



THE SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

BRANDS ARE LEARNING THAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT JUST A FREE MARKETING CHANNEL, BUT REQUIRES A CONTENT PLAN AND NIMBLE PROCESSES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE CONSTANTLY CHANGING PLATFORMS

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Ever since the advent of social networks, marketers have been striving for the formula to translate online interest into brand objectives. Today, a social strategy that is embedded in the company is becoming increasingly important, given the extent to which customers expect to engage with brands in social media, as well as the constant changes that social networks make to their user experiences and paid ad formats.

Facebook, for example, recently came under fire for manipulating users' news feeds to test how they respond to posts prompting more positive or negative emotions. It has also been criticised by marketers for reducing the frequency with which posts from brands are shown to users.

Dom Burch, one of Asda's most experienced social media specialists, claims that the supermarket's 1.3 million 'fans' represent some of its most loyal and valuable customers. But the senior director for marketing innovation and new revenue admits that he has been trying to "work out" YouTube for five years with mixed success, until now.

The supermarket's current social focus has been developed with Gleam Futures, which Burch describes as a "YouTube talent agency".

"It's about working with YouTubers who have huge influence, and harnessing their followings," he explains. However, they have to trust these individuals' connection with their audiences.

"These guys produce regular, lively content.

We learnt to editorially let go, to let the brand take a back seat. It's important not to be too forced or clunky in the content style."

The resulting videos have helped to kickstart Asda's Mum's Eye View channel on YouTube, which houses content such as fashion, cooking and make-up tutorials. The channel has amassed 40,000 subscribers since its launch in March, just before Mothers' Day, and Burch is confident that it will reach its target of 75,000 by the end of the year.

A home manicure tutorial video, for example, had 9,000 views, which had a demonstrable effect on sales for Asda's George Gel Pro nail polish.

Burch says Asda has been careful to recruit only true fans on social media channels: "It's better to connect with the right people. If you focus too much on volume, it becomes too transactional."

He adds that Asda's video tutorials have real utility and that the impact on sales are a positive side effect of increased engagement.

Coffee brand Taylors of Harrogate has also invested in specialist skills to create social video content. Head of brand communications Dom Dwight has been working with online content studio Rubber Republic and says it is important to treat social not as a bolt-on activity but integrated with all marketing channels and has buy-in from the entire business.

He describes TV ads as being a huge firework to draw attention, while social media is a slow-burning bonfire, housing content designed to keep momentum going.

Dwight agrees with Burch on the importance of telling genuinely interesting stories, in which the brand does not necessarily take centre stage. He points out that, compared to TV, the creation of social video can be more cost-effective.

He says: "Social video has been born out of the entrepreneurial internet. The costs work their way up rather than starting from a high, fixed level."

As Facebook rolls out new video ad formats and metrics, mobile network Three is working with online video distribution firm Ebuzzing to develop a strategy for social video. Social media manager at Three Daniel Lee says that although a long-term strategy is always needed, it is important to capture the cultural zeitgeist and to be part of current community conversations.

"It's about everyday moments, life moments and moments of entertainment. Social activity combines campaign work with live and unpredictable elements," explains Lee.

Online takeaway service Just Eat found exactly that during its experiments with social during the World Cup. Rachael Pollard, UK head of digital and CRM, says that Twitter has taken over as the primary social channel for the company, owing to its immediacy and the fact that it allows the brand to play on events.

"Increasingly, [social] is about speed, real-time elements and being in the moment," she says. The social media team learned how much more valuable it was to tweet during half-



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Louise Neale
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One mistake companies make with social is to use it as a free media channel. It needs to be about building one-to-one engagement at scale. The key is not being afraid to engage the audience in the way they want to be engaged. It's about 'adapting to' rather than 'speaking at' the audience. Brands often seek to find engaged communities around a particular topic or define who are the influencers.

Social media is not a place only to house content or 'free' marketing. Say you want to talk to a board-level individual as a B2B organisation. What are you going to say in 140 characters on Twitter? A big purchase or a difficult decision will mean there is a need to click through to a content hub. Often social content needs to be connected to other assets.

