

# Social media marketing must start at the top

*Companies need to make their efforts more of an “inside job”*

## Bad night's sleep

One recent survey by a California-based company came up with a statistic which would surely be guaranteed to make many products and service providers wake up in a cold sweat.

According to a survey by Lithium Technologies, 72 per cent of Twitter users expect a response to a complaint within one hour. This puts serious pressure on firms to quickly and effectively manage or coordinate their internal communication to support effective external communication. It is perhaps a less predictable spin-off from the emergence of social media, but it is not one that businesses can afford to ignore.

Consumers are increasingly using social media as a trusted source of information to share opinions on firms' offerings. This brings both opportunities and threats – such as the 60-min wake-up call – to a firm's relationship with existing and potential customers.

Social media is now a part of some enterprises' marketing programs with attention focused largely on consumer orientation – why, for example, consumers engage in different social media platforms. Rather less has been written about the internal activities of firms which enable them to capitalize on social media rather than taking a *laissez-faire* attitude or worse still, becoming its victims. In passing, it's worth observing that, where the majority of users expect super-fast responses, at least a few of those who do not receive it will use the medium to make their grievances felt.

## Marketing tools

The research here aims to identify organizational activities that allow firms to adopt and use social media as essential strategic marketing tools and to investigate how the activities contribute to social media marketing objectives. Ideally, firms should be finding new approaches that capture business opportunities and enhance overall strategies.

Top management will need to provide strategic vision. Only if they buy in completely can the way be paved for organizational change that enables members to adapt to the technologies, including social media.

Interviews among managers, executives and owners – all chosen because they were responsible for social media strategies – were held at 14 companies. Facebook and Twitter were the main social media platforms among participants with each firm having generally similar social media marketing objectives. Companies ranged from finance and insurance to retail, technical and scientific enterprises. The results were a very mixed bag, with some activities well adopted by firms to embrace social media, others much less so.

## A proactive CEO

One company that turned up more often than others in a positive light was Firm 14, a specialist in accommodation and food services. When considering top management vision, for example, this company was the only one that could really be said to provide it. Using Facebook has really made a difference and the company's manager of social media could hardly have been more effusive in praise of his CEO's role in making this happen. In the same way, firm 14 reported direct top management team (TMT) support, while, in most companies, TMT vision was limited to an awareness of social media merely as something to be tackled by middle-level managers. A factor here might be lack of clear evidence of a financial return on investment in social media; to ensure successful implementation of social media marketing strategies, there did not appear to be adequate funding and personnel.

That is, of course, is familiar enough tune in the business world. Among other issues that emerged, it becomes clear that while the problem of dealing with social media might be a new one, familiar issues will surface. Take long-term orientation, for example. It takes time for top and middle-level managers to understand the need for a new technology, and to reap its benefits, a long-term approach is required.

In Firm 2 (manufacturing), the director said: "When, I first started teaching social media there were a lot of conversations with folks at my level, trying to help them understand why we need it [ . . . ] and what benefit I thought it would bring to the company".

## Proliferating platforms

Fragmentation is an issue, too, with proliferation of social media websites. Organizations must work hard to understand all the platforms and be effective within them. Firm 14 interviewee again: "People are leaving Facebook for Instagram, people who are primarily Twitter users are not Facebook users, and it is hard to be effective in all these different spaces".

Other concerns that might have a familiar ring include alignment of strategies – here the need for the right marketing strategies alongside those for social marketing, with Firm 14 commenting: "We would like to align our social media goals with our overall marketing objectives. For example, our goal is to rank number one in industry benchmarks on various aspects of restaurants such as beverage quality, food quality, or knowledgeable staff [ . . . ] [the question is] what can we do in social media to enhance our appeal in these categories? Social media earns its keep because we are supporting each of these initiatives *through* social media."

Ultimately, top management must advocate social media via a long-term strategic vision, plough in sufficient resources and link social media into the overall marketing strategy. Social media and its power have to be entirely accepted as a reality of the modern business environment. Top management can play its part by inspiring employees through their vision and support for its adoption.

This will not happen overnight. Social media is still in its early days and there is a lack of knowledge about its use. It will therefore take time to get full acceptance and utilization of social media within the firm and achieve visible outcomes. Therefore, top management should set clear and measureable expectations of constantly increasing desired outcomes designed to align social media marketing objectives with marketing objectives.

## A cooperative process

Coordination – communication and cooperation between social media personnel and other areas – is also vital. One person, team or department might not be enough to track adequately and respond to all user posts. This suggests that social media personnel should cooperate with company outsiders in a cooperative process that will create better

all-round mutual understanding and engagement, and see the resources used effectively to create superior value for target customers. As a further part of this process, strategic monitoring of competitors' social media can be an efficient information source regarding certain facets of the marketing strategy.

Finally, firms must work harder at measuring effectively the success of their social media marketing objectives and their progress in achieving them. The findings suggest that firms tend to avoid measuring financial objectives and other "second order" non-financial measures. Use of analytical tools, for example, might help to measure the extent to which social media marketing objectives are being achieved.

Many firms do not appear to be adopting and implementing organizational activities. This is the reason the researchers in their full review (see reference below) see social media as the "step-child" of corporate functions, not receiving the resources or attention that other more traditional functions would receive.

But if internal communications were to become, in the ways outlined here, more effective at supporting external communication, those companies would surely reap the benefits. This might even include the opportunity for top managers to sleep more soundly.

**Keywords:**

Social media,  
Qualitative research,  
Organizational activities,  
Social media marketing  
activities

### Comment

This review is based on "Social media: is this the new organizational stepchild?" by Choi and Thoeni (2016). There are plenty of pertinent lessons here relating to company engagement with social media. It's tempting, however, to suggest that a lack of top management vision needs most closely to be addressed. This will make it more likely that the other issues can then be brought into play effectively.

### Reference

Choi, Y. and Thoeni, A. (2016), "Social media: is this the new organizational stepchild?", *European Business Review*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 21-38.

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