



Marketing Messages

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Social media: marketing's latest disruptive force

This fall internet ad spending in the UK out paced TV ad spending for the first time ever in history. TV ad spending commanded 22% and the internet took up 24% of advertising expenditures. While some were quick to write the obituary for traditional media, the UK market is a bit of an anomaly with its restricted advertising on the BBC and an abundance of broadband penetration. However, it does signal a significant shift. Let's call it a disruption.

The number of Chinese internet users now exceeds that of the US. That's 338 million Chinese web users to 308 million Americans. User penetration in the US is 70%. In China it's 25% and increasing. Let's call that growth.

Advertising Age recently reported a 400% surge in mobile video uploads to Youtube largely attributable to new iPhones and the Blackberry. It is now clear that there is an inseparable link between social media and mobile devices. Let's call that opportunity.

So where does disruption, growth and opportunity leave us? The internet is big, but mobile media is bigger. Online advertising is important, but social media is critical. Both mobile and social media are good at reaching niche audiences and getting them actively engaged on a personal level. And that's the new part of the selling process that marketers are coming to grip with. In social media it's about offering something of value, engaging passionate fans, and giving them the tools to influence others. It's not about pushing out a message or the number of exposures.

Interestingly, a whole new measurement mechanism is emerging to quantify social media. Infegy, a US based firm, tracks 20 million web pages, including the leading social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, Youtube, and reports the % of positive mentions against overall brand mentions within social media in their monthly Social Radar Sentiment Index. They analyze online buzz by the sentence, rather than just counting the number of positive words in an effort to get an accurate read of whether mentions are positive or negative. The index focuses heavily on mega brands, but it offers a clear insight about what leading companies are doing.

Here's a few highlights from a recent report:

Apple beat Microsoft largely on the basis of its overwhelming conversation volume, generating more than 900,000 mentions in a month. However Microsoft still had the second highest volume of mentions. Despite much negative media coverage in the bailout plagued auto industry, Ford had an 87.6% positive mention rate and General Motors had a 71.4% positive rating. And Dove generated more than 141,000 comments, 81.6% positive, still appearing to benefit from the "Campaign for Real Beauty" and viral "Evolution" video three years after it first appeared.

Leading brands are using social media to allow their customers to become their best advocates. Positive mentions are of course contingent on meeting and exceeding customer expectations and connecting with them on an emotional level. Perhaps this is where advertising dollars are best spent these days. Get good, facilitate talk and then listen.

Social media aided by the growth of mobile devices is undoubtedly a disruption. But disruptions have happened before. The printing press disrupted oral communications. Radio and film disrupted newspapers and live theater. TV in the 1950s disrupted radio. Cable TV and specialty channels in the 60/70s disrupted network TV. What is common with all these is this: The disruption fragmented the audience and caused new patterns of media consumption. However, the other thing that is common is that none of the previous communication vehicles went away. They simply took on a different role with a refined focus and purpose.

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