

Influence the Influencers

Building Brands with Social News Media

Social-media marketing embraces many possible techniques for advertising and branding across a wide array of online communities from social networks—including sharing sites for photos, videos, and bookmarks, virtual worlds, micro-communities—to social news sites. Brand marketers can purchase ad space for online display advertising using banners or rich media on community sites and can create brand personas that live among the community and contribute to it by offering resources and activities to members. Building brands with social media by leveraging social media's potential for engagement is a key message. But social media also enables an online version of publicity generation that can play a valuable role in meeting a brand's communication objectives.

Communication plans generally encompass a range of goals, like increasing brand awareness, improving brand likability, and improving sales conversions. Conversions refer to shifting viewers of an advertisement to the next stage in the buying process. The traditional conversion thought of online is the clickthrough rate, which documents the percentage of viewers who were exposed to the ad who then clicked on the message to learn more. Online sales conversion is the percentage of people who then continue to

complete an online transaction. Online advertising formats are almost always empowered with direct-response options for consumers exposed to the messages, enabling various levels of conversion and accountability for the advertising expenditures. Even the emerging approaches to social media frequently have a direct-response device embedded in the promotion in order to enable conversion. For instance, retail stores in Second Life include link to retail Web sites and online order forms. Social media is increasingly a part of strategic media planning given its ability to increase brand awareness, brand liking, and brand engagement.

There are other goals social-media marketing can be used to address in a brand's marketing communication plan. These include building credibility, driving Web site traffic, and influencing and encouraging word-of-mouth communication. Importantly, when these goals are accomplished, all are likely to generate incremental sales.

How can social media be utilized for these purposes? Social news marketing campaigns, a type of social-media marketing, accomplish these goals by leveraging the power of referrals from influencers in the social news arena to highlight branded content. The results can include (1) an increase in traffic to the brand's Web site, (2) improved perceptions of the brand's credibility, reputation, and quality, (3) improved search engine rankings, (4) lifts in word-of-mouth communication about the brand, and (5) sales.

■ Social News and Bookmarking Communities

When it comes to news, social media enables the creation of news stories by citizen journalists and the sharing and distribution of those stories virally. The shared distribution model is facilitated by a host of players, including content providers (e.g., corporate Web sites, bloggers, and publishers), participants in social news and bookmarking sites, known as influencers, and the universe of Internet users. Social news Web sites are social communities that allow its users to submit news stories, articles, and multimedia files, including videos and pictures so the submissions can be shared with other users and the general public. Submissions can receive enhanced attention and visibility based on votes from users.

The value offered by the social news and bookmarking communities is clear. The online social news media system is one characterized by enormous amounts of information and content. Technorati, a blog search engine, reports more than 112 million blogs active at the end of 2007. That's just blogs! There are also corporate white papers, articles from

online publishers, and other valuable content available online. Thus, the average online information consumer could easily be overwhelmed or simply miss valuable sources of information. Enter social news communities. Participants in these communities facilitate access to the most valuable information online by recommending content to other users.

These communities uphold the principles of media democratization. Individuals determine what material is disseminated throughout the community as well as the value ratings associated with the material. Users act in an editorial capacity, identifying what material should be pushed to the featured areas of the site. The process supports the wisdom of crowds in that individual users recommend and vote on submissions. Submitted content is filtered using an algorithm to determine the popularity of a story. The algorithm includes number of votes received as well as other factors like the richness of the discussion related to the story. The system ensures each individual has a voice, if he or she chooses to use it, but it also enables some voices to be heard louder than others. The most active and respected participants, the influencers, come to hold positions of high authority in the community. Manipulation of the voting system is minimized with the internal algorithms that help to identify voting campaigns (in which voters are incentivized to vote for a story). In addition, some social news Web sites have editorial staff who review stories and award featured positions for relevant, newsworthy stories. Social news Web sites can be general or narrow in scope. Digg is the most popular and well-known social news site. Other popular social news communities include Reddit, Mix, and Propell. Sphinn is an example of a site specific to Internet marketing resources.

