

#1 Social Media

UTM Round Tables

In association with




Welcome

THIS EZINE is utalkmarketing's first in a series that will run throughout 2009 covering a variety of areas in marketing. This month, we look at social media - how it fits into the marketing mix and the benefits and challenges it brings with it.

Social media is not just another channel to advertise – it's changing the way brands and consumers talk to each other. It has fundamentally changed the relationship, which has presented a challenge to marketers.

Social media is a lot like teenage sex, says Adam Abu-nab, engagement planner at Team Rubber. He enthuses that everyone in the marketing and branding world is eager to do it, but nobody is quite sure how. Furthermore, when they do do it, it never turns out as well as expected.

Social media is no one-night stand; it's a long-term investment and is about a brand committing to a relationship with its consumers and loyal brand advocates and ambassadors.

By Wikipedia's definition, social media is, "Information and content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies. It is intended to facilitate communications and influence interaction between peers and with public audiences."

However broad the description, marketers have still struggled to figure out how they can use the ever-growing medium in a way that will not only enhance their brand and its communication, but also track ROI.

At our social media round table, we discussed what running a social media campaign - or any activity on a social platform - means and how consumers perceive it and therefore react to it.

If you reflect back, the very first activities consumers did online included building their own personalised webpages, chatting on MSN or maybe even blogging on Yahoo! 360 and writing reviews on imdb.com. Times haven't so much as changed, but the way we use social media has evolved.

Some may argue that having a presence on social media is absolutely essential for brand awareness and integrity, while others proclaim, "Don't shout if you have nothing to shout about".

While we may not have all the answers and solutions, we hope this ezine will guide you along in your social media strategy and help you avoid some of the hefty pitfalls of getting it wrong.

Melinda Varley

Editor (acting) of utalkmarketing.com



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What happened at Utalkmarketing's Social Media Round Table?

Social media has been around since the dawn of the internet. However, it has only emerged as a marketing tool in recent years and marketers are still struggling to understand the dynamics of using it. But is social media the be all and end all of marketing? Our panel of experts discuss the ins and outs of everything social media.

Consumer research conducted by Quiet Storm's The People Project revealed that consumers were most likely to describe 'social media' as Bebo, Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn. Older generations, however, believed it to be a place on the internet for people to simply interact with each other and share ideas.

Q – Can brands be a part of what is a very personal space for consumers?

Dees – It's interesting to note that most of consumers only think of social media as something online – over the internet. For us, it's very much about what happens offline too – and then bringing that in correlation with the online element too.

Steve M – What most consumers said in the research was that they use it as a platform to communicate with their friends. So how does a brand become a 'friend'? Clients ask us how they can do something on Twitter. The problem is though you can't just go in there as a brand and expect to gain friends.

Peter – The key element with being a brand on social media is about giving your brand a face then taking that and engaging with consumers via a personality - starting that conversation from a more personal level.

Nathan – There's no right or wrong way for brands to use it. They key thing is that it has to feel natural to the user.

Q – What are brands using social media for?

Nick – One of the things that Dell is using social media for is

following people who talk about their brand. I think that marks a shift in the role of companies and how they listen to their customers as well as interact with them.

Steve T – There's two things that you can do with social media and I think the one that most companies have been concentrating on has been, 'What should we say?' Actually, what a lot of brands should be trying to figure out is, 'How can we listen to what is being said about us?'

Q -The way that marketers see their brands on social media is very different from the way that consumers perceive them. Can a brand ever really enhance the consumer's experience?

Steve T –The assertion is, can you ever go into this space appropriately, and I think that if you offer something entertaining or useful then you can.

Andrew –I think if a brand can offer something, be it advice or entertainment, than it can add value to the consumer's experience.

Steve T – Yes, that's the key question. What is the value for the punter? As long as you're clear about what that is and it's a compelling proposition for them, then you are on to a winner. The problem at the moment is that marketers and brands are in this space, building a Facebook application or whatever, purely because they can.

Dees – If I've not agreed for you to sell to me there, don't do it.

Hosted by: Melinda Varley, Editor (acting) of utalkmarketing.com and Niall McKinney, Founding Director and CEO of utalkmarketing.com

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Managing Partner, Gravity

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Director of Media Sales, Europe, LinkedIn

Steve Mulholland
Executive Creative Director, Galileo

Adam Abu-nab
Blogger, Engagement Planner, Team Rubber

Peter Grenfell
Digital Director, VCCP/Chime Group

Dan Rogers
Internet Marketing / SEO, Qype

Nathan –Social media to me is about recommendations and discussions and that is word-of-mouth, which I think is the more powerful attributer of using social media.

