

Week 4: Social Content: Reviews, Ratings, and Recommendations

Building on Chapter 10, “Social Content: Multi-media,” you’ll continue working through the social media content channels. In this chapter I’ll focus on ratings, reviews, and recommendations. These are social content, just as much as blog posts, photos, and videos. They too are created by people based on an experience, and like a photo or video they are intended to be shared.

Ratings, reviews, and recommendations are an extremely important form of social media applied directly to commerce. For thousands of years, people have wanted to know whether others were happy with their purchases (or animal trades), and whether they’d recommend the merchant (or trader) at the center of the transaction. Once again, it’s life moving in circles.

11

Chapter Contents

Building Consensus

Consensus and Marketing

Winning the Popularity Contest

The Main Points

Building Consensus

What's more basic than asking someone if they'd recommend for you what they just did. Did they like it or not? Did it work or didn't it? Are you likely to like it as well? The Social Web, especially when viewed from a consumer's perspective, is built on just such questions. To be sure, a lot of what appears on the Social Web might, from a marketer's perspective, be what you'd loosely call "personal entertainment" — photos of family, videos of community events, and similar material. But a significant chunk of the Social Web is also dedicated to commentary about the news, about politics, about commerce, and specifically about *the experiences of people following the purchase of a product, the use of a service, or an interaction with a brand*. This type of commentary definitely impacts your marketing efforts regarding awareness, persuasion, and ultimately conversion. This is one of you most fundamental connections to social media.

When your customers are positively recommending what you are selling, your work as a marketer is a lot like riding the perfect wave. Of course, there's no a guarantee the ride will last forever — even the best surfers still wipe out — but it sure beats sitting on the beach. Compared to paddling around by yourself, wondering where all the action is, having the Social Web working *for* you is pretty great. This chapter covers some of the most straightforward — but often overlooked — elements of the Social Web that you have at your disposal, social elements that can help you grab and ride that perfect wave.

Using multimedia content tools like those you've seen so far — Twitter, Seesmic, Flickr, and YouTube — people are telling other people "what happened." I'll extend these relatively informal channels with a focus on the tools that provide quantitative or otherwise structured information on "what happened," aka "ratings, reviews, and recommendations." Potential buyers are using this information to inform their pending purchase decisions. From your perspective, that has to matter.

Before getting too far into this chapter, I'd like to define a few terms. You may not agree exactly with them, but that's OK. These definitions are a bit arbitrary but useful nonetheless. I'd just like to be clear about the specific characteristics of ratings, reviews, and recommendations. Each is different, and each plays a different role in building and extending your Social Web campaigns.

Ratings A *rating* is an indication of how well or how poorly a product or service performs in its intended application. It is typically indicated using a five- or ten-point scale: For example, a lot of ratings systems use five stars, where "no stars" (or one star) is bad and five stars is as good as it gets.

Reviews A *review* is typically a written or visual description of what happened, of what was liked or disliked, along with supporting information that provides a deeper context. Videos are increasingly being used in place of text. Loïc Lemeur’s review of the Schiphol Hilton presented in Chapter 6, “Touchpoint Analysis,” is just such a review.

Recommendations A *recommendation* is intended to quickly let someone else know whether or not something is, well, *recommended*. That’s it: it doesn’t denote quality or relative fitness for any specific application beyond the basic choices of “recommended, or not recommended.” Two competing brands of tires may be recommended for use in the rain, even though one has a superior rating when compared with the other.

Ratings, reviews, and recommendations can be used as listening tools (for example, when following your own product or that of a competitor) to gather intelligence on the conversations that impact your marketing effort, either directly or via your competitors. Although it may surprise you, you can also use ratings, reviews, and recommendations as an outreach and marketing tool.

Let me explain that last line: As a marketer — or as any content producer for that matter — it’s really *not OK* to review or rate your own stuff. You can’t use ratings, for example, in the direct sense of promotion. I know that political candidates generally vote for themselves in an election, but that’s a bit different. For a candidate *not* to vote this way would be really odd: It would be like saying “Hey, I’m not even voting for me...so you shouldn’t either!” The correct analogy in marketing in this case is *buying and using* what you make. When you’re a marketer, it’s perfectly OK to *buy* your own products or eat your own dog food as the saying goes. It’s *not* perfectly OK to Digg yourself or to write glowing reviews or to pump up your own ratings.

So how exactly do you use ratings, reviews, and recommendations as awareness or outreach tools? By offering these abilities to your customers! I’ll assume that you make a decent product or offer a worthy service: if you don’t, then think twice before turning to the Social Web to promote yourself. Giving your customers the option of rating purchases, of sharing reviews for recipes, or recommending your latest software widget is an obvious element of your marketing plan. Yet, this basic set of social media features is missing from way too many businesses with an online presence. Either a lot of firms make less-than-par stuff — which even in my most cynical mind I can’t accept — or a lot of marketers have simply overlooked or actually chosen not to include ratings, reviews, and recommendations. Either way, it’s an opportunity lost. The practice of social media is about opportunity found.

From a purely practical perspective, I understand that not every marketer will want to or be able to implement every social media or web technology feature, no matter how strong the case for that feature may be. At the same time, if you are reading this book, you clearly have an interest in understanding social media and how you might apply it to your business or extend or strengthen the social media programs you are running now. If that's the case, and if you don't currently have at least one of the tools featured in this chapter (ratings, reviews, or recommendations) enabled already, then you should consider doing so. If you are working on a challenging product and don't expect the Social Web to be supportive, then focus on finding all of the applicable ratings, reviews, or recommendations on other sites and track them. Use the Social Web for *listening* and for improving your product. If you have a best-of-class product, then add ratings, reviews, and recommendations so that your current customers can easily tell others why they love you. This is a point that Andy Sernovitz, co-founder of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, made in a post to his blog, "Damn, I wish I'd thought of that" using the Bazaarvoice platform — on WalMart.com. Being able to rate everything changes not only the way in which your customers shopping for big ticket items (such as vacations or cars or HDTVs) make purchase decisions, but it also changes the way they shop for the little things, like a toothbrush. In Andy's words: "No consumer products manufacturer can avoid facing open, honest feedback." That is a hugely powerful statement with important ramifications for all marketers.

Damn! I Wish I'd Thought of That!

Looking for a list of unusually useful and socially savvy ideas for smart marketers? Look no further than Andy's blog: <http://www.damniwish.com/>

Consensus and Marketing

Ratings, reviews, and recommendations are the subject of this next section where I'll build on the basic definitions and provides examples and implementation guidelines. Along with discussions between consumers — think blogs and wikis — ratings, reviews, and recommendations enable consensus on the Social Web.

Ratings

The strength of a rating is in conveying how well a particular solution works given its claimed performance. It's more than 1, 2, or 10: it's a judgment of relative fitness for a specific application.

Tip: When implementing ratings, if you go beyond simple stars or other icons, pay attention to the terms you use to define each rating. “One star” by itself isn’t likely to hurt anyone’s feelings. By comparison, labeling that single star rating as “You have got to be kidding me!” isn’t likely to encourage further participation unless your audience expects that kind of attitude. Hey, some people like abuse. Personally, I don’t.



