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Opportunities and Risks: Marketing in a Web 2.0 World

On July 14th, 2009, comedian Dave Chappelle, who was visiting Portland, Oregon, told a few people around town his intention to perform standup that night downtown at Pioneer Courthouse Square. Rumors of the impromptu performance swelled online after Justin Machus, owner of Portland area clothing boutique Local35, updated his Facebook to report that Chappelle had shopped at his store that day, also posting to Twitter around five pm, “Free Dave Chappelle standup at midnight tonight at Pioneer Square!!!” (Machus). PDX Pipeline, a blog devoted to Portland music, arts, and events that is also active on Twitter, tried to flesh out the rumor: “This is the current rumor on the streets tweets of Portland, Dave Chapelle [*sic*] is here (basically confirmed) and planning a party tonight in Pioneer Square (not confirmed as of yet)” (“Rumor”). The post quickly drew more than 250 responses.

People began arriving in Pioneer Square around ten that night, following a message that had been repeated through texts and tweets, with thousands packing the area by midnight. As minutes after midnight passed with no Chappelle in sight, some were convinced that a massive hoax had just been facilitated by Twitter. When Dave Chappelle finally arrived in Pioneer Square at 12:53 am, he carried with him a small, battery-powered speaker and microphone that might have been appropriate for the two hundred person crowd he was expecting (Bachman). “I told four people,” he informed the crowd, adding, “this has never happened in my entire career. . . . I’m grateful everybody came out” (Faricy). Ultimately, few spectators were able to hear

Chappelle's comments as he searched for a better sound system that never materialized, but the awesome power of social networking web sites to quickly disseminate information was clearly displayed.

Marketers want to gain access to Internet-based new media and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter that are so popular with their customers, networks that can create the kind of buzz that mobilizes a crowd of thousands within a few hours. Some deride web 2.0 as mere industry jargon, but evidence suggests we are genuinely entering a new era in how we use technology. While the power of this new technology to resonate with consumers is becoming clear, embracing social media requires a significant shift in mindset and acceptance of risk that some marketers are not ready to make. However, the potential of these networks cannot be ignored, and the experience of companies that have already taken advantage of new web technologies proves the need to get on board before getting left behind.

Background

People are still unsure what web 2.0 is exactly. In fact, the term did start to gain popularity only after appearing as a marketing buzzword, developed by O'Reilly Media in 2004 to hype an upcoming conference on new web technologies (Rapoza). Today, “web 2.0” is generally understood to encompass web applications where users participate as creators or co-creators of content. This includes social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, wikis, which allow all users to collaboratively edit content, user generated web logs, or blogs, and photo and video sharing services such as Flickr and YouTube. Blogs are enhanced by Really Simple Syndication (RSS) technology that automatically feed web content—services like Google Reader amalgamate and organize RSS feeds, providing users with up-to-the-minute content from their chosen feeds. Bookmarking sites like Digg.com and del.icio.us aggregate user-submitted

URLs, creating an easily accessible list of web destinations that are recently popular. And by adding keywords or “tagging” posts, users can organize data, creating searchable directories on their own. Where users once simply read articles or viewed video clips online, with web 2.0 they are given the option to comment on and share the content with others via dozens of outlets including Facebook, Twitter, Digg, Yahoo! Buzz, and del.icio.us. This new, truly social media is totally participatory and personalized, and it is everywhere online.

Social networking sites have quickly become some of the most popular destinations for Internet users. More than two-thirds of the global online population visits social networks and blogs; as a category, they are more popular even than personal email, accounting for almost 10% of Internet time and growing three times faster than the overall rate (“Social Networks”). Every day, almost a quarter of global Internet users visit Facebook, spending nearly half an hour on the site (“Facebook.com”). In fact, the amount of time spent on Facebook has increased seven fold since last year, with time spent on social networking sites in general up 83% (“Time Spent”). Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia with more than 13 million articles collaboratively written by over 75,000 contributors, is currently the Internet's largest and most popular news and information source (“Wikipedia”). Twentysomethings and teens still predominate amongst web 2.0 users, causing some to question the possible buying power of digital marketing's audience. However, more than half of Facebook's huge network of users are out of college, and its fastest growing user demographic is the over thirty crowd (Hawkins 21). And according to Nielsen, the biggest increase in visitors to social networking sites and blogs was among the 35-49 year old age group, up 11.3 million over 2008 (“Social Networks”).