Henry – I think it depends on the actual social media site. In each site, whether it be Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn, there is a difference in how a brand can enhance a user's experience given relevance and curiosity.

Dan – Actually, according to Facebook, fan pages are by far the most successful forms of advertising on social media.

Steve T – I think you have to provide a reason to become a fan though, such as offering incentives.

Q – But can brands be genuine about their sponsorship or ownership of user generated content?

Lulu – We've been working with Nintendo Wii and to get the brand message across we've partnered with them to create a new co-branded website to promote the product, driving traffic from our community boards. The concept has been successful so far and the reason we proceeded with the campaign in this way is that in the past our community has been very unforgiving of us putting brands on our site that haven't been pre-approved by them. What we've seen with the Wii is a more positive reaction as our users are interacting with a brand they already own.

Peter – Such campaigns are very carefully planned out by agencies, but the really interesting stuff on social media is the

user generated content – such as the Cadbury's Wispa page to bring back the chocolate and the page about HSBC student loans created by annoyed customers. That's what is really interesting: where consumers are creating the content and it's growing organically. Consumers need to be able to see a viable connection between the brand and the content in order to be able to trust it.

Q – Are internet users more willing to accept messages and advice from other users and individuals that they either know or don't know?

Steve T – I'm not sure if people will listen to someone they don't know, say Bob from Ohio, when it comes to recommendations. I think though there is a 'wisdom of crowds' thing going on. For example, the way people use TripAdvisor is that they don't necessarily pick through all the reviews and then say, 'Bob from Ohio says this is a good place so I'm going to go.' What you do is you weigh up the balance of it and think, 'There are 17 good reviews and three bad'.

Henry – Most people, when they look at multiple reviews and recommendations they will look at the overall score – picking out 20 or so reviews and gauging a conclusion from that asking how that relates to them.

Dan – I think users also apply a filter to it. If I'm looking for a place to take my girlfriend in Paris, I'll read reviews written from people in Paris.

Nathan – I doubt we even have to use review sites anymore. Social media has allowed us to create our own RSS feeds where we can post a question and people in our own network will answer it straight back to us. I think that's the next phase of search – searching within your network because you're more likely to trust someone you know, or even a friend of a friend.

Andrew – However, users have to have a big enough network to be able to draw out the right recommendations.

Q – How do you get to critical mass when you're trying to get consumers to contribute content?

Steve T – It's about letting go of the constraints on what people can actually contribute.

Adam – It's also important not to give users too much freedom, as sometimes they may say something about your brand that you don't like.

Peter – Sometimes it's just about the incentive.

Dees – It also has to be something fun that makes people want to participate.

Q – How has social media gone from being a bit of an unknown space some three years ago to now being catapulted into the forefront of the marketing strategy?

Henry – Social networks are now a huge part of a consumer's day. They are spending more time online than in front of any other form of media.

Peter – I think it has just evolved on from what marketers were already doing via email.

Q – Will social media replace traditional above-the-line advertising?

Henry – I think no matter what, despite Sky + and the likes, people will still come home at the end of the day and put on the telly.

Peter – Brands aren't going to abandon above-the-line advertising; it still works and clients can prove their sales go up when they launch a huge TV campaign. Now though, marketers

are going to look for ways to incorporate what they do in traditional media with all these other channels consumers now use.

Steve M – Now we are more likely to talk to our consumers so we first engage them on that 'social media' platform.

Lulu – We are now more likely to talk to and respect our community/consumers in a certain space.

Henry – It's free to listen to the conversation so marketers can gain insights from their customers before they even think about other marketing channels.

Q – Can social media be a place for brands to manage their reputations?

Nathan – As long as you are always honest about what you are doing and have the right intentions, consumers will cut you a lot of slack.

Q – Traditional consumer brands have found great success on social media, but can the same be done for B2B and corporate brands?

Andrew – I think they can but the key thing to consider is the audience and what exactly they want when they come to those sites.

Peter – Also, social media isn't just the Facebook's and Bebo's – there is a social media platform for every niche interest.

Steve M – Simply, it's about that conversation in the lift. Will it then carry over online?

Steve T – As long as there is a reason for the conversation.

Dan – It's about creating offline interaction, which can then translate online.

Q – Looking at how far social media has come and how

quickly, how will the medium act in the future for consumers and brands?

Steve T – The long-term value for consumers is that it is a better value exchange between them and the brands they are interested in. For brands it's about taking the friction out of speaking directly to customers.

Dan – Search will become a lot more vertical where your users can categorise their own searches taking into account social media.

Henry – The future for us is about ultimately guiding consumers, helping them in their everyday lives and figuring out how to bring what we do, together with what consumers do in their everyday life.