Each industry, at a top level, also needs to think about how to avoid approaching social media from a siloed perspective. It's taking time for this message to get through to organisations, but it is happening. Projects are also more focused around owned, paid and earned media working together. In many cases it is social channels driving this change.

Working out how social impacts the bottom line is a challenge. There are not many tools that track the user journey across all touch points, but you can tie offline to email and match this to a social media user name or ID, and you can also append this to social conversation data. We have built our own methodology to overcome the challenges around identification and data protection.

However, there is also a lot of noise in social and there are challenges around natural language processing and understanding the volumes of content from users. Such challenges aside, social can offer an in-depth understanding of how you or your industry are being talked about in real time.

Some of our clients are creating short videos for Facebook and Instagram; Facebook recently brought out additional analytics for video posts. It makes it easier to see if people are clicking or viewing, but I have not seen many really good video-based campaigns.

When you are using Facebook, content has more social context than it does on YouTube, and you can add to this the fact that more and more people are spending more minutes of their day on social networks on mobile. The opportunity is there because people do use Facebook on mobile. I think we'll also see TV becoming more integrated into social.

In terms of whether you can achieve direct sales on social, it links back to mobile. It is still a challenge to get transactions on mobile – there are fears around security and it can be annoying to put in your details. But behaviour will shift.



"SOME OF OUR BEST CONTENT COMES FROM OUR FANS. THE USER-GENERATED CONTENT IS PRICELESS," LAURA CRIPPS, LUCOZADE ENERGY



time rather than just before a game. "We also had success in promoting early ordering, by warning that it would be busy later," she adds.

She notes that there are also peak times for takeaway food during entertainment shows on Friday and Saturday nights. "You have to be online when your customers are," she warns.

Pollard's team used Salesforce ExactTarget Marketing Cloud to enable real-time listening around the World Cup. Although Just Eat operates in 13 countries, the UK is the dominant market and her team can test strategies and invest in and negotiate deals on tools for their counterparts in other countries.

Laura Cripps, social media manager at Lucozade Energy, also believes that an adaptable and 'always on' approach is key for promotional activity on social channels.

She adds: "Some of our best content comes from our fans. The UGC [user-generated content] we receive is priceless, and our reactive posts have usually been the most popular."

The brand has been working with Twitter analytical tool SocialBro since April to find the best time to tweet, and to help shape its publishing plan for social content. "To be flexible and reactive, you need to understand your brand compass so when that time comes you'll know if an opportunity is right for the brand," she points out.

Melissa Pine, marketing director at Box Television, which is owned by Bauer Media

and Channel 4, also agrees that social media is "a grand experiment". However, she points to recent work with social platform Spredfast for its 4Music channel, whereby a 'Tweet to Beat' talent contest enabled viewers to vote for their favourite act.

"People really engaged with the interactive format. In pop culture topicality is key. The content almost creates itself, and it sparks off conversation. I think social and TV is going to boom," she says.

To make the most of the real-time nature of social channels, many businesses have restructured their operations. O2's head of social Kristian Lorenzon explains that the mobile network has made that move to focus on content creation and to enable it to act "more like a publisher or a newsroom".

He says: "The number-one reason for this was agility. Traditional media had the benefit of longer lead times."

He also notes that O2 serves around 5,000 customers a week on social channels and that this has led to both cost savings and increased customer satisfaction.

However, how much a brand should invest in social will vary. Colin Lewis, director of marketing at airline BMI Regional, says that agencies used to tell him to do social media but they could not identify BMI's core customers. He says: "Typically, our customers are business people over 35 and somebody else has paid for their flight. No amount of tweeting or facebooking can help with that."

He explains that the airline uses social as a tool



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Matt Owen
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Asda's Mum's Eye View channel already has 40,000 subscribers since its launch in March. Left: brands such as PetsPyjamas, BMI and Taylors are all investing in social strategies

for communicating information about destinations and for customer service updates. "We have to be realistic," he says. "Is my core customer base lying awake at night engaging with the brand on Facebook? Of course not."

Some companies are fortunate, however, in that they operate in spaces that automatically attract highly engaged followings across social media. Gracia Amico, chief executive at PetsPyjamas, says people with pets are naturally engaged and prolific sharers – especially of photos of dogs and cats. Amico, the former global ecommerce director for fashion brand Hobbs, says that she also plans to make more of PetsPyjama's own social network – Social Petwork.

