

Social Media – A Primer

I learned that the social media juggernaut is well and truly here to stay at the start of this year. My realisation came not from the inspiring use of social media to aid victims of the recent Australian floods and New Zealand earthquake, or from the movie “The Social Network” being nominated for eight Oscars. Rather, I was convinced of social media’s staying power when my father, who has trouble using the remote control for his television let alone a computer, “friended” me on Facebook.

Social media is now ubiquitous. The way we use the internet has changed from the passive model of consuming data and information to an active model where everybody has a voice, and everyone can make their mark on the internet. Most of us have Facebook accounts, and the list of social media sites we use each and every day in both our work and personal lives seems endless, encompassing the likes of Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, Myspace and so on. Even many of the news websites we access now incorporate a social media aspect, allowing us all to comment on the latest story and even post new articles and leads.

This has rightly made many people nervous. With the likes of Starbucks and Coca-Cola firmly establishing their presence on Facebook, and successful viral advertising campaigns being run using social media, more and more organisations are rushing to exploit the new opportunities that social media provides so as to avoid being left behind. Similarly, private individuals are increasingly turning to social media as their primary method of communication, sending messages via Facebook rather than through traditional e-mail, and in many cases even using Facebook and Twitter to tell friends and acquaintances what they are doing, where they are and how they can be contacted twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Unfortunately, as with any technology, especially where that technology is online, the use of social media is not without its risks. Organisations and individuals need to think about how they use social media, what they wish to achieve via social media, and ultimately how to balance the rewards offered by successful exploitation of social media with their incumbent risks.

Building An Identity

I am often asked by organisations what they should use

social media for. Some see it as an advertising tool, others as a way to engage with customers and potential customers, and others as a resource for brand development and the generation of new knowledge. Ultimately though, whether you’re a corporate entity, a public unit, or a private individual, social media should be broadly considered as a way to build, manage and portray an identity.

Consider for a moment your own individual Facebook profile. How often have you thought carefully about what to post as a status update, what to select as your profile picture, or better yet “detagged” a photo that someone else has uploaded of you because you didn’t like it? By doing so, you are managing your online identity, and this is exactly how organisations should be approaching the use of social media, albeit on a larger scale. The examples given previously of Coca-Cola and Starbucks’ Facebook pages are excellent examples of how an organisation can build an identity on Facebook and use it to its advantage. The Starbucks page is plain, it does not feature status updates, and it does not present itself as anything other than an advertising tool. It incorporates use of the popular Starbucks card, allowing users to “gift” coffee (real coffee, not virtual coffee!) to one another. At the time of writing, Starbucks has 19,705,716 Facebook users who “like” its page, and a wall that is almost evangelical in its love of the brand.



Of course, not every organisation manages its Facebook presence so effectively. Nestle, one of the leading worldwide food manufacturers, has its own Facebook page. Unfortunately, Nestle has received criticism over the years in relation to some of its business practices, and many of its more vocal critics have taken to posting their concerns on its Facebook page, often including criticism in response to status updates regardless of the nature of the status update itself. For example, one user’s response to an update announcing the launch of a new children’s “Eskimo Monkey” ice cream was met with the response “look at how much damage Nestle is doing - the more they sell the more damage they do”. Nestle has in the past tried to moderate criticism by deleting or responding to posts of this nature but unfortunately this is

typically seen by users as attempts to stifle criticism or even “bully” other Facebook users, with predictable results. In one spat between Nestle and a user on Nestle’s own Facebook page a user even commented “very bad use of social media!”.

There are lessons to be learned here. Users of Facebook, and indeed the majority of social media outlets, are from a very media-savvy, and often tech-savvy, demographic (though decreasingly so, if one remembers my father’s newfound Facebook presence). Many of them know the power of social media and do not like to think they are being manipulated by corporations or indeed government, even though they often are. The Coca-Cola Facebook page is a wonderful example of this, in that it portrays Coca-Cola in a very homely light, giving Coca-Cola an image that successfully humanises what is essentially an enormous multi-billion dollar corporation. At the time of writing 22,543,891 users “like” Coca-Cola.

Using Social Media Effectively

It’s easy to think of social media as only encompassing Facebook, when it is just one admittedly large part of the constantly evolving social media landscape. The opportunities and means for anyone with a computer and internet access to interact with the rest of the world are now myriad. Shot a video? You can upload it on YouTube. Taken some photos? Put them on Flickr. An aspiring artist? Publish your work on DeviantArt. One of my colleagues arranges hiking trips around Hong Kong using Meetup.com and I have an academic friend who uses ScienceStage.com to produce and publish research papers. For a private individual the possibilities are limitless and the connected world is truly a global village.