Steve M – There's no right or wrong way to use social media. As marketers, we're still figuring it out. But if what you've done has worked, it's good. If it hasn't then it's not good. However, brands can't just come along and decide to do a social media campaign or activity – there has to be a strategy and a good reason behind doing it.

Peter – I think the struggle at the moment is that brands are still trying to get those commercial messages across no matter what. They need to strike a balance.

Q – At the end of the day, marketing directors want to see positive ROI, and we are yet to figure out whether or not social media actually delivers. But with so many consumers going online, following recommendations and listening to brands, is it damaging for a brand not to be on social media?

Steve T – I don't think it would do the brand damage. Simply being available on social media just adds to the sentiment of the brand.

Nathan – Thinking about brands from a human level, if consumers want to know more about a brand, they are now more likely to look them up on Facebook or LinkedIn before they will type them into



Google. A brand's reputation and personality now lives on social media.

Dan – If someone is saying something bad about your brand, being on social media gives the brand a chance to react, which is important as it gives them a chance to explain.

Nathan – At the end of the day, would you trust a brand that doesn't open itself up to comments?

Q – What is the top mistake that brands should avoid when using social media and what should brands be looking to do instead?

Pete – Get involved in the conversation, but don't control it.

Andrew – Be listening to the conversation before it even happens.

Adam – Don't try and gain the system.

Lulu – Don't talk down to your audience and offend their authority. Respect their experience.

Dan – Seek approval from users, as users believe they own the site. Keep with the tone of the community.

Nick – Understand your audience first and know why it is you're doing what you're doing.

Peter – Look at how the principles you are using in social media and find out how you can apply it in the offline world too. If you're only behaving in one particular way in one specific channel you don't look genuine.

Steve M – The truth hurts, but don't ignore it. If consumers are saying bad things about you, take it on board.

Steve T – If you haven't got a great story to tell, don't tell it.

Quiet Storm is pleased to offer

The People Project: Social Media Special





How to use social media to attract people to your brand

James Kirkham, Managing Director of digital strategy agency Holler, explains why having a social media strategy is more than just having a presence online.

The massive growth and exciting trajectory of social media, has meant brands are queuing up to take full advantage. Those who have already dabbled have achieved varying degrees of success. Some, who have bulldozed their way into the space, have been badly burned and brusquely ushered back out by the very audience they were hoping to court. There have been few, however, who have got it exactly right, and are able to engage an audience by literally becoming what they're interested in. This is contrary to normal advertising philosophy, where a brand interrupts what the audience might be interested in.

Honesty is the best policy

For a brand to attract people by means of social media, it needs to display honesty and have engaging content. It is also crucial that it does not aim to hoodwink its audience in what is, in the main, an incredibly transparent forum. There also needs to be a distinct and compelling reason why a brand would be on a social network in the first place. The best examples are when brands engage, entertain, and drive discussion and community, not just advertise.

To attract an audience through social spaces, does not mean jumping in without first earning the right to be there. The current saturation of brands and messages has meant that people have learnt to filter through the masses, and cut straight to whom they trust. If a brand invades their space without earning this right, or even worse distract them from their task, it will be rejected.

Community minded

When we first launched the cult teen show 'Skins' with E4, it was an unknown property with an unknown cast and an unknown writing team. This meant we could not just expect an online audience to readily attach themselves to our site. Therefore, growing a community around the property through social media was a key part of our strategy. We created advocates rather than adverts. Instead of trying to distract our audience away from what they might be doing, we wanted to become their main point of interest. This was achieved by creating content experiences in exactly the places where our audience spend time. The purest example of their home then was Myspace.com.

Our Skins profile enabled us to blur the distinction between the show itself and the manner in which it was marketed. We were then able to invest in multiple opportunities for our audience to (get to know) become familiar with the show, its characters, and storylines.

The social space was also used to facilitate less conventional ways into the show and the marketing of it.

Re-focus

By engaging first and delivering the message second, a brand is more able to achieve its goals. It is essential to over-deliver with something that is compelling and that has clear value to users. We turned casual browsers into loyal fans. Ensuring our brand didn't try to sell meant a lot to our savvy audience.

In addition, brands need to interact with consumers without taking over. Building an online community in a social media space should not be about the brand, but focused on a community interest that can involve the brand.



With Skins, we first identified a core 5000 friends. This magic number was decided upon to become the driving force and engine room for our activity. We knew if we treated each follower like a most trusted friend, then we would always have a strong focal hub to engage with and produce content. This would, therefore, keep the community growing organically.