Ratings — typically shown on a multipoint scale — are used to indicate *expectation* versus actual *performance*. Figure 11.1 shows a typical rating of a photo posted in a wakeboarding community. Ratings, and in particular as applied to content, are an easy entry into the processes that drive the Social Web.

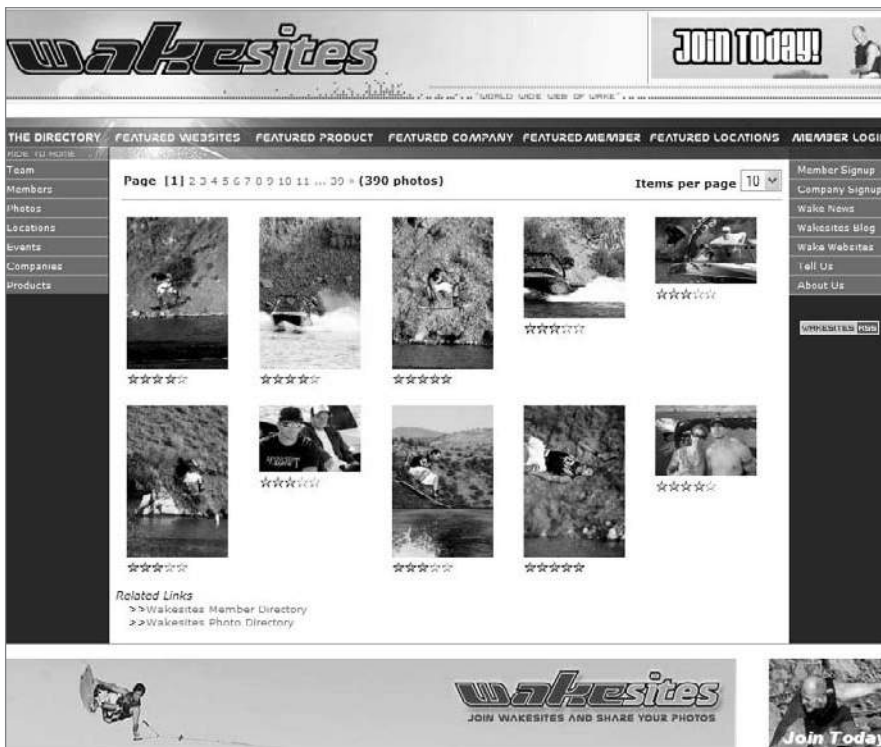


Figure 11.1 Wakesites’ Content Ratings

If you are offering online commerce, in addition to rating products or services, ask your customers to rate their satisfaction with the checkout process or the condition of the goods they received. This is a touchpoint, too, and it has a big impact on conversions. These ratings will then indicate to others what to expect in checkout and shipping: if they are positive, potential shoppers will be encouraged to *buy from you* instead of a competitor. Internally, these ratings can be used to guide improvements as indicated or needed. For example, upon the opening of a certain dot com retailer,

I ordered a *wood maul* — a large, heavy, long-handled tool used to split firewood — and a designer bathroom scale, just to see what would happen. Both arrived on time, as promised; however, they had been shipped together rather loosely in the same box. I use the wood maul each autumn to when I stock up our fireplaces. The scale has never worked right. What do you think my rating of the fulfillment process would have been had ratings been available on this site at the time? It’s actually too bad they weren’t, because my feedback would have no doubt alerted someone within the firm whose job it (would have been) to monitor those reviews and see that the shipping process needed some work! Instead — because there was no feedback channel — my experience was probably repeated with other customers.



Tip: Use ratings to set expectations, to differentiate performance characteristics, and to guide internal quality efforts. Ratings are most effectively used in consumer-facing applications early in the Consideration Process, where competing options are being evaluated and additional facts are being gathered.

Reviews

Reviews are the most useful — and most problematic — of the group. Reviews are information rich: they provide great detail (thoughts, suggestions, and comparisons) that can be tapped and used by both you and your customers in evaluating a purchase option. An Amazon review — in fact, one of my own reviews of a book that I really enjoyed — is shown in Figure 11.2.

The screenshot shows the Amazon.com interface for a book. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the Amazon logo, user name 'Dave Evans', and various utility links like 'Today's Deals', 'Gifts & Wish Lists', and 'Gift Cards'. Below this is a search bar with 'Books' entered and a 'GO' button. The main content area is titled 'Public Reviews Written by You'. It features a search box for 'People' and a 'Show: Most recent reviews' dropdown. The book being reviewed is 'Bit Literacy: Productivity in the Age of Information and E-mail Overload' by Mark Hurst, priced at \$15.40 and available 'In Stock'. A review by 'J. David Evans' (Austin, TX USA) is highlighted, dated April 5, 2008. The review text reads: 'After talking with author Mark Hurst about GooToDo, a to-do list for iGoogle that he developed I bought this book. It was clear to me that while I thought I knew how to handle my inbox (it was one huge inbox, with Google search laid over the top) I obviously didn't. I hated looking it: it was crushing me. I read Chapter 4 yesterday. I opened my inbox this morning: 2,734 items. By noon I was below 500, and by 1pm I was down to 19 that needed attention before closing them. At 5:34pm today I reached zero. It's incredible. Buy this book.' The page also includes a 'Community Features' section with links for 'Review Discussion Boards' and 'Top Reviewers'.

Figure 11.2 An Amazon Review

When Is a Review Not a Review?

A review is not a review when you write it for or under someone else's name! You may be thinking "We can create reviews based on our testimonials." Unfortunately, unless your customer writes the review *as a review*, it's not a review.

Useful though they may be, reviews also up the ante in terms of the issues around relatively uncontrolled user-generated content. To put it bluntly, if someone drops the f-bomb in an online review, what will your response be? In reality, dealing with profanity is pretty straightforward: nearly any review platform that you might consider implementing will have some form of input filtering. Profanity — at least in English and other common world languages — is pretty easy to screen out. The more difficult issue is controlling inappropriate references, hate speech, representations of profanity, slander, and similar expressions that you'd rather not have your customers exposed to — and certainly not on your website.

So how do you deal with this? Surprisingly, you enlist your customers. Enlist the members of your *review audience* — those people who write reviews based on experiences, those who read them, and those who use them to inform purchase options. Ask them to notify you when something is offensive, off-topic, or appears inauthentic or otherwise suspect.

Ensuring Safe User-Generated Content

Jake McKee (this book's technical editor) and Tamara Littleton of eModeration have developed a set of six easily understood and practical guidelines for ensuring safe content in a user-generated context. You can download the PDF here:

http://www.communityguy.com/six_techniques_for_safer_ugc.pdf.

Ultimately, the community that forms around the reviews is often your best defense against inappropriate or off-topic content. Sure, this means that one or more people will have seen the offensive item. But, if you act quickly, that's all who will see it. Plus, you get the added benefit of participating in a genuinely involved and responsive manner. The net result is an audience builder, not a business threat.

Tip: Use reviews when your audience has something to say that will itself aid potential customers in making a smart choice. Tap the audience, too, in order to keep content focused and appropriate. Consider implementing a "review of the review" to ensure quality.



