

# Week 2: Social Platforms

*In this chapter, you'll learn to evaluate the use of social networks in a business context and see how they encourage interaction and conversation. I'll show you how these networks provide quantitative information about how your brand, product, or service is being viewed. You'll spend time on community platforms, including support forums and the "white-label" community tools that you can use to build your own social presence. I'll make the case for why you should consider using social communities in support of your business objectives.*

*In your exercises this week, you'll gain hands on experience in online social settings. The exercises are designed to highlight the business oriented applications of these social spaces, and to provide you with ideas and a starting point when adding these tools to your social media campaign.*



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## Social Networks

In the opening section of this book, I talked briefly about the very early online social communities. Services like Prodigy catered to commerce and casual interaction while CompuServe focused on serving the needs of specific interest groups. The others that followed were likewise an early recognition of the kinds of interpersonal dynamics fostered by ubiquitous connectivity. When physical spaces no longer isolate people, common interests in very specific areas begin to emerge. Communities built around even the most obscure interests or fields of study are suddenly able to gather critical mass as those who share particular passions “find each other.” Flash forward beyond AOL, then Geocities and Tripod, to the beginning of the broadband Internet. What changed wasn’t so much the speed — sure, the Net is faster than it used to be — but rather the simple switch from a “connection event” to an always-on, always-around-us medium that gave rise to persistent and distributed communities. Prior to the widespread adoption of broadband, “going online” usually began with some purpose — to play a game, buy something, check a stock price or weather forecast — and involved a very deliberate “connecting” of the personal computer and the network. No more. Now, with mobile devices transparently navigating between Wi-Fi and cell networks, and personal computers in the vast majority of homes that are “always on” (meaning “always connected”), the Internet itself has become a sort of permanent place where things happen continuously.

Starbucks bills itself as the “third place,” behind home and work. I’d suggest that all three are right now moving down a notch, as the Internet and the communities that ride on it become the “first place” for a whole lot of people. They may jump in and out of these online communities, but their information is always flowing through them and therefore available to others as if they were present. They disconnect briefly to breathe in real air in the same way a whale comes to the surface periodically. Then, they dive back into the Social Web, to what is becoming their first home. As a marketer, you really need to be there.

The contemporary social networks build on this emerging dynamic, and in doing so create a forum where conversation flourishes based in part on experiences with the things you sell or offer. Social networks form around general interests — think MySpace or Bebo — and around different cultural commonalities. The result is the global spread of online communities that manage to retain regional culture and behavior. Selected leading networks in representative locations are shown in Figure 9.1. As examples, MySpace is popular in the United States and LiveJournal is popular in Russia. In Latin America, it’s Sonico and Orkut; in Asia a favorite is Friendster; and in the United Kingdom, it’s Bebo. They form based on personal styles and interests: MySpace with its focus on music and personal entertainment versus Facebook and its Ivy League origin, both giving rise to demographic characteristics that remain today. Across all of them, however, the application is surprisingly similar: people meeting people and sharing experiences.

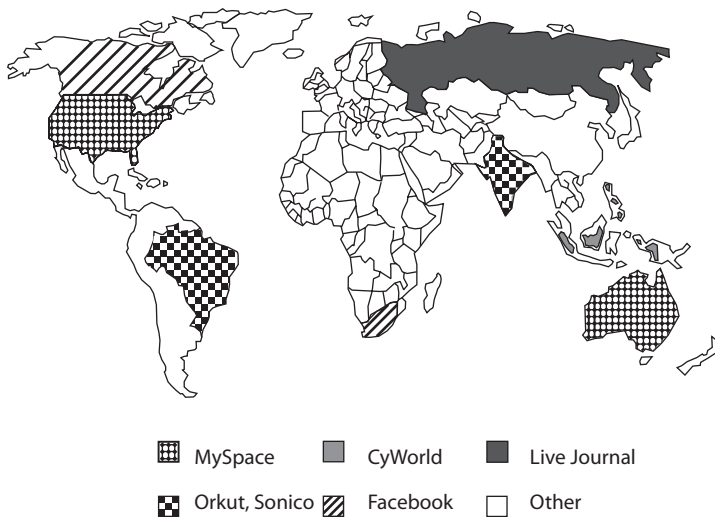


Figure 9.1 World Map and Social Networks

If you step back and look at this, more than a few possible business uses for these networks jump out. In addition to the obvious application for interruptive advertising — buying a home page or feature banner on MySpace or one of the new left-column ads on Facebook — these networks are both sources of information and places where your brand can establish and show elements of its makeup that it might not be able to do otherwise. How can these elements help you? That’s where you’re headed next.

**Tip: Simon Says ... Do This** The appropriate use of social spaces in business is critical to your success as a marketer. You are a guest, just like anyone else. The rules of conduct that apply to members of any given social network apply to you as well, with the additional requirement of full disclosure. If you’re transparent, and genuinely helpful, you’ll find that you will make allies within your communities, and that you will be in great position to begin building true community presence and connections.



Consider first the extension of your brand. On TV you are limited to 30 seconds give or take, and to a method of communication that is “one way.” Online, through rich-media and interactivity, you can extend this a bit, but you’re still limited by a context that is largely interrupt-driven. This means that the time your audience is willing to spend is limited as chances are whoever is engaged in your expandable banner right now was doing something a minute ago and probably needs to get back to it. In a social setting, this changes: participants are there to relax, learn, engage, or be entertained. They are looking for content. Compared with the limited time available on TV or even through online media, social networks are like being invited to dinner. The

BMW Facebook case study presented later in this chapter is an indication of what you can do when participants are willing to give you several *hours* of their time.

## Personal Social Networks

Rules of etiquette apply on the Social Web and in social networks. Sure, there are rules that apply on TV as well, but in the case of social media and social networks in particular, *the other participants — and not the producer or programmer — by and large make the rules*. One of the issues that you will have to pay attention to when developing and implementing a social media-based marketing program is that social spaces are not always advertiser friendly. In fact, it's probably safe to say that until shown otherwise, they are advertiser *unfriendly*. But that's OK: you're going to see how you can get along.

