



# Choosing Platforms

**A**lthough we asserted earlier in this book that platform selection is one of the last factors you should consider in developing social marketing programs, making the right choice is critically important. This chapter examines the major options and provides guidance for their use.

Platforms that perform best in business-to-consumer (B2C) environments are not necessarily the ones favored by business-to-business (B2B) marketers. In addition, we believe that companies should make it a goal to drive visitors to their own web sites, where they can engage in richer conversations, showcase their products and content, and own a record of interactions. These days, though, most conversations start in public spaces.

In the next three chapters, we'll talk first about public web 2.0 options such as blogs and Facebook. Then we'll offer guidance on choosing a platform on which to host your branded, destination web site. Finally, we'll show you how innovative B2B companies are using these platforms in concert with each other to achieve results.

## **The Big Four and More**

Four years after MySpace became a cultural phenomenon, we can finally count the number of social networking pure plays winners on one hand: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Not only do

they dominate the landscape of online interactivity today, but they are likely to do so for the next several years. Each of these platforms is being used successfully in B2B marketing, but not all of them have equal value. Whether or not you choose to play, you should understand where they're strong and how other B2B marketers are using them.

Social networks may be hot, but mature platforms like blogs and podcasts still have an important role, particularly for B2B companies. Let's look at the pros and cons of each option.

## ***Blogs***

Blogs have been around for more than a decade and have already gone through the hype and disillusionment phase that characterizes any hot consumer phenomena. By some estimates, more than 200 million blogs still lurk on the Internet, but our experience is that only about 20 percent are tended regularly. That's still good for a 1.4 million new blog entries every day, according to comScore. A large percentage of these are in B2B markets.

Blogs are the Swiss Army knife of social media. Simple to create and easy to update, they deftly accommodate multiple media types such as audio, video, and widgets, and they have excellent search engine performance. As truly *social* media they fall short because discussions are limited to a simple post-and-respond metaphor. Think of them as the online equivalent of a business presentation. The blogger is the speaker and the person who controls the microphone. The audience mostly listens and has a chance to challenge and respond at the end.

B2B marketers cited blogs as the most effective social platform in research conducted by *BtoB* magazine and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) in early 2010. The principal advantage of blogs for B2B purposes is their depth. Entries can be of any length, and graphics and multimedia can be incorporated to illustrate a point. In the technical realm in which many B2B professionals dwell, blogs are the best way to explain complex concepts and engage in audience discussions of equal depth. It's not surprising that technology companies have swarmed to blogging platforms as a way to connect developers with information-hungry constituents.

Their search engine performance shouldn't be underestimated. Search engines are hardwired to favor web sites that they, in their algorithmic wisdom, considered to be useful. For example, type "buy a PC" into Google and note that the search results are much heavier on blog content than marketing come-ons. That's because Google's finely tuned engine favors how-to advice over salesmanship.

## ***Facebook***

The success of Facebook is legendary. With more than 500 million members in just 3 years as a mainstream social platform, it is the fastest-growing consumer phenomenon in history. The key word here, though, is "consumer." Facebook's freewheeling informality make it a marginal platform for many B2B companies, but given the social network's ubiquity, this could very easily change. Even today, B2B marketers can find pockets of value.

Facebook is the ultimate word-of-mouth marketing vehicle. All marketing on Facebook is permission-based. The administrator of a Facebook page (previously called a fan page) may communicate only with members who register their interest. Members vote for the companies and causes they like by registering their approval with a "Like" button and sharing their activities and preferences with others. Members' activities, such as joining a page, are automatically shared with their social network through a constantly updated news feed. In addition, members can recommend that others join groups or fan pages that they like. There is no such thing as unsolicited contact because members may receive messages only from organizations they choose to endorse.

One feature that is unique to Facebook is its applications. These small programs usually involve games or self-assessment tests, and some have achieved huge numbers in the consumer realm. However, B2B applications on Facebook are relatively rare. One of the few we found was "A Mini with HP Supplies," which challenges fans to submit photos dramatizing the life of an office manager in exchange for a chance to win a Mini Cooper automobile. The contest page drew more than 15,000 members. Facebook makes most of its money

on targeted advertising, but it is beginning to charge businesses for promotions like contests.

B2B companies have found Facebook to be an effective vehicle for recruiting. Ernst & Young, Deloitte, and Sodexo are among the firms that have had success there. In a novel twist, copper producer TVI has also adopted Facebook as a way to communicate with investors.

