“Social marketing: lessons for managing social media initiatives”

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Social marketing: lessons for managing social media initiatives

Abstract

The explosion of technology, particularly interactive social media, has had a profound impact on the way firms engage with both current and potential customers. Unfortunately while many firms employ these technologies in their marketing activities these efforts are often not wholly effective. In large part this is due to a failure to fully understand how to implement the technologies. This paper presents seven lessons, or guidelines, for firms to incorporate into their social media marketing program which will provide a foundation for success.

Keywords: social marketing, viral marketing, e-marketing, direct marketing, social media.

Introduction

The past few years have seen a dramatic proliferation of new technologies for reaching current and potential customers in markets around the globe (Brettel and Spilker-Attig, 2010). The most notable of these are those classified as "social media." Social media initiatives are interactive, web-based technologies that enable users to create public (or semi-public) profiles, articulate lists of other users with whom they share a connection, and view those connections – all with the goal of affording individual users the ability to create content (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Scott and Jacka, 2011). As a result, social media technologies have allowed individuals to no longer be just consumers of information, but to play a large part in creating content for others to consume (e.g., Tapscott and Williams, 2008). The adoption of these technologies has been quick, and the size of the global user base impressive. In the past five years the number of users engaging in social media activities within the United States has more than quadrupled, with now more than 46 percent of American internet users interacting with social media (Lenhart, 2009). Today, the sheer number of globally connected social media users – Facebook (over 800 million users[1]), YouTube (over 780 million users[2]), Twitter (over 160 million users[3]), and LinkedIn (over 80 million users[4]) – represent an attractive pool of consumers for companies looking to market their products and services.

The ability to mass-customize the firm's market contacts using a standardized technology platform while also interacting with the market at the individual level is a powerful marketing tool (Ansari and Mela, 2003). One of the primary attractions of social media from a marketing perspective is that it has provided a method to utilize the web to harness the power of the masses, and through this a new means by which firms can establish relational interaction with both current and potential customers has been created. Combined with the popularity and interactive nature of these technologies, the interest in social media's application as a marketing tool has exploded in the past few years (e.g., Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010, Greer, 2011; Campbell et al., 2011, Bulearca and Bulearca, 2010; Akar and Topcu, 2011). Social networks (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), blogs (e.g., Gizmodo, The Consumerist), online communities (e.g., TiVo Community, Harley Davidson Community), discussion forums (e.g., TripAdvisor), viral videos (e.g., Nike – Touch of Gold), viral campaigns (e.g., The Dark Knight), and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life) are just some examples of how social media are changing the ways firms interact with the market.

1. The emergence of social media marketing

While most firms are aware of social media technologies, a relatively small proportion fully understand how to effectively apply these technologies into their marketing strategies and tactics (Andreas, 2010). One of the primary reasons is that the objectives and techniques required to market with social media – whether a single marketing campaign or developing a complete marketing strategy – is significantly different than managing marketing initiatives that have come before. With past communication innovations – print to radio, radio to television, or even television to the early days of the web – communication based on marketing and advertising has always been unidirectional. Traditionally, the objective of an organization creating an advertising message has been to clearly inform, persuade, or remind present and potential customers of their offerings (or of the organization itself) through carefully planned communications and information that originated from within the organization, or their representative agencies (Barton, 1950, p.

[1] As of June 15, 2011, https://www.google.com/adplanner/planning/site_profile#siteDetails?identifier=facebook.com&geo=001&trait_type=1&lp=true.

[2] As of June 15, 2011, https://www.google.com/adplanner/planning/site_profile#siteDetails?uid=domain%253A%2520youtube.com&geo=001&lp=true.

[3] As of June 15, 2011, https://www.google.com/adplanner/planning/site_profile#siteDetails?uid=domain%253A%2520twitter.com&geo=001&lp=true.

[4] As of June 15, 2011, https://www.google.com/adplanner/planning/site_profile#siteDetails?identifier=linkedin.com&geo=001&trait_type=1&lp=true.