Interruptive advertising — whether on TV, in print, online, or presented as a banner in a social setting works based on a trade-off between fundamental characteristics. It's interruptive. You schedule it, and it appears. Your message gets seen. As a sort of relief valve, the person viewing it is generally able to ignore it if interest is low or timing is off. Taken together, even though it's interruptive, most consumers accept TV advertising because they can always choose to ignore it. The same conditions exist online, though perhaps to a different degree. Most people understand that MySpace is free in exchange for the presence of advertising. At the same time, it remains to be seen how long this will last and, therefore, how long a marketing approach based largely on interruptions will remain effective. LinkedIn's April Fool's Day joke of 2008 — that it was planning to end its free service — may be closer to the truth than its timing would indicate. More seriously, just like on TV, if the audience makes a habit of ignoring the ads, then sooner or later the social networks will have to resort to some other means of generating income. If you *knew* that no one was watching, would *you* still pay for the ad? If interruptive advertising revenue decreases, something else has to replace it. If you couldn't interrupt...what would you do?

Figure 9.2 shows the first visible portion of two opening screens: on the top is my personal MySpace page, and right below is Weather.com. Surprisingly, the amount of space that is devoted to advertising — and which therefore interrupts my activities — is about the same on each of them. Weather.com isn't a social application, although it would be nice to share sunshine with friends. Weather.com is instead a simple utility that helps plan what to do over the weekend. It runs on interruptive advertising: to see the weather, I have to scroll down past the ads.

In the case of MySpace, where the share of space used for ads is about the same, the fact that they are purely interruptive really stands out. *There is no obvious motivation or mechanism for me to share the advertising content*. It's just there for *me* to look at. It's odd that a social network would start my experience — built around participation — with an interruption given that *sharing* rather than consumption is the basis of my belonging.

On the Social Web — banners on social networks included — the only way your message receives any real attention is through the interest of your audience. If you are *dependant* on the interruption, you'll find limited success, at best, through social media. Instead, adopt an approach of sharing and of influence, and of less control rather than more.



Figure 9.2 Ads on MySpace and Weather.com

*How* you conduct your campaign in a social context is critical to success. The key is not so much to “let the guests make the rules” but rather to work with those already in the community and to become part of it, to establish your value and develop a shared sense of respect. If you’re a newcomer, watch and listen and then join in. Become part of the community. As a member you can certainly influence it through your own participation, just as each of the other members is equally able to do. In summary, be interested, and above all, be *interesting*. You spent time working on the touchpoint map and social feedback cycle *first* because the social components of your overall campaign are just that: the *social* components.

It’s important to get the triggers for conversations — many of which are set at touchpoints and then carried into the purchase process at the point of consideration — established in a way that supports and amplifies your complementary use of other channels (for example, through in-store or traditional media). The social channels are only one piece of a larger whole, and though they operate differently than the others, they must operate in a consistent, supportive manner. Worried that you can’t “strongly suggest” or “forcefully persuade” through social media? You have plenty of places where you can shout, persuade, and exert claims *outside the Social Web*.

Within the social networks, you've got the responsibility of conduct that comes with being a guest — and in particular a guest who would like to be invited back some day. In return, you have the opportunity to engage your audience at a level that you simply cannot match elsewhere.

So far I've focused on your presence in personal social networks. Whether you build a profile for your brand, or participate through discussion groups and similar, being a part of the community can be a great way to learn about your brand, product, or service and a great way to help customers get more value from whatever it is you offer. If you make kayaks, and are fully transparent about it, you are actually in a pretty good position to help someone looking to undertake the sport. You have genuine domain expertise: people who work at kayak or outdoor companies tend to be enthusiasts and therefore knowledgeable about these things. At the same time, the person considering the purchase has the whole rest of the Internet to check what you say.

Beyond a directly participative presence you can use marketing applications that are themselves embedded into the social platforms. Beginning with Facebook's opening of its API, firms like Slide and RockYou have developed and launched a wave of applications that ride on the social networks. While many of these are entertainment oriented — e.g., Vampire Bites, Sending Karma, and Truemors — there are also hard-working marketing applications like those built on Graffiti Wall or applications like Social Vibe, shown in Figure 9.3, and Friend-2-Friend's Product Pulse. Product Pulse and Social Vibe are supported on both Facebook and MySpace and will no doubt spread further. These types of marketing tools can help you establish a consistent presence in multiple settings.

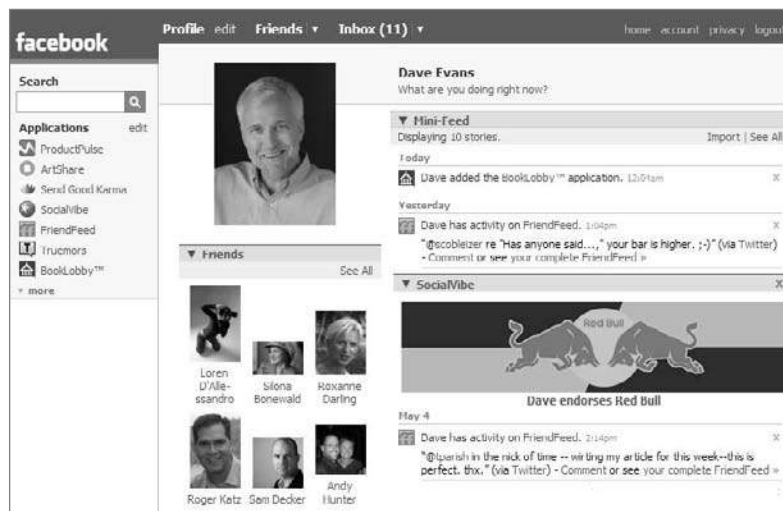


Figure 9.3 My Facebook Profile with Social Vibe Endorsement

OK, so you can develop a presence, and you can build campaigns on embedded applications with a marketing component. What else can you do? For starters, you can use social networks to attract and retain key employees. Having better people than your competitor gives you an advantage that often can't be bested by a lower priced competitor. As the Social Web takes hold — something that is happening as you read this — *performance* will become increasingly important across a growing range of products and services. Products that *almost work* — think back to the Net Promoter score and firms that consistently score 6, 7, or 8 — will face an increasingly tough sell. How many times do you really want to replace a cheap light bulb, regardless of how few people it takes? This same drive for quality extends to the floor or phone experience as well...and all of this comes right back to attracting and retaining the best employees. Walk into any Whole Foods Market and ask for Oscilloccinum, an absolutely fantastic flu and cold product. The associate you speak with will *walk* you — not point you — to the center section of the store and to the very shelf, and then hand it to you. If you ask, that associate will even tell you how to pronounce it! That is the kind of employee-customer experience that drives the unmatched success of Whole Foods Market as a grocer. For Whole Foods, its Associates and their passion around what they do give rise to a formidable competitive advantage.