## ***LinkedIn***

If Facebook is a T-shirt, then LinkedIn is a button-down and blazer. The 9-to-5 counterpart to Facebook's perpetual house party is built on résumés, professional networking, and a vast collection of no-nonsense topical discussions. The *BtoB* magazine/ANA research found that 81 percent of B2B marketers said they use LinkedIn, compared with just 25 percent of B2C marketers.

LinkedIn's most distinctive feature is Connections, a six-degrees-of-separation metaphor that maps members to each other via their common contacts. Although members may message only their primary connections directly, they can request introductions and forward messages via intermediary connections. You can also upgrade to a premium account, which allows you to send three LinkedIn InMails directly to connections outside of your network. At a cost of \$7.50 per InMail, they are rarely misused and have a 40 percent response rate, according to Brian Frank, Director of Global Enterprise Operations at LinkedIn.

LinkedIn is strictly business, and that's what makes it such an attractive option for B2B marketers. There are groups for almost any professional discipline you can imagine, and discussions are focused and active. It's easy to start groups, and you can also drop in on relevant discussions to find out what's on the minds of business customers. "Our LinkedIn groups are all under 200 people and they're all customers of ours," says CME Group's Allan Schoenberg. "You can ask anything and get a reaction."

LinkedIn is also a lead generation machine. Its novel approach to company profiles presents a view of businesses from the bottom up, enabling members to identify mutual contacts of employees they might be trying to reach. Its Answers feature is a great way for members to

showcase their expertise by helping others solve problems in full view of others. Not surprisingly, LinkedIn is particularly popular with consultants and small business owners who have extensive domain knowledge. But it's also a good way for businesses to augment campaigns by forming regional and/or topical groups within their areas of focus. The site is a popular way to promote events and has even sparked a class of unofficial, regional networking events where LinkedIn members meet and mingle.

## ***You Tube***

The world's number one video-sharing site—and number two search engine—has clocked some astounding growth in its 4 years in the public eye. YouTube reportedly logs more than 20 hours of video uploads every *minute* and in 2009 passed the 1 billion daily download mark. YouTube is a rudimentary social network, but its strength is as a video library with the capability to let members easily share content and embed videos in their own web sites.

A particularly valuable feature to businesses is member commentary, which can quickly provide an informal poll of a video's appeal. Many businesses find that YouTube is a cheap way to get bonus exposure for promotional, training, and demo videos that are no longer needed in active campaigns. It's also a good way to test concepts for new promotional campaigns, share customer testimonials, or just show employees doing their jobs. A counter keeps track of the total number of video views both on the site and through viewers of the video embedded elsewhere. But it should be noted that the counter registers each time a new viewer starts rather than finishes a video, and YouTube's autoplay functionality exaggerates that number. In fact, the "views" counter would be more accurately described as a "play starts" counter.

Consider YouTube as a possible home base for all of your public video assets. Once stored in a branded channel that you own, they can be easily streamed through any web site that supports embedding. The principle downside of YouTube is its 10-minute length limit. Business-focused services like Viddler, Vimeo, and Blip.tv offer more latitude with a premium account for a modest fee.

## *Twitter*

The social networking growth story of 2009 was a topic of constant controversy. Twitter eclipsed the 100-million-member mark in early 2010, but research has indicated that the percentage of active users is quite small. SocialMediaToday.com estimated in early 2010 that although 87 percent of Americans had heard of Twitter, only 7 percent actually used it.

For B2B marketers, however, Twitter is a must-have. As of the end of 2009, more than one third of the Fortune 500 and nearly half of the top 100 companies had a Twitter account, according to research published by the Society for New Communications Research. By comparison, just 22 percent of the Fortune 500 had a public-facing blog, despite the fact that blogging has been mainstream for five years. The *BtoB/ANA* research found that Twitter was used by 70 percent of B2B marketers, compared with 46 percent of B2C marketers.

Entire books have been written about Twitter, and it's difficult to summarize all of its applications in a few paragraphs. Its 140-character limit, which is often perceived as a limitation, is actually a virtue, because it's easier to come up with 140 characters than a blog post. People post messages to Twitter that they would never publish to a blog. Although that creates a certain amount of meaningless chatter, tweets can be filtered and grouped in a way that yields meaningful trends. Insights gained from Twitter are likely to have greater immediacy and emotion than those that appear in long-form media because the service encourages spontaneity and impulsivity. Twitter is also so fast and used so candidly that trends can become evident there more quickly than any other medium.

