It's Rude to Interrupt: Marketing in the Social Media Revolution

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[Communications course]

Introduction

Were there a set of commandments for marketing, the first would almost certainly read, "Thou shalt follow the eyeballs of thine audience." Every time a new platform or technology gets developed and is widely adopted, marketers have to get on that platform. Following the eyes of audiences is simply the nature of the business. Since the advent of the Internet, though, audiences have become much more greatly dispersed because there are suddenly so many more *options* for where they can choose to spend their time. No longer are eyes held captive to three television channels. Yet even in this widely dispersed environment, social media are places where huge numbers of people choose to spend time. That makes them important platforms for marketers, certainly; however, social media greatly differ from old media where audiences took a passive role. The multidirectional flow of information in the Internet enables users to create their own discourses, which, thanks so social media, can reach enormous audiences. When users suddenly wield as much or more discursive power than marketers, the entire game changes.

Perhaps the most serious implication of the social media revolution is that advertisers no longer control the stream of information; rather, they are now just one voice in a huge, user dominated conversation. To be successful, marketers have to embrace their new role, the communicative agency exercised by users, and the fact that social media are successful platforms for *conversations* but not *campaigns* (Agresta & Bough 2011). Instead of fighting a trend they can't beat, marketers will need to learn to participate by facilitating what *users* want to do, e.g. to converse and make their own content. In doing so, marketers must retool their marketing practices—for instance branding—to be nothing if not interactively consumer-centric. Perhaps most importantly, marketers will have to keep in mind that they are entering a social space where consumers have the expectation of control. Marketers must acknowledge that commercial

messages constitute an interruption in users' conversations, and, in a social space, interruptions are extremely rude and generally met with rejection. That is the impact of the social media revolution: marketers now must listen first and speak only when their message can be made useful to a preexisting conversation owned by the users.

The Creation of Active Users

In the old media, such as television, radio, and print, consumers took a passive, back seat role. Marketers composed a messaged that supported a static brand image, and that information "flowed from ever more capital-intensive commercial and professional producers to passive, undifferentiated consumers" (Benkler 2006). Consumers were viewed as passive because the nature of the media did not allow for a response. That is, old media was characterized as a single point which radiated information out in straight lines to a mass group of recipients.

The Internet has enabled a drastically different model. Old media still functions as it always has, but suddenly online there exists a "distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes" (Benkler 2006). Furthermore, the low cost nature of getting online combined with its facilitation of multidirectional communication has essentially removed the enormous start-up costs necessary for mass distribution present under the old media model. The result is that ordinary users can now respond. They can talk back, talk to other individuals, or create their own content for mass distribution through social media. This ability fostered by the Internet has produced, "… [A] qualitative change in the role of individuals as potential investigators and commentators, as active participants in defining the agenda" (Benkler 2006). Furthermore, the Internet also engendered agency by enormously increasing the ways in which users might choose to spend their time. Agresta and Bough note that this spike in in ability to

choose is the "core reason" for which "social media has changed general marketing strategies" (2011).

The Power of Social Media & the Reason Marketers Should Care

"The reason social media is so much more effective than the conventional marketing that we've done for the last 6,000 years is that it's two-way communication, not pontification" (Safko & Break 2010). Essentially, social media facilitates conversation making it suddenly easier to communicate with the people you know. More importantly, social media expands your network beyond the people you see every day. These media connect you to friends you see daily, people you haven't seen in years, and (crucially) it connects you to the friends of friends—more people than you could possibly have accessed independently in the same amount of time. So why is that important to marketers?

Long before the Internet, people were turning to each other to assess commercial messages, compare experiences with a product or service, and get trustworthy input before making purchasing decisions. Word of mouth is by no means a new phenomenon. The idea is that other individuals generally have nothing to gain if you do or don't buy a product, and as such a consumer has good reason to consider those reports as honest—or at least substantially more truthful than what a salesman has to say. That ability to converse with other consumers, however, was much more limited in decades past, and often commercial messages were much more readily available than were other consumer voices. Now, however, a person can very easily access huge legions of other consumers and their experiences—positive or negative. That's important from a marketing perspective because users place much more weight on those presumably neutral opinions when making a purchasing decision than they do on commercial messages.

Marketers need also be concerned because word of mouth imposes a much more significant threat (or potential benefit) than it ever has before. For instance, "'An angry customer will tell up to 20 other people about a bad experience…,' that's face to face" (Safko & Break 2010). The nature of highly extendable social media networks ensures that a message won't just reach one person as it would in face to face conversation; rather, a single communication can reach dozens, hundreds, thousands, or more based on the number of people in a given user's extended network. As if that weren't enough, messages on a social medium can be shared over and over again, thus drastically increasing its reach. The result: "[Users] are either reinforcing marketing efforts or beating marketers at their own game by directly sharing their own experiences and thoughts on the social web. Welcome to social media marketing" (Evans 2012).

Knowing that these conversations are happening with or without the marketers, refusal to participate in social media seems an exceptionally poor business choice. "Not participating on the social web is effectively saying, 'I know what is being said, and it's okay with me'" (Evans 2012). Particularly if people have something negative to say, which they often do, lack of a social media presence may insinuate to the networked communities a lack of interest in consumer voices or worse. Frightening as that proposition might be, it doesn't mean that social media can't be immensely useful from a marketer's perspective. In fact, "Social media is an effective guidepost … [and] can be used to gather valuable information about how your product, service, and brand are perceived in the marketplace" (Evans 2012). Essentially, with the right approach, marketers can get social media users to perform valuable functions for them, and these don't end with a simple litmus test for brand reception.