Consider the popular objection to marketing on the Social Web, that “MySpace isn't for business. It's a place where kids hang out.” Recognize that because the person saying this is usually about my age (fifty-something, I've lost track), it's a good bet that “those kids” are “twenty something” with a margin of plus or minus 5 or 10 years. In other words, the next bag checker — beginning a climb to CEO of your firm — is probably on MySpace or Facebook or Bebo or Orkut *right now*. Why not create a social presence that is maintained by *your employees*, a presence that makes the case for why this young man or woman should come to work for you instead of your competitor? Quality employees are becoming increasingly scarce, and networks are a great way to find them. There is good chance that you or someone working next to you found a job through a network. That's something to think about, and something that is most definitely related to your marketing campaign and to the way in which marketing, operations and human resources can all work together on the Social Web.

### **Social Vibe: An Alternative Approach to Charity**

SocialVibe (<http://www.socialvibe.com>) is empowering people to generate contributions to charity to drive its business. SocialVibe understands that in social media, people are the publishers and therefore are a critical component of the value chain. However, the potential for ad-sharing at the member level — giving a portion of the advertising proceeds to these “micro-publishers” associated with the value they generate for brands — is likely to generate a few tens of dollars in a year, not much of a motivation for this new generation of content creators. SocialVibe offers instead the ability for members to choose a charity and pool their resources.

*continues*

**Social Vibe: An Alternative Approach to Charity** *(continued)*

The result is the potential to turn a rather significant portion of media spending into a meaningful contribution to charity and to create a very favorable presence for the brands offering member-level sponsorships through SocialVibe in the process.

This is a really smart approach to the effective use of social media. Not only can marketers achieve effective distribution in social media, but they can leverage direct connections with their consumers to improve their brand, product, or service. SocialVibe President Joe Marchese, puts it his way: “Advertising used to be all about how many people you could get to see your message. With the Social Web, advertising is all about how many people you can get to show your message. This means that, while the challenge with traditional advertising is creating an effective asset for consumer consumption; the challenge with social media is creating an effective asset for consumer adoption and distribution. Your consumers are your media. Reach out and engage them correctly and they will build your brand for you.” SocialVibe is focused on helping marketers achieve just this result.

**Business Social Networks**

Next up are business-oriented social networks, where the network itself is designed to be used for what are generally business-specific purposes. LinkedIn, Plaxo, and more recent entrants such as Spock are part of this group. Facebook is in this set, too, as is Jigsaw, a socially driven contacts tool for business. Obviously, there are more. Each of these is designed to facilitate some aspect of a business transaction — a sales contact, a referral, or similar business purpose.

**Marketing on Facebook**

Wondering how to use Facebook effectively for marketing? You’ll find the answer in the “Facebook Marketing Bible,” which you can download at <http://www.insidefacebook.com/>.

Like personal social networks, these business-oriented networks can be powerful *components* of your marketing plan. For example, you can use the data-searching capabilities in LinkedIn and the contacts tools in Jigsaw to develop a very focused prospect list, against which you can apply a high-impact, highly personalized direct marketing campaign. Or, you could use a network like Facebook to develop a group around a new application that you are launching. You can grow your beta audience and engage them to elicit feedback, saving you development cycles and speeding your entry into the larger market. You can also use these networks to build your own organization, whether you are looking for marketing or related talent or for the kinds of general expertise or “raw materials” from which to build an excellent team. Any way



you approach it, the use of business social networks is very likely a factor in some aspect of your marketing plan.

### Monday's One-Hour Exercise

This week's exercises are intended to introduce you to social networks, beginning with a business presence. By starting with *yourself* and seeing the ways that *you* can apply social networks as a professional, you'll gain valuable insight into the broader range of applications of social networks in business, and of the role that social media plays within them.

**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 with what you've got: yourself and the things that make you unique. Individuals are the core components of any social network — and a business network is no exception. By building your own network, you increase the number of people you can enlist when it comes to answering questions, asking about other's experiences with social media, and in general increasing the collective knowledge that is available to you.

Create a presence on a professional network, and invite a few colleagues to join along with you. Or, ask your colleagues which networks they are already members of and join one or more of those networks. Either way, the objective is to get involved and to participate. The goal of these next exercises is to increase your understanding of how people use social networks and therefore how you can — and cannot — use them for marketing. As a bonus, by doing this in the context of your current business network, you are actually learning and growing your business networking skills at the same time.

Make a list of the networks you are in, or would like to join for business or social purposes, and write out the purpose/benefit of each network identified. Include in this list the obvious: social networks like Facebook or LinkedIn. Also include support forums — Dell Support, for example — as well as fan clubs, social organizations (online and offline), and similar. For each, answer the following questions:

- Why do you participate in this network or social group?
- What do you expect to get out of it?
- In the past 30 days, what have you put into it?
- Also over the past 30 days, how much time (roughly) have you spent, and what have you done?
- Within the online social networks, how is advertising done? Who is advertising, and what are they advertising?
- What products and services are being talked about? What are members saying?



**Tip:** If you are not in a business or social network, here are some suggestions:

- Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>)
- LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>)
- AdGabbler (<http://www.adgabbler.com>)

### Monday's Wrap-Up

Today you looked at business-oriented social networks and noted the specific benefits you get through your association with other members. If you weren't a member of a business-oriented network, you should be now. If you have just joined, then be sure to spend some regular time — 30 minutes each day, for example — over the next few weeks so that you can get a good sense of what participation is all about.