928). The primary challenge was making sure a large number of individual consumers saw, and processed, the message. Consumers were simply that, recipients who only consumed a given message, passively reacting to them either by becoming attentive to, being converted by, or being able to recall the message (Berthon et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2011).

Unlike the past, marketing communications are no longer unidirectional (from advertiser to audience) and responded to passively (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). In fact, many forms of social media have no parallel (e.g., Facebook "fan pages", or Twitter "tweets") in the "offline" world (Taylor et al., 2011). Social media are about how people are interacting with the message and each other through the medium. Rather than merely consuming messages, users are now actively discussing message content. This content creation is a strong and unique focus of social media. No longer the creation of glossy print advertisements or commercial videos is limited to the domain of organizations with large marketing budgets. Customers are now making their own ads, and propagating them for *free* on social media outlets (Campbell et al., 2011). The final, and perhaps the most important difference in all of this, is that social media are not about *communicating to* the largest group of customers, but *engaging with* customers.

Even with its ever-increasing importance, many marketing managers are reluctant, or unable, to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively with social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011). In order to effectively use social media as a part of an overall marketing strategy, marketing managers need to understand how these fundamental differences require a different techniques and tactics associated with the management of marketing initiatives that utilize social media from more traditional approaches. However, in order to effectively employ social media in any marketing effort, it is imperative to have a clear understanding of its potential, and limitations. This paper highlights seven lessons and the accompanying core concepts marketing managers need to be aware of when going through a social media planning-engagement-evaluation process.

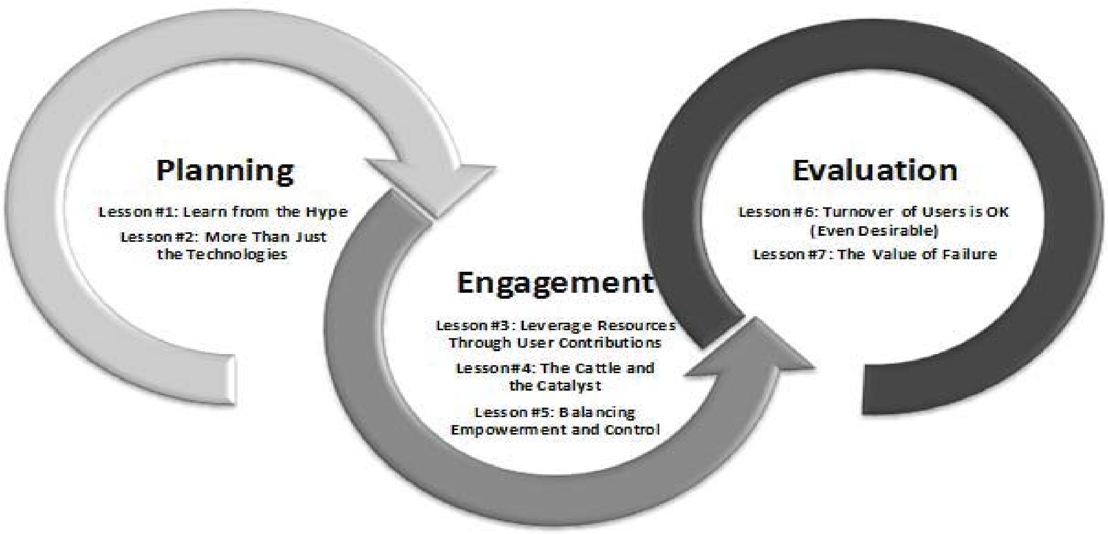

Fig. 1. Social media planning-engagement-evaluation process

The issues drive successful social media implementations, and therefore can form the foundation for any social media-based marketing program. Most importantly, by understanding these issues and how they differ from the management of traditional marketing techniques, marketing managers will be able to better assess if, and how, social media can be useful in their overall marketing strategy.