Social bookmarking communities are similar to social news communities in that users can share material from around the Internet with each other and the size and influence of a user's network affects the ultimate influence of the resource in question. Users store and organize bookmarks (using tags, one-word descriptors that enable easy search and retrieval of related items) to online source materials with the social bookmarking site (instead of storing bookmarks with one's Web browser). The community aspect comes into play with the network of users. Within each community, users can share bookmarks with friends and colleagues, resulting in a shared wisdom effect. The leader among social bookmarking sites is del.icio.us.

Regardless of the community type, note that there are three key layers necessary for the community to function and benefit. First, there must be *content creation*. In the past, content was created by professional writers and journalists. In this age of media democracy, anyone with something

to say can create content. Second, the content must be *shared*. Again, there was a time when society relied almost solely on editors, publishers, and large media outlets to distribute content. With the advent of social media, anyone can act as an editor and distributor of content. Third, content must be *consumed*. If there is no demand for the content, the content is without influence. Its creator might experience value in creation for the sake of creation, but the influence we associate with content exists only when content is consumed. Social media also supports the content consumption process by filtering the mass of content available such that the most desirable, relevant, and consumption-worthy content is featured.

■ Power in the Social News Community: The Influencers

Social media is applauded for its democratization of media, such that everyone and anyone can create, disseminate, and critique content. At the same time, social news communities are hierarchical with some users gaining positions of authority and power. These powerful users are known as influencers. Influencers have long been a subject of interest in marketing. Referred to as market mavens and opinion leaders, influencers are people who are seen by others as knowledgeable sources of information with a strong communication network that results in their ability to affect purchase decisions for a number of other consumers, directly and indirectly.

Ed Keller and Jon Berry propose five characteristics common to influencers. They are (1) activists, (2) well connected, (3) capable of making an impact, (4) mentally active, and (5) trendsetters.¹ In other words, influencers develop a network of people through their involvement in activities. They are active participants at work and in their communities. Their social networks are large and well developed. Others trust them and find them to be credible sources of information about one or more specific topics. They tend to have a natural sense of intellectual curiosity, which may lead them to new sources of information. They set trends by being among the first to adopt new innovations. Typically, influencers are not innovators, a term used to describe the very first group of consumers to adopt a technological innovation. Rather, influencers belong to the early adopters group, the second group to adopt innovations. This is an important distinction as innovators are thought to be too different from the general population to be influential.

Influencers exist in all social communities. It is a natural pattern for some to be more active and acquire positions of authority within a community. Influencers have a strong network, which means there is a

channel in place for the distribution of the influence they have to wield. The source of influence itself, however, originates from the power bases refined by the influencer. How can someone acquire power? As French and Raven explained in their classic article, “The Bases of Social Power,” several sources of power individuals can accrue in organizations.² These sources of power include reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, expert power, and information power. Reward power is associated with one’s ability to provide others with what they desire. Coercive power is the ability to punish others. Legitimate power is organizational authority based on rights associated with a person’s appointed position. Referent power is authority through association. Expert power is based on others’ recognition of one’s knowledge, skills, and ability. Information power is based on one’s control over the flow of and access to information.

For influencers within social-media communities, several forms of power can be developed (and, importantly, anyone willing to invest time in accruing power can become an influencer). Influencers begin by actively participating in the community, submitting high-quality content (and possibly also writing original feature content). Over time, the user will develop a reputation as an expert. The user will also spend time commenting on the submissions of influential others. This will build referent power by association. Likewise, the user community will recognize the investment in time and energy heavy users are making to benefit the community, resulting in legitimate power. Eventually, as a user gains power, he or she will begin to influence access to content (information power) and can reward or punish others (reward and coercive power) with the decision on whether or not to support new submissions. Ultimately, the influencers are critically important to the success of a social news marketing initiative. Without support from one or more influentials, the incremental traffic resulting from a social-media campaign would be inconsequential.

■ The Value of Social Media for Achieving Marketing Objectives

These communities can draw attention to branded content and drive traffic to the source of that content. Social news marketing campaigns are designed to facilitate exposure of the brand’s content to the social-media communities targeted. Clearly featured links on social news community sites will increase brand awareness, but there are other marketing benefits as well. First, links from the social news and bookmarking sites

will lead to an increase in traffic to the site hosting the original content. In addition, after promotion on a social news site like Digg, other Web sites might also link to the branded content. These links result in referral traffic from secondary Web sites.