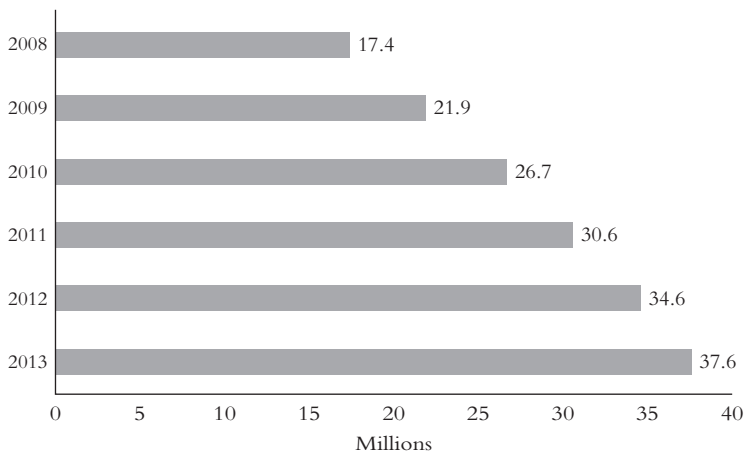
Twitter has one of the oldest demographics of any form of social media, and it is particularly popular with professionals in the technology, marketing, and communications fields. Nearly all major media outlets now have a presence there, which means that marketing campaigns that have a media outreach component should make Twitter a core tool. Twitter has also been shown to draw a highly brand-aware audience. A 2010 Edison Research study found that 42 percent of active Twitter users learn about products and services via Twitter and 49 percent follow brands or companies.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of "Twitter

users talking about marketing and brands far exceeds the usage on the other social networks,” according to Tom Webster, vice president of strategy and marketing at Edison.

## ***Podcasts***

Media hype elevated podcasts to prominence before they were ready. Once seen as a replacement for terrestrial radio, podcasts never lived up to their potential in consumer markets. What is often overlooked is their remarkable B2B success.

Podcasts are downloadable audio programs that play on a computer, an iPod, or other mobile device. They’re reasonably easy to create using inexpensive recording devices or computers with open-source software. Although the term “podcast” technically refers to the delivery of an audio or video file via RSS, it has come to be used for downloadable audio or video as well. Recent market figures are hard to come by, but eMarketer estimated that the 2009 audience would more than double by 2013 (see Figure 8.1). The research firm has also estimated that regular podcast listeners are twice as likely as nonlisteners to have incomes exceeding \$100,000. Video podcasts are a more



**Figure 8.1** Estimated U.S. Podcast Audience.

Source: eMarketer.

recent evolution. In both cases, the process of loading the program into a mobile device for playback on the go is the same but podcasts can also be consumed via desktop using iTunes and Google Reader.

Podcasts are one of the hidden success stories of B2B marketing. The audio format is extremely time efficient; it allows busy professionals to consume information when they are occupied with routine tasks like commuting, exercising or mowing the lawn. They're an excellent way to capture presentations, speeches, and even meetings for playback to people who couldn't be there. When combined with PowerPoint in a package called a "slidecast," they can also be self-contained presentations.

Business-to-business technology companies like IBM, Cisco, and National Semiconductor have public libraries containing hundreds of podcasts. But it's not just technology firms. The management consulting firm McKinsey & Company has podcasts on topics such as finance, high-tech, and international business. Bosch Rexroth has a series on lean manufacturing. The Missouri Industry Beef Council has produced more than 200 podcast interviews with its members. There are dozens devoted to various aspects of marketing, including the excellent For Immediate Release: The Hobson and Holtz Report and, of course, Eric's award-winning On the Record . . . Online podcast, the official podcast of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) International Conference since 2006.

## **Other Platforms of Note**

The six platforms mentioned so far aren't the only ones you should consider. A few other services have particular relevance to B2B marketers.

### ***Wikis***

Outside of Wikipedia, few consumers use wikis in their everyday activities, but inside businesses, this simple collaboration platform is extraordinarily popular. A wiki is basically a big electronic whiteboard



upon which anybody can post nearly any kind of content and also change and annotate content contributed by others. Wikis have almost no value as marketing vehicles, but they have one great advantage for businesses that are dipping their toes in the social marketing waters: they're a great tool to deploy inside the organization for collaboration. In fact, IBM's main internal wiki gets more than 1 million page views a day, according to social media communications manager Adam Christensen. Other big organizations like the Central Intelligence Agency and pharmaceutical giant Pfizer have spoken publicly about the significant value they've derived from internal wikis.

