

Make Friends, Don't Pitch Them

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have empowered people on an unprecedented scale to build and maintain connections with others. These sites allow users to share personal news, interests, and videos, as well as to play games and get to know each other better. Can these virtual neighborhoods also be a space where marketers can build and maintain their brands?

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Until a few years ago, the term “social network” was limited to the realm of academia. Today online social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, Bebo, and Orkut offer people the chance to reach out to existing friends and make new ones. What started as a youth-driven online phenomenon has now filtered into all age groups, and users can access their communities using mobile phones as well as computers. Now that social networks have logged over a billion registered users, it is no wonder that marketers are interested in the possibility of connecting with consumers through the social media. Advertising on social networks is projected to grow faster than other online formats in the coming year, but even so, advertisers are struggling to find good ways to engage people in this evolving environment.

A Tough Nut to Crack

Why are social networks such a tough advertising nut to crack? The answer is simple. Most marketers are not using social networks for the purpose for which they were intended. People go to social networking sites to communicate and interact with friends. They don't go to these sites to research potential purchases or to shop. While a few marketers realize this, far too many don't, and continue to reach out to people in their virtual communities using heavy-handed mass-marketing techniques. The few successful advertisers also recognize something else about social networks: They are places where customer relationships can be built and strengthened, but not necessarily started from scratch.

Of course, the users' mindset is not the only barrier to successful brand building using social media. While home page ad displays on MySpace are reported to reach 40 million users on any given day, that apparent reach may offer only a fleeting impression as people log in to reach their personal pages and those of their friends. Extend that concept beyond the big, well-known sites to the plethora of smaller ones designed to appeal to specific regions, demographics or interests. Then add the fact that advertising models vary across these sites. The result? Communication becomes a logistical nightmare; what works on one site may not be feasible on another.

Given these facts, perhaps it is not surprising that many advertisers have resorted to using display advertising on major sites. Not only is it a familiar tool, but both Facebook and MySpace offer targeting on a number of factors such as geography, demographics, and various categories related to user interests. MySpace also offers “HyperTargeting,” which places users in buckets based on their interests and delivers ads accordingly. While Dynamic Logic's AdReaction® 2007 study found that



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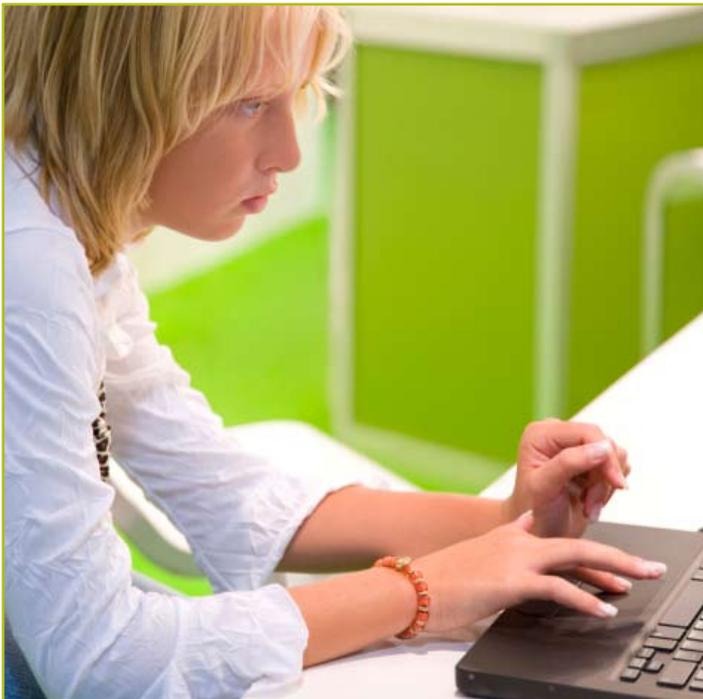
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most people were ambivalent to the idea of advertising on social network sites, a recent survey by Prospectiv found that nearly 9 in 10 social network users found few (or none) of the ads they saw to be interesting or relevant.

The fault may not be with the targeting, however; the advertising may be very relevant to those who see it. Rather, the problem might be that the ads are served up to people at an inappropriate time in an inappropriate place. For example, even though my profile suggests that I am interested in kayaking, that does not mean I want to stop and check out a new boat while I'm in the middle of looking at photos of my buddy's latest paddling trip. In this respect, advertisers may be reaching the right person with the right message, but is it the right time?

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Don't Push — Pull

Pushing advertising to niche audiences in myriad new Web communities does not make sense for most brands, but the right pull strategy can work. Marketers just need to realize that they are there to take part in the conversation, not to dominate it.

Creating a custom-branded page or profile — assuming fans have not already created one for your brand — is a first step to becoming sociable. Apple, Victoria's Secret, Starbucks and McDonald's all have popular pages on Facebook with fans numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Other brands attracting large followings are Converse All Stars, Red Bull and Marmite. A branded page allows a brand to interact with fans in a way that is in tune with their mindset. A brand can post its own comments, videos and surveys and encourage fans to do so as well. The utility of a branded page can go well beyond simple publicity. Ernst & Young uses its "Careers" page on Facebook to publicize the company and engage in conversations with potential recruits.

