



Social Media: Fans and Followers Are an “End,” Not a “Means”

The last couple of years have seen some massive changes in our world. The financial bubble that reached its peak in 2007 popped, leaving us to enjoy what has been dubbed “The Great Recession.” The Dow Jones plummeted, along with consumer confidence.



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But not everything declined. In the realm of social media, the number of Facebook users grew dramatically, blog readership increased, and a new phenomenon called Twitter exploded onto the scene. It’s enough to make you think that using social media is the latest and best way to effectively build your brand. Various pundits suggest as much, and many brands seem to be buying into the idea.

However, I think that those who manage brands should look before they leap. I believe that the race to utilize social media channels is representative of the same sort of irrational exuberance that led the stock market to unprecedented heights and allowed people to have faith in incomprehensible financial instruments. For many brands, large-scale investment in social media campaigns is likely to prove just as ill-advised and imprudent. In other words, I think we may be witnessing a social media bubble.

The Power of Social Media

There is no denying that social media can be an incredible vehicle for change. One compelling example is the Facebook campaign that prevented *X Factor* winner Joe McElderry from reaching the top of the U.K. music charts last Christmas. The *X Factor* winner has been number one on the charts since 2005, so it was not surprising that after McElderry became the 2009 winner last December, the *Telegraph* announced that his debut single “The Climb” was the “all-but-guaranteed number one in the Christmas chart.”

But something else happened instead. “Killing in the Name,” a 17-year-old track by Rage Against the Machine (RATM), an American rock band formed in 1991, snatched the number one slot from “The Climb.” This unlikely upset was the result of a campaign started on Facebook early in December by husband-and-wife team Jon and Tracy Morter as a protest against *X Factor*’s monopoly of the Christmas chart. The news media picked up on the story, causing thousands of people to join the campaign; the number of fans on the Facebook page exceeded 800,000 (more than Google, Pepsi, or Wal-Mart). What is more, those fans acted. In the crucial pre-Christmas week, “Killing in the Name” sold



over 500,000 copies. While 19.5 million people viewed the *X Factor* finale and 6 million voted for McElderry, only 450,000 bought “The Climb.”

A number of factors contributed to the success of the RATM campaign. First, the effort had the authenticity borne of its grass roots. It was founded by real people advancing a real agenda, and that agenda was one that tapped into a current concern — the suspicion that “big business” was manipulating the public psyche for its own ends. Next, the vehicle chosen to advance the cause (the song “Killing in the Name”) was highly appropriate. The song’s expletive-laden lyrics expressed the right note of anti-establishment sentiment, and the song carried positive associations for people who remembered it from the 1990s.

Interestingly, these factors are quite similar to those that define iconic brands. Does that suggest that achieving success with a social media campaign may be as difficult and elusive a goal as becoming an iconic brand? Can Facebook work the same way for a consumer brand as it did for the RATM campaign?



The Characteristics of Successful Facebook Brands

I undertook an analysis to address these questions. I identified 12 brands that have been held up for their effective use of social media: Southwest, Honda, VW, McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Subway, KFC, Dunkin’ Donuts, Krispy Kreme, Starbucks, Coca-

Cola, and Red Bull. I related the number of fans these brands had on Facebook (all had more than 250,000) to data from Millward Brown’s BrandZ database (specifically, U.S. data from 2009), and compared the results for these successful social media brands with other brands in the same product categories.

My first observation was that the five different product categories attracted very different numbers of fans. On average, the soft drink brands included in our BrandZ study had over 16,000 fans while airlines had barely 1,000. I believe this is directly related to the number of people who are actively involved with a category on a regular basis. The level of satisfaction with brands in a category also seemed to correspond with the number of fans the category attracted. Only 18 percent of U.S. air travelers are satisfied with the brands available to them, while 56 percent of soft drink buyers claim to be totally satisfied with their brand choices.

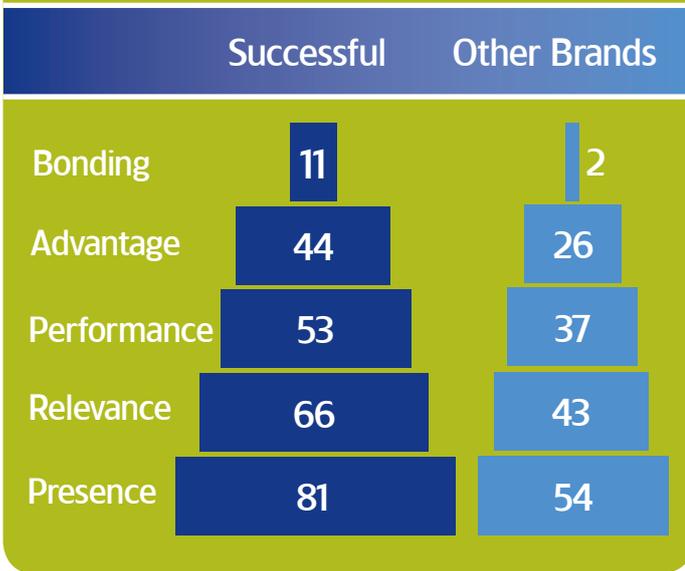
My next observation was that, in most categories, one or two brands attracted the lion’s share of fans. Those brands are not necessarily the biggest or the oldest, but rather the ones with a distinctive positioning that sets them apart from competitors. For example, in the case of domestic U.S. airlines, Southwest is the dominant brand, followed by Virgin America, a newcomer to the United States. I believe that Virgin’s commitment to excellent service and customer satisfaction is what enabled it to draw more fans than American Airlines, United, or Delta.