Traffic to the brand's Web site will also increase as a result of higher search engine rankings which occur because of the large number of links developed through the social news community. Search engines refer to the number of natural, permanent links from nonrelated Web sites in determining organic search rankings.

Traffic from organic search engine rankings and from influential members of the social-media community in question is enhanced with the credibility and trust associated with the referral source. Of course, some traffic will be unproductive. However, some of the prospects will visit the site with the understanding that a search engine or referral source on the news community site recommended the brand's content. Referrals are recognized as among the most valuable source of new prospects for any business. Prospects who originate from a referral have a predisposed positive attitude toward the brand. They view the referral source as unbiased and credible and are likely to internalize the referral's opinion of the brand, making it their own. It is for this reason that word-of-mouth marketing has received so much attention in the past. Social media makes this use of referral marketing efficient as well as effective.

In addition to Web site traffic, brand awareness, and borrowed credibility from trusted sources of information, social news marketing is inexpensive. The costs are limited to the time and manual labor necessary to create content and promote the content to the social news communities. It is, in essence, quite similar to the role played by public relations specialists. Press releases about a brand are prepared and pitched to news media that are thought to have an audience with and influence over the target market. This approach cannot be the only one used in a brand's marketing communications campaign, or perhaps even in a social-media marketing campaign. But it can be an effective and efficient complement to other tactics.

■ Marketing with Social News Communities

Social news marketing begins with the development and offer of content. This content is designed to pique the interest of the target audience such that once aware of the content, people visit the site hosting the content, read the content, and perhaps even stay to browse the site, make a purchase, or return another time. Social news and bookmarking

communities facilitate this process by promoting high-quality content among their users. Getting content noted as popular on a social-media site leads to a high clickthrough to the content itself and, if things go according to plan, the other benefits noted. There are three key strategies to getting content rated on social-media community sites, and they will be described in detail shortly. All of the strategies presented assume that the brand has high quality and interesting, engaging content to share.

Social news and bookmarking communities are unlikely to vote an online sales catalog to a position of popularity. These communities do not exist for the purpose of marketing. Rather, they exist for the value of the members to meet their needs for social and intellectual stimulation. Consequently, using a social news marketing campaign requires a brand to create content. This content can be in a number of forms. Blogs, white papers, video tutorials, and articles are all possible forms of content, which can ultimately lead interested consumers to a brand's Web site. When preparing content for this purpose, quality is more important than quantity. The goal is to generate a credibility rating through the "popular" designations offered on social-media community sites and to parlay those ratings into site visits. Having a lot of content of mediocre quality will not be as influential as having less frequent, highly engaging pieces.

This notion of creating an engaging piece of content is a key tactic in generating votes for content. Content should be constructed with "linkbaits" that will work to intrigue potential readers. Andy Hagans' blog, *Tropical SEO*, provides a detailed account of linkbaiting, explaining that linkbaiting is essentially packaging the content in a desirable and interesting package.³ The most important piece of linkbait is the content's title. For example, Hagans' entry on linkbaiting is called "Andy Hagans' Ultimate Guide to Linkbaiting and SMM," but it could have been called "Basics of Linkbaiting." The title is critically important to social news community because this is the primary bit of information seen about the content. It should do all it can to garner attention and interest in the piece itself.

Hagans also identifies several "hooks," which can be used in positioning content for a target audience, including the resource hook, the contrary hook, the humor hook, the giveaway hook, and the research hook, among others. The resource hook is common, but appreciated, among social news addicts. It refers to content written with the intent to be helpful to the target audience. For example, the Serta mattress company might create an article entitled "5 Methods to Ensure a Restful Night's Sleep." The contrary hook is used to refute some accepted belief. Challenging the belief incites people to read the content if only to argue the point.

For instance, Weight Watchers might post an article entitled “Is It Possible to Lose Weight with Chocolate?” recognizing that this will spark an interest from those who believe chocolate cannot be part of a weight loss plan. The humor hook is designed to show that the content will entertain. The giveaway hook promises something for free. In other words, it embeds a sales promotion, an incentive offered to encourage a specific behavior response in a specific time period, into the content. For example, our Weight Watchers’ article could have been titled “Save \$50 Doing What’s Good for You!”