It is also important for a brand, wherever possible, to micro-manage each friend and speak to them individually. This way, a much greater kudos is built up around an audience in a social space. Instead of creating a solitary "one size fits all" banner message, using individual tailored experiences will give each user the ability to express their voice, in the knowledge that it is likely to be heard.

"Social media is contrary to a normal advertising philosophy where a brand interrupts what the audience might be interested in."



How did we ever live without social media?

Molly Flatt, WOM Evangelist at word-of-mouth agency 1000heads, explains how social media is allowing brands to listen to the conversation

Just as there was a time when we were perfectly capable of meeting someone in the pub without SMS, there was a time when we managed to maintain our friendships without Facebook, talk about the weather without Twitter, and share our creativity perfectly well without Flickr or Metacafe. However, we did live in a way that was much more opaque to marketers. Before social media, what consumers really thought about brands' products and advertising was basically a mystery to marketers.

Back to basics?

Sales figures could tell you how many people bought the goods; blanket viewing stats and circulation figures gave an idea of how many eyeballs had been subjected to the ads; and the customer database, along with the odd focus group, might give you a bit more insight into their loyalty and longevity.

Social media, on the other hand, has allowed brands unprecedented access to the opinions and behaviour of consumers across the world: not just what they're thinking and doing, but why and where.

A gradual uptake

The amazing thing is not that we ever lived without social media, but that brands are being so slow to tap into their potential in a serious way.

Lego is a prime example of a company which has boosted its old-school appeal by using the new platforms and tools that utilise social media. Having lost its way with too many movie tie-ins and theme parks, resulting in a deficit of Dkr1.4bn (£144m) by January 2004, the Danish toy maker decided to put its ear back to the ground and realised that there was still a groundswell of support from online fans. By listening to its fans, Lego developed a series of social Lego games with British designer Cephas Howard, and invested in a social media strategy focused on nurturing and inspiring those valuable advocates. The company has since seen its net profits soar 32% to Dkr1.35bn, with sales up 18.7%.

STA Travel is another social media star. Sites such as Tripadvisor are massively popular, but travel is still rooted in the real, offline world, so any social media strategy in the travel industry must integrate both physical and virtual worlds. We helped STA create the STA Explorers, a band of its existing customers who create content and conversation across a whole gamut of platforms including social networks, forums, blogs, microblogs and media sharing sites, with the hope of helping others make decisions ranging from whether to take a certain tour to finding the best curry in Kazakhstan. Users remain independent, talking on their own venues and being as critical as they are complimentary. However, they're networking and promoting each other as a self-identified, sharp-tongued STA tribe. As a result, a positive, engaging discourse regarding STA Travel has increased significantly in the past year. Networking with likeminded travellers, users are more than happy to engage with the brand in an uncommercial, emotional and immersive way.



Listening to brand advocates

Social media is allowing brands to be flexible and responsive in a way that was all but impossible a few years ago.

The good examples are gaining ground from others still seeding virals, emailing bloggers' press releases and paying for posts; desperate not to be left behind but not quite ready to invest in a sustained and receptive way. Part of the problem is the idea that social media is something that has entirely changed what we do and who we are. It has empowered and accelerated our creativity, sociability, visibility and reach, but so did the omnibus. We're still human beings, just doing what human beings do in a more public and global way. Rather than treating social media as bewildering badlands that need dazzling, seducing or bribing to tow the company line, brands should be listening to and engaging with their consumers by employing the same elements that have always made up a mutually beneficial and long-lived conversation: transparency, relevance, passion and time.

"Before social media, what consumers really thought about brands' products and advertising was basically a mystery to marketers"



icrossing /::/

ICrossing helps Channel 4 re-engage with its teenage audience

At the start of 2008, Channel 4 Education took the unprecedented step of shifting its entire £6m commissioning budget from TV to online and cross-platform projects, in a bid to re-connect with its teenage audience. This ground-breaking content strategy, spearheaded by Channel 4's new Commissioning Editor Matt Locke, came about after research revealed that its education content was largely unseen by its target audience.

Overview

Taking a measurements-focused approach, Locke wanted to accurately understand how target users are engaging with education content outside of Channel 4 online properties, to assess the impact of different types of content. He took the forward-thinking step of collaborating with digital marketing agency iCrossing for the launch of its pilot Measuring Engagement service, to assess how users engage with Channel 4 Education's new online game Bow Street Runner.

Objectives

- Evaluate the success of the Bow Street Runner game, to learn what 'viewer' numbers and results Channel 4 Education can expect from similar online gaming projects, delivered within a social media framework.
- Understand the kind of gaming content that teenagers can get passionate about and advocate.
- Have visibility on how users are engaging with Channel 4 content outside of the broadcaster's online properties.
- Develop a working model to ensure that future social media planning, from content creation through to game seeding, is based on more considered learning.