Recommendations

Recommendations can be among the easiest of the three to implement. A recommendation itself can be as simple as a “thumbs up, thumbs down” or as complex as the ten-point scale presented in Chapter 7, “Influence and Measurement,” where you saw the Net Promoter score. The basic two-point scale — thumbs up versus thumbs down or more simply, no thumbs given at all — is a very casual approach to a recommendation, something intended to be used quickly and without a whole lot of deep thought. “I think you’d like this. I recommend it.” By comparison, the Net Promoter score is a much more considered approach to a recommendation. The Net Promoter score gets at the issue of how strong the inclination to offer a positive recommendation is and, therefore, how likely that recommendation is to result in the start of a beneficial social conversation.

An important clarification is needed here, and this is an example of the importance of understanding the difference between a rating and a recommendation. Looking back at the definitions I provided, a recommendation is an indication of whether or not I think this will benefit you. Consider two tires, both advertised as being suitable for use in the rain. Although both may have high ratings, they may or may not be equally recommended for any particular driver. One tire may be intended for use on a minivan, where ride quality and tire wear are important factors. The other may be intended for a sport or performance application: shorter life is given as a trade off for a “grippier” tire that also transmits more “road feel” (aka, harsher ride). Both tires have high ratings, but you would recommend the \$300 sport tire that is likely to wear out in 10 or 15 thousand miles for use on a family minivan? Probably not.

Digg, shown in Figure 11.3, is a basic recommendation service that operates on this simple premise. Online publishers of ezines, firms offering online product catalogs, and similar content and ecommerce site operators can add the Digg widgets and icons to the items on their sites. Visitors can then click and register “Diggs” — think popularity votes — on the Digg site where a larger audience follows the voting and thus learns about these items. This, by the way, calls all the way back to the opening definition of social media: “The posting of content...normally accompanied with a voting process to make media items become popular.”

If you compare Digg recommendations with those underlying the Net Promoter methodology, there is obviously a difference. Digg is quite casual. *One* Digg isn’t worth much, whereas a hundred Diggs (which gets you on the Digg home page) or 10 thousand Diggs (which lands you in the all-time tops) is. In the case of the Net Promoter, a single “1” or “2” is an indicator that there is a committed voice out there ready to speak out against you. Given the power of search engines and the lasting presence of content on the Internet, sooner or later that one voice will be heard. In the case of Diggs, it’s a quantity thing: with the Net Promoter, every vote counts: your “9s” and “10s” are your best defense against detractors, provided you have given their bestowers the tools

to easily share those thoughts and opinions. After all, these are the people who have indicated that they are willing to stand up for you. Help them out: make recommendations — along with ratings and reviews — part of your online presence.

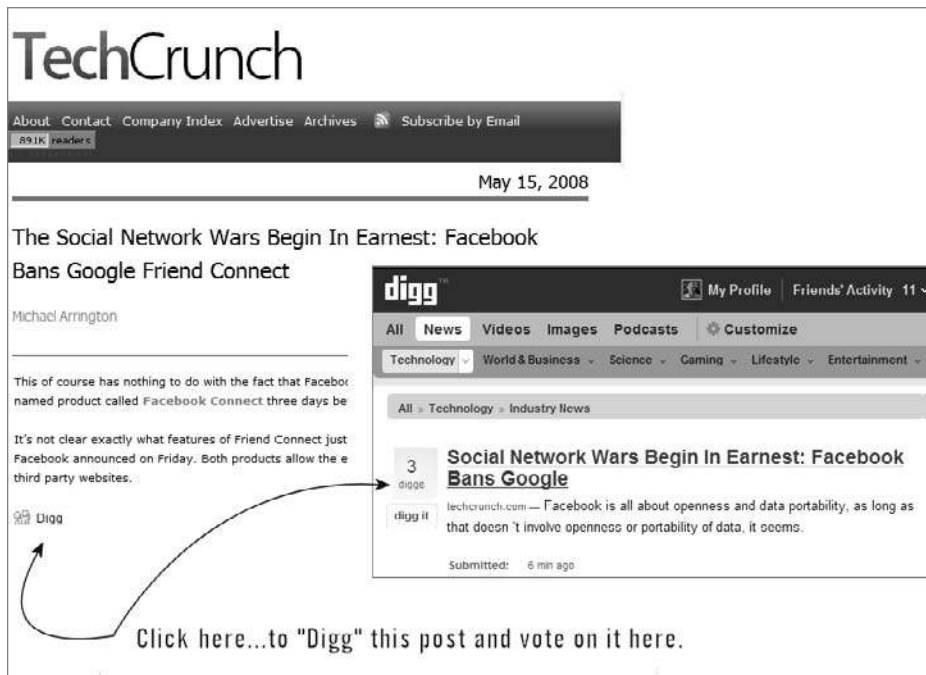


Figure 11.3 Digg Recommendations

Tip: Use *recommendations* when the objective is to encourage a direct action. Recommendations are most effective when used in proximity to a clear call to action.



Putting It All Together

As you consider using ratings, reviews and recommendations in your social media efforts, take the time to think through the specific type of tool — or combination of tools — to offer in each distinct context.

Taken together, rating, reviews, and recommendations add considerably, not only to the social experience but to its usefulness to you and to your customers. (Recommendations in particular are an easy way to introduce participation into your online presence.) Adding this type of feedback increases the value of your online commerce or community sites because it provides information that is by definition relevant to your marketing and business objectives: your customers are in a direct way telling you what they think of your offers. Used purely as a listening tool (for example, to

track the ratings and reviews on your own site, or on a competitor’s site or blog), this type of actionable feedback provides you with the specific information that you need to make an effective case within your organization for needed change or the continuation of efforts that are winning praise in the marketplace.

Of course, there are more subtle issues that arise in applying ratings: what “one star” means varies from person to person, and varies in specific cases. Just as one star means something different when applied to a light bulb that perhaps doesn’t last as long it should versus an underwater shark cage with a slightly faulty latch, the number of stars awarded to identical products will also vary according to the specific interests of the person providing the rating. Reviews can help in combination with ratings by adding the detail as to how a specific item is simultaneously rated “1” and “5” by two different reviewers. How you implement ratings, reviews, and recommendations, and in particular the combined use of them, can help your audience make sense of what you offer, get more value from it, and make better personal choices as a result. This helps you: customers who make smarter choices up front are more likely to post favorable reviews after the purchase.

As a practical example of the use of ratings, reviews, and recommendations, consider Amazon. As a pioneer of the use of “reviews” alongside online commerce, Amazon instituted customer-generated book reviews early on. While these were very useful, it soon became apparent that basic reviews could be “gamed,” manipulated by those inclined to artificially raise or lower the rating of a particular book. In response, Amazon developed the “review of the review,” shown in Figure 11.4. Although this doesn’t eliminate the problem, it effectively turns control to the audience: if someone fakes a review, while the audience may or may not snap to the shenanigans, they will very likely conclude that this review is “less useful” than others. Either way, and as a direct result, the impact of the faked review is reduced, with the direct beneficiary being the potential buyer.

