

DISCOVERING SOCIAL MEDIA

B2B marketers are keen to reap the benefits of social media, but few have unravelled the complexity of what's on offer, explains **Lucy Fisher**

Business brands are jumping on the social media bandwagon, but it's no easy ride. The brave are exploring new routes to market, faced every day with a new network or channel that claims to be the next big thing in the world of Web 2.0.

It's far from simple – but that's not putting off those who realise that social media is here to stay. "We've seen an explosion of interest from B2B brands looking at how to leverage our platform," says business network LinkedIn's director of media sales, Henry Clifford-Jones.

The networking behemoth recently exceeded 40 million members, with 2.25 million of these in the UK. "We've seen a growth in MBA schools such as Harvard and LSE leveraging the site as a marketing tool. As the economy suffers, business decision-makers are looking for alternative ways to spend their time and

improve their skills," says Clifford-Jones.

LinkedIn isn't the only expanding network. German business website, Xing, now has three million members in German-speaking countries and four million members elsewhere in Europe, and says its sales and profits are growing quarter by quarter.

Thorsten Vespermann, Xing's director of corporate communications, notes a wave of people turning to business networking sites to look for career and business opportunities in the current economic climate. "Investment banking and the car industry are two areas where we are seeing growth. When you read that a company is in trouble, almost immediately you see an increase in members."

It's perhaps unsurprising to learn that there are more than 40,000 recruiters using Xing to make hires. And it's a similar situation at LinkedIn. "Our audience is



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What the experts say:

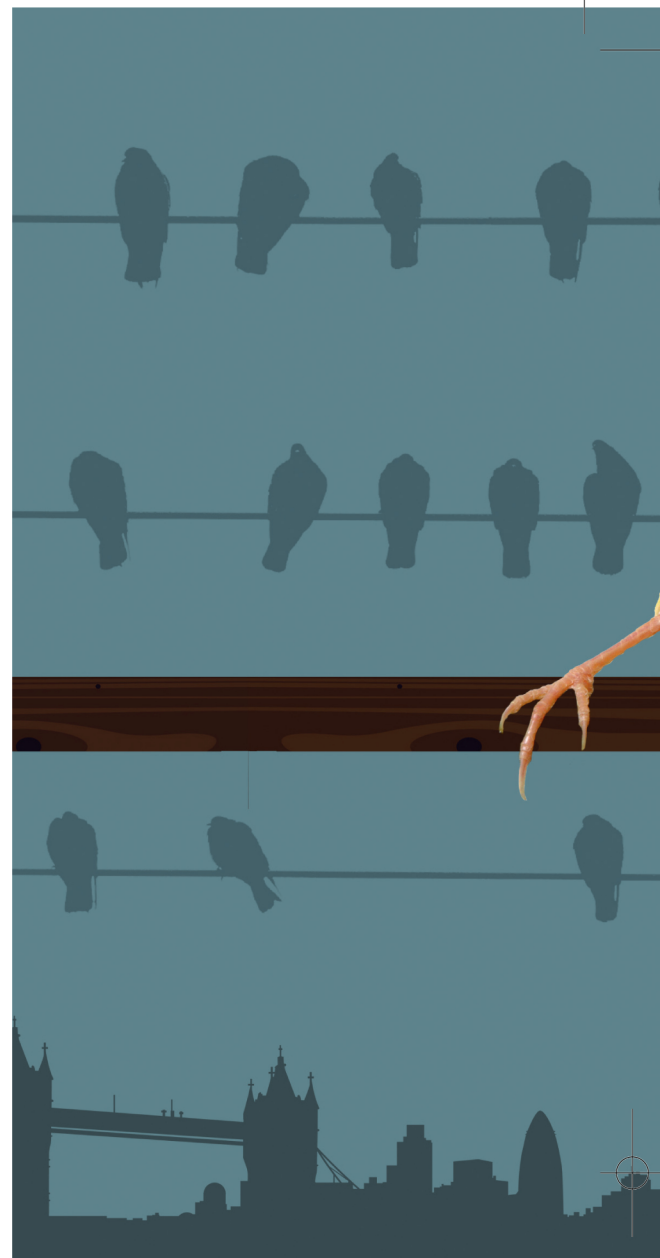
- Maintain a confident and transparent stance online – and show a willingness to relinquish control.
- Mobile will become an increasingly important channel for the purposes of social marketing.
- Only use platforms in ways that suit them
- Implement a formal strategy behind any initiatives.

ambitious, so the HR market leverages the site to showcase corporations as good places to work," says Clifford-Jones.

But it's not just these two major players in the business social media space that B2B brands are using to promote their services – whether by placing banner ads on the networks, creating groups, or sponsoring certain sections. The list of options seems to increase daily, with new ones setting up all the time. The list is endless: Naymz, Plaxo, Talkbiz, Viadeo... And then of course there is Twitter. A key challenge for businesses is to work out which is the best option for them.