The newest darling of social media is Twitter, a micro-blogging social networking site. Traffic on Twitter has exploded, increasing 1,382% from February 2008 to February 2009; the

site now serves more than 10 million users, although there is some doubt as to Twitter's ability to retain its registered users (“Twitter Hype”). Twitter posts, or tweets, limited to 140 characters, can be sent and received through text messages on cellular phones, making them highly mobile and repeatable, possibly fueling the kind of viral response that produced the huge audience for Dave Chappelle in Portland. Text message use is so prevalent, in fact, that many of Twitter's heaviest users rarely even visit the site (Arrington). In 2008, nineteen percent of US social network users accessed web 2.0 sites from their mobile phones, up 156% from the previous year (“Social Networks”). As mobile technology continues to grow, accessing online resources will not mean sitting down at a computer, and social media will spread to more parts of our lives.

At the same time that traffic to the web is skyrocketing, traditional media outlets have seen their audiences plummeting. Newspaper circulation in the US declined 7% from 2008 to 2009, nearly twice the rate of decline seen the previous year, while audiences to newspaper web sites were up 10.5% in the first quarter of 2009 (Arango). New media revenues are growing almost four times the rate of that of traditional media (Wertime and Fenwick 27). Digital media is fast becoming the mainstay of culture. *Time* magazine has a weekly circulation of 3.5 million; in contrast, Perez Hilton's celebrity gossip blog reaches 5 million people a day (Wertime and Fenwick 8-9). Television networks produce webisodes of popular shows that are only available online. Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace.com in 2005, adding the social networking site to his News Corporation media empire. And stories are now breaking on the Internet. Details of the emergency landing of a US Airways flight in the Hudson river in early 2009 were first reported via Twitter, and in June, after disputed election results in Iran, the service was used as a primary mode of communication by protesters there (“Twitter Iran”). It's no wonder that web 2.0 networks are also known as “new media”—for many consumers, web 2.0 content is quickly

supplanting more traditional media that marketers have relied on to advertise their brands.

Along with the exit of traditional media outlets, so goes the traditional marketing model. Companies are used to carefully crafting brand messages and handing them out to target audiences through chosen media. In place of this usual “telling and selling” technique, web 2.0 offers two-way communication with consumers. Building relationships with customers online means creating brand experiences *with*, not just *for* consumers (Stern and Wakabayashi). Trusting users as co-creators of content does entail yielding a degree of control over “The Message,” a risky proposition for marketers used to exclusive management of marketing communication. However, as *DigiMarketing* authors Kent Wertime and Ian Fenwick explain, “when the majority of media is digital, participatory, two-way, and potentially viral, it doesn't make sense to still execute marketing as if it were a one-way world” (29). Because new media is so participatory, marketers have to genuinely engage consumers online or face being ignored. Companies who listen to their customers through social networks on the Internet stand to gain their trust and following, at the same time enjoying the possibility of improving marketing messages, business practices, and even product design.

Marketers are jumping into web 2.0. A recent survey found 66% of marketers using social media in 2009, up from 20% just two years ago (“New ANA/BTB”). But how can marketers utilize web 2.0 applications that are so user-centric, places where people want to connect with their friends and families, not view a lot of marketing messages? How should marketers approach social media that is so new that best practices do not exist yet? Michael Mendenhall, Senior VP and Chief Marketing Officer at Hewlett-Packard, elucidated the difficulties web 2.0 presents to marketers in a speech to the American Association of Advertising Agencies earlier this year:

Web 2.0 has brought on a paradigm shift in the way people communicate, collaborate and engage. Ideas, opinions and, in fact, attention are no longer the proprietary assets of a few powerful, centralized organizations. This presents enormous challenges. How do we, for example, integrate social media into our brands? How do we join the conversation in a natural and authentic way? (Mendenhall)

This is the essential challenge for marketers in a web 2.0 world.

Successful Digital Marketing

Digital marketing has to mean more than just setting up a corporate blog—just one in eight adults or teens online reported interest in reading a blog by their favorite brand (Carey). Rather, marketers will have to get creative and get consumers involved if they want to stake a claim in the increasingly fragmented and competitive online world. Many companies have successfully experimented with web 2.0 by fostering communities for their customers on the web or exploiting existing communities that are already popular with Internet users.

