

## Everything your brand wants to know about the social media, but was afraid to ask.

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### What is social media?

At the basic level, social media provide the tools to develop a relationship between one and many users. It's a conversation. A brand site is "social" if it allows and inspires conversation as it appears in the "comments" section. If it uses "rating and reputation" and tools to facilitate engagement, social media will allow and encourage a dialogue to develop. Some social media provide tools for people to contribute online, like YouTube, while others are intended for rating and criticizing, like del.icio.us and Digg. Still others are tools for questions and answers, such as YahooAnswers and HelpShare. These days the most headline-grabbing are MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and, of course, *Second Life*—a content-providing and community subset of the social media. Just using a blog, videolog (vlog), or podcast format doesn't automatically qualify something as a social medium. Genuine social media depend on running commentary, criticism, and conversation. In short, social media are about participation. In our digital democracy, social media are the public forum. In our actual democracy, social media are the newest frontier of the First Amendment, as we see in citizen journalism sites like *NowPublic* and *Current.tv*, which inspire users to report news and events.

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## + A BRAND IS SOCIAL IF IT ENCOURAGES DIALOGUE, PARTICIPATION, AND RELEVANCE.

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### What are social media tools and how are they used?

There are many different types of social media tools, with more being developed every day. Social media tools fall into roughly four categories:

- + Social Networks: MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, InnoCentive, Second Life
- + Tools: Blogger, YouTube, PodcastNation, Twitter
- + Rating and Reputation: Technorati, del.icio.us, Digg.com, NowPublic
- + Questions & Answers: YahooAnswers.com, HelpShare, Wondir

These tools could help build the infrastructure of the relationships you want to develop depending upon the need of your users, business, or brand.

### Who uses social media?

Chances are your teenager is already well (or even over-) represented on MySpace, your children maybe on Club Penguin, and every Internet user has been exposed to YouTube.

And now, brands themselves are getting more and more involved with conversations with their customers. Stonyfield Farm has two very successful blogs, *The Bovine Bugle* and *Baby Babble*, both of which provide great conversation and community.

Like any relationship it's all about developing trust. Brands should tell a story, but they shouldn't make up stories.

Ethics is just as important online as it is offline, and brands must strive for an authentic voice that conveys the brand's truth to its users. Brands must not mislead participants by gaming, shilling, or misrepresenting themselves via social media tools. It is so simple—and sound—to be transparent.<sup>1</sup>

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### **How will social networking impact business?**

First let's hear what Jim Stengel, CMO of Procter & Gamble, thinks about the key idea guiding any new media or social-networking approach:

*"What we really need is a mind-set shift, a mind-set shift that will make us relevant to today's consumers, a mind-set shift from 'telling and selling' to building relationships."*

The key to business is relationships. Why shouldn't a business be social? A quick visit to the coffee machine demonstrates how truly social a business is. I don't believe a business can afford to ignore or shun its inherently social nature. It is, as Mr. Stengel says, the job of businesses to build the brand, and, in turn, to build relationships to the brand.

Social media are a valuable and cost-effective adjunct to the usual research methods. For example, businesses can set up a blog and videocast to help launch a new product or service, and they have discovered that the online community is only too willing to comment, joke, opine, or even deride. Of course, managers must be ready to hear criticism. They must be thick-skinned. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, the prince of paradox, offer something many people disagree with, and your readers will write half your content for you. Just put that in the light-speed collaborative context of the Internet social media, and half of your electrons will be provided for you.

Marketers should think about how a direct relationship with your customers can enrich the conversation. More and more, customers develop a sense of ownership with the brand. Why not let them *digg in* and share their thoughts?

Well, the web has certainly grown up since Tim Berners Lee created hypertext markup language to ease the sharing of particle physics knowledge. It's gone from static interface to WWW. And, with the universalization of broadband, motion graphics, and sound it enjoys widespread distribution. Now, consumers of website content are not only reaping the benefits of broadband; they are contributing by using social media tools, from webcams to digital animation to original content, the "Webizen" is talking back.

### **How does the democratization of Internet tools and user-generated content affect brands?**

It would be an absolute shame not to exploit the willingness of all these people to contribute. It is an awesome new way to build consensus and accurately determine what people want. Perhaps best of all, it fosters not just brand loyalty, but partisanship, so the user can feel that, "Hey, I had a say in this or that."

### **... and brand management?**

Brand managers will need to change their mind-sets. Things are shifting out there, and it's going to get bumpy. But, as traditional media gets more expensive for less return on investment, social media allows a brand manager to get very close to the customer, providing information up front so that more knowledgeable decisions can be made.

### **... and media in general?**

Whatever's been true about what sells media will remain true. Story. The narrative has to be compelling. People will have to want to watch. There's still no algorithm for the "Big Idea." We are at the crossroads with advertising media. Today's generation wants media when they want it and how they want it, and they don't want to be constrained by advertisers' media decisions. Consumers are in control: where they should be, as discomfiting as that may be to some of the traditionalists out there.

Let me elaborate: A 27-year-old turns his phone number into an online phone experiment. Luke Johnson, living in Gilbert, Arizona, creates a video asking people to give him a call. His simple call to action stirs the Luke Johnson craze. He has registered close to 2 million views of his video on YouTube, inspired 8,800 comments and gained “favored” status 2,511 times. Cell phone companies are deluging Luke with offers. Luke simply let the comments flow and turned a social medium into an engine. He reaped free PR from national, cable, and local news providers. He used readily available tools like YouTube. His message is out of the bottle. Way out.