Social networking for business

Business-oriented networking sites can work well for the B2B space given that they can offer very specific groups of individuals to target. For example, business software



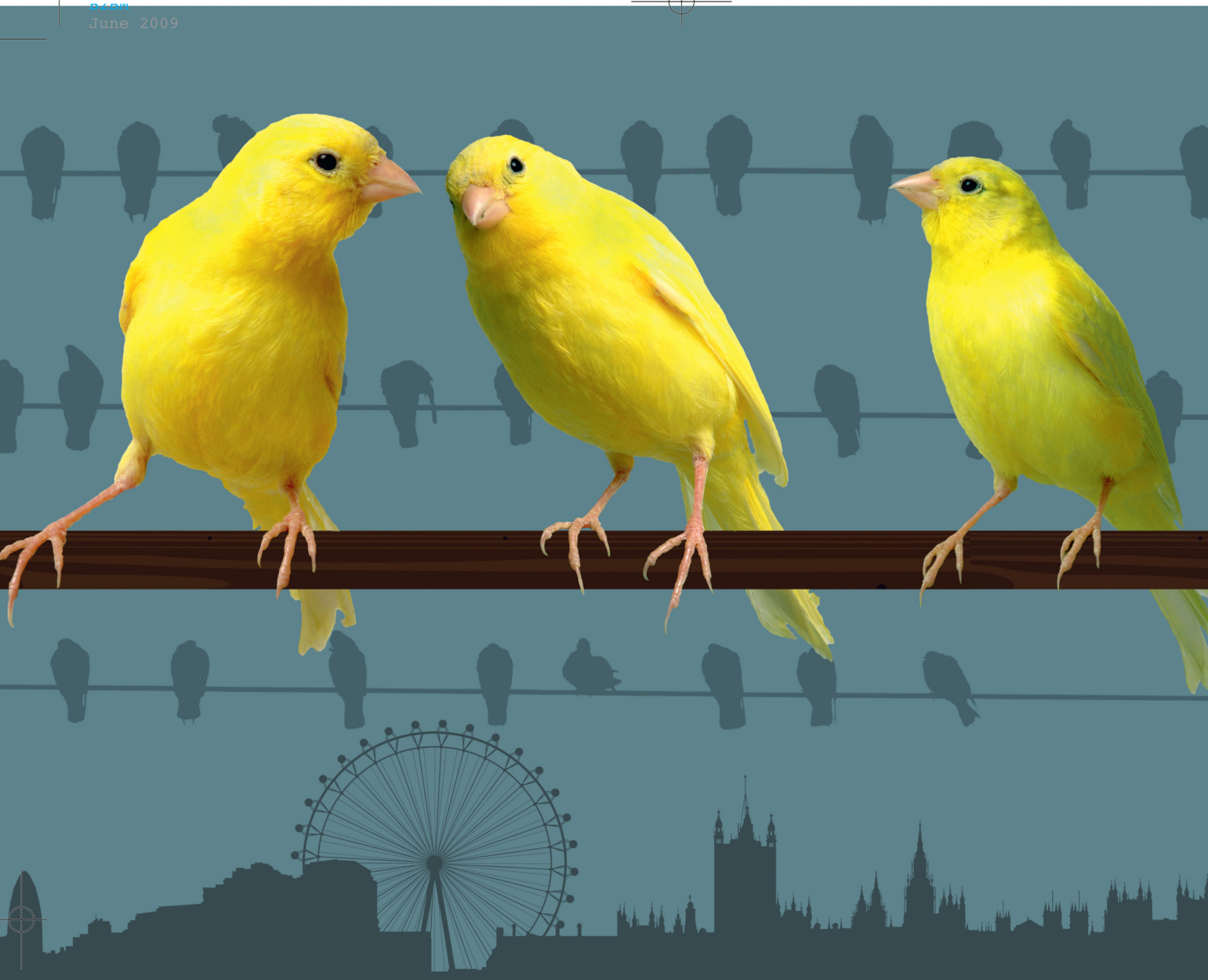


Illustration by Idego media limited

Case study: Drivers Jonas

Commercial property firm Drivers Jonas started using Twitter for marketing purposes earlier this year. Richard Crook, marketing and business development director, says he was sceptical at first. "My initial reaction was, 'How on earth can we use this in the B2B environment?' I thought it was all about chatting and flirting on Facebook."

Having attracted about 100 followers in the first month, he changed his mind: "We were surprised at how quickly people got involved. It's a good way to meet people, say if you are 'tweeting' at an event."

Drivers Jonas employs two full-time content editors that maintain the brand's presence on Twitter. This has to be slotted in around their other work. Crooks explains that this investment is key: "As quickly as people start following you, they leave."

Given that the company is on the shortlist for the development of the third runway at Heathrow, Crook believes having a transparent and responsive online presence will help to

provider Sage recently implemented a campaign designed to increase brand awareness, of which a key part was a partnership with LinkedIn.

Media agency PHD, which brokered the deal, explains that the site was chosen



Drivers Jonas' Twitter page

manage any sensitive issues that may arise. "Rather than hide, we will be able to respond quickly," he says.

Crook describes social media as "two-way communication with clients", and says it's an important part of the marketing mix. "It changes the way you communicate," he says. "Many are nervous about being exposed; but if they don't get on board, people will think, 'What is there to hide?'"

because of the need to reach particular job roles. "The profile of the people we could target was exactly right," says digital planner/buyer Oliver Wilton.

