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The State of the Social Universe:

What Marketers
Should Keep
in Mind, from
4 Experts Who
Can Help
You Reach
for the Stars



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In the words of Disney's lovably resolute *Toy Story* character Buzz Lightyear, social media is rocketing toward "infinity and beyond." From forums and blogs to robust social networking sites that seem to multiply overnight, everything has gathered momentum along the way and propelled modern life into another dimension. For brands interested in harnessing its power to further their goals, social media offers enormous opportunities. But navigating this cosmos, with its constellations of emerging stars and its universe-like reach, requires more planning and strategy than ever.

One aspect that has emerged through all this connectedness is the power of the individual. The virtual social footprint available for individuals to access via social media has shifted branding power (along with an amplified voice) to the customer. Suddenly, the audience is involved not just in buying products and even reviewing them, but also in real-time brand assessment. While many brands are recognizing this and finding ways to take full advantage of it, opportunities to do more—to do better—still exist.

A study by the Chief Marketing Officer Council released in 2011 found a disconnect between what consumers want when they "like" a brand on Facebook, for example, and what marketers *think* they want. Sixty percent of consumers responded that they wanted to interact with other customers and share their experiences. Yet only 24 percent of marketers seem to understand this. In fact, the majority of marketers (57 percent) responded that consumers "like" their brand if the "content is agreeable." Similarly, 40 percent of consumers answered that their last experience with social media was positive but they had left wanting more.¹

It is the modern consumer's motivation to *engage* that can be simultaneously thrilling and unnerving for marketers managing brands in the digital age. Those who are savvy, however, and capitalize on this willing audience, offering it the "more" it's looking for, are sure to see measurable results.

To get the best glimpse of the current state of the social universe and how brands can fully mine its resources, Silverpop talked with four experts in various segments of social media. They shared their insights on where things are now, what trends are emerging, what marketers need to emphasize, and how they can make the most of it all.



Although each has specific ideas for getting the most out of social media, all agreed that while businesses can't waste time dithering about their social campaigns, neither can they afford to jump in without some research and a strategy that defines and targets their main goals. Good business sense should always prevail, and social media, with its myriad benefits and innovative strengths, should always be viewed as a way to further smart marketing.

As our first expert, Sarah Meaney, partner and vice president of Hanson Dodge Creative, puts it: "Business has always been a social endeavor. We do business with brands we like and trust. The emergence of social media hasn't changed the drivers of business success, but it has changed how businesses interact with potential customers. Those who embrace and master new technologies will emerge as market leaders."



Drive the Mobile Vehicle Smartly, and Honor Your Email Opt-In Relationships

Sarah Meaney Partner and vice president of Hanson Dodge Creative

We're an on-the-go society, and thankfully smartphones have risen to the occasion, allowing us to talk, email, socialize, shop and even evaluate that shopping experience from one device. It's no wonder that social media and email are experiencing a true integration. The channels that were once distinct and served different purposes to largely different demographics have begun to melt into one another.

This is opening new doors to brands eager to combine the most practical aspects of email—like its reliability and ever-present place in our lives along with its rich format—with social media's fun, interactive and demographic-delivering components.

Hanson Dodge's Sarah Meaney hails the smartphone's proliferation as the No. 1 driver of the social media-email convergence and believes businesses who find ways to make their email-based marketing programs the most mobile savvy will be the ones that experience the most success.

"People check email differently on mobile phones than on laptops, and businesses will have to tailor their outreach to that if they want to be successful," she says. "We can't overlook the importance of being mobile-device oriented."

Meaney points to the need for email design that's mobile-friendly, emphasizing that short attention spans are part of the mobile package. Smaller snippets, fewer calls to action and imagery that's fat-finger-friendly are all aspects businesses must keep in mind to be most successful with their consumer-outreach campaigns. And those campaigns, Meaney predicts, will continue to combine all manner of social media elements, including so-called "gamification," which uses game-like mechanics and psychologies to engage more users for things like loyalty points and other rewards.

With all the social options available today, however, Meaney cautions companies to be precise in how they use them to ensure they're reaping the intended results and not just overwhelming or frustrating consumers.



“Most marketing emails are trying to appease too many email consumers at one time,” she says, explaining that businesses too often muddy messaging (and spoil their intended goals) by combining too many options and calls to action. “It’s more important than ever to ask, ‘What’s the primary purpose, and what’s the focus behind it?’”

Similarly, the convergence of mobile with social media puts an added responsibility on businesses to manage their consumer relationships with integrity. Opting in and signing up for email should not mean an onslaught of irrelevant messages. Meaney refers to it as “honoring the relationship” and says companies should keep tabs on emerging technologies that provide more specific demographic information that can help them tailor their email campaigns.