Guy Blaskey, founder and director of dog food and treats brand Pooch & Mutt, points out that for a small business, activity on social can be cost-effective. "In terms of return on investment, we did a Valentine's Day promotion based on the notion of showing love for your dog. It was easy to measure as it was almost entirely on Facebook. It resulted in around 4,000 sales in one day," he says.

Meanwhile, Krishnan Chatterjee, head of strategic marketing at global IT services company HCL Technologies claims that a community that the brand has created on LinkedIn and YouTube called CIO Straight Talk has demonstrated results to the tune of several million US dollars. "It results in quality leads to our website," he claims, pointing out that a recent recruitment campaign run on

Twitter led to 88,000 applicants for five jobs, with the cost of the campaign equating to less than recruiting one person via traditional means.

HCL is not the only B2B brand to have seen success with social channels. Blake Cahill, global head of digital and social marketing at electronics company Philips, says that operating across both B2B and B2C sectors has helped the healthcare and technology brand to remain focused on the audience in its various forays into social media. "Many companies do social just to be on the platforms," he says. "We try to think in terms of the reason for being there."

Cahill's role involves sending a global editorial calendar to local teams, so that the brand can ensure reach and consistency are maintained. "We call it the responsive newsroom," he says. "It's about reacting to demand and speeding up when necessary. You want a drumbeat of content with spikes around the editorial calendar. To keep this going, you do need a strategy and a plan."

Jeremy Brook, global lead for digital strategy at Heineken, agrees. Working with WPP-owned Fabric, the brewer found that high-quality content is more important than maintaining a constant stream.

He adds that while social has "come of age", with paid, earned and owned elements frequently coming together to produce results, it is a falsehood to view social activity as a type of reactive, 'on the go' marketing. "It has to be planned and considered," he warns.

Companies using social media fall into two main categories: those who sell and those who do not.

On the 'no selling' side of the fence, we have brands that fire out messages to promote affinity and engagement, or to act as a customer service portal, with return on investment based on lowering costs. Many brands shy away from mentioning their products, feeling that they must earn the 'right to sell' by entertaining customers with pictures of kittens before revealing that they are in fact an industrial spigot manufacturer.

Then there are the overt sellers. Selling takes the form of a legion of staff empowered to use social channels for nurturing leads. Unfortunately, there also seems to be an underlying fear that anyone with 'sales' in their job title cannot be trusted to use Twitter responsibly. We see cases where content is prewritten for them or guidelines are overly strict and a lot of the joy is sucked away.

Both approaches are process-heavy, requiring staff training, frameworks for escalating problems and content ratification by brand departments. This led to the infamous but not uncommon situation at cheese brand Président, where one tweet allegedly took 48 days to be approved.

So, how do we stay up to the minute? The answer is simple but requires deeper thinking about the way social media is used to sell. With a few exceptions, saying 'buy this now' is considered bad form, but just because you are not selling openly, it does not mean you are not selling.

Social media is always selling. Look at Oreo's 'You can still dunk in the dark' creative, tweeted during an electrical blackout at the 2013 Super Bowl. It was as effective as a TV spot and probably slightly more measurable. Oreo could have tweeted copy but it had an optimised image, emblazoned with its distinctive logo. How could the team create this so quickly otherwise?

The key here is that agility still requires process. Adidas is a great example of this. Someone wins sportsman of the year – cue image of the winner appearing on Twitter. This trend is increasing, as a flurry of activity around Uruguay footballer Luis Suarez's biting incident at the World Cup proved.

These companies have two things that make them stand out. Adidas has hundreds of images of sports stars on stand-by, so it takes perhaps a minute to put together this kind of content.

The second element is more complex, but important: trust. Businesses facing up to the realities of life as a digital business talk about transparency and openness, but it is important to remember that this is not only customer-facing. It needs to be internal, which means trusting social teams to understand brand voice and react to events without having to wade through layers of approval. Agility and personalisation can be built off the back of process and involve a lot of data work to scale appropriately, but a simple, personal touch makes a huge difference.