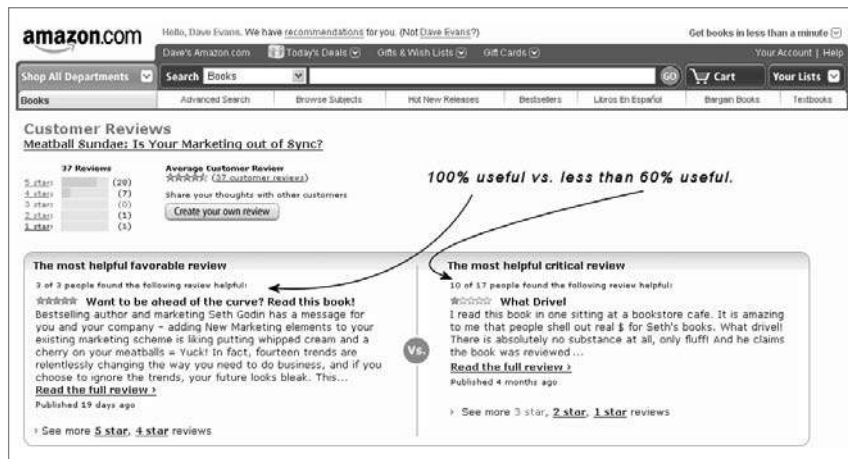


Figure 11.4 Reviews of Reviews

Going further, Amazon combines reviews, ratings, and recommendations to provide a very powerful combination that really helps people make choices. There are the *reviews* themselves: you can read about what others thought of a title that you may be interested in, as well as what others thought of the reviews. You can quickly sort out whether or not a book, CD, DVD, or anything else Amazon sells is for you by using the *ratings*: click on the fives and then click on the ones: look at the reviews and see if the things that you are looking for are praised or faulted. Then, look at the respective reviewers and see which are most like you. Finally, by participating and creating reviews and ratings yourself, you improve Amazon's *recommendation* engine as regards what it suggests that you might like.

Worried About Negative Reviews While Shopping?

Although it may seem counterintuitive at first, the presence of a small number of less-than-favorable reviews in a commerce setting can actually strengthen the value of the reviews overall. A recent Bazaarvoice study showed that conversion rates improved in the presence of a small number of less-than-excellent reviews, suggesting that the negative reviews add credibility to the positives. Make no mistake: if *all* of the reviews are negative... I think you can guess the outcome.

So what can go wrong when implementing ratings, reviews, or recommendations? For starters, you can offend people, not directly but instead through the actions of others. If you are implementing ratings, for example, on a craft site — where people are rating each others' work — take care that terms you use to describe “one star” aren't offensive. Requiring that people be logged in — in other words, disallowing anonymous ratings or reviews — is another way to avoid mean-spirited posts. To protect the integrity of the ratings system, do what Amazon does: require a purchase, require a log in, and limit reviews to one per person per item. Pluck's Sitalife, a white-label community platform, has a built-in feature that prevents ballot stuffing: Once you have given a “thumbs up” to a particular piece, you can't vote on it again. Ratings, reviews, and recommendations aren't perfect — no social media component is and sure enough there are tricks around most any measure. With reasonable care in implementation, however, these tools can be quite effective in adding real value to your online programs.

Monday's One-Hour Exercise

Tip: A set of worksheets covering this week's exercises can be found in the appendix of this book. In addition to these printed worksheets, you can also download electronic copies and access related resources at the website accompanying this book. Complete information regarding these resources and the website is included in the appendix.



Start today's exercise by making a list of at least five books that you've read in the past year. (Ten books would be even better.) The books can be about business, travel,

personal interest, fiction, or anything else. For each book, write down your thoughts on the following:

- Did you like it? Why or why not?
- Did you recommend this book? Why or why not?
- Did you write a review — anyplace — for this book? If so, what did you say about it? If not, why not?

With the first part of this exercise done, go to <http://www.Amazon.com> and look up each of these books. I recommend Amazon because they have implemented the “reviews of reviews” feature I talked about. Also, and maybe it’s just me, but compared with Barnes & Noble, the ratings at Amazon seem to cover a wider range, from “love it” to “hate it.” As such, they will be more useful in this exercise.

At Amazon, compare what you’ve written (your experience) with the reviews you find. Record the results next to your comments: note both the rating associated with the review, and the share of people who found that review helpful.



Tip: While you’re visiting Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or your favorite bookseller or online retailer, take the time to add your own ratings and reviews for books, CDs, DVDs, and other items with which you have direct experience. Get in the habit of participating and in the process increase your own awareness of the use and effort required with regard to social media from a consumer’s perspective.

Monday’s Wrap-Up

The reviews of the reviews offer an insight into the workings of the Social Web and the role of social media. You probably found some reviews in your exercise today where you agreed with the crowd and others where you didn’t. It’s also likely that where you differed significantly in opinion from the reviews, others did as well. There may even be one or two where you found yourself the odd man (or woman) out. This is how the Social Web and social media work: among people with a similar interest (for example, the audience for any particular book) there is a range of opinion that centers on a consensus. There are always a few outliers as well.

Note in particular the share of the number of people who found each review helpful: this *can* but doesn’t *always* help you spot the suspect reviews. For example, on reviews where you did differ significantly, did the share of people who rated that review and found it helpful also dip? If so, for whatever reason, that review might be considered suspect: someone certainly said it, but no one else really believes or values it. In any event, it’s clear that people are giving less credit to it than the more highly rated reviews.

At the extremes, and differing markedly from the consensus, are the genuine outliers: the people who just saw it differently. Importantly, also in this group are those who posted a review with a clear bias. In general, both groups will be de-emphasized

by the collective. But don't dismiss them either: those with a genuinely different point of view are often predictors of the next wave. You'll be taking a deeper dive into the collective versus the individual versus mass in the next section.

Bad Reviews...Are Good Information

Bad reviews, while perhaps less desirable than good reviews, are still very valuable to you as a marketer. Bad reviews can provide a sense of reality: when you see only great reviews, you might still wonder what your customers are really thinking. When you see bad ones, you know. If you are seeing bad reviews, take note, address the issue, and then reconnect with the specific people writing the bad reviews. True detractors aside, they just might become your biggest fans.

Winning the Popularity Contest

Think back to Chapter 3, “What Is Social Media?” and the definition of social media from Wikipedia:

Social Media: Participatory online media where news, photos, videos, and podcasts are made public via social media websites through submission. Normally accompanied with a voting process to make media items become “popular.”

The last part of that definition — “normally accompanied with a voting process to make media items become popular” — is the focus of the next section. In the prior section, I covered the ways in which something that someone experienced is rated, recommended, and/or reviewed. In this section, I'm going to focus on *voting* and on the specific relationship between recommendations and voting. Voting is one of the mechanisms through which specific content items gain popularity and are, therefore, spread beyond their original audience.