"From Campaigns to Conversations" [1]

We've established that social media are platforms for conversations among users, and to enter those conversations it is crucial to abandon marketing strategies that are not consumer-centric. In the prime of old media, that notion would have been considered exceedingly strange. An advertiser's job, then anyways, was to focus on the product. The consumer was much more frequently an afterthought. But in the networked era, consumer-centrism is no longer an absurdity so much as it is an emerging norm among marketers (Turrow 2006). Agresta and Bough reiterate that sentiment, stating that social media marketing requires a complete shift, "…from impressions to connections—and from campaigns to conversations" (Agresta & Bough 2011).

Perhaps the most important guiding principle for marketers is a reiteration of how imperative it actually is to shift from designing campaigns to participating in discourses. By virtue of being *social* media, these are platforms for conversation; they are interactive, and social rules do apply. Furthermore, social media are platforms that users control: they can block other users they find irritating, they can filter content according to what they find valuable, and "*in their purest form, all conversations are participative and engaged in by choice*" (Evans 2012). As such, when unwanted, uninvited corporate messages intrude on this space, they are not received well at all because they interrupt conversations. And interruptions are *rude*. That means, "The new way to sell is not to sell at all. In fact, if you use social media to sell, you will get flamed. Social media marketing is all about listening first, understanding the conversation, and speaking last" (Safko & Brake 2010). The idea is incredibly similar to how one would go about entering a conversation with strangers. Simply interjecting with information about yourself (or a product, for instance) would be met with shock and scorn at your bad manners.

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[1] (Agresta & Bough 2011)

You would not likely be willingly included in future talks. As such, the social media revolution demands that marketers approach differently than they did in the old media. No longer is it permissible to rudely interject with commercial messages as has long been the case on television. On social media, consumers have the option of easily turning away or reporting messages as spam. As such, marketers must make their content not only relevant to the players in a conversation, but they must also integrate it in a way that is useful rather than obtrusive and rude.

Helping Users Do the Talking

Users clearly enjoy having the ability to assess marketing claims by accessing trusted sources in their networks. That doesn't necessarily remove advertising from the process of deciding to purchase a product, but social media has relegated advertising to a different role: "Advertising is a great way to hear about something new, but the information presented is not, by itself, considered trustworthy. Hear about it in an ad, but then ask your friends if it's any good" (Evans 2012). Trying to combat the perception that peers have less at stake than an advertiser would be a fruitless battle—because it is a fact that advertisers *do* have an interest in persuading the consumer. Rather than fighting the information available to consumers via their networks—a losing proposition—marketers can take a cue from social media architecture to achieve a better result. For instance, by actually making it easier for users to work the way they want to (i.e. by actively assessing information with the help of their networks) marketers can make users more inclined to utilize *their* services because they function in a way that is social, intelligent, and aware of how users like to work. Consider how Amazon has done precisely that:

> "These networks [LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.] multiply the networks we've already built. Amazon directly leverages this in the improvement of its ratings and reviews: It's not the reviews that provide the real value. It's the *reviews of the*

reviews, the reviews that occur in the extended network…Using this extended

network, you can actually go one social level deeper and sort out for yourself

which of the reviewers you are most like and pick out the reviews that most other

people like you found helpful. This helps you make a better, more informed

choice *given your specific needs*. It's that ability to connect as an individual that

consumers had been looking for." (Evans 2012)

Users will talk. By embracing that fact and facilitating consumers' desire to do so, marketers can

do quite a bit to improve their standing in the eyes of users.

Another area in which marketers can facilitate user agency is branding—a process that

looks substantially different in the interactive context of social media. In old media, marketers

could carefully construct a brand image, deliver the message to audiences who passively

received the information, and then move on to the next project. In social media, however,

nothing is static because users continue the conversation—in that way, users demand that a brand

live, breathe, respond, and interact. That presets a unique problem for how marketers manage

their brands, but it isn't without potential solutions.

Not only do users keep conversations going, they also generate their own content. That

has the potential to be an immensely useful tool for marketers because "brands today can rely on

the passions of their consumers to create content" (Agresta & Bough 2011). Agresta and Bough

note an instance when a man made videos of himself dancing in various locations on a trip

around the world. The videos, an example of user generated content, generated a huge number

of views they resonated very well with other social media users who connected with his styles of

dancing and mission to travel the world. Noticing the momentum, Stride (a company which

manufactures gum), sponsored him on another trip around the world and used the videos he

produced as promotional content. Essentially, they found a message to which thousands of users had already responded favorably and adopted it for their brand image to say, "We as a company stand for the kind of adventure and excitement this man's videos portray, and we'll prove it by helping him make more." This example shows how companies can use social media platforms to see what consumers feel passionately about by looking at what already has momentum—i.e. popularity with audiences. "The bottom line is that the future of branding lives less with … brands and more with the people who represent them and the consumers who engage with them" (Agresta & Bough 2011). Thus in the social media context, an exceptionally effective form of branding is to foster already successful user generated content and put it to work as a representation of how their brand ties in to consumers' passions.

Conclusion

Social media present a change to how marketing has been done for decades, and history has certainly provided many examples of businesses digging in their heels to resist change. Users, however, are adopting and participating with or without marketers' consent, and their ability to converse multidirectionally and on a mass scale is utterly revolutionary. Additionally important from a marketer's perspective are all the ways he/she actually stands to benefit from the new set of tools that social media have to offer. Herein lays the catch: social media will only benefit those who behave according to the rules of the environment. As a social platform controlled by the users and geared to generate conversations, marketers are the outsiders. They must abide by the social rules: listen first, speak second. Jarring commercial interruptions will not be tolerated in social media because users here have the ability to filter messages that are disruptive or not useful. Thus the delightful impact of the social media revolution is forcing marketers to amend their manners and listening skills to make themselves nothing but consumer-

centric with the goal that users might find them valuable and choose not to exclude them from

the conversation.

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