“We have to be better about gauging people’s level of interest and then send them the appropriate level of communication,” she says, adding that the communication must be relevant and valuable. “We should be aware of the number of times we’ve knocked on the door—no matter that we have the key.”



It’s About Location, Location, Location: Know Where Your Customer Is

Asif Khan [Founder and president of the Location Based Marketing Association](#)

Perhaps nowhere is the convergence of social and mobile more evident than in the fast-emerging arena of location-based marketing. Like social media itself, the GPS is a life-changing development that has completely altered the way we’re doing everything. The ability to find and be found is now the backbone of our modern culture, and nowhere is the progress—or the marketing doors it’s opening—more apparent than when it collides with the social universe.

Because consumers are always somewhere, finding them and reeling them in is the bedrock of marketing. And that’s why Asif Khan, founder and president of the Toronto-based Location Based Marketing Association, says location-based marketing is not just here to stay but should be viewed in terms of cross-platform appeal.

“Location is part of every kind of media, which makes every form of marketing essential to location-based marketing,” Khan says, adding that businesses should think “horizontally” about their location-based campaigns to make them both more effective and measurable.

This comprehensive approach lends itself well to email because it’s a rich format with a robust platform capable of presenting consumers with a more personal experience, Khan says.

Additionally, location-based marketing has the added advantage of working within parameters and permissions set by customers, which takes much of



the guesswork out of who the potential customer is and what he or she might be interested in.

With its movement among companies during 2011, location-based marketing likely is just heating up, and Khan believes retail will continue to be the primary training ground for this sector since it's where consumers are most socially active and motivated to act. For retailers looking to capitalize on the recent traction, he has some advice.

"Before you jump into location-based marketing, you should think about your goals and ultimate objectives and use location-based marketing strategies and tools to manage those," he says, explaining that retailers should consider ways to connect the power of the social universe with that of GPS, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth to increase foot traffic, then sales. The convergence can tell marketers where shoppers are and what they're looking for.

"The last piece of that, and where email has a huge role to play, is the loyalty component," Khan says. Shifting to the perspective of a consumer, he asks a series of rhetorical questions he counsels companies to also consider: "How do you keep me coming back? How do you build a relationship with me? How do you continue an ongoing dialogue?"

The answers to these questions come from merging creativity with business sense as it applies to today's social universe, Khan contends. Turning 10,000 Facebook "Likes" into sales isn't magic, it's about knowing where those 10,000 potential consumers are in relation to your store at any given moment.

Using location-based marketing's check-in data in real-time to trigger email offers and tailored messages is an excellent way to draw people in and build an ongoing relationship, Khan suggests.

In fact, the checking-in routine opens a world of possibilities for marketers. Plying the demographic information voluntarily supplied here all but guarantees offers will be relevant, which, in turn, significantly bolsters the type of reciprocal relationship necessary in today's consumer-savvy market. Further, the check-in is an excellent opportunity to offer an email opt-in, which helps build databases.

In the end, location-based marketing is offering businesses a host of ways to be more relevant, Khan says.

"My core belief is that people will engage with all of social media at the level that it benefits them. It must be relevant to the individual and offer true value," he says. "Location-based marketing can play a huge role in that effort. When campaigns are designed well and specific to the targeted demographic, they can have enormous impact."



On the Rise: Social Intelligence

Doug Camplejohn CEO of Fliptop

To Khan's "measurable and effective" entreaty, Doug Camplejohn couldn't agree more. The CEO of San Francisco-based Fliptop believes this is where social intelligence can make a huge difference in email marketing, especially.

In fact, social marketing intelligence is one of the newest stars in the social universe, having emerged from its nebulae in the last two years. The term refers to the process of gathering valuable demographic intelligence from the information entered into social networks, and it holds infinite potential for companies looking to kick their engagement marketing campaigns into warp speed.

As Camplejohn explains, "Social intelligence helps brands fill in the missing data about their online subscribers; understand the overlap between Twitter, Facebook and email followers; and pinpoint their most engaged and influential customers."

Companies like Fliptop are creating ways for brands to do just that, building Web platforms that mine social data to increase brand popularity, audience reach and, ultimately, sales.

"The most robust options provide rich social and demographic profiles about customers—including location, employment information, influence and the social networks where they engage with your brand," Camplejohn says.

