



OVERLAND AGENCY

Mastering Social Media Marketing Its 6 categories and 10 benefits

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Introduction

The hottest buzzwords in marketing today are “social media,” and related to that the “conversations” that marketers are attempting to have with potential and current customers in the interactive space. Whether you buy into the excitement around social marketing or not, one thing is certain: people will talk; you can’t stop them. We believe that if you have something to sell people, talking is a very good thing.

Companies that engage in conversations through social media potentially have the 1.6 billion people with an online connection as their competitors for the microphone. But you shouldn’t let that overwhelm you. If you handle the still-new social media campaigning correctly, the conversations you will have will essentially be one-to-one. Every person with an online voice has an opportunity to speak, and a representative of a company (not the whole company!) has a chance to respond and help elevate the brand. Then, of course, a lot of other people are going to listen in, and perhaps comment, on your original one-on-one conversation. And you want as many people as possible to do just that. If you bear these realities in mind, and learn to leverage the six categories of social media marketing, your company, no matter what size, can to varying degrees:

- Increase brand awareness and brand preference
- Promote company-related events/initiatives
- Recruit new talent and worthwhile business partnerships
- Gain online exposure in never-before-imagined outlets
- Generate traffic to your website
- Discover alternative channels for increasing sales



What is Social Media?

Social media, in its broadest sense, is often defined as user generated content (USG) on the Web. That is to say that men and women of all demographics can easily generate virtually any kind of content they choose and publish it for the world to see.

How social media impacts companies most immediately, of course, is that anyone can spread the word about your company in the time it takes to type, video tape, or publish a recommendation or negative opinion. Whether people spread good or bad information about your products and services depends, largely, on you. If you play your cards right in your social media efforts, you may help inspire people to spread positive brand messages about you across the web. They may decide to attend an event you're having, check out your website, send you an e-mail or call your customer service, subscribe to your newsletter, buy something from your e-commerce site, or visit your brick-and-mortar store. The possibilities are endless in social media.

Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM) is the term we use for utilizing one or more of the six social media categories. Think of SMM as technologically savvy, grassroots, guerilla marketing. SMM is really all about empowering users to adopt and spread the word about your brand, or take an action beneficial to you. And, as you will see, a key element of empowering those people to do so is to ensure that your original social media efforts provide something of real value for the people with whom you are trying to communicate. In other words, don't spam them.

In the best scenarios, you're not blatantly marketing to people, but offering something legitimate for consumers and clients, preferably filling needs they have. If your information or offer is useful, it may even virally spread to others through social media, with people doing your publishing/promoting for you. Whether you operate in the business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) arenas, you can benefit from SMM. But to do so, you must listen to customers/clients, and engage honestly in the social media space with them.

At this writing, companies are flocking to SMM, and all indications are that they will continue to do so in increasing numbers. You're going to have lots of competition in the space. However, that's probably a good thing, since people will get more and more used to accepting branding and gentle sales messages in online social formats. Forrester Research, in May 2009, estimated that of all online tactics Social Media Marketing will show the greatest percentage increase (34%) in the next five years. SMM is set to beat e-mail (11% growth), search marketing (15%), display advertising (17%), and even mobile marketing (27%).

Many studies in the past year have shown that on social platforms, users prefer creative and compelling forms of company communications, including groups, and innovative software applications. So it pays to be as creative as you can in your conversations, as long as you don't stretch the truth. As you will see by examples below, if you don't respect the user-policed rules of etiquette on social sites, and you try to crassly leverage social media to hard-sell potential customers and clients, or you lie about your products and services, it can backfire on you. That will almost surely bring you unwanted negative online conversations aimed at your brand.

With those caveats in place, let's look at ways you may use social media to achieve positive marketing results.



The Six Categories of SMM

The Overland Agency divides SMM into six distinct types largely recognized as being effective forms of social marketing in the interactive space. They are (combined with a few examples of each):

- Blogging (WordPress, Movable Type, Typepad, Blogger, etc.)
- News Sites (Digg, Reddit, Yahoo Buzz)
- Bookmarking Sites (Del.icio.us, StumbleUpon)
- Social Networking (Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace)
- Social Knowledge (Wikipedia, Yahoo Answers)
- Social Sharing (YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Yelp)

There are many ways businesses can and do gain by using the six the SMM categories. Here are 10 benefits, one or more of which companies may try to achieve from SMM:

1. Provide widespread brand exposure — SMM has the ability to spread the name, culture and influence of your brand to many new channels and communities. A perfect example was the controversial “Whopper Sacrifice” campaign . In that initiative, Burger King ran an application on the (200-million-users) Facebook platform announcing a free Whopper to every Facebook member who removed 10 of his or her online friends from their existing profile page. Over the course of the eight-week project, Facebook users removed 234,000 friends. The social network eventually demanded that Burger King stop the campaign. By that time, the well-known food chain had achieved their brand exposure goal. Controversial campaigns are often more buzz worthy (and successful) than ones that don’t raise any eyebrows. And the buzz surrounding the campaign spread the word about Burger King far beyond the roughly 23,000 hamburgers they gave away, and probably more than justified the initial web-campaign costs.