As you develop your business social networking skills, think about the following ways to get more out of these networks and accomplish more as a direct result of your network memberships:

- Developing a presence to extend your brand
- Reaching out to potential employees
- Gathering feedback about what you sell or plan to offer
- Building a profile of your sales prospects

### Participation Is Everything

The Social Web demands an active presence. On the Social Web, if your profile isn't up-to-date, if you're not commenting, if you're not making connections, you don't exist. "Lights on, but no one home" and you won't get the results you otherwise might. That seems obvious, but I point it out because I see a lot of profiles across a lot of social networks and communities that are evidently abandoned and are now home to what look like virtual zombies taking up residence in so many empty storefronts. Chances are, that's not how you want to be perceived. Before you start building a presence on the Social Web, make sure you can commit to keeping it alive.

Look back at your exercise from yesterday: which are the networks that you get the most out of? Why? Most likely, these are also the networks you spend the most time in, and the ones you get the most value from when you do. In other words, like any other online endeavor, a social network has to perform; it has to do something for you. Unlike conventional TV programming — where someone else has done all of the work and you get to sit on the couch and relax — social networks are built continuously on the contributions of individual members. This partly explains why those members are also protective of the experience they have created, and why they tend to resist the presence of marketers. But it also raises the opportunity for marketers who show up with something of value, *ready to pitch in and lend a hand building the community.*

That is the approach you want to take when joining a network: just as you expect to get something out of your membership, you must also expect to put something into it.

From a marketing perspective, this means first and foremost following the rules of the community. Here is the basic credo for participation in a social network, as a marketer or in fact for anyone:

*As a participant, I will add value to my community. I will not assume a false identity or post under a false name. I will not pretend to be something other than what I am.*

A quick note with regard to the above: by “false identity” I don’t mean “assumed name.” In most of the communities I participate in, I use the handle “evansdave” as it is generally available. In others, I use “digitaldave,” a name that I got almost 15 years ago when my wife and I launched our consulting company, Digital Voodoo. She is “voodoojen” and I’m “digitaldave.” Obviously, “digitaldave” is not my real name. That’s fine. What I mean by “false identity” is a profile name and description that would lead someone to believe you are “Joe Consumer” when in fact you are talking about your own brand or company. This is the kind of thing that can get you in trouble — real trouble, legal trouble — on the Social Web.

How do you avoid even a hint of impropriety? It’s actually pretty easy. Be yourself. Whether I am “evansdave” or “digitaldave,” I *always* include two things: a real photo (generally about 100 pixels square) and (where supported) a set of coded “XFN” links that point back to my primary website. Refer to the XFN sidebar for more about this emerging social protocol. The name you choose can often be enough by itself: A particularly good example is provided by Dell blogger and digital media team member Richard Binhammer. His profile name, “RichardatDell,” makes it pretty hard to miss the connection between his posts and his employment to Dell.

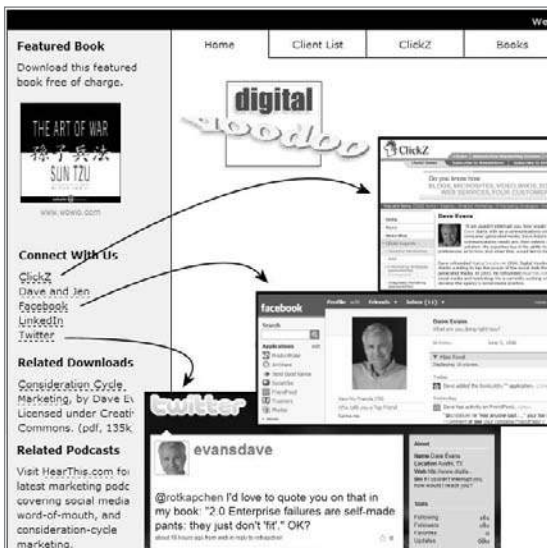


Figure 9.4 Digital Voodoo and Related Contact Points

### XFN: Showing Relationships on the Web

XFN — shorthand for “XHTML Friend’s Network” — is a simple protocol that describes the type of relationship implied by an otherwise ordinary HTML hyperlink. You’ve seen the basic link and a usage such as “more info is here” — where “here” is the link to supporting content. What that link does *not* tell you is how the source of *that* information (the information being linked to) is related to the source of *this* information (the information in front of you now). XFN is intended to tell you: XFN is used to show how information sources are related to each other. For example, on my primary website, the links to my Facebook account are coded as “me,” letting people know that the link to Facebook is a link to “more about me.” Links to my family are coded as “kin,” and links to people I work with are coded as “colleague.” Using XFN, someone who finds me on Twitter can link back to my website and know that it is me in both places, and not just two users who happen have the name “Dave Evans.” For more about XFN, search via Google for “XFN” or visit the XFN information page on <http://gmpg.org/xfn/>.

Through the use of a consistent username and a photo, it is always clear who I am. On top of this, I *always* explicitly disclose any relationship or interest that I may have, for example, when writing a book (as I did in the opening section of this one) or an article, or when posting in a forum about the virtues of social media! When your audience understands your full rationale and basis for participation, they can “discount” as needed, but they can also “credit” you for being an expert and having the personal integrity to take the time and disclose. *Disclosure is a net positive*. If you feel you can’t disclose, you’re pushing your message in the wrong medium.

Setting up for today’s exercise — participation in social networks — the big points are the value of consistent participation and the imperative of transparency. Consistent participation in a social network is a lot like blogging: if you blog once a month, don’t expect much of a following. Blog regularly (and blog well...) and you’ll build an audience. Jive CMO Sam Lawrence offers this perspective on the importance of regular participation: the quote happens to have been made in Twitter; however, it applies equally well to any social network.