For organisations, successful use of social media is more of a challenge. The holy grail for many a corporation’s advertising and marketing department is to produce an advertisement that becomes so popular that it “goes viral”, passing from user to user via word of mouth, amassing views on the likes of YouTube and becoming part of the cultural zeitgeist. In mid-2010 Old Spice ran a truly inspiring advertising campaign. The campaign started with an off-the-wall video advertisement, in which actor Isaiah Mustafa, dressed only in a towel and fresh from the shower, informed female viewers that although Old Spice could not make the man in their lives as attractive as him it could at least make them smell like him. The “smell like a man” advertisement

was tongue-in-cheek, poking fun at the Old Spice brand, and became a global phenomenon, viewed millions of times worldwide. Tribute videos appeared on YouTube in their droves.



Old Spice responded to this with a three-day social media campaign. Users could ask Isaiah questions, and his in-character responses were filmed and released on YouTube. Over the three days Isaiah commented on celebrities, the economy, the environment, his critics, and he even made a marriage proposal on behalf of one user. The campaign was such a success that sales of Old Spice increased 107% and a new YouTube campaign using Isaiah, which is proving equally amusing and successful, is currently underway. Indeed the campaign was so successful that it even made it onto children’s television, being successfully spoofed by Sesame Street’s Grover.

Of course, not every organisation has the resource and ability to exploit social media so effectively, and even with the resources in place, judging the public consciousness contains such an element of luck that success can be difficult to replicate. But there are still many smaller ways in which an entity can successfully engage social media. One of which is “crowdsourcing”.

Crowdsourcing is the act of outsourcing a task, which might typically done internally by an organisation, to a “crowd” made up of social media users. Companies have engaged the crowd to come up with new marketing campaigns, advertisements, product names and slogans. Software companies regularly ask the crowd to beta test software prior to its release through open betas. Clothing company Gap, last year, used the crowd to garner opinion on a rebranding exercise. The crowd responded with such vitriol that Gap immediately switched back to its original old logo and admitted that the exercise it had undertaken was perhaps not best suited to crowdsourcing

As it increases in popularity, more private organisations are turning to crowdsourcing as part of their social media strategy. But some sections of the public are sceptical, and see crowdsourcing as a way for large, wealthy corporations to have their work done for free. Legally, there are some

concerns with how crowdsourcing leads companies to let loose their intellectual property on the internet in a manner over which they may have limited or no control, and there is the issue of the relationship between the company and any individual whose work is used. Who owns what? Could someone in the crowd make a claim for remuneration? How would the individual react to being asked to sign a contract? With this in mind, crowdsourcing is an excellent tool for private organisations to use but it must be treated with care.

But it is uniquely suited to use by public entities. In the last few months alone we have seen police in Australia using crowdsourcing to aid victims of the catastrophic Queensland floods, the UK government seeking public input on how to handle its 2011 budget, and the authorities in India using the anonymous nature of the internet to help tackle bribery and corruption. In situations like this the public does not see crowdsourcing as “working for free”, and indeed through this medium social media can engage the general public and the government, the police, or social services in a manner previously thought impossible. Members of LegCo in Hong Kong are currently engaging with the public via Facebook for input on matters such as the new Competition Bill, and this is a process which is likely to continue, and indeed should be encouraged.



Managing Risks

That said, use of social media in this way is not without its problems. Consider again the micro example of building an identity via your individual Facebook profile. You can spend time vetting and editing photos and tailoring your favourite books, films and music, but it can all be in vain if through an error of judgment you post something to your profile, or someone else does, that portrays you in a very ill light. There are many examples of celebrities and politicians embarrassing themselves online via social media platforms, most prominently through indiscreet Tweets via Twitter.

Social media gives everyone a voice, and that includes the individuals within your organisation. Do you allow

these individuals to engage in social media on behalf of your organisation? If so, it is recommended that they do so in accordance with a carefully drafted social media policy setting out what they can and cannot do and reminding that they should think about their audience, which may be a global one, before engaging. In addition, what about those staff who you have not authorised to represent your organisation? Odds are that they contribute to social media on a regular basis, and odds are that they have not considered who is able to see their contributions. It is estimated that approximately 60% of Facebook users have not changed their privacy settings from the default, which allows anyone to see their status update. If a user forgets the division between his or her personal and professional life, as we all do from time to time, there is a danger that they could inadvertently cause themselves not just public but professional embarrassment. There are already many stories circulating of individuals being fired because they criticised their employer online, and many more organisations are checking social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter when hiring or working with new individuals and organisations.

These risks, whilst very real, should not be overstated. Through education and a bit of common sense they can be easily guarded against and they certainly should not put off individuals from using social media sites, or organisations from including social media as part of their wider media strategy. The fact is

that social media is changing the way we interact in our daily lives, be they professional or private. It is an evolution of web 2.0 and our online life rather than the internet revolution that some would have us believe, but it cannot be doubted that it lets users, companies, governments, friends, families and social groups from all fields interact in a way which previously would never have been thought possible.

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