The Voting Process

The process of voting content up and down in popularity is part of what drives the Social Web: if saying something is the cost of entry, then having others agree and affirm what you've said is the payoff. The voting process, when looked at this way, takes on a larger significance that is specific to the Social Web and the use of social media in marketing. Items that are voted up — and in particular those that include content that others considering a purchase might find useful — are being voted up based on collective experience and the desire to make sure that others do in fact see this content. *This voting process directly drives message spread.* As a marketer, your challenge is to create the kind of experience — and as result, the social media — that gets beneficially amplified through the voting process.

On sites like Digg, the voting process is part of the fabric. One Digg equals one vote. New items arrive and get voted up, and in so doing move from the “most recent” page *that the site opens with* to the “most viewed in 24 hours” or similar pages that reflect popularity as it accumulates over time. Hold the thought about new content appearing in a prominent place in your mind.

By comparison, in addition to subscriptions and recommended videos, on the opening page YouTube lists promoted (paid) videos along with featured and most active video content. It does *not* list the new content. On the home page of YouTube additional votes accumulate based at least in part on this prominent placement. Home page content gets more mention, and as a result more votes. You can see the cycle that sets up.

Where Digg brings new content to its subscriber base, YouTube presents and amplifies the content most appealing to a mass market. YouTube is the big dog chasing TV: Digg is the long tail.

Here’s how it happens: Suppose five new pieces of content are posted today on YouTube: I’ll assume that one person finds and Digg each video, so all five are now referenced on Digg as well as on YouTube. Digg users will see each new video (or pointer to it) on the home page: YouTube users, unless they navigate to the Video tab and then select “Most Recent” *will never see these*. While YouTube is an archive for what is made popular on its own site and through sites like Digg, the YouTube home page is a *mass channel*. The net impact is that where Digg will tend to expose niche content, YouTube will suppress it. Put another way, Digg will tend to promote diversity while YouTube will reinforce stereotypical preferences. Look no further than the starting page of YouTube as proof: All of the expected content, given the user base, is present. Very little of the “richness of the Social Web” is presented. In many ways, YouTube *is* the “new TV” and is acting more and more like TV as a result. Highly popular (mass) content, featured on the home page, is used as a carrier for interruptive advertising.

There’s nothing wrong with being popular, per se, and there are certainly a lot of reasons to offer the kinds of products and services that are attractive on a mass scale. However, if you agree that one of the promises of the Social Web is the realization of what Chris Anderson describes as the long tail, then one of the ironies of the Social Web and the emphasis on popularity is that the long tail can actually get cropped. Niche content — the long tail stuff which, by definition, will never be “most popular” — gets pushed further down in a relative sense as the mainstream rises to the top. The Digg and YouTube home pages are shown in Figures 11.5 and 11.6. Look at the content, and how different (and alike) what is presented really is.

This may seem like a nuance but it is actually a significant point for a marketer. If you are looking for a highly popular, interruptive (e.g., a typical online media buy) media property then YouTube is a great site. If you are providing a niche service or

product, or if the content you are creating for the Social Web is highly focused, then for sure YouTube is still a place you want to be, but you'll also need to drive interest in and awareness of your content from sites or services with a niche focus. In this case, be sure to consider the role of services like Digg in building awareness of your content in addition to simply posting it to YouTube.

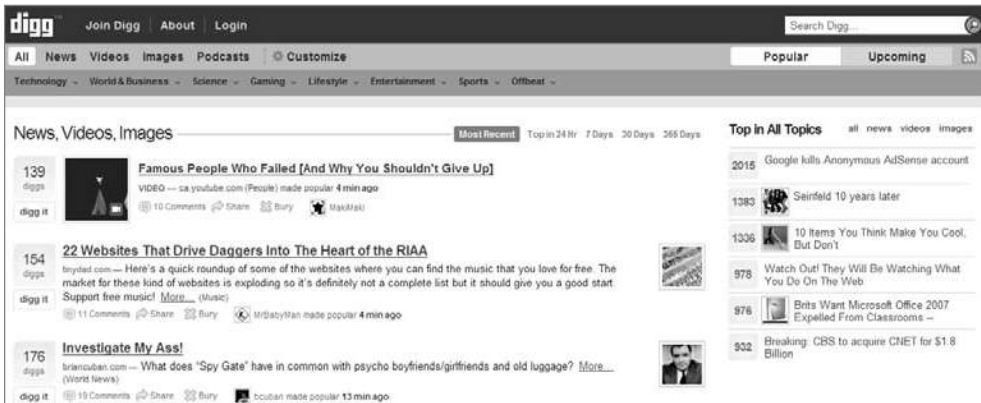


Figure 11.5 Digg

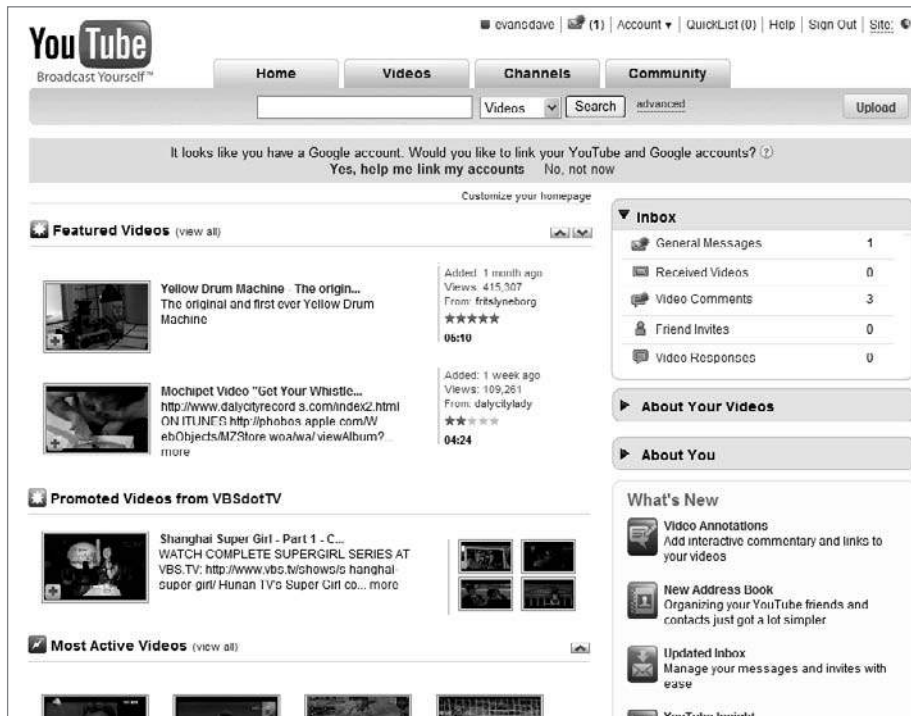


Figure 11.6 YouTube



Note: I have talked extensively about Digg and the role that recommendations play in driving popularity. Importantly, Digg is also very useful for sharing: by “Digging” something you are placing a link to whatever it is that you “Digg” in a public index. You are, in effect, sharing this content. Other popular sharing tools include Del.icio.us (covered briefly in Chapter 4, “Web 2.0: The Social Web”) and Stumbleupon, a browser toolbar that taps the wisdom of crowds to suggest content that you might like based on what others with similar interests have themselves liked.