Wikis underlie popular customer communities at IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Intuit, T-Mobile, and the Dell TechCenter, which we profiled at the beginning of Chapter 1. They can be deployed internally to introduce social networking concepts to reluctant employees and then moved outside the firewall as a safe place to interact with customers. Peter Kim maintains a massive list of social media marketing examples, including several wiki-based customer communities at [wiki.beingpeterkim.com/master-list](http://wiki.beingpeterkim.com/master-list).

### ***SlideShare***

Founded in late 2006, this presentation-sharing service operated quietly under the radar until 2009, when membership grew 400 percent and monthly page views topped 60 million. Co-founders Rashmi Sinha and Jonathan Boutelle had probably sat in enough new business meetings to understand that PowerPoint is the tool of choice for pitching business so they built a site that became the equivalent of YouTube for PowerPoint presentations. It has attracted a blue-chip member base, more than 60 percent of whom identify themselves as business professionals. Spend a few minutes browsing the presentations on SlideShare, and you'll quickly see that this site offers a laser-focused collection of B2B visual essays, many of which are designed to shore new business prospects.

SlideShare offers the same basic functionality as YouTube. Members can upload and download presentations, create channels, and comment on one another's work. The simple rating system is limited to a

polite “favorite” metaphor to recognize exceptional value. Members can also follow one another, create groups, post status updates and embed presentations in another web site. SlideShare is one of only a handful of third-party applications supported by LinkedIn.

In 2009, the service added two features aimed at B2B marketers. Companies can now purchase branded spaces where they can consolidate their own presentations as well as those of others. Members can also pay to generate leads by capturing contact information from member downloads. SlideShare has the YouTube-like appeal of being a convenient source of bonus exposure for existing content as well as a place to showcase expertise.

## ***Ning***

This is probably the fastest and easiest way to get your feet wet with branded social networks. Ning was originally a free service, but in 2010 it abandoned that model in favor of monthly fees ranging from \$2.95 to \$49.95 per month. Still, the cost is trivial compared with the value of learning the tools and tactics of social networking. There are some surprisingly large communities operating on Ning, many with tens of thousands of members.

The chief value of Ning to marketers is that it provides many basic community features at an affordable price. These include personal profiles, forums, groups, photo- and video-sharing features, and blogs. For marketers who want to test communities inexpensively, it’s a great choice. However, experienced users tell us that successful community operators almost invariably want to migrate to more functional platforms as their needs grow. Be sure you can move people and conversations under those circumstances.

## ***Scribd***

This 2007 startup is trying to do with PDF documents what SlideShare has done with PowerPoint: make reading a social experience. It’s another way for B2B marketers to find new life for content that might otherwise be relegated to a dusty archive.

The core of the service is a reader technology that can handle anything published in the Microsoft Office format, as well as text and Adobe PDF documents. Scribd addresses a unique need in the market: most text content today is created in one of these formats, but posting such material on a web site while retaining format and images is beyond the skills of the average computer user.

Scribd's reader makes it possible to read documents on the screen as if they were on a printed page. The company has been a leader in championing the new HTML5 standard, which delivers reader-like capability on standard web pages. As with SlideShare and YouTube, the reader can be embedded on other web sites and documents can easily be shared via integration with Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, and other popular services. Members can even sign up to have their reading choices automatically shared with their networks of online friends.

Scribd is hugely popular with professional publishers, who take advantage of its e-commerce capabilities to deliver samples of their products and invitations to download or buy for a fee. What may interest B2B marketers more, however, is the service's value as a way to distribute manuals, white papers, technical publications, and regulatory filings for popular consumption. Companies can create branded channels, attract subscribers, and subscribe to others. It's just one more way to tap into an existing audience and potentially find leads.

It bears noting that at the time of this writing, viewing documents embedded in third-party web sites via Scribd was a hit or miss endeavor. As the company grows and secures resources, this should change, but currently we're seeing the "load" graphic spin indefinitely and service's widgets fail to load, so at this point, you may want to steer clear of using their embed codes.

Now that we've covered the major public platforms, we'll tell you why we think your own destination web site is the heart of B2B social marketing.