Strategy

For the pilot project, iCrossing developed a bespoke method of measuring and evaluating user engagement, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to evaluate what is driving user attention and influence around Bow Street Runner.

The strategy consisted of two key components:

- An engagement scorecard, to bring together on and off-site data, to show levels of engagement with the Bow Street Runner game, and associated Channel 4 Education brand.

- Active listening to understand elements of user behaviour that cannot be tracked simply, presented as a narrative on how the Bow Street Runner game is being discussed and engaged with.

Solution

iCrossing developed a bespoke Measuring Engagement scorecard, based on a model outlined by Forrester in their August 2007 paper by Brian Haven entitled 'Marketing's New Key Metric: Engagement'. In line with the Forrester model, the scorecard broke down into four key areas:

- Involvement – Are people coming to the site and playing the game?
- Interaction – How far do users get in the game? Do they come back, do they interact with other users and Channel 4?
- Intimacy – what do users feel about the game? Do they bookmark it?
- Influence – how far do users spread knowledge of the game through associated networks?

Key Findings

The results of the project were not focused on demonstrating the success of Bow Street Runner, but rather on using the game as validation for the measurement framework, and as a benchmark to show how target audiences are currently engaging with online Channel 4 Education content, to inform future output.

- Overall, engagement increased from the beta release benchmark, with users continuing to engage with the game as new episodes were released.
- Initially 30 per cent of user-generated content was positive, however there were similar levels of dissatisfaction over difficulty and bugs in the game. As these technical issues were ironed out, positive sentiment outscored negative.
- Engagement with the game was high within gaming networks.



There was less engagement with other communities, indicating further potential to identify and engage within education communities for example.

- Geo-segmentation findings revealed that the Bow Street Runner audience was different to that of Channel 4 as a whole.

Working together

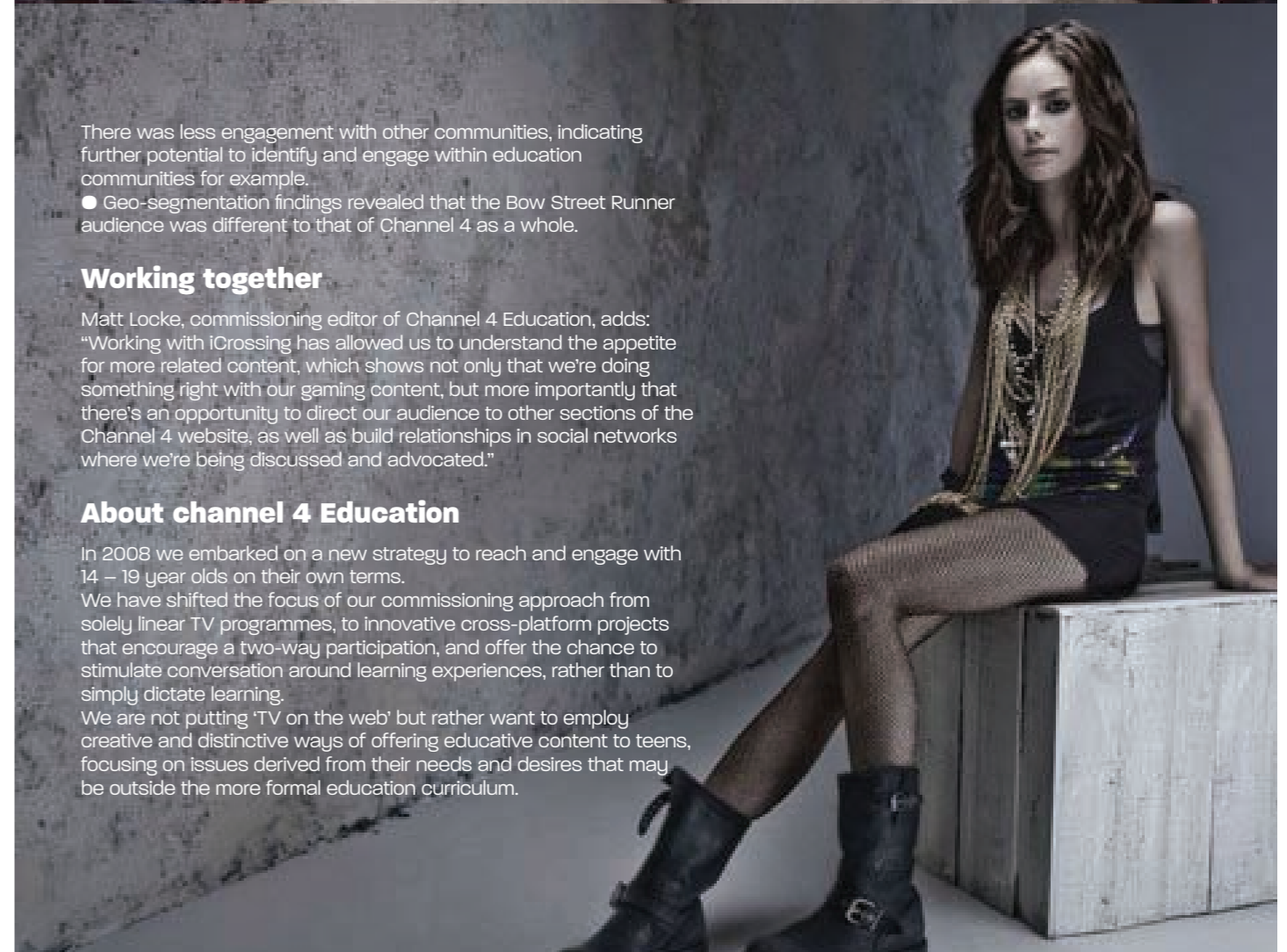
Matt Locke, commissioning editor of Channel 4 Education, adds: "Working with iCrossing has allowed us to understand the appetite for more related content, which shows not only that we're doing something right with our gaming content, but more importantly that there's an opportunity to direct our audience to other sections of the Channel 4 website, as well as build relationships in social networks where we're being discussed and advocated."

