is notoriously challenging for newbies (those with little time spent and minimal expertise operating in world). To address this issue, Dell created its own orientation facility to offer lessons on using and advancing in Second Life. Avatars might not need computers, but many do want Second Life tutoring. Dell made its brand relevant by meeting this need.

Staff It

The initial imperative when it comes to social-media marketing is to simply get there—to have a presence in the community of interest. Focusing on presence can result in brand assets that are underutilized and underperforming in terms of the objectives set for the campaign. Companies focus on profiles and advertisements in social networks and “builds,” like the Sun Pavilion in Second Life, in virtual worlds. These companies take an “if you build it, they will come” *Field of Dreams* approach, without addressing ways to build and maintain traffic and interest. Joel Greenberg of the Electric Sheep Company, an agency

specializing in developing Second Life corporate presences, wrote in his blog, “Any web developer will tell you it’s easier to get funding for a website than it is for moderator, hosts, or other human beings to keep a web community vibrant.”⁸

A superior presence may attract an initial visit from consumers who stumble upon the profile, in-world build, or a Web site, or who have heard about the brand’s work from some other source, but this is not sufficient to drive and sustain traffic. Consumers need a reason to stay once there and a reason to return. Developing interactivity, emphasizing relevance, monitoring the asset for needed maintenance, responding to visitor feedback, and providing new content will keep the asset fresh and inspire a curiosity to return among the core audience. Importantly, these components of successful social-media marketing require an ongoing commitment of human resources.

Don’t Limit Your Campaign to One Social-Media Outlet

Embrace the lessons learned from integrated marketing communications and rely upon multiple social-media channels. For example, Coke’s Virtual Thirst campaign was not based solely on its Virtual Thirst site in Second Life. It also utilized a MySpace profile (www.myspace.com/virtualthirst), a Flickr page, a video clip on YouTube, tags in del.icio.us, and information on Coke’s own MyCoke.com site.⁹ A front-page ranking on Digg can be as valuable for a driving traffic to a brand’s content as an endorsement from Oprah is for generating book sales of a new release.

Remember the Socialcentricity Inherent to Social-Media Outlets

No matter the range of social-media outlets, whether social news and bookmarking sites, virtual worlds, social networks, or blogs and wikis, the community exists for the sake of community—not for the sake of branding. Did Webkinz or Neopets—virtual worlds with clear brand sponsorships—come to mind when reading that last statement? Regardless of the financial backer of a site, consumers are not joining the community because of their relationship with the brand. They join the community to be a part of something. They join to make friends, share stories, have fun, and to take part in the relational activities that make life interesting and enjoyable. They join for social support. They join to get to know others and to let others know them. For a brand to succeed in a social community, the brand must also be part of the community.

Guidelines from experts in all areas of social-media marketing emphasize the need to build relationships in order to use this approach. Even something as simple as requesting influential members on Digg to submit a content piece from the brand's Web site can be perceived as negative and overbearing if there is not a previous relationship in place. Forum posts that feature brand feedback are analyzed by fellow posters for the "member since" date to determine whether the information is credible and offered by a real member of the community or a trespasser with commercial objectives. In Second Life, big brands have been "griefed," a term that refers to resident vandal attacks, when launching in-world campaigns that are perceived by residents as disrespectful or irreverent to the Second Life community. For instance, a Nissan's build was attacked by helicopters protesting the rise of big business in world. The brand must want relationships, want to socialize with communities of consumers, and, perhaps most importantly, be willing to play by the rules set within the community.

Invest the Necessary Time

Social media works in a manner different from traditional advertising. While a television campaign can utilize a heavy buy early in its media plan to incite near-immediate awareness and build momentum, social media is just the opposite. Paul Gillin notes that it can take months for a social-media campaign to build awareness.¹⁰ However, if designed for engagement, the campaign can continue to run indefinitely, with minor investments required to maintain it. Consequently, while the results may take longer to see, the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the social-media model can be well worth the patience and resources required.

These seven guidelines apply to the four targets for social-media marketing featured here: social networking, virtual worlds, and social news and bookmarking, and opinion-sharing communities. In the following chapters, we'll take a closer look at each of these social-media branding opportunities.