Nike is a leader in digital marketing. In 2006 the company created NikePlus.com, a network for runners that gathers data like speed, mileage, and calories burned from Nike+ sensors in running shoes synced to Apple iPods or its own wristwatch SportBands. Within two years, Nike sold more than 1.3 million Nike+ iPod sets and half a million Nike+ SportBands and runners had logged 93 million miles on the site (Greene). Sales of these products were hardly significant to a company with the huge revenues Nike sees, but Nike+ was originally conceived as a new way to combine running with music, “never about how can we convert some percentage of users [to buy Nike shoes],” according to Nike executive Stefan Olander (qtd. in Greene). Still, Nike's share of running shoe sales in the US went up from 48% in 2006 to 61% in 2008, which

market research analyst Matt Powell attributes mostly to Nike+ (Greene). And Nike has a huge following online—a 10K run sponsored through Nike+ in 25 cities last year drew 780,000 participants in the world's largest running event (“Nike Running”). In another online venture, NikeiD lets consumers fully customize their own running shoes and share their designs with the community. Next, Nike plans to launch the Facebook application “Ballers Network” for basketball players to organize games and manage teams online. All these web 2.0 communities are building brand loyalty for Nike, which has a cutting edge reputation among consumers thanks to its innovative marketing on the web.

Upscale grocery retailer Whole Foods Market has added a number of social networking capabilities to its web site. It posts recipes which use ingredients that can be bought at its stores, hosts a blog about its products, a blog by its CEO, cooking videos, and natural body care podcasts, in addition to being active on Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The Whole Foods site allows registered users to comment on recipes and blog posts with additional abilities to recommend other comments and rate recipes. Whole Foods has authorized “Team Members” post responses to users, but commenters also answer questions, for example pointing out which section of the store certain products can be found and whether or not particular recipes work at altitude. Whole Foods provides the content free of charge for its community, but in turn, consumers are discovering new products available at the retailer—in response to a pizza recipe one commenter wrote, “This recipe helped me to discover the fresh sausages from the butcher case and they are so delicious!” (“Naan Bread”). Whole Foods also sponsors a forum for users to swap recipes, discuss products, and provide their feedback. A recent topic on the forums is “Health Care Reform,” which has drawn nearly 17,000 responses in 2,200 discussions—Whole Foods CEO John Mackey recently criticized President Obama's health care plan in an Op-Ed

piece that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* (“Whole Foods”). Forum users have both decried and supported this stance, also helpfully posting Whole Foods cofounder Renee Lawson Hardy's rebuttal of Mackey's position. Whole Foods is using web 2.0 technology to connect with a community of its customers in a profound way, even letting them use company space to post negative commentary.

The easier and cheaper alternative to creating online communities for consumers is to try and take advantage of web 2.0 applications and networks that already exist. For example, Carnival Cruise Lines, which is active on Twitter and Facebook, tracks customers who book cruises directly after viewing Carnival posts online. “We've made more money on Twitter than Twitter has,” reported Jordan Corredera, senior manager of Carnival's interactive strategy (qtd. in Carey). Dell has announced promotions online that have been immensely popular with consumers. Dell's @DellOutlet account on Twitter has been active since 2007, releasing exclusive news and time sensitive promotions that generated more than \$3 million in revenue in less than a year (“Real-Time Internet”). When Jet Blue recently announced (and tweeted) its \$599 “All You Can Jet” monthly pass, its Twitter account was “bombarded” with questions and the offer became a “Trending Topic” on the site with multiple mentions every second (Johnsson). The route map on Jet Blue's web site saw a 700% increase in traffic the day after the promotion was released and Jet Blue had to end sales of the pass two days before expected due to overwhelming demand (Engle). These companies are using popular web 2.0 tools to drive traffic back to their own web sites, seeing results in the process.

Social media can also be used for public relations. Kodak recently used web 2.0 networks to correct misinformation released in a news article, quickly blunting any negative effect the information could have. When the *Wall Street Journal* erroneously reported that Kodak could not

afford to keep two of its divisions, the company quickly responded online and a cadre of blogs and tweets were clarifying the report well before a correction could be officially issued (Watson). Creating the response was easy because Kodak was already engaged in social media such as Twitter and YouTube. In contrast, United Airlines recently faced negative exposure from a customer whose guitar was broken by the company which refused to pay for the damage. The customer happened to be a struggling country musician who wrote a song about his experience and posted a music video that attracted almost five million views on YouTube thanks to promotional efforts on Facebook and Twitter (Johnsson). Because United was new to social media without a lot of followers, it struggled to respond to the wash of negative publicity online. Involvement with web 2.0 can be a powerful addition to the marketer's toolbox and a useful outlet to get promotional and public relations messages out to the public.