Lastly, the research, or statistic hook, offers some claim about something of interest. All of these hooks can act as successful forms of linkbait, encouraging submissions to social news sites, links from bloggers and other Web sites, and clickthroughs from those exposed to the links. Regardless of the degree of linkbaiting incorporated into the brand’s content, it should be relevant to the audience and relate back to the brand and the brand’s message.

■ Strategies for Social News Marketing

There are three primary approaches to marketing with social news media: (1) influence others, (2) develop a large network, and (3) influence the influencers. The first approach, influence others, requires that the brand representatives establish themselves as an influencer within the social-media communities targeted. This approach will take time to participate and gain the respect of the community. Social-media communities do tend to show respect to those who have been involved the longest and invested the most time in the community. Once the power is established, the influencer can market content from one or more specific brands (and even draw negative attention to competing materials). The time investment necessary is a drawback to this approach, but the relationship between the influencer and the branded content is a limitation, too. Other users are likely to discount repeated recommendations of branded content once it is common knowledge that a relationship exists between the brand and the influencer promoting the brand’s content.

The second approach is to build support from the “grassroots,” developing a large network of supporters. With this approach, it is not necessary to garner the support of influentials because the sheer number of votes for the branded content will ensure a featured placement on the social news site. How can you acquire so many votes? Develop a voting network. Solicit friends and colleagues to register for the social news site targeted for the campaign, and then collectively vote. Some

companies have attempted this model even paying users for voting up specific stories, but this is frowned upon by social communities as it undermines the intent of the social news community. Acquiring large voting blocks can be difficult to accomplish and, even when large numbers are generated, it can backfire if the site's algorithm targets artificial voting patterns.

The third approach is to influence the influencers. Just as journalists receive pitches for content from public relations specialists pitching stories that promote specific brands, influential social news users can receive pitches for branded content. This is basically public relations for social media rather than traditional media. This method is less time consuming than the first option and also offers the added value of leveraging the credibility of the influencer recommending the content. The influencer acts as a referral, providing an unbiased, third-party word-of-mouth endorsement of the content.

The process of influencing the influencers follows the public relations model. The key to success is to ensure that the content pitched is relevant for the influencer targeted. The better the pitch is targeted to the right person, the higher the rate of success. Remember that influentials gained power within their community by making good recommendations to the community, consistently. Consequently, influentials will be cautious in making endorsements.

There are several steps in the process: (1) setting objectives for the campaign, (2) targeting the social news communities, (3) targeting the influencers within each targeted community, (4) networking with influencers, and (5) pitching content. Begin by setting objectives for the social news portion of the campaign. What is it that needs to be accomplished? Is it brand awareness? Does that brand seek to build a reputation or enhance its image? Is there a desire to drive more traffic to the brand's Web site? Is there a need to increase search engine rankings? In the second step, the specific social news communities to be targeted will be identified. Digg, Reddit, and Propeller are the most popular communities, but depending upon the brand's industry and the type of content the brand has to promote, a niche site may be more effective. In selecting the communities to target, there should be a match between the brand's target audience and the characteristics of the community population. Ask, will this social news community provide the kind of audience needed to meet the campaign's marketing objectives?

The community should also be evaluated for quality and engagement. Inactive or weak communities will not offer the social support necessary to propel a successful social news marketing campaign. Consider this list

of community characteristics when evaluating the desirability of a community target:

1. What is the community's focus (general news, specific topics)?
2. How many active users are involved in the community? What kind of traffic does the site receive?
3. How active are the top users on the site?
4. How many comments on average are generated for each new submission?
5. How many votes are required to earn front-page status on the site?
6. Are stories on the site's front page recent? How rapid is story turnover?
7. Are there limitations for branded content in the community's Terms of Service?
8. What have others (such as bloggers) said about the social news site?

In the third step, the specific power users, or influencers, are identified. These will be the heavy users on the site that might ultimately support the desired content. In selecting the influencers to target, one must first identify the influencers and then profile those influencers to determine who is best to target.