2. Planning

As discussed above, social media has revolutionized the long standing models of consumer interaction. Firms now find themselves in the midst of a new communication landscape as new social media sites and services vie for the attention of individuals and communities (Kietzmann et al., 2011). At the same time, this makes it increasingly difficult to stay abreast of these almost constantly changing options. Yet companies must continually scan the environment in order to understand the ever changing conversations and other information flows that could impact their position in the market (McCarthy et al., 2010). By understanding the following two lessons marketing managers will be better equipped to assess if they should embark into this new space; and if so, more successfully navigate their first forays into the social media frontier.

Lesson 1: Learn from the hype.

There is little doubt that the various available social media tools have created a wealth of new opportunities for interacting with consumers in the marketplace (Lynch, 2008; Klaassen, 2008). While relatively inexpensive and easy to implement, marketing managers need to realize that they should not attempt to use emerging technologies without first having a clear idea of what objective(s) to pursue. Despite the popularity and anecdotal evidence surrounding Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the vast majority of social media campaigns are not going to make headlines or change businesses' core capabilities. In fact, companies regularly ignore, or mismanage, the opportunities offered by social media (Berthon et al., 2007; Kietzmann et al., 2011), in part to a lack of understanding regarding what social media are (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). If an organization is trying to make headlines or create buzz among stakeholders, employees, or customers, implementing a system utilizing social media does not guarantee success.

The successful firm will not simply jump on the social media bandwagon unless there are reasons beyond a desire to project an innovative and trendy market image (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011). While the hype surrounding many new technological phenomena, such as social media, is frequently lacking substance and can sometimes be misleading, this hype can in fact be useful to organizations considering adoption of new technologies (Swanson and Ramiller, 1997). Sustained hype can be an indicator that the technology has moved into the larger organizational consciousness. This signals that other organizations are indeed wrestling to understand this new technology, along with its potential benefits and risks. Furthermore, hype can provide signals of who is, and who is not, adopting the new technology. This can provide potential adopters with additional information related to the technologies usefulness and appropriateness within certain organizations (Fenn and Raskino, 2008). All of this can provide valuable insight into the future direction of competitors in the market place, as this information can be useful in identifying opportunities for marketer intervention and involvement (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011). As such, if marketing managers are looking for a tool to improve firm-customer interactions, such as making a process more efficient or simple for users, social media can be something to consider after learning from, not chasing, the hype.

Lesson 2: Social media are more than just the technologies.

Social media are not just about innovative technologies, but effectively applying these technologies. This effective application allows people not to only work and think about information and problems at an individual level, but also expands the process to allow organizations to harness any additional potential in order to aggregate their efforts and derive benefits (Rios and Riquelme, 2008). For example, many people have piles of what appears to be "clutter" in their work space that have particular significance to each single individual. Designating items to one pile or another implicitly creates and records information associated with the item. However, this information is usually inaccessible to anyone other than the owner of the information because it's system of organization is in his or her head. Social tagging provides a means to externally systemize this natural process and aggregate it, allowing customers and potential customers alike to benefit from the collective judgment of some aspect of the firm's social marketing program. If many users apply the same label, for example, to an item, it is likely that the label is accurate or will be perceived to be accurate by the market. Wikis are essentially a way of supporting the development of collections of information (e.g., product performance) with flexibility and openness. They provide the market with the ability to organize, view, edit, and discuss these collections of information in a document-like format. Social networking websites identify people and relationships, and then use this to inform decision-making, increase referrals, and encourage word of mouth marketing and distribution. If one person publishes a standalone website about itselves, it may only be useful to a small number of people. But a centralized source of information about acquaintances, business contacts, or target customers is more valuable and easily accessible.

The intrinsic marketing value of social media lies in the techniques the technologies employ, not just the technologies themselves. In fact, many of the techniques can be used with, without, and across the various available social media outlets (e.g., Twitter content can be designated for use on Facebook). The crucial point to remember is that these techniques focus on aggregating, and disseminating into the greater market place, small bits of information previously held by an individual or a single entity (Howe, 2008). These bits of information create value when they are amassed or combined with others. For such an approach to be effective, the social media strategy will only employ these techniques but will apply them to make the individuals actions often fun, easy, and quick as well (Thompson, 2007). Making the interaction easy and enjoyable leads to greater adoption and fuels the ability to harness the power of the market.