About channel 4 Education

In 2008 we embarked on a new strategy to reach and engage with 14 – 19 year olds on their own terms.

We have shifted the focus of our commissioning approach from solely linear TV programmes, to innovative cross-platform projects that encourage a two-way participation, and offer the chance to stimulate conversation around learning experiences, rather than to simply dictate learning.

We are not putting 'TV on the web' but rather want to employ creative and distinctive ways of offering educational content to teens, focusing on issues derived from their needs and desires that may be outside the more formal education curriculum.



Facing Fears



Antony Mayfield, Vice President, Head of Social Media at iCrossing, explains why social media is an essential element of today's marketing strategy.

by Melinda Varley

The main reason that brands are reluctant to get involved with social media is due to fear of the unknown according to Antony Mayfield, from iCrossing.

Mayfield heads up a team that has developed new approaches to online marketing and communication at the search and social media-led digital agency.

As a social media expert, he explains that 'social media' isn't anything new but a simple evolution of human behaviour online. Mayfield says, "Social media is a lot like living in a small village where everyone knows who is who, who is trustworthy and a place where everyone has a reputation. The web has let us evolve from that and take everything we do in the physical world and make it bigger and better on a larger scale."

For both brands and individuals, social media allows brands to have one-to-one conversations and relationships with thousands of people at once. Mayfield describes it as, "Normal social behaviour on steroids and lots of cups of coffee!"

So how can brands cash in on the social phenomenon that has evolved far beyond them?

"Brands live and die by how humans perceive them," explains Mayfield. "The idea of brand engagement isn't exclusive to social media, or the web for that matter. Brands live and are successful because they engage with people and social media provides the perfect platform for that."

As we discussed at our round table (see transcript on page 3), consumers are now spending more time online than they are in front of any other media outlet, making social media an essential part of any marketing strategy for brand engagement.

When marketers engage in community driven conversations though, they need to talk with real voices and have genuine conversations. It's all about relationship building and brands cannot simply pretend to be interested in what consumers are saying.

These conversations should also be open-ended and the community should be in the driver's seat. Brands must also evaluate how to appropriately engage with their customers in a way that is mutually beneficial to consumers and the brands alike.

Mayfield says that while consumers are not happy to be interrupted during their social activities online with commercial messages, they do welcome engaging content.

"Consumers are happy to have their online social lives interrupted with content as long as it is interactive and there is a purpose for that conversation. Basically, if a consumer feels engaged, whether it be emotionally or rationally, the interruption is welcomed," said Mayfield.

However, he stresses that as much as brands want to use social media to enhance their brands and create brand awareness, they must realize that consumers use sites such as Twitter and Facebook for entertainment.

"Once you take a step back from looking for ways to make money out of these sites, you realize that the likes of Twitter and Facebook is fun. Take a look at the pure joy and what these sites do – they enhance our relationships with those (people or brands) that we can't be with in the physical world."

Mayfield, who works with clients including Toyota, Channel 4 and Unilever, says that social media is essential for every brand to understand for both strategic and practical reasons.

He enthuses, "From a strategic point of view, marketers have to understand social media as its changing how the web is now working and the entire media world. What we at iCrossing encourage our clients to realise is that they need to be where the customers are and that's no longer newspapers and TV, but online."