*“Twitter should let you search by more criteria. Like, filter people (out) who haven’t tweeted in X amount of time.”*

On the Social Web, participation is important. To be sure, there’s nothing wrong with being a spectator. However, if you *only* watch, you’re not going to earn the credibility that you need when you start talking. If the only thing the community ever hears from you is “Let me tell you about this new product we have...,” you’ll get ignored. On the other hand, if you’re a consistent source of useful information, the community is going to assign some credibility to you and by association to your brand. That is what

you want on the Social Web. The Social Web is not an advertising platform per se, but is rather an adjunct to what you're doing elsewhere. You are building credibility, and then turning that into support for the marketing you do in the channels where more direct forms of marketing are appropriate.

### **Tuesday's One-Hour Exercise**

Look back at your list from yesterday. After today you should be a member of at least two networks. I recommend joining Facebook specifically if you haven't already. Look at the social marketing applications like Social Vibe and Product Pulse within Facebook, and take note of how the level of involvement with the brands, products, and services is different from the interaction with the banner ads. Facebook, more so than many other networks, provides a number of excellent examples of marketing tools that have been integrated into the social experience.

For each of the networks you are in now as well as those you join today, do the following if you haven't done so already:

- Complete your profile
- Post some content
- Add one or more new friends

A few notes are in order. If you don't want to use your own picture, use one of your dog or your car or your city. Upload something other than the default image. For some, an actual photo might be problematic: a predatory ex-mate, a religion that precludes digital images of oneself, or simply your own preference. These are all valid reasons not to use a picture of yourself. In these cases, how about an icon? You can express your personality graphically even if you don't choose to show your face. Mikons (<http://www.mikons.com>) is a social site where you can create your own personal icon in just a few minutes. Complete as much of your profile as you are comfortable with, adding your name, email, personal and professional interests, and more. If you're in the Witness Protection Program, don't use your real name: use your authorized alias. It's OK in this case.

The point here is to give others something to go on when evaluating your posts, your content, and your contributions. Posting everything as "Mystery Guest" might seem acceptable, but for a marketer seeking to participate and gain influence, this just isn't going to work. Upload a picture or an icon. Post some video. Post a comment. Add a friend. Ask a question. The value of the networks that you are in depends on your participation. If you sign up and wait for the information to flow to you, not only is it going to be a long wait, but you will miss the essential element of collaboration and connection that powers social communities. You can see my LinkedIn profile in Figure 9.5: note the "100% Complete" indication.

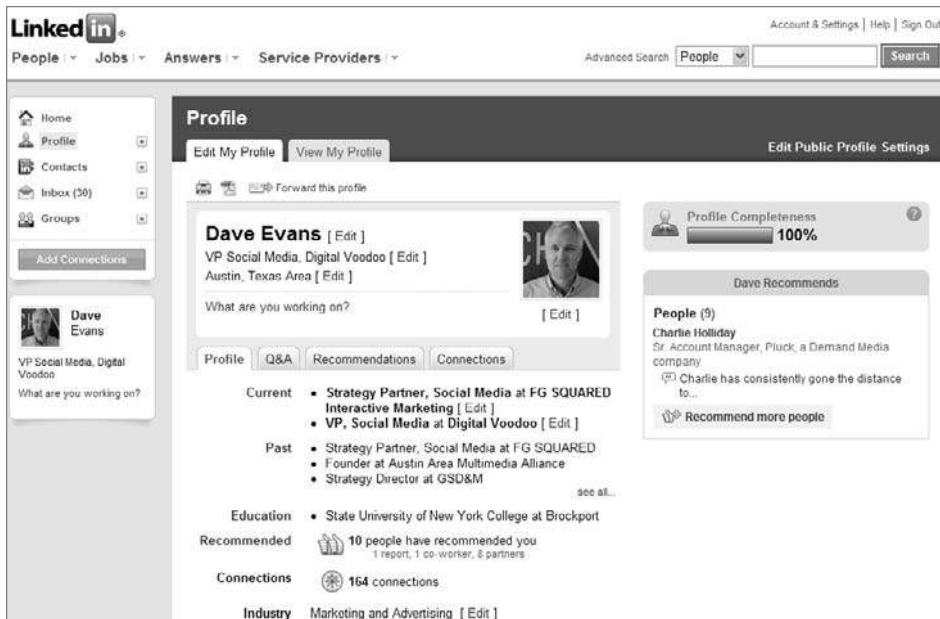


Figure 9.5 My Completed LinkedIn Profile

You may be wondering why I am asking you to do all of this — it might seem more like play than work, and after all the point of this book is work. What I am hoping is that you will experiment and learn, both as an ordinary participant and as someone interested in using social media for marketing. By getting to know how to use different networks while at the same time building an identity based on disclosure, you are setting a foundation for your participation as a marketer on the Social Web.

### Tuesday's Wrap-Up

Today you took another step toward social media proficiency. “Joining a network” may seem trivial, or it may be a new experience for you. Either way, at this point you should be a member of a couple of a couple of social networks. Are you participating? Is your profile complete? Do you have online friends? Are you posting content? Participation — while following the rules of engagement — is the cornerstone of success on the Social Web.

It’s in this sense that the value of the hour-a-day format emerges: you are moving through a series of small steps, getting each of the required elements in place to successfully participate in the next, to successfully tap the new forms of media in ways that complement the work you are doing through traditional channels now. Some days may take you less than an hour, others a bit more. But as you close in on Chapter 14, “Develop and Present Your Plan,” you’ll be in a great position to present a plan, handle objections, and lead a team or direct an agency in the effective use of social media as a marketing extension.

## White-Label Platforms

On Monday and Tuesday you focused on the use of existing social networks. You covered the use of personal networks as participative forums where you can extend your brand, and business networks where you can gain intelligence and make connections. Today's topic — white-label social platforms — is all about extending your presence through your own support forum or community. A couple of caveats are in order: First, this is not for everyone, nor is launching a private platform something you can *complete* in an hour. You *can*, however, get a good idea of why or why not having your own social community makes business sense, and that is what you will focus on today.

There are, of course, a number of reasons why your own social space makes sense. Applications range from customer support to product development to customer engagement. The types of platforms that are available are further testament to the diverse nature of the application of community within a business context. In this chapter, you'll focus on support forums and customer-centered communities. Together these provide clear examples of how social networks can be applied to business issues of interest to marketers (and more) and how different the applications can be in the ways in which they involve customers and engage a larger audience.