Creating an interesting and attractive venue, however, is just the first step. The real challenge to becoming a sociable brand is to keep the interaction going. And that requires an ongoing investment. As in any relationship, a brand needs to keep itself fresh and occasionally share new ideas and content.

Widgets and applications have received a lot of attention over the last couple of years. These particular forms of content are discrete tools and games that can be shared across sites or profile pages. In 2007, Facebook was the first network to open its platform to third party developers, allowing a large number of applications to be created for the site. Among today's most popular Facebook applications are those that allow people to interact with their friends, and to identify themselves in terms of their taste in movies or books or their similarity to a Harry Potter character. Not only do applications provide a creative and fun way of connecting and sharing information, but they also contribute an important viral component. The addition of an application is noted in users' news feeds on

their profiles; friends can then click to play or add it to their profile. A few brands have managed to leverage applications like these to successfully engage their customer base.

In June 2008, ConAgra Foods launched its new integrated campaign for the Slim Jim snack brand. Broadcast media were used to drive traffic to an immersive Web site that offered gaming and social networking experiences on partner sites, including MySpace and Facebook. On the latter, the brand used the Superpoke! application, created by Slide, which allows users to poke each other and show off their “spicy” side.

Tablet Hotels took a different approach in creating the *Global Nomad Challenge*, a quiz that asks people to identify a new hotel each week from a photograph. The prize is a free hotel stay. Players do not need to rely on their experience alone but can identify the hotel by clicking through a list of other hotels in the same location and so learn more about the Tablet roster in the process.

While most people enjoy playing with the various applications on Facebook, they are pretty simple to use and rarely engage attention for long. According to Adonomics, a firm that tracks Facebook statistics, only 138 of the nearly 17,000 applications on Facebook had more than 1 million installations. So, though they have generated a lot of industry buzz, widgets and applications are not the silver bullet of social media. Some companies have opted for an approach that provides more value and relevance to users. Visa, the world's largest credit card processor, has introduced the Visa Small Business Network with the aim of bringing together the half million or so companies listed on Facebook by providing them with free tools and a means to connect. In the Network's first two weeks, 10,000 companies joined, incentivized with an offer of \$100 worth of Facebook advertising.



Developing a Successful Social Strategy

While it is clear that many mainstream brands are now leaving the familiar territory of push advertising to engage with their users more directly on social networks, the results to date have been mixed. A successful social strategy will address the following five requirements:

Understand the environment

People come to social networks to interact with their friends and make new ones, not to buy products and services. Therefore, a blatant sell is not welcome. People may be willing to spend time with your brand but only if they find value in doing so. Also, as mobile becomes a bigger force in social media, those logging on from their phones will have even less time for traditional advertising than those connected by computer.

Also consider which sites may be most appropriate to your brand and communication strategy. Our research suggests that for some brands, MySpace is more suitable than Facebook while for others, Facebook would be preferred. For many brands, some other community on the long tail of networks may be more appropriate still. And don't assume everyone will find you through their friends; a successful engagement usually requires a significant media buy to drive traffic to the sponsored group page.



Listen, learn and respond

A brand that seeks to engage people through social media is entering into a conversation. The first step should be to listen to what people are already saying. This may allow you to identify new opportunities for engagement and steer clear of potential missteps. What needs might your brand be able to fulfill that are not already being met online? What sorts of things do people want to hear about your brand? What might they find interesting, enjoyable or valuable? Once you enter the conversation, you must be prepared to continue that involvement by reading comments and responding quickly and appropriately.

Create a sense of community and keep it alive

Social networks online reflect the communities built around strong brands offline. Think of Harley Davidson or Manchester United. People are driven to join by the age-old desires for belonging and self-expression. How can your brand bring people together to share their passion? Nokia has created an opportunity for ardent gamers to come together through its N-Gage platform, which allows users to download games as well as discuss them and blog about them. And don't assume that online and offline are separate worlds. The webkinz.com site draws more than 3.8 million visitors a month. Kids who have bought one of the plush toys can enter the secret code that comes with it to play virtual games featuring the toy's avatar.

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Create unique content

If you want the word to spread beyond your initial contact group, you must offer something of unique value that people can share. This could be entertainment, advice, or a useful functional tool. Most people think of viral communication as an edgy and subversive video or joke that gets passed from person to person, but people also value information and advice. They want to hear what others have to say, particularly if the source is trusted because of shared interests or experiences. Today's applications may not all represent best practices; in the future, we expect social media applications to be more immersive, engaging and helpful. Do not assume that the first iteration of an application will be successful. Ask users for feedback and plan upgrades to keep people interested.

Be authentic

People respect a brand that has an authentic voice. They distrust brands that seem condescending or duplicitous. Marketers who find ways to engage their consumers openly and honestly will be the ones to win big. A brand that offers applications of real utility to customers or a distinct point of view on a social or cultural issue stands a much higher chance of generating real engagement. Those who try to buy praise or disguise their sales pitch as independent advice risk not only diluting the credibility of their brand, but also that of the medium.

Few brands inspire the sort of passion guaranteed to attract a loyal and active following in social networks, but those that do will find them fertile ground for engagement. Others can use social networks as part of an integrated campaign to offer people something of value. In both cases, a liberal dose of traditional advertising will help generate the critical mass that will make your efforts worthwhile.

To read more about social media, visit www.mb-blog.com.

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