To put it in prospective, the internet will soon become the main station for home entertainment in Europe, surpassing TV, according to a recent report from Microsoft.

The 'Europe logs on' report forecasts that by June 2010, internet consumption will average 14.2 hours per week, or over 2.5 days a month, compared to 11.5 hours a week of TV, or 2 days a month.

By 2013, internet access will average 14.2 hours per week against 11.5 hours for traditional TV channels.

Currently, Over 60 per cent of young consumers (16 – 24) use social media at least weekly, and about 40 per cent check their networks every day (Forrester Research). These young creators grew up in the age of personal computers, graphical user interfaces, and digital social annotations. The social media boom of the past few years has created an online identity and digital hub, altered as frequently as one's clothes.

What marketers and brands really have to understand, according to Mayfield, is not just social media but who is in their network, "There is

no dictionary definition as to what social media is – it's not that simple. If you get into social media as a direct response approach I think you're in trouble and are in for a hard time."

While some marketers may argue that their reluctance to do social media campaigns boils down to ROI, Mayfield suggests that the aim of social media differs greatly between brands. He explains, "One of the defining characteristics of the social web is complexity and that means that there is no simple answer to 'can you get ROI on this?'."

"ROI totally depends on what your objectives are in the first place. For some, a social media strategy is about brand awareness, while for others it may be about driving sales."

Social media has decentralised brands and audiences, creating a new class of digital creators, curators, and watchful observers. This new form of distributed creation and communication has changed the way brands must market and monitor their business to both new and existing audiences.

Mayfield concludes, "Social media is hugely significant for brand engagement as it allows them to listen to the conversation delivering insight to what their consumers really think about them. That in itself is what every brand should seek to do in order to be successful."

Antony Mayfield's 3 principles for brand engagement:

- **Understand where the people that are important to you are and what they are talking about**
- **Understand your role in the conversation. Do people want to hear from you?**
- **Be present. Listening is still be social and it allows you to take on board what consumers are saying about you.**

ATTENTION!

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Exclusive look at how a meerkat sparked a change in strategy for

Creative agency VCCP were faced with the challenge of making comparison website comparethemarket.com memorable – introduce a Russian meerkat into the equation and somehow we have a social media phenomenon. How did a fuzzy meerkat become the vehicle for a whole new approach to the brand's digital strategy?

by **Melinda Varley**

Comparison websites in the UK have typically followed a particularly dull format when it comes to their advertising – cheap, annoying ads with unmemorable characters such as pirates and elephants or, worse still, over-actors pretending to be customers asking very obvious questions.

These sites have used repetition and the annoyance factor to establish their name in the consumer's brain. However, the format never quite worked for Comparethemarket.com and thus a Russian meerkat named Aleksandr Orlov was born.

The site, that compares car insurance brands, struggled to get consumers to remember its name. George Everett, planner at VCCP and the brains behind the comparethemarket.com phenomenon, with Cliff Hall, account director, said that getting people to simply remember 'market' was incredibly tough.

Everett explained, "Research showed us that people using the site were describing it as GoCompare or Compare.com. To try and get people to remember 'market' we had to come up with something that would really draw attention to the term 'market'."

Hall added that the agency initially sought to come up with jokes around the word 'market', but the idea really wasn't taking off, "The next step was to try and use something that sounded like 'market'. Then we came across 'meerkat', which gave us something that could allow us to be engaging and fun, as well as featuring a character."

Market comparison sites, or any brands in the financial sector, tend to have quite dry advertising. However, Aleksandr may just be part of a new trend.

Since January this year, many other financial brands have been creating more sophisticated campaigns. Aviva (now Norwich Union) used celebrities in its TV spot including Elle MacPherson and Bruce Willis; the Co-Op Group used Bob Dylan and Swiftcover is currently using Iggy Pop.

The challenge with using a face or character in comparethemarket.com's case, is deciding how best to treat that personality indirectly given the brand.



Everett explains, "We thought about a glove puppet, someone dressed up as a meerkat and then the animated character. Our main aim with the character was to develop a personality that people could warm to and engage with in a very real and human way.

"If you have a character who you're trying to put over as being real you've got to portray him as a real human personality in order for people to want to engage with him."

The idea (around using) behind the use of the micro-blogging site Twitter was that the agency wanted consumers to be able to interact with Aleksandr the way they would interact with their real life friends.

The famous meerkat is able to post comments, jokes, updates on his activities and photos to both his profiles on Facebook and Twitter in a way that allows his followers to virtually catch-up with him as they would their real-life friends.