2. Build meaningful customer relationships and brand advocates — A good SMM channel lets you build new users and retain them through steady interaction to form a community. For instance, athletic shoe and apparel company, adidas, has more than 1.8 million fans on one of its Facebook pages. One item on the page made by the company has garnered more than 10,000 people saying they “like” that post. Other posts have received feedback from as many as 1,000 consumers. Target lets Facebook members vote on its fan page on how the company will spend \$3 million on popular charities. When you consider that each person showing brand preference on a company sponsored fan page may have 50 to 500 or more friends who see their comments/brand preferences, you start to realize the power of viral branding.

3. Open a vital, previously guarded communication channel — Companies that have leveraged effective new paths to customers include the cable/broadband provider, Comcast, whose customer service department was an early adopter of Twitter, the micro-blogging platform that allows users to post their messages (called “tweets”) in 140 characters or less. In early 2008, Comcast customer service started monitoring complaints about Comcast service on Twitter. When a critical tweet surfaces on the platform, the company attempts to reach out to the customer and resolve the issue.

4. Provide reputation management — The above-mentioned “ComcastCares” on Twitter is a good example of how SMM can help manage a company’s reputation. To date, the company claims to have answered some 30,000 customer tweets for help. Comcast responded to a potentially negative situation by showing a listening and helping attitude. They turned the situation into a win-win. The buzz the company has generated has been phenomenal: countless favorable website and blog mentions, magazine, newspaper, and TV reports. Resolving issues by leveraging SMM can be a powerful reputation builder.



5. Position your company as “the experts” — By blogging, tweeting, writing an educational entry on your company’s products and services on Wikipedia, and/or posting informational videos on YouTube, you can show your expertise in your chosen field of endeavor. The larger the amount of expert wisdom you spread across the Internet, the greater the chances that one of your company’s interactive initiatives is going appear in a potential customer’s search engine results page (SERP) for terms relevant to your expertise. In our personal experience with YouTube, a client has had garnered some 1,200 “views” of their B2B product demo and a five-star rating in two months after posting. These are brand and product messages that show your expertise, and which potential and current customers choose to view.

6. Translate to sales — There’s a debate about how well direct sales can be driven by companies through social media platforms. Twitter’s fledgling efforts to allow companies to stick sales messages into tweet spaces are less than impressive. Many people find blatant advertising on social media sites intrusive. However, there are more innovative ways to drive business and sales. One success story that showed creativity used “followers” on a Twitter account to drive business. A popular mobile Korean barbecue truck in Los Angeles amassed upwards of 15,000 followers who want to be alerted when the truck is going to be in their neighborhood. How do you think that affects the mobile unit’s food sales? Our agency is in the process of developing an innovative social platform application (for a recognized international brand) which will drive “fans” to a microsite where they will be able to get access to great discounts at the company’s stores. (Stay tuned on our website for future news.)

7. Drive traffic directly to your website — Social news and bookmarking sites (Digg, Reddit, Yahoo Buzz, and Del.icio.us, StumbleUpon) are primarily traffic-driving mechanisms. But they can be risky for companies, unless you are a legitimate member of the community. Community members on social news and bookmarking sites often consider company postings as spam. Web-savvy, frequent social media users accuse spamming companies of “Astroturfing”: creating fake grassroots. So, it’s far preferable to have a popular user on the news site upload your news item, along with the appropriate link to your site. For instance, in late march, when Wired Magazine posted an online article on Samsung developing a more “green” ultra-thin LCD TV, the item got “dugg” 152 times. That put the article high up on the home page of Digg.com. Another good way to build links and drive traffic is through tweets (on Twitter) and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo.

8. Help organize and promote events/initiatives — There is probably no better way, certainly no less expensive or viral way, to organize and promote events than using social media marketing. You can promote events, and even enjoy the viral friend/associate-tells-friend/associate effect in everything SMM: blogs, news sites, networking sites, Twitter, YouTube and more. It also helps entice potential attendees when a platform such as YouTube offers them a video “taste” of what’s to come at the event, or you gain third-party traction from people on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn endorsing the worth of your events. Nothing sells like somebody not involved in the event saying your show is a must-attend.

9. Help develop products and services — B2C and B2B companies can both benefit from social media feedback from customers and clients about needed/future products and services. Here, feedback loops are key. The table stakes to engage in social media are that companies “listen” to customer and client complaints, comments, and desires. Social media dispenses with the old “push” media, “I’ve got the mic” model, and opens up those conversations we talked about in the beginning of this paper. Once you engage in meaningful idea exchanges with your target audiences, you can gain valuable insight for ultimately providing better products and services. A great example of a company which is taking such a strategy to heart is Intel, which is currently weighing social-media-generated ideas from consumers about the designs and features they would like to see in their ideal personal computer. Intel claims they plan on using these public comments to help them build a blueprint for a new, potentially more useful (and popular) notebook PC.