Tuesday’s One-Hour Exercise

The point of today’s exercise is for you to get an idea of the degree to which the major social media content sites are — or aren’t — creating a place for niche content.



Tip: If you’re not a member of Digg, take a minute and join. While you can review Digg content without joining, in order to add your own vote to content that you like you’ll need to be a Digg member.

For today’s exercise, first visit Digg and then visit YouTube, and do the following:

- Look at the home page content: by default, is it the newest, or the most popular content that you see first? How does this change the mix of content that you actually view at each site visited? Take the time to look into the items themselves, and explore beyond the home page.
- Looking at the top 10 items on each home page, which has more content covering topics you’ve never heard of? How many of the topics — on either site — are also present in the headlines on your favorite news site?
- If you had to pick, which site offers the most unexpected versus expected content? There is no “right” answer here — again the point is to experience the differences in the ways that different content sharing sites share and promote content.

Tuesday’s Wrap-Up

Today you looked at the impact of social consensus, in both positive and negative lights. What does this say about diversity? What does this say about niche versus mainstream products, services, and the lifestyles of your audience? The take-away from today’s exercise is simply this: if you are marketing a mass-appeal product or service, you are likely to see things like your TV commercials and other forms of content that

you create picked up and repurposed on the Web. You can build on that, by either making this content available (e.g., posting it yourself so that those watching TV online can find it) and/or posting “outtakes” or bloopers, content that you could not show on TV but which might become popular online. By comparison, if you are in a niche segment or are creating content for a very focused audience, then you will definitely want to promote these items and make them accessible to these specific communities. Dropped loosely on the Social Web, they will surely get buried.

Online Performance Rights

To properly repurpose and monetize content for the Web, you may need to secure online performance rights from participants. The best time to do this is before you create your content: you can often negotiate more favorable terms by creating a package of rights and usages as compared with seeking Internet performance rights by themselves, after the fact. Always respect copyright and performance laws. Not only is it the right thing to do, but this is the Social Web: if you disregard performance laws, for example, expect to hear about it *in public*. It goes without saying — but I’ll say it again anyway — that a public dispute will generally reduce the net benefits of your social media programs.

Applying Recommendations

So how can you as marketer, tap the basic *recommendation*? If you’re selling a consumer product or service, and especially if you’re selling it from your website, let your customers recommend specific items to others, making sure that the supporting materials on the site provide a context that answers the question of “why” the recommendation is being offered. But what if you don’t have a retail or similar site? What if you offer editorial content or consulting services? What if what you do requires a lot of thought prior to the purchase?

You can still use recommendations. In these cases, use the recommendations to drive awareness and interest in the supporting materials that lead to a sale or to suggest that certain types of editorial content might be applicable to “people like you.” Figure 11.7 shows a typical news article — in this case from the *Wall Street Journal*. The marketing application of Digg is to drive more readers to the *Wall Street Journal* based on the popularity of this article and hence boost ad sales. This is actually a very common application of Digg, so much so that Digg has a dedicated news section where recommendations for articles of note, taken from a wide range of sources, are posted.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
 Digital Network | WSJ.com | MarketWatch.com | Barrons.com | All Things Digital | More

MARKETBEAT
 WSJ.com's inside look at the markets

March 28, 2008, 2:05 pm
Planes, Trains and Automobiles
 Posted by David Gaffen

If conventional wisdom — and a mountain of economic data — suggests that the U.S. economy is falling into, if not already in a recession, **why are the transportation stocks doing so well?**

Investors often look at transportation stocks as a bellwether for the economic outlook. Transportation, in one way or another, is an integral part of many major industries, and if manufacturers are seeing slack demand, they will be shipping fewer goods. However, through Thursday, **Transportation Average has gained 4.6% on the year**, hardly an indicator while the Dow Jones Industrial Average is down 7.3% and the broader S&P 500 is off by 9.7%.

It's a very interesting...
 Most...
 Advisor...
 The equity...
 Future growth, th...
 Expectations o...
 rebound in economic growth later in the year, just as it foreshadowed the decline in late 2007. The DJIA's closing high in 2007 was 5446.49, in July, months before the Dow's apex in mid-October.

Permalink | Trackback URL: <http://blogs.wsj.com/marketbeat/2008/03/28/planes-trains-and-automobiles-2/>
 mod-WSJBlog/trackback/
 Save & Share: [Yahoo! Bookmarks](#) | [Share on Facebook](#) | [Del.icio.us](#) | [Digg this](#) | [Email This](#) | [Print](#)
 Read more: [Global](#)

Comments
 Report offensive comments to marketbeat@wsj.com

Well, the commodities are going up indicating a strong demand for them. Also, low dollar makes exporting attractive and carriers who are exposed to international markets (think FedEx and UPS) may be seeing an

Visit WSJ.com's Markets page ▶

OTHER BLOGS FROM WSJ.COM

- Law Blog
- Political Receptions
- Washington Wire
- Real Time Economics
- The Juice
- W
- MarketBeat
- Deal Journal
- Developments
- The Numbers Guy
- The Wealth Report
- Baghdad Live
- Insider

INDEX	LAST	CHANGE	%CHG
Dow Jones Industrials	8620	-102	-1.18
S&P 500 *	1408.66	-5.82	-0.40
Nasdaq Composite *	2496.70	-1.58	-0.06
Russell 2000 *	736.07	-0.78	-0.11

COMMODITIES	LAST	CHANGE
Gold, June	864.10	+2.40
Crude Oil	123.78	-0.44

TREASURYS	YIELD	CHANGE
10-Year Note *	3.9226	+232

CURRENCIES	LAST	PRIOR DAY
Yen (per dollar)	104.9700	105.1
Euro (in dollars)	1.5457	1.5461

Source: Reuters and Dow Jones
 Note: Closing quotes are preliminary * At close

MARKETS ON THE MOVE

Track indexes and hot stocks, with roll-over charting and headlines. Plus, comprehensive coverage of bonds, commodities and forex. Markets Data Center highlights:

- Most Actives
- Gainers
- Losers
- New Highs and Lows
- Money Flows
- Intraday Futures
- Currencies

MOST POPULAR POSTS | VIEWED | EMAILED

Figure 11.7 Wall Street Journal and Digg

Wednesday's One-Hour Exercise

Today you're going to visit sites that do — or at least could — utilize recommendations and content sharing tools like Digg. For each of the sites listed, look for things that you are interested in or would simply like to read more about. Your task is to find things that you'd like to share with friends, and then do that.

- Wall Street Journal
- Ad Age
- Amazon
- Edmunds
- iVillage

As you work through these sites, consider the following:

- Which sites made it easiest to share content? To rate content? To share the ratings?
- On which sites did you actually share the most content?
- If the tools on the sites that made it easiest to share content had been available on all of the sites you looked at, would you have shared more content?

Wednesday's Wrap-Up

Today you looked at the role of the combined impact of recommending and sharing content, and at a sample of top-tier sites across a range of applications for which content sharing — in the sense of driving awareness, generating members, or building at least some aspect of community — is essential. Yet, the tools to do this ranged from very visible to nonexistent. Think carefully about the impact of *not including* basic content recommendation and sharing tools: as it turns out, they matter.