3. Engagement

Marketing is evolving into true two-way interactions, with the once controlled arena of marketing communications giving way to a complex environment of market-based communications originating from multiple originators (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Pitt and Berthon, 2011). As such, marketers have been confronted with the realization that social media was designed for people – not brands (Pitt and Berthon, 2011; Fournier and Avery, 2011). The power has been taken from those in marketing and given to individuals that create, share, post, and tweet – communicating about firms and products – with, or without, permission of the firms in question (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This being the case, businesses must reassess how they interact with consumers in order to ensure at least some degree of control over message content in the marketplace (Ramsay, 2010). The aim of the next three lessons is to prepare marketing managers to have a better sense of direction when engaging their customers via social media.

Lesson 3: Leverage resources through user contributions.

Traditional marketing programs typically require the infusion of significant financial resources to acquire the varied assets, such as advertising budget, marketing staff, ad agencies, or television time, required to mount a successful campaign. However, social media do not typically require a large amount of resources in order to have a positive impact in the market place. The real marketing power of social media systems comes from the ability to harness the power of the market itself – attracting people, building communities, and organizing collections of consumers to work together to address relevant issues on a large scale. Furthermore, unlike many traditional firm capabilities, the competitive advantages provided by social media are not determined by the complexity or the cost of the firms' assets. In fact, availability and access to social media systems are freely available. These all add up to one of the greatest potential advantages of social media systems – their ability to leverage available resources and self-sustain those resources more efficiently than traditional marketing techniques.

With traditional marketing initiatives, the investment of resources develops a predefined and specific pool of systems incorporating hardware, software, infrastructure, data, and people. Once created, employees are able to use the established systems to enhance many of the internal marketing activities within the firm. In doing so, they generate benefits for the organization, such as closely managed client relationships, accurate inventory tracking, and timely product distributions. Ultimately, if an organization's marketing systems are functioning effectively, this process will lead to a significant impact on the organization's revenue generation (Metcalfe, 2004). In short, by investing in systems and facilitating their use, the organization improves performance (see Figure 2).

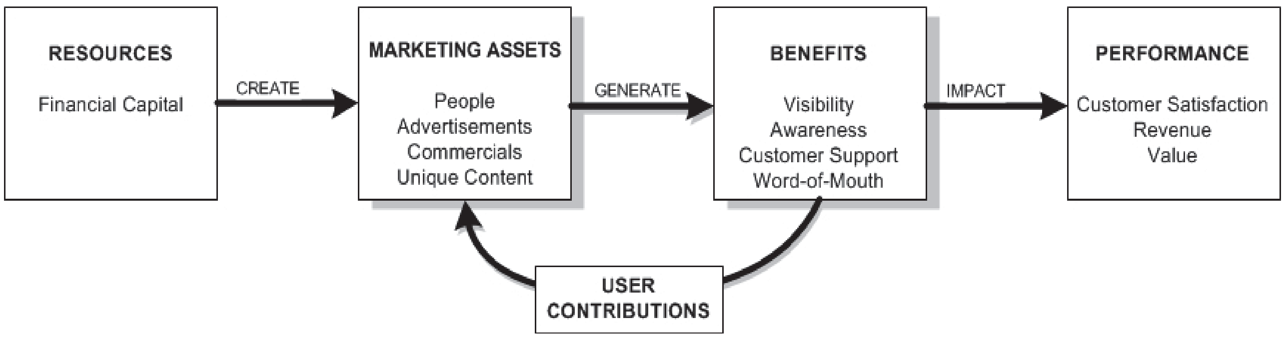

Fig. 2. Traditional resource and benefits model

The majority of organizations' systems are intended to follow this traditional model of benefit creation and performance impact. However, in order to sustain their impact, traditional systems rely on a continuous supply of resources to maintain this process. Maintenance costs, estimated to be over 70% of a typical technology budget (Huff, 1990), represent a strain on firm resources. One of the characteristics of social media that differentiates them from traditional marketing approaches, is that they have a feedback loop (Butler, 2001). By changing the nature of the infrastructure, social media make it possible for the users – the people who traditionally only receive one-way marketing communications – to not only receive the message, but to also contribute to the creation, development, and deployment of these messages as they interact with them (see Figure 3). This allows marketing communications to sustain a substantial level of impact on the organization and at the same time greatly reduce the level of recurring resources that need to be provided by the organization (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011).