### How could this translate into a business opportunity?

Let’s take a closer look at how businesses use social media tools:

On the one hand, Intuit uses social media tools to help customers get business and tax answers, or for businesses that need to partner with their legal departments.



Intuit uses social media tools to help customers get business and tax answers

Deloitte takes a different approach, using podcasts called *Deloitte Insights*. The producer of *Deloitte Insights* first takes the script to the Deloitte legal department. Then the podcast is carefully vetted. The podcast goes through another legal review before it is released to the public.



Deloitte Insights develops podcasts

For obvious legal reasons, there is no allowance for give-and-take. Whereas Intuit encourages participation and collaboration from users, Deloitte does not. You cannot rate the Deloitte podcasts, make comments, or share them.

Deloitte is therefore making use of podcasting, but not the true essence of social media. This may be the right direction for the Deloitte brand but are they missing the opportunity to foster and truly build a community?

### How should businesses use social media?

You can get going on this right now. As we’ve seen, the tools and the network are out there; a whole wide world of information flow and content waiting for the next Luke Johnson to strike a digital gold mine. Best practices should be developed combining website, utility, community, information, and of course, online sales.<sup>2</sup> Social media tools can be incorporated to provide participation, education, direction, and customer relations. For instance:

Your thought-leaders should use blogs, vlogs, or podcasts to present their latest thoughts and encourage participation through comments and offer rating tools.

Invite your best customers to preview a new product. This is a great opportunity for an informal focus group. Demonstrate the product by using video. Get reactions through comments and rating and reputation tools.

Social media tools can be used to educate on various policies like new tax laws. These can greatly help translate complex legalese—just as a video demonstration would.

After all we are a viewer nation.

Here are some other uses of social media:

Honda generated a very compelling video. They launched this Rube Goldberg-inspired machine on Google Video, which has been watched more than 96,000 times with several viewers’ commenting on they’re delight with what they saw.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4187430023476942057-&q=amazing+honda+ad>

Deloitte ranks at 3,600 on Technorati, with over 600 blogs linking in. Deloitte realized the necessity of tracking what is being said about them in real time, as well as who is connecting to the Deloitte blog.

Eli Lilly realized R&D could be developed through Crowdsourcing<sup>3</sup> and developed a method to post a challenge that needed to be solved. It was so successful Eli Lilly spun off InnoCentive. Now companies like Boeing, DuPont, and Procter & Gamble use InnoCentive to solve their most difficult scientific problems.

Currently being hyped by the new media and businesses is *Second Life*, an online 3D world. Reuters, Pontiac, and many other brands are setting up shop in *Second Life*. This online world boasts over 2 million users. Like any community, there needs to be rules and regulations, according to Randy Farmer, who created *Habitat* for Lucas Films, back in the 1980s—one of the first 3D online worlds—“A community leader needs to foster members and encourage growth. Strong leadership is about strong principles.”

*Keep in mind this equation:*

Community = Dialogue + Participation + Relevance

*(Talk amongst yourselves!)*

To start a conversation with your community, you should consider the types of tools your community will adopt. Just employing tools, such as blogs, vlogs, and podcasts doesn't make it a social environment.

There's a whole new world out there to be explored and reaching out is very important. Every day there are additions to the social media tool box. Twitter.com is providing the latest tools, which gives users only 140 characters from their mobile devices to blog. Over the past months, I've been tracking the twitters from friends who are geographically spread across the US. A definite pattern in their twitters consists of travel, food, sports, shout-outs, technology, and each has named a brand or two.

### Evolution is now

In the historical evolution of interactive, we have seen technologies created for user needs. This progression has focused upon content, context, communication, commerce, and customer as important.

Presently, we see more user-generated content than businesses taking advantage of social media. Perhaps it is because we crave attention, interaction, and need to be social.

At this point in the evolution, we understand the importance of relationships where human contact is significant. This is right at the heart of brand interaction. As aforementioned, the brand is about making the connections, so choose your tools wisely. Fusing social media tools with face-to-face opportunities could create a natural and organic opportunity for brands.

Brands have a huge opportunity to lead the conversation, engage customers, intrigue, educate, teach, and delight as well as learn from their customers by using social media tools—keeping in mind participation and contact are keys to developing the dialogue.

Digital conversation can benefit the brand, business, and user by making a connection and interacting. The landscape of social media is both exciting and nascent. If you're interested, we can continue the digital dialogue online at <http://www.SiegelGale.com/blog>

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<sup>1</sup> Schofield, Jack. (October 16, 2006). “What's a Flog -- a Fake Blog”. Technology Blog, Guardian News & Media. Retrieved on April 29, 2007 from [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/technology/archives/2006/10/16/whats\\_a\\_flog\\_a\\_fake\\_blog.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/technology/archives/2006/10/16/whats_a_flog_a_fake_blog.html)

<sup>2</sup> Garfield, Bob. (March 26, 2007). “Bob Garfield's The Chaos Scenario 2.0: The Post-Advertising Age”. Advertising Age.

<sup>3</sup> Crowdsourcing is bringing together groups to initiate business/project/experience in a collaborative environment on an online platform.

#### Credits:

Podtech.net. (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.podtech.net/marketingvoices/marketing-voices/1254/intuit-builds-community-using-social-media-tools>

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