The best way to do this is to put your consumer hat on: think of a few things that you want to buy and visit sites that offer information. Compare the sites that include consensus tools such as recommendation indicators with those that do not. To really drive this home, pick a product that you want (in my case, a new TV) and one about which you know relatively little (so, for me, that would be digital and HDTV). The recommendations — call it the wisdom (or even just “casual knowledge”) of the crowd — can be really helpful in making a choice.

Getting There Faster

In Chapter 9, “Social Platforms,” you read about white-label social networks and community platforms. A white-label solution, simply, is a set of services or capabilities that can be branded and offered as if it were your own. The downside of a white-label solution is that you get what you get. The services offered range from “everything you need” to a somewhat smaller feature set than what you had in mind, limited for example by what the majority of a particular platform vendor’s customers need, or by that vendor’s view of the market and its demands. The *upside* of a white-label solution is that you get what you get...today!

From my perspective, having it today trumps having the wish list.

I say this for three reasons: First, unless your core business is building and maintaining social software, don’t stretch your limited resources by building what you can buy and therefore competing in a business at which you cannot be the best. Not only will it distract you, but your customers will start leaning on you to match the features and performance of firms like Jive Software, Pluck, Lithium, KickApps and many others. Jive Software builds world-class collaborative tools: Jive Software uses its own tools internally and with its customers. That makes sense: they learn by using

their own tools. When Seagate — a company with no doubt more than a few tech-savvy employees who know how to build a website — decided to add a support community, they enlisted Lithium, a white-label service provider. The resulting success story was a case study featured in Chaptered 9.

More important though, especially in the short run, is *time to market*. While not impossible, it is very difficult to match the time-to-launch that you can achieve by using a best-of-class software services provider. The race to the Social Web is on: your business is likely facing this pitched battle on multiple fronts. Whether attracting and retaining key employees or attracting and retaining key customers, part of the challenge you face in tapping the Social Web is in getting it done *today*.

Finally, any advantage to getting exactly what you want often erodes over time as new technologies — think helicopters — marginalize the value of the effort that you’ve just put into blazing the first trail on foot through the jungle. The reality is often that as tasty as your wish list looks, there’s probably a 5 percent advantage to doing something custom against a 95 percent chance that having “almost everything” would in fact get you where needed to be. Your audience won’t miss many of the features you end up skipping, particularly if you do your work up front and skip the right stuff. In the end, grabbing a lift in the chopper and being in the market sooner rather than trekking through the jungle means you gain more *market* experience, and gain it faster. That’s experience that you can use to crush the competition.

In this chapter, you are exploring one of the most fundamental and easiest to implement social elements: ratings, reviews, and recommendations. If you see this as a competitive advantage — *meaning your competitors likely see it the same way* — then this means that you need to *quickly* add these components to your plan. Otherwise, your competitors will get there first.

I’ll feature Bazaarvoice (see sidebar) and its Ratings & Reviews platform as an example. I highly recommend looking at Bazaarvoice and using this platform along with services like Digg. By using these tools in combination, you can have a powerful social presence — and more metrics than you thought possible — up and running and building your business *very quickly*.

Bazaarvoice: Ratings and Reviews to Go

Bazaarvoice, launched in 2005 by CEO Brett Hurt, offers a plug-in ratings and reviews platform. Brett’s prior venture — Core Metrics — provided the background and insights needed to make the step from *measuring* to *generating* metrics. Amazingly, 50 of the top 100 retailers — including Wal-mart, Home Depot, HP, and Dell — use the Bazaarvoice platform to power their ratings, reviews, and recommendations services.

Bazaarvoice: Ratings and Reviews to Go *(continued)*

The Bazaarvoice commerce platform provides ratings, reviews, and recommendations capabilities along with advanced analytics that support shopping cart optimization. For example, using the Bazaarvoice tools, you can show your customers what prior customers have tended to purchase along with the items that are currently in a shopping cart as it nears checkout. This can directly boost shopping-cart value. Even better, in the process, it produces a more satisfied customer. This is a direct result of the ability to tap the collective intelligence: if most people who bought *A* also bought *B*, you can offer product bundles, for example, and in general make it simpler for your customers to get everything they are likely to need in one stop. That is the kind of experience that generates a favorable review positive word-of-mouth, and a result more business.

A full-featured ratings, reviews, and recommendations platform — however you choose to implement it — should provide tools beyond the ratings, reviews or recommendations themselves. Specifically, any inclusion of ratings, reviews, or recommendations *within your site* should also provide you with quantitative data that you can use to guide successive efforts. In Chapter 7, I presented the beginnings of the measurement of influence. This led to the presentation of a basic dashboard and report card. In Chapter 13, “Objectives, Metrics, and ROI,” you’ll be pulling together more of the data — including data from sources like your community and ratings, reviews and recommendations platforms — and developing a more comprehensive dashboard.

Ratings, reviews, and recommendations are obviously important tools for consumers when shopping. They help guide purchases, and tend to increase satisfaction with the item ultimately purchased. From a brand point of view, many consumers now expect this as basic commerce functionality. This is an important point to note when you factor in the role of word of mouth in driving the Consideration Cycle and the creation of social media. The more satisfied (or dissatisfied) the customer, the more likely it is that a conversation will start. Think back to Chapter 7 and the Net Promoter score: the sixes, sevens, and eights are tossed out. These are the people that were OK with the product. If pressed, they would say things like “Yah, it worked well enough.” That kind of word of mouth doesn’t count for much.

Adding ratings and reviews provides your customers with the information they need to make an *informed choice based on the actual experience of others*. The result is not only an often increased spend at the time of purchase, but a lower return rate after the fact. In other words, the result is *higher satisfaction*. In Net Promoter language, sixes, sevens, and eights become nines and tens. Threes, fours, and fives that drive your Net Promoter score *down* often arise out a lack of information that would have resulted in alternative purchase. When ratings, reviews, and recommendations are present, these misinformed and hence highly unsatisfactory purchases *never occur*. Your Net Promoter score goes *up* as a direct result. The economic benefit alone of

dropping the product return rate is a huge — and often overlooked — benefit that again points to the linked dependencies that exist between Marketing and Operations when working with social media. Take a look at the featured case study — Petco’s implementation of the Bazaarvoice platform: the results speak for themselves. The Petco website, including the Sort by Ratings search option, is shown in Figure 11.8. Figure 11.9 shows a close-up of the ratings tools available at the product level on the Petco site.



Figure 11.8 Petco’s Website

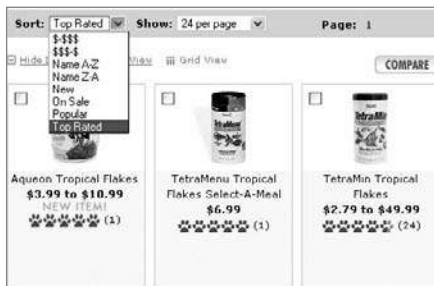


Figure 11.9 Petco Product Search: Top Rated Sort

Thursday’s One-Hour Exercise

For today’s exercise, go to the Bazaarvoice website and look at the Clients list. Pick several that interest you: for example, look at Petco, Circuit City, and Dell. Look at more than three if you have time.