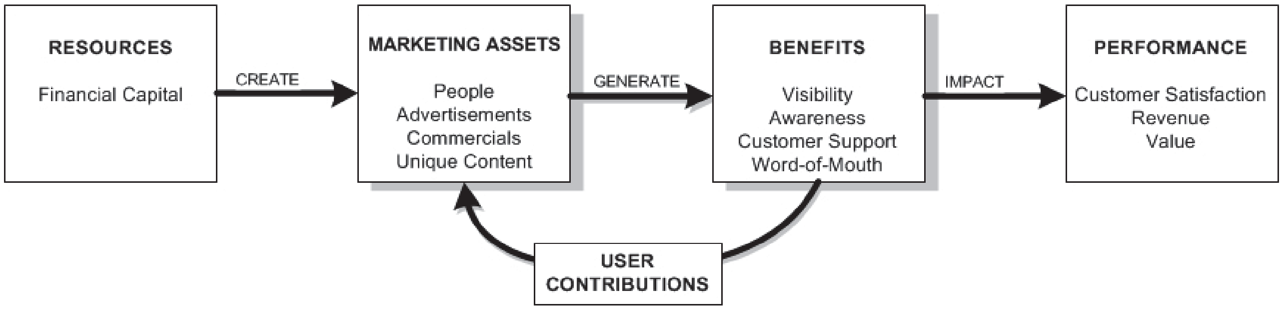

Fig. 3. Resource and benefits model with contributions feedback loop

It is important to note at this point that these resource investments cannot go away completely. A common misperception of social media is that their usage is "free" (e.g., there are no economic costs to organizations utilizing Facebook). While social media may be free to the end user successful marketing applications still have some level of active, ongoing, support on behalf of the firm (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media implementations still require firms to have representatives that engage with customers, they still have people that have to create marketing content, and there is still administrative and technological overhead. If an organization is going to engage users in the market as a resource, these users need to be seen as just that – an additional resource that needs to be managed, not ignored. The overall benefit to the firm and its marketing communication efforts is that the feedback cycle does not eliminate the need for external support – rather it minimizes the need for external support because it leverages this support with user contributions. The feedback cycle provides firms in general, and marketing managers in particular, with a method for designing social media marketing programs which can achieve greater impact given the same level of investment compared to systems designed with no such feedback mechanism (Ha and Lennon, 2010).

Lesson 4: The cattle and the catalyst.

Social media need users willing to contribute content and users willing to consume it (Kim and Song, 2010). Many managers are familiar with the 80-20 rule of thumb, where 80% of revenue comes from 20% of the customers. Social media are not different. If the percentage of the contributions performed by users of a typical social media site is rank ordered, one finds that a very small number of people, the early adopters or "catalyst" (usually fewer than 5% of the market), are doing the vast majority of the work. The remaining large group of users, the cattle, individually put forth very little content, as illustrated in Figure 4.

