

## **The Age of New Media: Is Your Brand Up to Speed?**

by Laura Pasternak

You Tube. Facebook. MySpace. These are just a few of the new media channels that have shaped our culture, influenced opinions, and sold ideas, products and services. Are you leveraging them to build and promote your brand?

While the traditional methods like print, television and radio still help to build a brand, technology is changing the way in which we learn about political candidates, discover new trends, introduce emerging artists and their products to potential audiences and more. Today, consumers are in control. They pick and choose what they watch, how they buy and where they get their information. Forums abound, offering reviews on everything from merchants to hotels. Blogs offer up varying perspectives on our social, economic and political landscapes. These new channels are changing the way brands are presented, marketed and even received by consumers.

### **Tuned In, Logged In and Plugged In**

A 2007 survey of 7,705 U.S. college students conducted by Reynol Junco and Jeanna Mastrodicasa, authors of the book, *Connecting to the Net*, illustrates how technology has entered practically every facet of daily living:

- 97% own a computer
- 94% own a cell phone
- 76% IM (instant messaging)
- 15% of IM users are logged on 24/7
- 34% use websites as their primary news source
- 49% download music using peer-to-peer file sharing
- 75% have a Facebook account
- 60% own an iPod or other portable music/video device

Such statistics should be an eye-opener for businesses that haven't considered leveraging these mediums in their branding efforts. Often referred to as social media, social marketing or social networking (for consistency, we will refer to these collectively as social marketing), these mediums are shaping how brands are created, developed and perceived.

Social marketing outlets allow users to self-publish (e.g. blogs, You Tube, online forums) and provide other opportunities (think Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace) to interact and, in many cases, even shape buying choices. They wield a broad swath of influence; heightening exposure for the subject or brand and enabling viewers to help spread the message or sell the brand. For example, Wikipedia notes that in July 2006, there were 65,000 videos uploaded to You Tube daily and more than 100 million videos being watched there daily. This same source also cites that Facebook and MySpace have more than 64 million active users worldwide and well over 300 million accounts respectively. In January of this year alone, nearly 79 million users watched over three billion videos on YouTube. Those are staggering statistics.

Social marketing is proving to be fertile ground for all genres including businesses, charitable organizations, politicians and even the common consumer. Individuals can easily, quickly and inexpensively create, disseminate and/or gain information as well as establish and maintain social connections that help build and strengthen a brand.

### **Leveraging and Protecting Your Brand**

In the past, media outlets consisted of print, television and radio. As a result, companies were able to maintain control of how the brand was positioned and represented – both visually and verbally. With the advent of the Internet, there are new opportunities and challenges to branding. Here are a few things to consider:

#### **Know Your Target, Know Your Media Channel**

Although the basic tenants of marketing still apply, you must understand the demographics and psychographics of your target. Then select the appropriate tools and outlets to reach them.

For example, if your audience is older than 30, chances are they are less likely to be visiting websites like Facebook or MySpace for entertainment and information (although they might be there to monitor their kids). However, if your target is 30 or younger, these outlets are prime breeding grounds for promoting your brand.

We're past the point of dismissing these channels as a "fad." They are here to stay. With each passing day, they will become more commonplace. Companies that neglect the potential role of these channels in their branding run the risk of eventually being perceived by consumers as inflexible, outdated and out-of-touch – not a good thing.

#### **Seek Out New Research Tools**

Customer feedback is an essential market research tool. Technology offers newer, more efficient methods for gathering organizational and marketing intelligence.

The Internet has become a modern day, inexpensive tool for research. The days of assembling people in a controlled conference room, as you gauge their feedback from behind a one-way mirror, have changed. Today, online outlets offer opportunities to capture important information about your brand. Additionally, the appeal of social networking sites such as Facebook make online forums an ideal channel to gather business intelligence. Consider setting up a user name/password-protected forum to solicit feedback on your products and services. It can be an effective market research tool, while also conveying to customers that you value their input.

#### **Encourage the Spreading of the "Virus"**

Viruses usually have negative implications. However, viral marketing can be a valuable ally to businesses. In his book, *Unleashing the Ideavirus*, author Seth Godin presents

the idea that traditional advertising methods will be replaced by marketing strategies that rely on consumers to spread the word. He also believes that consumers will grow to become more reliant on the opinions of their fellow consumers.

Leveraging the mass appeal of social networking venues like Facebook and MySpace to promote and refine your brand is one example of viral marketing. Companies like the retail chain Target have used such sites to appeal directly to students, particularly during Back-to-School campaigns. These companies post valuable information for students about preparing for school, living in college dorms and more. Once they are engaged in the content, students are more likely to buy, and consequently, sell for you as they tell their friends about your site.

However, there is a caveat to this idea. Be careful to not use these sites to “hard sell” your brand. Remember that most of the visitors to these sites have been bombarded by the media and technology their entire lives. Hard sells don’t work for them. The initial approach should be one that offers them practical advice and tools combined with the opportunity to start a dialogue. Once that foundation is successfully established, then you can promote your brand.

Finally, recognize the power these marketing channels offer for introducing a new brand. Just because your brand is new doesn’t mean you must choose traditional (and often more expensive) routes to herald its arrival. Emerging artists are one example of how effective these new mediums can be. Musician Colbie Caillat posted her then unknown songs to MySpace. Her profile was visited more than 3 million times and her songs like “Bubbly” have been played over 10 million times. As a result, she signed with Universal Republic Records and released her debut album that offered downloads of her songs through iTunes. Pretty powerful stuff.

### **Be Transparent, but Proceed with Caution**

As with any promising new territory, by all means proceed, but do so with caution. In this instance, it is important to ensure that there are no skeletons in your closet before venturing into social marketing. Unfortunately, the discount chain Wal-Mart learned this lesson the hard way. The company has been the target of numerous stories and allegations about unfair work practices. As wonderful as this medium is, it can also open up a Pandora’s Box, especially for those companies whose operational practices are not aligned with their messaging. Before venturing into this space, make sure your social awareness practices are forthright and reflective of your values.

In the shadow of Enron and other corporations that walled themselves off from their customers, today’s organizations must maintain an open dialogue with their customers. Your audience expects (even demands) to be heard and in turn, insists on answers. By actively participating in online forums and blogs, you can instill trust among your customers and reinforce your organization’s integrity. All of which influences how your brand is perceived.

Venturing into new territory is always daunting, and there are pitfalls along the way. However, if you heed these tips, there's no telling how far you can take your brand. Just ask Colbie Caillat.

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