For each of the sites you've selected, do the following:

- Look at the product reviews. You may have to navigate to a specific product, or there may be a link to “top rated” items present on the home page. Think about the advantages and disadvantages of having direct access to top-rated products.
- If a Sort by Ratings feature is available, use it. Think about the impact of the role of ratings and your ability to navigate them in terms of contribution to shopping-cart value. If this feature is missing, ask yourself what difference it makes to your overall shopping experience.
- Look at the reviews associated with the various ratings: do the reviews tend to support the ratings, and vice versa? Is the combination of ratings and reviews more valuable than either alone?

Featured Case: Petco and Bazaarvoice

PETCO is a leading specialty retailer of premium pet food, supplies, and services: its stores offer more than 10,000 high-quality pet-related products. Given the complexity of these offerings, adding product reviews and supporting information designed to help consumers quickly arrive at the best choice given their particular needs was a natural choice. Among the features installed was the Top Rated search-sorting option: this option allows customers to sort search results by “top rated” in addition to sorting by name, price, and other typical choices. With the Bazaarvoice ratings platform in place, the results were tracked over time. The results indicated a 49 percent boost in conversion rates and a 63 percent higher average order value when the Top Rated option was selected. In fact, the Top Rated results-sorting option is now the number 1 option at Petco.com.

The benefits didn't stop with sales, however. The overall customer experience was improved as well, as evidenced by the reduction in return rates. Return rates were just over 20 percent lower for products with reviews versus those without. For products with at least 25 reviews, the product return rate was reduced by an incredible 45 percent. These two improvements — increased conversion and reduced return rate — benefited Petco's business.

Thursday's Wrap-Up

Today's exercise centered on two primary concepts: the benefits to the consumer of a full-featured ratings and reviews platform, and the simultaneous requirement for consumer participation in creating this valued content. I point this out because it is too often the case that technology leads the social effort, rather than the business objectives that suggest a role for a social effort leading the technology. It's easy to get blinded by the allure of a quick solution: “If we only had this, we'd be all set.”

In reality, it is seldom the case. Instead, by directly experiencing a sample of commerce sites that use ratings, reviews, and other forms of social media, you can see first-hand the requirement that the consumer be directly involved. What does this mean

to you? It means that your plan needs to begin with the *consumer's role* in creating social content rather than your desire to sell more. To be sure, I'm not suggesting that the consumer's desire to generate content is the driver for your business. Your business objectives clearly come first. The point is this: given your business objectives — whether launching a new product, increasing sales by X percent or changing attitudes as measured by the Net Promoter score — the choice to add social media to the mix is tightly coupled with your view of your customers as sources of information. If you see in your customers the answers to your questions, you're in good shape. If you don't, take a quick walk around the block and clear your head. When you come back, take another look at your customers.

“If you have a question, go to the store. Your customers have the answer.”

— SAM WALTON, founder, Wal-Mart.

This means getting very clear about how much you trust your customers as conveyors of your message to others. The underlying truth of social media — and in particular as evidenced through simple additions like ratings, reviews, and recommendations — is that *consumers are turning to each other to get the information needed to make an informed choice*. By providing the forum to do so and integrating it into the purchase process (or into the content ratings for publishers and noncommercial applications), you signal your implicit trust of your customers. This is how you win the popularity contest.

Building Your Plan

You've now got two of the three big social media channels under you belt: you've seen social spaces (two weeks ago), multimedia content (last week), and now ratings, reviews and recommendations. In addition, you've got a solid handle on the social feedback cycle as it applies to your business, the touchpoints that drive it, and the beginning set of metrics that define it. It's time now to start pulling things together.

Friday's One-Hour Exercise

Today you add ratings, reviews, and recommendations to your developing social-media marketing efforts and to your larger marketing plan. Here are some guidelines and tips on how to approach today's exercise:

- Think holistically. Ratings are not a purely digital technique. Use the ratings you collect in other media. Figure 11.10 shows how President's Choice taps its ratings in its print circulars.
- Involve customers. Customers have the answers, but they don't always know where to go or what to do with them. Tell them. Figure 11.11 shows a receipt from Wal-Mart advising electronics customers to rate their purchases at Walmart.com.

- Don't reinvent the wheel: look at existing services and solutions. Take advantage of the options and custom programming tools that are already offered to make your implementation as unique as your brand.
- Look at the data that is available to you: if your customers are sending you a message, be sure you're listening. Collect the numbers, and take the fight to Operations, where you can do something about it.
- Involve Operations directly. Social media is driven by conversations, and conversations result from experiences that are driven by Operations. If your customers are your external allies, Operations is your internal life partner.



Figure 11.10 Ratings in a Flyer



Figure 11.11 Invitation to Rate on Receipt

Here are your actions and objectives for this exercise. Consider each of the following and write out your responses, adding these elements to your developing social media plan.

- Look for the low-hanging fruit: based on your current digital marketing efforts, could you add Digg or Del.icio.us buttons to encourage recommendations and sharing?
- How do ratings and reviews apply to your business? If you offer goods and services online, it's a fairly straightforward application. If not, then what? For example, if you are offering expertise and you write a blog, is a Digg button part

of each post? If you sell through a channel, are you pulling content that channel partners produce, packaging it with Digg, and adding it to *your* site to help your current and potential customers see the value of your channel partners?

Identify the specific uses of rating, reviews, and recommendations and add them to your plan. If you are planning to use a white-label platform, or planning to build your own, make a note of the data that you expect to collect. Keep that handy, as you'll need it in Chapter 13.

Friday's Wrap-Up

You're building a plan that begins with your business objectives and is rooted in your current marketing program. This is evolution, not revolution. Through the Hour a Day approach you are building this in stages. You can roll it out the same way.

At this point, you've got a social media program that potentially includes a community space, content that you or your customers create and post in places like YouTube, Flickr, Seismic, and Twitter, a good start on fundamental measurements, and now the immediate feedback and content sharing capabilities of ratings, reviews, and recommendations. With about a month to go before your presentation (I did mention that you'll be presenting this plan to your colleagues, right?), you're in a very good place.

Chapter 11: The Main Points

- Ratings, reviews, and recommendations are different elements: each has a specific sweet spot.
 - Use recommendations to encourage direct action closer to the point of purchase in the consideration cycle.
 - Use ratings to provide information that will set expectations and address performance questions earlier in the consideration process.
 - Use reviews to provide detailed information needed to make an informed decision that can be “passed down” after a purchase experience: implement reviews of reviews and community policing to maintain review quality.
- Voting, typically via simple recommendations, both drives and hobbles the Social Web: it indicates consensus, typically based on experience. However, it can also drown out diversity as mass interests overwhelm niche content.
- Consider building or adopting a ratings platform to provide both the capability to customers to inform each other, and to provide the data that you need to drive your business. If you don't have an online store, you can still tap ratings and reviews by adding them to print campaigns and end-aisle displays.
- Help your satisfied *offline* customers tell their story. (The dissatisfied ones will figure it out on their own.) Look at Wal-Mart as an example: include a simple note on the cash register receipt.