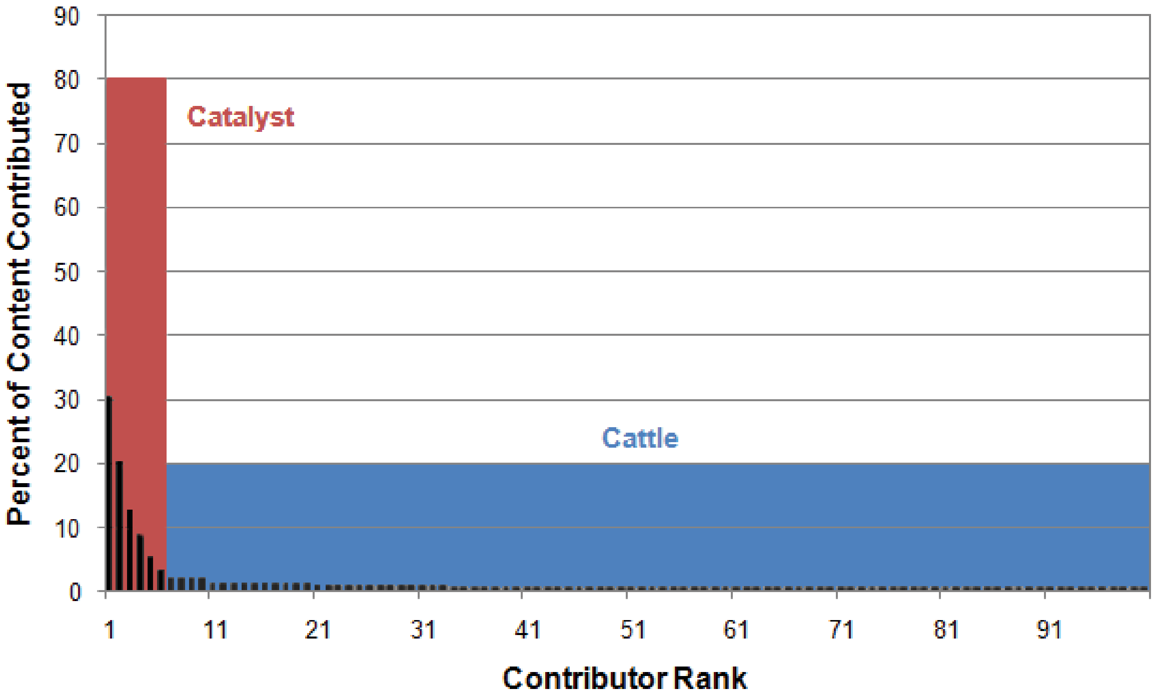

Fig. 4. Rank order of user effort

If the consumer action in traditional marketing initiatives were skewed in this manner, the result would be failure, with little to no real value for the organization. However, with social media systems, this represents a healthy balance, due to their ability to capitalize on all levels of work. To achieve this balance, marketing managers should try to identify the customer-users who are committed and passionate about interacting with the system as these are the catalysts (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011). The crucial consideration is to provide these early adopters with a means by which they can do what they enjoy (i.e., contribute resources) but can also have the opportunity to create an even bigger impact by providing direction and shaping the social marketing initiative. At the same time, it is important not to ignore the less active users, or those who only occasionally use the resources of the system. This is important because it is from this group of users that future leaders in this new firm-market interaction will emerge (Kim, 2000).

Furthermore, it is from these less active users, coupled with social media's ability to aggregate the smallest of contributions from this very large user base that the real power of social media systems. For example, Wikipedia permits anyone to edit articles, allowing for them to be refined over time. Similarly, Facebook amasses individuals' pages, creating an alluring collective resource, whereas individual, disparate pages would have minimal value. While the aggregation of the collective small contributions plays an important role in garnering the attention of others, any significant impact would not be possible without the high volume of participants. The fundamental marketing challenge is to create a balance between these two essential user bases by identifying complimentary needs and motivations. Having too much in either extreme does not work well. If marketing managers can find this balance, they have a greater chance of success with social media.

Lesson 5: Balancing empowerment and control.

The primary focus of traditional market analysis is to identify processes, stakeholders, and sources of information and to develop more efficient processes that meet the defined objectives (Im et al., 2010). This means incorporating the enhanced processes and providing systems which facilitate market interactions and other activities. By incorporating defined roles, policies, and processes, systems are designed to provide constrained information flow that ensures all individuals perform specific roles as planned (Kirsch, 1997). These systems are often rigid and difficult to change. In traditional organization-based marketing programs, those involved in design activities often do not take into account the possibility that users themselves might be willing, and able, to provide input which could improve a product or design. Rather, when firms attempt to tightly control users' interactions with the marketing systems the result can be organizational frustration as all possible interactions within cannot be anticipated.