10. Differentiate you from the competition — This is, sadly, the no-brainer benefit. Most companies are simply too busy to start a Facebook page, surf the content on Del.icio.us, or maintain a blog. They're too lazy to create a LinkedIn profile, or tweet, or comment on Digg. They are too trapped in "old think" to develop an app, shoot and post a YouTube video, write a Wikipedia entry, or to do any of the other necessary things that will show theirs as a company worth building a brand relationship with online. Remember that about 75 percent of the consumer-aged U.S. population is online (which means 75 percent of the people in your town, too, if you are simply a "local" business). There's a pretty good chance your competition is not very good at talking with all those potential customers in the social media world. That's too bad: for them. You on the other hand probably have more sense. Look Before You Leap

Crafting a sound SMM campaign entails the same kind of hard work you must undertake to forge any smart marketing initiative: online or off. You need to prepare properly. We recommend, whether you work with a professional agency that does social media programs or you are doing it internally at your company, you are careful to:

- Study the people you'll try to reach out to online. Who are they?
- Try to determine preferences for each target group. How are they using social media?
- Think brand. How do you want to be viewed in your SMM?
- Think technology. Which social media is for you (blog? Facebook? Twitter? YouTube?)
- Study marketing options. What works, and doesn't in each social media technology?
- Innovate and be compelling. What will be new, exciting, value-rich for users?
- Be sticky. What are social media tactics and updates that will keep people coming back?
- Determine your budget in money and time. Dollars spent? Who manages it?
- Determine success. Is it awareness? Click-throughs? Page-views? Sales?
- Track results: they're measurable. Your strategy for improving effectiveness?
- Never give up. Can you stick with SMM? (Done best, it's a long-term, building strategy.)

CONCLUSION

SMM "specialist" businesses have cropped up like weeds on the Internet, and many conventional and digital/web development agencies are promoting themselves as experts. But it's a young science, and true-to-life success stories, ROI-generating case studies, are rather rare. So, you should not view all SMM tactics merely as bottom-line enriching initiatives.

Likewise, many SMM purveyors will tell you how "inexpensive" it is to do marketing in the social media space. While it's true that an SMM campaign may be a good deal cheaper than a national TV spot, you never get something for nothing. The real cost of conducting an SMM campaign can vary greatly.

Starting a blog, or a company fan page on Facebook, or having an employee send out messages on Twitter may not be overtly expensive. But time is money. To do SMM effectively, requires assiduous, on-going effort. Somebody will have to actually write the blog every day (and answer the comments when they come in). Someone will have to update the Facebook fan page regularly. Someone will have to generate all those micro-blog tweets on Twitter, and answer "re-tweets." It's a big job, costing time and salary (including the time necessary to devise the strategies and track their effectiveness).

Likewise, apps on services such as Facebook — which are largely "bigger brand" types of solutions — also cost to create (according to some sources, on average between \$20,000 and \$150,000 to create and launch). However, apps, when done correctly, can be cost effective. The bottom line is: ounce-for-ounce social media marketing is less expensive than many forms of traditional media. And everything is moving more quickly into the digital realm, with social media leading the pack.



The take-away for business today is that the race to excellence is no longer merely for people who have good products and services, or even to those who go the extra mile to spend honest effort to market those things. Today, you must also show that you care what your customers and clients think about you and your offerings. And you have to show them that, when they speak, you really do care about satisfying their needs. You have to answer them, quickly and fairly.

For all these reasons, we conclude with a simple statement: participating in social media is one of the necessary marketing tools today for virtually every company. You may as well do SMM well. Now that you've been invited to join the conversation, what was it you had to say?

About the Overland Agency

The Overland Agency is an award-winning Portland, Oregon-based brand marketing and interactive agency with deep capabilities in web design and development that combines high-level strategic consulting with smart, passionate creative execution. The agency serves as an online integrated marketing partner: an ad agency, web development shop, search-optimization consultancy, and brand specialists within one company. Clients include adidas, Mutual of Omaha Insurance, Extensis, Lightspeed Technologies, Stash Tea, and Volt Information Sciences. The agency also does pro bono work for such groups as the Oregon Council of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. More information is available at www.overlandagency.com.

About the Authors

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Greg made the transition to advertising from international newspaper and magazine reporting in 1989. Since that time he has been the creative lead and senior writer on successful national and international campaigns for clients selling high-technology (hardware & software), fitness equipment and apparel, foreign and domestic automobiles, food and drink, insurance, cosmetics, and many other products and services. He joined the Overland Agency in its first year, 2001, and has focused since that time on interactive strategies. Greg has also written half a dozen books on subjects that include innovative business solutions, Fidel Castro's documentary photographers, fiction, religious architecture, Hawaiian shirts, and 20th Century popular music.

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Joshua is responsible for the implementation and management of all levels of interactive media for a broad range of B2C and B2B clients — ranging from a \$12 billion international insurance conglomerate to varied North American e-commerce retail operations. He manages Pay per Click, Paid Inclusion, Search Engine Optimization, Social Media accounts and Analytics. Josh has six years of experience running SEM campaigns, online copy writing, and strong working relationships with search engines Google and Yahoo. He holds a Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Oregon.