While traditional analytics models that gathered customer information have existed for years, solutions designed specifically to gather intelligence from social media are more flexible and able to respond to the real-time marketing demands of today's landscape. Social intelligence models take full advantage of the information people share voluntarily about themselves across the social media spectrum, including networks, blogs, forums and chat rooms. At no time has there been a better resource for discovering prime demographic information, such as buying preferences, brand preferences and general lifestyle choices.

For email marketing, this allows brands to turn databases into powerful contact profiles that give them a leg up on the always-important marketing aspirations of relevance and creativity, not to mention the ability to improve audience segmentation and targeting.

"I think we're just beginning to see the possibilities for using social data to personalize sales, marketing and support interactions," Camplejohn says, adding that while applications that enhance email and marketing automation have led the way, innovative uses of social data are appearing in other applications, such as customer relationship management (CRM).

Like Meaney and Khan, Camplejohn also believes taking a step back in the early stages to create a plan that targets the primary goal is critical to long-term success.

"It's always important for marketers to focus on what objectives they are trying to achieve, and then see what data and tools support those goals," he says.



Start—and End—with Your Content

Ann Handley Chief content officer for MarketingProfs

With its abundance of options for engaging current customers and drawing in new, social media has the potential to overwhelm brands trying to navigate it all. Like the proverbial candy store, its bonbons and confections can distract even the best-intended. Ann Handley, chief content officer for MarketingProfs, ranks messaging at the top of her list for ways to be smart about social media.

“Absolutely the first thing is to create compelling content and think about your story,” says Handley, co-author of the 2010 book *Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, and Webinars that Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business*.

All companies and all brands have a story, maintains the former print journalist. Handley has made a name for herself by helping businesses craft language that connects them to their intended audience and builds relationships. To her, working within the social media universe shouldn’t begin until a business commits to strong content that’s relevant to the intended customer base. That message should also be trumpeted consistently across all channels, from email campaigns to blog posts to pages on social networking sites.

“The reality is that your story is the cornerstone of marketing these days. Talk about who you are, what makes you unique and how your products or services help people,” Handley says, adding that the digital age has provided businesses with a wealth of channels where they can distribute their stories.

Brands should agonize over tone, recognizing that the voice that emerges will speak—or not speak—to their audience for the long haul, she adds.

“Sometimes I hear companies talk about their social media strategy, and they start the conversation by talking about technology, then eventually get to their content,” she says. “They need to flip that. Content is key. Pay more attention to it than the bells and whistles.”

Once there’s a commitment to the content itself, there must be the same dedication to publishing it. Blogs that sit idle, static Facebook pages and lax Twitter accounts are wasting valuable space and branding opportunities, Handley says. She’s equally indignant about social media that has little interaction on it.

“You need to work to fix that,” she presses, circling back to strong content and making sure that messaging is entertaining, educational and offers lots of tie-ins and links.

Blog posts, for example, should work to engage people and build potential customers (or followers who turn into clients) at the same time. An entry about services could include sidebars, how-to guides, where to go if you have questions and even related articles. Creating concentrated, relevant material helps build momentum, she says.



“Engaged followers don’t just happen, they’re nurtured, and brands have to spend time and energy figuring out how to do that best,” Handley says, adding that determining where their customers are and what social channels they’re using can save a lot of time and resources.

“Know who you are and where your customers are,” she says. “There’s blogging, there’s Facebook, there’s LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest and a host of others. Depending on your audience, though, you may have more potential in one or a few of these channels.”

Once these basics are covered and enough compelling content is consistently published to the right channels, other areas of digital marketing are more apt to fall into place, says Handley.

“This is a sphere that’s not going anywhere,” she says about the social universe at large. “It taps into our innate tendency to be social and offers some amazing tools for connectivity. Being online is the way people are connecting, are socializing, are doing business—not to mention it’s the way we’re making purchasing decisions. That’s a shift in behavior that’s here to stay.”

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the social universe is a realm where today’s marketers want to be, but with its seeming endless options, it can be an overwhelming place to tread. Its growth and traction in the last year alone demonstrates its place in today’s culture, but knowing how and where and when to tap into it isn’t always obvious. Too often this can result in an approach that doesn’t match a brand’s priorities and, ultimately, doesn’t produce the desired results.

Like everything else that impacts good business, smart marketing with social media relies on knowing what the goals are to begin with. Taking the time to review your strategy and defining a master plan can save countless hours and resources. Additionally, knowing your audience and applying smart communication tactics that are focused on the right channels for that audience will ensure you’re getting the most out of your social media campaign.

Footnotes

1-Chief Marketing Officer Council, “Variance in the Social Brand Experience,” 2011