### White-Label Platform Listing

You'll find comparative listings of white-label social networking tools online, including a two-part series at TechCrunch. The easiest way to find this posting is through Google: search for "tech crunch white label." An additional listing is maintained by Forrester's Jeremiah Owyang. Using Google, search for "jeremiah owyang white-label social networking platforms" to connect with Jeremiah's blog and his comprehensive listing.

### Support Forums, Message Boards, and Communities

As the name implies, support forums are intended to solve specific product or service-related issues, offer "pre-sales" advice, or otherwise extend the positive experience associated with actually using the product or service. Message boards are often geared toward supporting personal interests and hobbies, health issues, and similar. In all cases, the basic mode of interaction is largely the same: a focus area is defined, topics within that area are declared, and the posts begin. Underneath each post is a series of comments.

As an example, consider a software vendor with several product lines. Within the support community there would be a forum for each of the product lines, and then within each line there would be categories like "Installation" and "Application Development" and "Beta Release Program." Under "Installation," for example, there might

be posts like “Can’t open CD” or “Version 2.0 of plugin failed to install.” Under the post are the comments of those who have encountered the same issue, and, solutions posted by those who have sorted it out. A typical support community — this one featuring Circuit City and built on Pluck’s SiteLife platform, is shown in Figure 9.6.

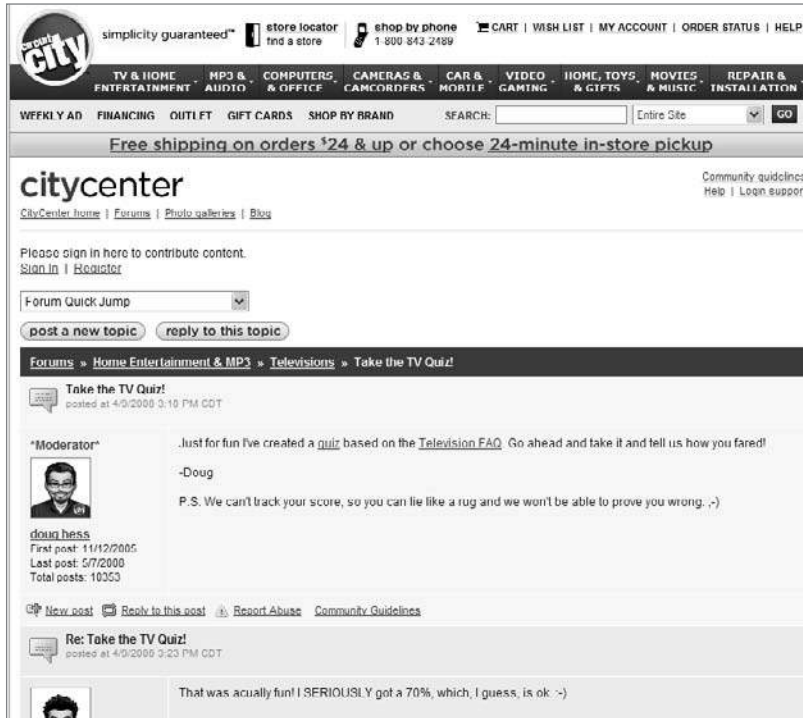


Figure 9.6 Circuit City

The benefits to the business making the product and their customers through the application of online support forums are obvious: The problems are solved more often than not by other customers, lowering the overall support costs. While product developers do a generally decent job of testing and anticipating issues, given the complexity of the “real world,” they just can’t match the range of application environments that are likely to exist. Unanticipated errors occur. Prior to online support the only real remedy was a call to customer service. The problem is, though, that not only is direct, personal customer support expensive and only minimally scalable, the customer support team is often unable to replicate the issue for the precise reason it occurred in the first place: they lack the particular setup or environment that their (now failed) product has been deployed in.

By contrast, there are likely other customers who have similar issues and have resolved them. The online forums allow those in need of an answer to get connected



with a solution that has been developed by someone else. Seagate implemented just such a solution using the Lithium platform: the Seagate Support Community is shown in Figure 9.7. A case study is featured as well in the associated sidebar. When online support works — and more and more it does — it makes everyone happy. The business saves money, customers in need get taken care of quickly, *and the customers who have developed and offered solutions feel a sense of ownership for the well-being of the product and the support community to which they belong.*