How can one find the right influencers? It is easy to identify the power users for most sites. There is a list of top Digg users, for instance, that ranks power users by order of influence along with the number of submissions made and the number the user made popular. However, it is not sufficient to simply target the top power users. Power users gained power by making good recommendations to the community. Consequently, they protect that reputation by resisting pitches unless they believe that the content will further their power base in the community. In other words, the content must be relevant (as well as high quality). Once the list of power users is identified, visit the profiles of these users. The goal is to match the content's topical area to an area of interest noted in the user profiles. Doing so will enhance the chances that the influencer will perceive the content as worthy of recommending. Another technique is to simply search the news site for other submissions on the same topic. The top users submitting on the topic will appear with the search results. This step is critical to a successful social news marketing campaign. Without identifying the right target, the content will not receive the best promotion on the site.

The fourth step is to develop relationships with the targeted influencers on each community site in the campaign. Just as most people do not appreciate hearing from a friend only when in need of a favor, influencers as a group are unlikely to respond well to obvious pitches from social-media marketers. Some care must be taken to introduce oneself, acknowledge

the contributions the influencer makes to the community, and flatter the influencer's judgment and expertise in making high-quality content submissions. The influencer will be helping the brand by virtue of the content submission and vote, so it can be useful to help the influencer by offering other content that will be perceived as desirable prior to pitching the branded content.

In the final stage of this process, the pitch is made. While traditional public relations practitioners might make a pitch using a standard press release, this is not the case with social media. Interestingly, there is a social-media press release template publicly available online. This approach can be considered when attempting to get attention from a social news sites' editorial staff. However, when approaching influencers, the use of a standardized social-media press release could be considered social-media suicide. Instead, a more personal pitch that emphasizes knowledge of the influencer's recommendation patterns and the marketer's relationship to the branded content is likely to be effective.

■ Search Media Optimization

Rohit Bargava coined the term *social-media optimization* to refer to the need to optimize a site so that it is more easily linked to, more visible in social news and bookmarking searches, more visible on custom search engines like Technorati, and more frequently included on blog posts.⁴ Based on the general concept of SEO, which recognizes the need to ensure a site garners the best organic search engine ranking possible, social-media optimization enhances the visibility of content in the realm of social media. Since the introduction of Bargava's rules for optimizing social-media marketing, several other rules have been proposed resulting in a list of best practices for social-media optimization, and these are detailed at the Influential Marketing Blog. For search news marketing campaigns, embrace these best practices for optimization.

- Provide content. For a site to gain incremental traffic from social media, it needs to offer content to the social-media community. This content can be in the form of blogs, white papers, or thought pieces, or even summarize or index other published content.
- Encourage others to tag or bookmark the content. Make it easy for others to link to the site by including "add to del.icio.us" and "digg it" buttons to the contents page.
- Include Trackbacks to promote those who promote your content. The term trackback refers to posting links to other sources of content that links to

original content. It can be a method of communication between bloggers but, importantly, it provides a method of acknowledging those who are sending traffic to the brand's site while reciprocating the kindness.

- Promote valuable content. When a site has valuable content of interest to a group of readers, encourage influencers to acknowledge the material so a wider audience can benefit from the material.
- Syndicate content with an RSS feed. Enhancing the ease of content distribution with an RSS feed makes it easy for others to consume new content as it is offered.
- Participate in social news and bookmarking communities. Social media is a conversation. It should not be limited to anonymous submissions of content. The more the brand is engaged, the more likely it is the consumers will reciprocate.

Social news marketing campaigns can accomplish challenging marketing objectives with amazingly little in terms of financial resources. Still, there are limitations. It is not appropriate for brands whose prospects and customers are unaware of social media or do not use social news sites. It also requires that the brand offers content, not advertising but real content that can inform and/or entertain the target audience. Without content, there is nothing to share through the social news communities. Patience is required. Results are not typically as rapid as with paid forms of promotion, though they do tend to accrue rapidly once content is designated as popular on a social news site. Social news marketing campaigns can build brand awareness, word-of-mouth communication, and Web site traffic, ultimately resulting in additional sales.