Social media as the path to a marketing strategy

Companies must become "curators" to meet the challenge

"Only connect"

There are two primary motives for social media users: communication and connection with other people.

Social media touches almost every facet of our personal and business lives, so it is hardly surprising that it is now becoming established as a key focal point for an organization's core communication strategy.

The social media transformation process is developing as a core marketing strategy. There are numerous individual cases of such campaigns and some that are recognized as of the highest quality, such as the Metro Trains "Dumb Ways to Die" campaign that was a winner at the 2013 Cannes Advertising Festival. Companies need to think very hard about how they engage with social media.

Future economic historians writing about our era will be able to bring up any number of cases involving companies who have been victims of their own folly in connection with the new media: either because they ignored it or they used it inappropriately, in ways that backfired disastrously. These accounts, *pace* such examples as "Dumb Ways to Die", will probably make for more interesting reading than the many success stories.

How to engage?

Social media provides the potential for companies to interact with users who are highly involved and to build relationships. The individuals thus "won over" will then represent the organization in a positive way to their social media communities. That, at least, is how it can be made to work. The social interaction component in the likes of Facebook, Linked-In and Twitter has significant implications for how organizations and society engage with this new media. So how can corporations best curate and use social media content in their marketing campaigns?

A series of studies including both social media users and corporations was undertaken. These involved a range of highly focused research techniques with each stage informing the research objectives of the subsequent stage. In-depth interviews were undertaken with industry leaders, followed by interviews with managers and then surveys of graduate students in executive programs and finally textual analysis of online media channels. As a final step, industry experts were used to provide feedback and external validation of the research findings.

The interviews were conducted with panel experts and attendees at one of the largest American Advertising Federation professional symposiums, focusing on social media advancement, and at another major advertising media event in Michigan: in the USA, 20

www.manaraa.com

per cent of all advertising investment comes from Detroit agencies and client firms. Later, communication with industry experts included brief and informal discussions and casual interviews with senior executives at the likes of Facebook, Yahoo, Google and AOL. Professional events, seminars, panels and symposiums provided access to individuals who are typically hard to get hold of.

Issues of integration

A set of questions was administered to 20 graduate students in the USA and New Zealand who fitted the profile of heavy and informed users of social media. A survey was then administered to 105 executive graduate MBA and graduate masters' students with five years of industry experience in appropriate industries. Integration of previously identified key themes led to the identification of the social media transformation process.

Social media is now an ever-present part of promotional work; curation, engagement and co-creation of content are common themes of such campaigns. The numbers are impressive: if you reach a customer with an average of 130 friends of Facebook then, exponentially and allowing for some overlaps, there is a potential spread of 10,000 friends of friends.

Computer-assisted content analysis was then performed on 723 online media articles relating to social media marketing. The aim here was to identify the existence of themes being discussed across a broad range of prominent online media platforms and to determine how they relate to one another. Eleven primary themes, most significantly marketing, customers, content and business were identified, together with key-related concepts. For example, key concepts related to marketing were: "brand", "strategy", "digital" and "effective". This is not surprising: strategy's foremost relationship is to marketing, with specifics such as branding and market. Social media was also strongly related with content, and content was about "quality", "sharing" and "audience", as well as "attention" and "engagement".

"Key influencers"

For most users, the primary motives in using social media are to communicate and connect with other people, and in doing so, improve their feelings of self-esteem. Messages developed for social media channels therefore need to be designed to allow for this, via sharing, embellishment and/or content expansion.

At the same time, the greatest value or benefit of the social diffusion of a corporate message is achieved when key social media community influencers endorse and diffuse it. These key influencers have large networks and their standing within the community means that the message is likely to be looked at. Their motivation therefore needs to be determined to develop targeted content that will increase the likelihood of social diffusion. The key organizational consideration should be the identification of why a social media influencer would want to have a conversation with a brand rather than their friends, family or network community.

It also follows that if a corporation can develop relationships with brand advocates who are also social media influencers, then there is the potential for a significant return on investment. E-word of mouth is powerful: in an environment where more and more people are using the Internet to find reliable social sources of information to assist them in reducing their purchase risk, influencing the influencers can generate significant returns.

So how can all this be best achieved? Providing influencers with information that they then pass on to their network community enables them to maintain their expert status in their community. As the message comes from the influencer, and not the corporation, it is viewed by the community as a social message rather than a corporate source of information – this, in effect, is the social media transformation process.

Joining the conversation

If targeted promotional campaigns result in a response, then future social media content can be generated to engage influencers and their followers in a conversation. The subsequent investment in the relationship by an organization may be partially dependent upon consumers' degrees of influence and their size of network community.

Organizations must also appreciate that, for all their attempts to steer messages in a certain direction, the medium is an interactive one. Ultimately, key influencers have the most influence over network perceptions and must be targeted intelligently.

Companies must be curators, but they don't necessarily have the final say in what goes into the "archive".

Comment

This review is based on "The social media transformation process: curating content into strategy" by Kilgour *et al.* (2015). Nothing comes for free, and developing the social media transformation process as a core marketing strategy is a challenging and potentially time-consuming process. As the authors acknowledge, finding and nurturing the key influencers is everything.

Reference

Kilgour, M., Sasser, S.L., Larke, R., Honkaniemi, L., Lehtonen, M.H. and Hasu, M. (2015), "Well-being and innovativeness: 'the social media transformation process': curating content into strategy", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 326-343, ISSN:1356-3289.

www.manaraa.com