Companies are also using digital channels to listen to consumers in order to gain new marketing ideas. Consumers generate their own commercials for real brands on YouTube all the time, remixing content from advertisements into digital mashups or parodying commercial content in their own spoof ads. While these are not always flattering to the brands in question, some companies have capitalized on the creative talents of their customers. Frito-Lay first invited consumers to create the 2007 Super Bowl advertisement for its Doritos brand in late 2006, repeating the contest every year since. The latest winners of the "Crash the Super Bowl" contest created an ad that was the most memorable of the game as measured by *USA Today's* "Ad Meter" survey (Learmonth). Companies are also seeking user-generated product designs from online networks. Hewlett-Packard sponsored a competition for its customers to design the next HP notebook, drawing nearly 17,000 designs from 94 countries around the world (Mendenhall). The company is currently hosting the You on You project, a contest for YouTube users to tell

their personal stories in a creative way—without showing their faces. This kind of collaboration with consumers constitutes long-term relationship building between brands and people who have staked a claim in them through networks online.

The holy grail of web 2.0 is viral marketing—content that manages to catch the attention of people who repeat it through blogs, tweets, Diggs, and Facebook updates to their own networks, causing content to spread “virally” and eventually producing huge audiences. Consumers pass on content they find interesting, and messages spread online through word-of-mouth emerge from genuine grass-roots enthusiasm among users and therefore resonate with them. Nike released its video “Nike Cosplay” for a Japanese audience solely online, building word-of-mouth through a blog-based ad service and drawing more than a million views (Stern and Wakabayashi 6). Unilever's immensely popular “Evolution” video for Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty also went viral and has now been seen on YouTube more than nine million times since it was posted in 2006 (Piper). As YouTube videos can be embedded in blogs and other social networking sites, this underestimates the number of actual views. People were talking about “Evolution” through social media and the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty became a real part of user-generated content, sincerely resonating with consumers on the web. Because buzz generated by web 2.0 is spread by users themselves, it is more powerful to consumers than messages simply handed down from marketing departments.

Suggestions

The first task for companies embarking upon digital marketing is to engage their customers online. This is harder than just setting up a Facebook page and collecting friends. Recent research of 140 global brands on Twitter found that one third were ignored by their followers; that is, users did not “retweet” messages sent out by brands to their own network of

followers (“Almost”). Katy Howell, managing director of immediate future, the PR firm that compiled the data, related:

The problem is that many brands view Twitter as a broadcast channel and they measure their success on the size of their audience, rather than the level of engagement they have with their followers. The best brands attract followers by having something interesting to say and engaging their audience in a genuine conversation. Organisations which think it's good enough to build up a large number of Twitter followers and broadcast the same old tired corporate messaging at them are not only missing the point, but also the opportunity. (“Almost”)

In a web 2.0 environment, users seek out the content they want to view out of all the information online. The total amount of digitized information is doubling every eighteen months; by 2010, there will be 988 exabytes of digital information, a figure that represents 18 million times the information in all the books ever written (Mendenhall). Companies need to craft authentic and interesting messages if they hope to attract the attention of their online audiences—customers recognize overt advertising when they see it, and they reject it.

Alan Wolk, a Creative Director and Social Media Consultant, believes that only the top global brands, so-called “prom king” brands like Nike, Apple, and Starbucks, will ever attract a mass following online. However, the Internet has the unique ability to pull together people who are interested in things way outside mainstream consciousness. This is the “long tail” of the 80:20 rule where 20% of products make up 80% of sales (Wertheim and Fenwick 65). Traditional retailers (and culture) focus on top-selling hits, but the economics of the Internet are different—Amazon.com has nearly limitless shelf space while a brick and mortar like Barnes & Noble does not—allowing for almost infinite niche marketing online. When IBM analyzed 1.5 billion posts

on the Internet to ascertain attitudes about brands, they were surprised to find that Australian spread Vegemite had the strongest appeal, naming it the world's "most loved brand" (Robertson). Think about that: the world's most loved brand on the web is not Starbucks or Nike or even Coca-Cola, but *Vegemite*. There is demand for the other 80% of products, and people are talking about brands online whether or not companies have joined the discussion. With web 2.0, marketers can take advantage of this long tail, and customers can connect with even the most obscure brands.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity presented by web 2.0 lies in market research. People are talking about brands and products online in usually very visible public outlets. Marketers can tap into these networks to ascertain consumer attitudes and also join the conversation, instantly communicating with their customers. While some worry about potentially damaging negative feedback online, Jen McDonald, Senior VP of Digital Marketing at Bank of America put it this way:

The conversation is happening anyway. You can choose to be in it or just stand on the sidelines. . . . We're able to jump in when there is criticism and explain our position. The really interesting thing about this space is that it opens up a service area for us that is not there through any other vehicle. People are saying things about us that we wouldn't hear on the phone. (qtd. in Spitzer)

Bank of America is taking advantage of online networks to check in with people they otherwise wouldn't hear from, building relationships and trust with their customers. To get started, companies can sign up to be updated when chosen keywords appear in posts online, making it easier to keep track of what people are saying on the web in order to respond when appropriate. While unable to yield complete control over communication, companies are able to steer web 2.0

discussions by offering their input. Communicating with consumers in an open and honest way online can outweigh the risks posed by possible negative responses.