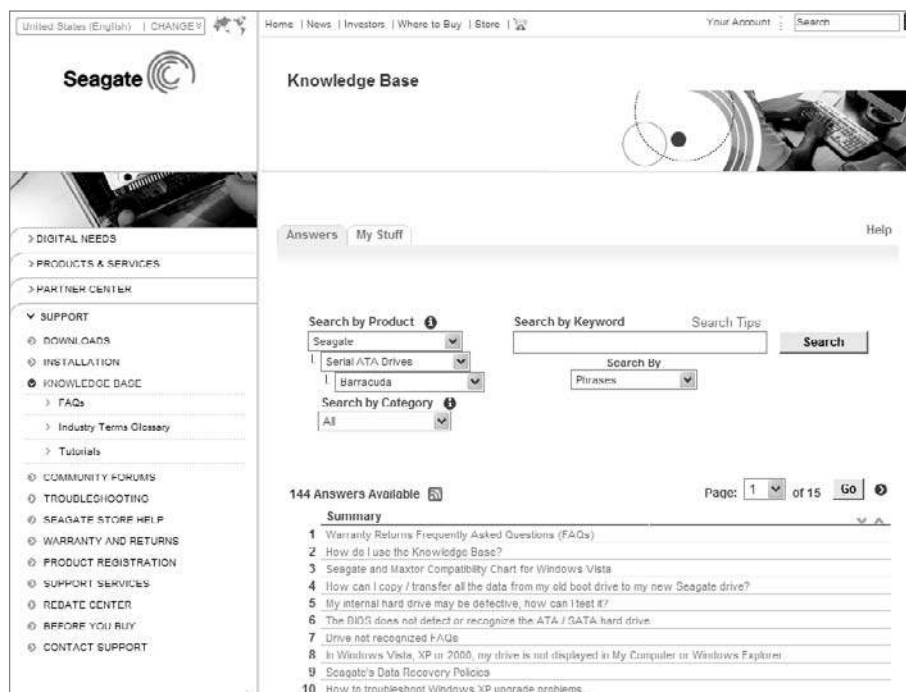


Figure 9.7 Seagate Support

Consider that last point for a moment and your exercises of Monday and Tuesday: communities are built with the contributions of members. When a member of a support community posts a solution, kudos result. This is precisely why participation is so important, and why ceding control to members — who are then empowered to solve problems for themselves — is a winning community strategy. Of course, there is a role for guidance, and this is where the community moderators, either paid or volunteer, step in. Without going too deep into forum moderation — easily a book in itself — suffice it is to say that moderators play a key role in keeping conversations on track, checking that rules are followed, and that problems with regard to the use of the forums themselves are handled. Though it may surprise you, the best *technical solutions* often come from members.

### Featured Case: Seagate Support

Seagate launched its initial Support Community in November 2007. This initiative was driven from customer feedback collected from the company’s ongoing CSAT survey. The survey feedback indicated that a community was the most requested addition by customers to help augment self-service. Since its launch in November, the Support Community has become one of the most highly visited sections on Seagate’s Support site. Based on this success, Seagate decided to launch French and German communities for the EMEA region in late calendar year 2008.

Think back to what social networks are all about: call it the strength of the collective or the wisdom of the crowds. There may be, for example, a post that says “I’ve had this happen. What you need to do is...” and an explanation will follow. Underneath, comments such as “Thank you. That worked perfectly!” attest that this solution is in fact a good one. Future readers pick up on this very quickly, with little or no input from the moderator. In fact, it’s actually easier and less costly in terms of moderation to manage a large community than a small one. Why? Again, turn to the “wisdom of the crowds.” A larger support forum — one with more members and therefore more posts — is going to be collectively “smarter” and more able to take care of itself than a small one. In a community of two people, if they both have the same problem, they aren’t going to be much help to each other. In a community of 2 million, there is a very good chance that at least one of them has already found the solution and has posted it for the benefit of the rest.

### Wednesday’s One-Hour Exercise



**Tip:** For today’s exercise, you can do one of two things: you can do the following exercise using the example cited, or you can pick a favorite product or service and go and find the support for that instead.

Today you’re going to visit Dell’s support forum, built on the Lithium Technologies white-label forums platform.



**Note:** Unless you own a Dell and have a specific issue you’d like assistance with, please do not enter posts. These are real forums. If you have a Dell and have a question, then go right ahead: this is the place to ask it. Remember, this is an active community.

- Go to Google and search on “Dell support forums.” The Dell forums are typically the first link that appears. You can also go to the Dell website and click into the Dell Community. From there, select “Support Forums.”

- Once into the Forums, take a look at the First Time Users area. Here you'll find tips on how to use the forums, the importance of providing complete information, and similar guidance. This is actually an important part of a successful forum. After all, in any social setting — real or virtual — there will be a set of “mistakes” that all newcomers make and some established members that will get irritated as a result. Think back to the rules of etiquette I talked about: this is a good example of just such rules. It's therefore in everyone's interest to provide a “get acquainted” area so that the actual support forums run smoothly.
- After you've looked around a bit, jump into the photo/video discussions. Look at the topics, and in particular notice the number of replies to the various posts.
- Next, click on the poster's names and see what information is displayed about that member: you'll find this link in the Author column. Click on several, and notice how the status of the author changes as the number of posts and the overall usefulness of posts increases. In particular, notice that within the author's profile there are nearly identical personal attributes as you'd expect to find in any social network: name, friends, recent posts, contact info, and more. The support community is just that: it's a community. People get to know each other just they do in any other community.
- Finally, find and click the Who's Online link. This is an almost purely social feature — it is very much about being able to look into a social event and see who's there. Notice too that you can see who's there *without* being logged in yourself — like peeking through a window before deciding to join the party. Why do you suppose this feature is present? Most often, so that members who blab or rant excessively can be avoided!

As well, take a look at the content in these forums: the actual posts, the people involved, and the issues being discussed. Think about the last time you called (on the phone) a customer support unit. As you look through these forums, you'll almost certainly find issues that you've had with a laptop that you own or use, or one that is very similar. In other words, the problem that you waited for 10 or 20 minutes on hold to get help with very likely could have solved in less time through the use of a support forum.

*“My daughter needed but couldn't find the Product Key for her Sims II game. She is recovering from surgery and is very cranky. She gave up trying to find it. I used Google, located a forum, and in it found the directions for retrieving it from the computer's registry. Voila! She thinks I'm a genius now.”*

— KATHY CARLYLE, freelance copy editor

Now put your marketing hat on. If your customers could benefit from similar access to online support, investing in a white-label platform might make sense. Talk

as well with your Operations department: it may well be that online support is actually less costly. This is certainly the experience with Dell and many others.

### Wednesday's Wrap-Up

Today you spent time in the Dell support forum. I picked this forum as an example for a couple of reasons. First, recall a few years back when Dell was dinged for its lack of effective support. Blogger Jeff Jarvis drove a good amount of press (albeit negative, though clearly well-intentioned) through his Buzz Machine blog. To its credit, Dell overhauled its support program and enlisted its *customers* in a big way. Building on this initiative, Dell added IdeaStorm — implemented to capture the ideas of customers as to how Dell might improve and add customer-driven features. More recently, Starbucks has added a similar tool, like Dell's Ideastorm also built on the Salesforce.com "IdeaExchange" platform. Support forums and the idea of reaching out to customers for guidance are a winning strategy and solid social media starting point.

### Customer Communities

The support forum is a near universally applicable social extension for most brands. If you have a user base, you've got the opportunity to build a real community. It may be hard work, but the investment is worth it.