In contrast, social media are their own unique user-to-user ecosystem (Taylor et al., 2011). Social media technologies are open spaces where individuals both within the firm, and in the market at large, have the ability to freely contribute and participate. Social media systems provide the firm with opportunity to incorporate ways to empower users not to only pass along feedback but to create and make improvements (Kim, 2000). This process also expands the benefits afforded to participants, especially those related to increased visibility, reputation, and social support associated with product acquisition and use. Most traditional marketing and promotional initiatives do not provide users with these benefits, but these additional benefits can serve as incentives for consumers to interact in this new environment (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Rather than consumer participation serving only as a mechanism through which resources are converted into the evolution of the marketing program, this added dimension provides firms with a tool through which users' interactions with the system can fuel the process, reducing the need for external support. Rather than creating a system which ensures specific tasks are performed, social media systems are built as open environments where the interactive environment allows for continuous improvement.

To think about building a marketing initiative with the intent of letting users decide if, and how, they are going to interact with the program runs contrary to traditional market planning and implementation (Ives and Olson, 1984). In fact, failing to relinquish some control to users by allowing them to play a substantial role in running these systems essentially eliminates many of the benefits found in social media, as less control and intervention is preferable (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). If firms give consumers the freedom to engage in social media campaigns, they will – and firms should foster this (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011). However, companies should not try to persuade customers into engaging in particular social media conversations if they are reluctant to do so, as a truly compelling social media campaign needs to stand on its own (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011).

That is not to say social media environments are devoid of rules and structure (Butler, 2010 et al.). The primary goal is to achieve a balance between controls. Controls that enable the firm to manage the program while empowering customer-social media users so that they continue to do much of the ongoing communication on the firm's behalf (Kim, 2011). This can be achieved by providing the structures to allow the guided evolution of policies within the community. Firms that utilize most social media sites, such as Facebook or Wikipedia, are embedded in a specific structured architecture (Muniz Jr. and Schau, 2011). When roles or rules need to be created, social media technologies do not prohibit action, but serves as a platform where this can be discussed and established. Social media has ushered in an era of consumer control (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) – for a social media campaigns to gain desired traction the firm must relinquish control (Pitt and Berthon, 2011). Even if customers using social media are critical firms should be cautious of attempting to exert excessive control over the conversation as this could be viewed as excessive and damage the initiative's credibility (Campbell et al., 2011).

4. Evaluation

Social media is still in a burgeoning growth phase. As these technologies continue this rapid growth, they will continue to challenge the manner though which firms engage customers. Social media will also require a different perspective when evaluating the success or failure of their use, particularly for firms' initial forays utilizing the media. The goal of the final two lessons is to inform marketing managers of some counterintuitive viewpoints they should utilize when reflecting on their journey into the social media space.

Lesson 6: Turnover of users is OK, even desirable.

Today, consumers have a variety of powerful technology-based information sources available to help them interact with a firm and its products at a high level (Chau et al., 2006). This has created competition for users' attention in the market place (Jones et al., 2004). Technology connected users tend to give more attention to social marketing programs that are the most clearly relevant to them as individuals. To determine the value of technology customers, and potential customers, will typically explore it first. For social media, this competitive environment creates a dynamic which is non-intuitive: successful social media initiatives have more turnover than their less successful competitors. In social media environments, it is very rare for a user to become a dedicated user before testing it. As a result, the target users who are testing out the system are highly desired because they create the base of potential adopters. In the extreme, if no one cares about the system, no one comes to try it out, the result being a percentage of the test users cannot adopt because they simply do not exist. In the other extreme, if people care about the system, some come to try it out, and then a percentage of these test drivers adopt. The percentage of the customer-user base that tests out a social media system, and then decides to leave, represents the turnover. However, this can still be viewed positively as they decided to at least test it out (Chau et al., 2006). Furthermore, it is desirable for these users not to use the system, or leave the community, if the value in its use is not apparent to them raising the overall quality of the contact – an area which is traditionally problematic in marketing and promotional efforts.