Smart marketers know when to simply listen to customer concerns and when to actually respond. A Dove Campaign for Real Beauty ad about the onslaught of media images presented to young girls was successfully parodied by Greenpeace, which produced a video pointing out Unilever's consumption of palm oil and the resultant destruction of Indonesian forests. Unilever is now working in partnership with Greenpeace on the issue, developing a larger public relations response and societal marketing orientation. "Digital is bringing [social and environmental concerns] to the surface in a completely new and powerful way," said Unilever Chief Marketing Officer Simon Clift, who also foresees brands "that address the world's challenges. . . . It's a sort of enlightened self-interest. It's not about philanthropy. It's a marketing program with social benefits" (qtd. in Neff).

In another example, one first generation iPod customer, frustrated with his 18-month-old device's inability to hold a battery charge, posted the negative video "iPod's Dirty Secret" on the Internet after the company refused to replace the battery when he first inquired at the Apple Store, called the technical support line three times, and even mailed his iPod to Apple executive Steve Jobs. The video was quickly viewed by more than a million people and within days Apple rolled out battery replacement and extended warranty programs, although it claimed the programs were in the works for months (Stuever). While web 2.0 allows negative consumer feedback to gain an audience, in the long term, Apple and Unilever appear wisely responsive to their customers and it is hard to denounce the positive changes for consumers brought about through this two-way communication.

On the other hand, marketers who fear that consumers will "hijack" their brands online

may end up overreacting to negative feedback, actually bringing larger audiences to controversies than their detractors ever could. For example, a Johnson & Johnson ad for Motrin that portrayed a mom with neck and back pain from carrying her infant in a sling caused a furor among real moms online, provoking Johnson & Johnson to pull the ad and issue an apology on its web site. However, a Lightspeed Research survey later found that almost nine out of ten women had never seen the ad to begin with, and once survey respondents viewed the piece in question, 45% reported liking the video, 41% felt indifferent and 15% didn't like it, with only 8% saying it negatively affected their feelings of the brand while nearly one-third said it made them like the brand more (Klaassen). If web 2.0 users make up only a tiny portion of a particular brand's target audience, it makes sense to let those users air their concerns online, monitoring situations that have the potential to become viral and enter the mainstream.

One major concern for companies branching into social media is the difficulty in measuring whether or not digital marketing is effective. But according to Tim O'Reilly,

The secret of social media is that it is not about you, your product or your story.

It's about creating value for the communities that happen to include you. If you want to make a positive impact, forget about what you can get from social media, and start thinking about what you can contribute. Funnily enough, the more value you create for the community, the more value they will create for you. (qtd. in Van Zyl 7)

A basic and measurable starting goal for companies embarking on digital marketing is to simply interest consumers on web 2.0 networks in order to drive traffic back to the main company site. But really, "Nobody has any idea of what they're doing on social media," said Jeffrey Kalmikoff, Chief Creative Officer for popular web-based T-shirt company Threadless, adding, "It's just how

comfortable your company is in taking risk. Some things can pay off; some things can fall flat” (qtd. in Johnsson). Companies will have to play around with social networking until they find strategies that work for them and their customers. Nike created Nike+ just to mash up running and music, never expecting to develop a huge online network of runners from around the world. Of the immense response to its “All You Can Jet” Pass, Jet Blue spokeswoman Jenny Dervin related, “We're going to learn a lot from this. Next time we do this, we may have different rules around it. But honestly, Twitter will tell us. It's the ultimate market research tool” (qtd. in Johnsson). Experimenting with social networking is the only way to see if it will pay off. Marketers have always taken risks. Some of them have paid off and some of them have fallen flat; business people are just hesitant about social media because it is so new and ever-changing. Still, those who innovate stay on top. They always have.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 represents substantial opportunities and risks for marketers. The exponential growth of new media in recent years portends a future where digital media will constitute a primary channel for marketing communication. Through social networks and blogs, people from all over the world are getting together to talk about companies and brands and their business practices. Companies should begin to engage their customers through these channels if they are not doing so already. While the risk of negative exposure will always remain a possibility, if companies are engaged in social networks they will be able to quickly respond to consumer concerns before they can spiral virally into mainstream consciousness. Once marketers learn to let go of control, they can engage with consumers in an authentic and genuine way, collaborating to build relationships and brand loyalty online that will confer higher sales and profits in the real world.

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