Aleksandr Orlov has more than 10,000 followers on Twitter and more than 350,000 fans on Facebook.

To keep fans engaged, a team of three at VCCP constantly update Aleksandr's profiles on Twitter and Facebook. But how long will a character's personality live on through a virtual medium?

Everett says, "The major challenge for us is in making sure that this isn't just a one hit wonder. Some characters in the past have lasted three months and others have lasted decades. We are in this for the longevity so our plans with Aleksandr are endless."

"We recognize though that it takes a very intense approach to maintain the character's credibility in reality as if he were a real person. We also know that one mistake and we could lose the whole thing."

The brand, comparethemarket.com, in case you've forgotten, is still experiencing significant growth and attracting new customers every day.

According to ranking data from Hitwise, comparethemarket.com is

now the seventh largest comparison site in the UK, moving up from the ninth spot where it sat just three months ago. The site now also has a 3.12 per cent market share.

Quote volumes have increased by 80 per cent and the cost per customer acquisition was reduced by 73 per cent. In the first eight weeks of the campaign, comparethemarket.com went from fourth to first in spontaneous awareness over rivals with double the spend.

Everett says, "In terms of our targets, what we were aiming to do by the end of the year, we reached in the first nine weeks of the campaign and doubled it."

He said that the unexpected success of the Compare The Meerkat campaign was a combination of the right timing, having the right creative, as well as having a very brave client who was willing to try something new and take on an entirely new direction and strategy.

"It's easy to do social media when you have an interesting brand, but there is no more boring brand than a car insurance aggregator site. However, you can do anything with any brand given that you have the right creative solutions," adds Everett.

Hall said, "it is actually incredible that the consumers that are out there communicating with Aleksandr and his friends, are also coming up with ideas of how to carry him on."

The team at VCCP managed to take an unusual and clever idea and turn it into a funny and memorable campaign that was then able to find further success with social media.

[Comparethemarket.com](http://comparethemarket.com) have created a whole event out of the concept that some people accidentally find comparethemarket.com. When a consumer arrives at the site, they are then given the option to either continue through to comparethemarket.com or go on to comparethemarket.com.

The brand has created a rounded, well-developed character that people like and want to know more about. He has a story and a personality indirectly plugging the comparethemarket.com website and directing 'friends' to the actual brand.

Many brands do not see the value of this sort of marketing because it isn't direct enough and may not produce instant results. [Comparethemarket.com](http://comparethemarket.com) has taken a chance on establishing themselves in the consumers psyche over a longer period of time, as well as enjoying some word-of-mouth advertising.



A three step strategy for social media

By Philip Buxton, Head of Marketing at **iCrossing** /

Social media are the communities, conversations and content that always acted as the most powerful driver in what we bought and from whom – it's just that they used to exist solely outside of brands' sight and reach; over the garden fence, in the pub, and down the Post Office.

The web has enabled that natural human behaviour of 'social recommendation' to move online and – thanks to the 'connectedness' of digital media – be disproportionately amplified. Studies have found, for example, that 61% of people check online reviews, blogs and other online customer feedback before buying a new product or service [Opinion Research Corporation, July 2008].

But, by existing online, it is possible for brands to not only gain true insight into what their customers are saying about them and their competitors, but engage directly to influence those conversations.

So, for brands seeking a new approach in a world where social recommendation is so powerful as to make traditional marketing an irrelevance, where do they start? iCrossing models its approach to social media engagement on three key steps. They act as a model for those companies that accept that the real question is not whether to engage in social media but whether to engage with their customers at all, for it is without question in social media that they now choose to exist.

1. Understand your networks

Around your brands, products and services sit networks of communities, conversations and content through which your customers' perceptions of those brands, products and services are built. Research these networks thoroughly to answer the following questions:

- **where is activity relevant to your brand occurring?**
- **what is being said and who are the influential voices?**
- **what content is being created and proving popular?**

2. Be live in your networks

Being active in social media is crucial to being able to have a legitimate say in relevant conversations. Does this mean advertising on Facebook, starting many Twitter accounts and launching several blogs? Possibly. What it certainly means is that, to have your voice heard, you need to be in the room. Choosing which rooms to be in, when to speak and when to listen is the challenge.

3. Be useful to your networks

This mantra can help answer key questions about when and how to engage in social media. The most crucial thing to deliver to your networks is value – that may be through entertaining content, useful information or a direct answer to a customer service question. The key is to remember to ask not what your networks can do for you, but what you can do for your networks?

For much more on how to understand social media and networks, download iCrossing's free e-books 'What is Social Media' and 'Brands in Networks' at <http://www.icrossing.co.uk/what-we-think/our-research/>

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