For this reason, in contrast to traditional marketing campaigns where the goal is to have the marketing message viewed by the largest audience possible, the focus with social media campaigns shifts to managing the flows of the social media user-consumer. Social media are designed to capitalize on the collective interests of users. The integral objective is to attract a crowd of users. Some will stay and some will not, as discussed above. Some users will move from being an occasional user to being a core leader. Some leaders will get burned out and leave. This is normal, and is a sign of a "healthy" social media campaign. Therefore, when determining the vitality of a social media campaign, the important metric is not how many users exist at a given time, as with marketing campaigns, but the traffic and flow of people coming in and performing different roles over time. In determining the stability of a social media-based community the important question is not "How many users are there?" Instead, the questions should be "Who are the active users?", "How many people have tried using the system?", or "What is the average tenure?"

Lesson 7: The value of failure.

Finally, it is important to realize that successfully implementing a social media marketing initiative is not easy – blog posts go unread, Facebook pages are not "liked", community forums go silent and die (Pitt and Berthon, 2011). In short, many social media initiatives fail. Given this risk, the initial reaction of some marketing managers has been to avoid such initiatives (Kietzmann et al., 2011). However, failure can play an essential, non-intuitive, role in the development of social media marketing initiatives. The development of a social media presence is an evolutionary, and often speedy, process of system development, as empowered users direct the focus and provide the content, quickly shaping the new system. While this approach can lead a social media initiative to propagate with an abundance of ideas and successes, it can also be a path to rapid failure. Failure with social media systems is valuable because it provides timely signals to marketing managers about the status of the initiatives in the form of direct input from the market. A timely demise of a particular initiative acts as a cleansing and focusing mechanism as it allows for resources to be dedicated to ventures that are showing signs of success.

This story of failure is not new to business. Many marketing initiatives fail to meet expectations, most new products fail, most small businesses fail, and a large number of investments do not provide a positive return. Fortunately, many organizations have learned how to manage this risk by utilizing portfolio diversification strategies. Successful organizations do not have only one new product, they have a product line; venture capitalists do not invest in only one start-up, they invest in a portfolio. As such, risk is balanced across these different alternatives (Mcfarlan, 1981).

The risk of failure associated with social media initiatives can be balanced using a product management strategy. A large proportion of investments in social media are associated with acquiring the internal resources necessary to develop to content and messages to be communicated over various social media sites. This cost is mitigated, or balanced, because the resulting materials can be used and reused in different applications in a variety of markets and market conditions. Compared to perspectives surrounding traditional technology-based marketing approaches that are highly structured, social media utilize a more flexible service-oriented approach. This approach breaks the structure into small pieces for reuse, allowing applications running on the new infrastructure to be easily implemented and tested quickly. The fundamental insight is that in the realm of social media marketing this is acceptable, even desirable, and that some implementations may succeed, while others fail. For this reason, social media embody a different approach to marketing and promotional strategy.

Conclusion

As with any communication tools available to marketers social media must be evaluated by a professional with knowledge of both the firm's needs and the media's capabilities. Marketing managers should look at the toolbox of technologies available and consider how they can use this new approach to solve existing problems as well as addressing new challenges in the market place. Marketing managers can also look at the technologies and determine how they may take advantage of these technologies through combinations with existing opportunities for improvement. While social media can be used many different ways to achieve a variety of marketing objectives, the bottom line is that the way social media create their market impact is different from traditional marketing approaches. As a result social media require a different perspective be adopted by marketing managers in order to ensure effective ongoing management of the initiative(s). Marketing managers assessing the potential for social media in their firm's marketing activities should not be fixated on radically changing how their firm approaches market interactions. Rather they should approach these technologies with an eye toward how they can be used to improve the way the firm operates in the market using technology, essentially as infrastructure components, where pieces can be added and experimented with to test their potential usefulness. Social media can facilitate this process by providing an inexpensive means to support these activities and at the same time allow the firm to reach a greater audience.

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