Selected members were driven from the network to a Sage microsite where they



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could play a game designed around the theme of training your 'business brain'. Players were also given the opportunity to join a related Sage group. Several thousand went through the game process and registration, and within a few weeks the group had 700 members.

B2B brands leverage social networking sites in a number of ways – via sponsorship, or by running polls to research attitudes, or simply by generating conversations.

What does social media mean to you?



Henry Clifford-Jones, director of media sales for Europe, LinkedIn:

"Social media is anything from blogs or user reviews to forums, social and business networks."



Tom Sharp, creative director, Stone Soup:

"Social media is like those medieval towns where people would shout about their products. It's the hurly burly of the marketplace."



Alex Ang, managing director, RelationSys Technologies:

"Social media is the ability for anyone to create and receive content in a personalised way. Behind it is the wisdom of the crowds. And it's 24/7."

When Microsoft launched an enterprise server project, Bill Gates signed up to LinkedIn and started posting questions on technology in a designated area of the site. This led to 4000 responses – not bad if your aim is to generate awareness.

Picking the right platform

Experts say the only real clue to choosing the most appropriate social media platform is whether or not your audience uses it. "Another day, another network – what's key is if your audience is there," says Zeinab Lenton, digital content manager at Sage. "If they choose to be in the Twitter space, we're there too."

Jessie Paul, chief marketing officer at Wipro Technologies, is only too familiar with the need to take a chance when using social media in marketing campaigns: "You have to hedge your bets. You can't always tell which channels will be successful," she says.

Not long ago, it was a brand's website that was of central importance online. Now there are all these other sites and networks you need a presence on, she explains, likening the situation to the need to have a 'mall presence' as well as a high-street store.

Wipro has been experimenting with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn, with differing degrees of success. At times, any difficulty is related to the fact that many such networks were not designed with business in mind. "Businesses are scrambling around, saying, 'How do I use this?'" says Paul.

Like many others, she has realised that generating good content is key: "It's all about pull – there is no push element. You

have to be more interesting than ever before, and you have to provide at least one good update a day."

Content-rich social media

Both Wipro and Business Link – a government-run network designed to help businesses across the UK – have found the use of video on YouTube to be a relatively easy and well-received means of communicating with customers and prospects online.

Tom Sharp, creative director of agency Stone Soup – which has been working with Business Link Yorkshire on the development of a social networking site for entrepreneurs – explains that the use of video can be an effective way to engage with audiences. "So far, between 100 and 150 people have signed up," he says. "You do need good content for it to work."

Technology provider Webex is dipping its toes in the water too (see p10 for more on the company's recent social media campaign). Alex Brayshaw, director at agency DNX – which is working on the brand's current advertising campaign – says that it's necessary to take a few risks. He says that Webex is "treading carefully, taking small steps."

Getting ROI

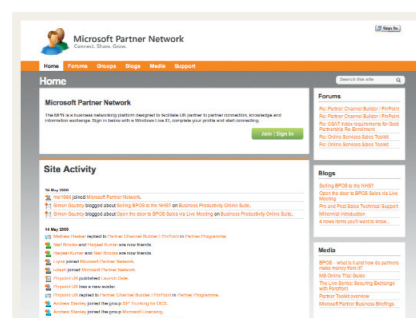
One area of difficulty, he admits, is the issue of monetisation of social media. For this reason, it's important to have very clear objectives from the outset: "We use social media to build awareness, which we can measure in the usual way through research. But judging the amount of sales you get on the back of social media campaigns is a hard step to take at the moment."

Amplify, for one, is a business that has been set up to help brands digest and



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Case study: Microsoft

In January 2009, Microsoft UK launched its new partner community website to provide a channel for partner-to-partner connection, collaboration and information exchange.

Having gained user feedback on its previous portal, Microsoft wanted to create a community for its UK-based channel partners to enable them to network with each other and reduce email-based communications. To create this platform and ultimately increase adoption, Microsoft worked with digital agency Metia and Telligent to develop the community.

The new community site allows partners to connect with ease; create and join groups; participate in discussion forums and wikis; post and respond to blogs; as well as upload files for sharing.

Following a viral campaign to generate engagement, it now has more than 1250 active members and is growing by 100 partners each week, which will enable it to achieve target two months ahead of schedule.

"Work styles are fast-evolving towards a collaborative approach," said Clare Barclay, director of partner marketing, Microsoft UK. "With Metia's help we've built a community that aims to offer something relevant for partners across the board, so we're delighted with such strong initial engagement rates."

understand what people are saying about them online. Says Mark Redgrave, CEO, "With social media, people are giving brands insights into their products and services. It's important to mine this data.

"We've got a long way to go in terms of maturity," he adds. "But social media is about the emotional desire that humans have to communicate – and that's going nowhere."

No doubt the coming months and years will see a plethora of service providers proposing solutions to the many grey areas that surround the sometimes murky waters of social media. For now, it seems, marketers just have to dive in.