My final observation was that the playing field did not appear to be level for brands competing on Facebook. It seemed easier for some brands to gain traction simply due to their product category and their positioning. But there is an even larger obstacle to be overcome by many brands. Brands that are already big and successful start with a major advantage. The more loyal customers you have, the more fans you tend to have on Facebook. Therefore, it is the big brands that get the most out of Facebook — not necessarily the new and trendy ones.

Using the Millward Brown Brand Pyramid, I compared the composite brand equity of the two groups of brands. The comparison (see Figure 1) demonstrated that successful



Figure 1: Successful social media brands tend to be stronger brands



social media brands start with 50 percent more Presence (familiarity with what the brand stands for) and finish with five times as much Bonding (the strongest measure of attitudinal loyalty). The overall correlation between Bonding and the number of Facebook fans across all brands in the five product categories was 0.69. The successful brands have an average of 1.6 million fans each, while the remaining brands (those that have Facebook pages) have an average of 140,000 fans each.

Mass Exposure Is a Catalyst to Social Media Success

One final element must be considered by brands thinking of marketing through Facebook: the need for mass media coverage. Most notable social media campaigns have relied on mass media to gain critical momentum. The Rage Against the Machine campaign would likely have languished unnoticed by the vast majority of people if the traditional media had not picked it up and publicized it. The same is true of some of the classics of viral marketing: Burger King’s “Subservient Chicken” benefited from widespread media support, and Dove’s “Evolution” was boosted by a strong PR campaign from Edelman New York.

Integration of mass media and social media helps transcend the disparate personal connections that drive social media in order to achieve critical mass. The meerkat Aleksandr Orlov, created to star in a TV campaign for the U.K. financial comparison site

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comparethemarket.com, now has nearly 700,000 fans on his Facebook fan page (which was created as part of the ad campaign). The combination of tightly integrated online and offline marketing heightened interest in the brand, drove traffic to comparethemarket.com, and increased quotes by 45 percent compared to the previous year.

Beyond Facebook

While Facebook is the biggest social media network, it is not a homogeneous community, nor is it the only channel through which brands can connect with consumers. In fact, Millward Brown identifies eight different types of social media: pure-plays, blogs, syndication, peer-2-peer, wikis and collaboratives, open source, tagging and rating, and consumer reviews. Each type serves different purposes and audiences. Among the pure-play vehicles, a low-reach, high-engagement medium such as Twitter offers the chance to make that all-important ongoing and personal connection.

But Twitter users aren’t using the channel to be informed about brands. They are using it because they want to hear from people. Brands with social-media savvy know this and often designate a lead Tweeter to represent the company and engage people. Tony Hsieh, the CEO of online shoe retailer Zappos, is the archetypal corporate Tweeter. He follows over 36,000 people and is followed by over 32,000. His tweets help engage customers and allow them an inside peek at how the company works.

Fans and Followers Have Their Own Agendas

Dynamic Logic’s *AdReaction 2009* study found that while 59 percent of Internet users are actively engaged with social networking sites, only 13 percent of those people use the networks to follow or keep up with brands. Those that do follow brands do so in an average of three categories, and they do so to gain access to information, discounts, and giveaways.

This presents a challenge for a brand. To pander to a small percentage of your target with discounts and added-value



giveaways can undermine your brand’s status and profitability; what you should focus on is engaging people with new information and ideas that improve the customer experience.

Build a Strong Brand and Fans Will Follow

Because people use social media to connect with people and brands that they know, respect, and admire, social media makes a great channel for engaging existing customers. But fans and followers are not a means to building a brand; rather, they are an end. Social media can’t help to build brands



without the other ingredients that make brands strong: an effective business model, a great brand experience, clarity of positioning, and the ability to disrupt the status quo in a product category.

As I stated in my Point of View “Make Friends Don’t Pitch Them,” creating a strong presence in social media is a good vehicle for confirming a brand’s benefits and validating its commitment to its users. However, any marketers still considering how to construct a social media strategy that will build buzz, saliency, and a deeper engagement with loyal brand advocates would do well to ask themselves the following questions:

- Do people care enough about my brand and category to engage with it? If not, maybe social media is not for you.
- What types of social media sites offer the most potential? What would be the best bet – a pure play or a blog? An active presence on multiple sites might be necessary to engage even a small proportion of existing customers.

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- What value can your brand offer beyond freebies and discounts? Games, puzzles, and competitions were popular means for engaging people long before the advent of social media. Remember, while social media may be a new communication channel, the motivations, interests, and desires of the people who use it are not new; they are the same as they have always been.
- How do you sustain the initial engagement beyond a simple sign of affinity? Even large successful brands must continually find new ways to engage fans that are consistent with their basic appeal; otherwise the novelty of “fandom” will quickly wear off. Coca-Cola’s Expedition 206 offers fans a chance to vicariously explore the world through the eyes of three “happiness ambassadors” tasked with finding out “what makes people happy” in the 206 countries in which Coke is sold.

Whatever your chosen strategy is, remember: There is no substitute for creativity and consistency. Find an idea that will resonate with your target audience and is in keeping with your brand’s positioning. Promote what you do widely, in whatever ways are most appropriate. Then listen to the response and respond in turn.

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