Social communities form around collective interests: in developing a social community — in comparison with a support forum, for example, where the motivation of getting support or assistance is clear, the initial requirement is that there is some activity that is both related to your brand, product, or service, and that this activity is better when undertaken in a social setting. In other words, like any other aspect of social media, from the member's perspective the community needs to fill a need *for them*. Given the investment that you will make — whether in time, costs, or both, the community will also have to fill a need for you. This is particularly true given that the majority of brand-sponsored social communities are free to the member. This generally means that the community is supported directly by advertising, or indirectly by a *verifiable* increase in sales or operating margin (for example, through support-cost expense reduction) as a direct result of online community involvement. When considering the implementation of a social community, there are a handful of key factors that can greatly impact your chances for "success."

The first of these is a definition of what "success" is. Though it may sound odd, this for me goes all the way back to 1994 and the focus of our initial consulting practice — working with companies interested in a website and what it could do for them. Some of our best referrals came as a result of showing clients — again, this is 1994 — why they really *weren't in a position to benefit* from having a website. The issue, from a business perspective, is the same now: social media and in particular the development of a dedicated, online social community can be a powerful element

of an overall marketing strategy *in cases where there is a clear need to be met*. Ten years from now, online support will probably be the “front line” of support in most companies. But today, right now, the real question is “What do you want it to do and how will you know when your network is successfully doing it?” That means showing a measurable return on investment. As a prerequisite to doing that, it means knowing what you are going to build and being prepared to operate it. Next up, then, is preparation. It often begins not with your customers but rather with your lawyers.

**Tip: Who You Gonna Call?** More than a few firms implementing active social media programs have placed legal resources either into or at the direct disposal of marketing teams *to facilitate participation* in social media. If your legal team is an obstacle, invite them to join the party. There are serious issues that can arise, and having knowledgeable, involved, and ready counsel can be a real competitive advantage.



Engaging in traditional media is for the most part “safe.” You can plan, preview, and verify that any claims you’ll make are based in fact. This largely minimizes the risk associated with the campaign itself. With social media, it’s different. Just doing research — seemingly “safe” — can lead to real problems if you aren’t prepared to properly act on what your customers share. Your customers might suggest changing something that you can’t change. Now what? Originally, all they wanted to do was make a suggestion. Now, they are upset because, from their perspective, you asked for input and then ignored it. You’ve moved backwards. Or, your customers may suggest a new feature — and when you go to implement it, your legal team points out that “the customer who suggested it owns part of it.” What is your response now?

These are the types of issues that you need to resolve in advance. As you start to move into outreach — for example, with a blog or other form of social media that involves consumer-generated content — the risks can go up further. Take the case of the pharmaceuticals industry, where regulatory compliance is a major factor in the development of any campaign, and no less so a social campaign. As you genuinely hand control of your message to consumers, what they say becomes part of what could be construed as *what you are saying*. It is therefore essential that you prepare for this: the seemingly innocuous “give your users control” isn’t always the right answer — it’s often instead about working with customer to build the right level of understanding as to what “participation in the process” means. It can be as simple as disclaiming or positively delineating the consumer activities from your approved corporate activities. Be clear that while you may not do everything that your customers suggest, you will consider everything. It may also mean forgoing some otherwise beneficial aspect of social media until such time as you can implement a rational plan. In any event, you want to be prepared for *what actually happens*.

Suppose you launch your community, and your members greet it with open arms. They love your product, and they say so on your new blog or in your community forums. Then you add or acquire a new product, and they *hate it*. You gave them the keys — you can't take them back now. You have to be prepared to use the tools you've put in place to correct the situation. This means you need to forge a tight alliance with operations — where the experience at issue is actually being delivered — ahead of time. Social media and owned-communities, in particular, require a holistic approach that combines the strengths of marketing, operations, human resources, and your technology team.

Oddly, your worst problems can emerge because you are too successful. I am reminded here of a campaign that I had seen where a free t-shirt was being given away on the company website. The marketing director and agency running the campaign had anticipated giving away a few hundred or a perhaps a thousand t-shirts to current and potential customers who visited the site and signed up to learn more about a new service being introduced. At first, things went fine. Then one day several thousand orders came in for t-shirts. The “free stuff” websites — communities in their own right — had linked to the request form. It happened again the next day, and the day after that, too. The website was quickly changed, but the damage was done: people who had been denied a t-shirt exchanged nasty comments with each other, all coming at a cost to the brand. At GSD&M, we ran a similar program: we had produced a free “coffee table” book for UnitedHealth with the intention of distributing the book free-of-charge. It was a straight-up “goodwill” piece. We printed a large number (hundreds of thousands) of books and ran TV in three markets. Through TV, we gave away a good number of books over the months that followed. Through the website, we had *days* where we were giving away in excess of 10,000 books. We were prepared: the whole point was to spread a message of a sensible approach to maintaining personal health as far and wide as possible. The “free stuff” communities drove the success of this program. In summary, be prepared, and think it out in advance. Going further, be doubly prepared for what “success” may bring.

Finally, have a forward-looking plan. You don't have to launch with everything — you can build your social media program as you sort out what makes sense and what doesn't. In fact, rolling out slowly is often the far better strategy, especially when working with new tools like social media. Start with forums, or a basic persona-plus-blog. Even simpler, start by encouraging your current site visitors to review and rate the content that you have put in place. What's helpful? What's not? Consider making registration a requirement for commenting, and start building an audience. Whatever your first step, though, have steps 2, 3, and 4 in the bag: be ready as you may find that your audience wants “more” right away. That ought to be a marketer's dream. By being prepared, and knowing what your “next step” options are, you can at the least avoid a marketing nightmare.

### Thursday's One-Hour Exercise

Today you'll be reviewing selected social applications, built on a range of social platforms. You are welcome to visit any community sites that you currently use, or you can choose from the suggested examples. If you are not currently a member of a community site, pick one or two from the list that interest you and join that community.

*You may need to create an account to fully participate.*

The sites that you will visit are:

- USA Today, built on the Pluck Sitelife platform (<http://www.usatoday.com>)
- Fair Isaac's FICO Forums, built on Lithium Technologies engagement platform (<http://ficomforums.myfico.com/>)
- Bank of America Small Business Community, built on Jive Software's Clearspace platform (<http://smallbusinessonlinecommunity.bankofamerica.com>)
- RealMadrid America U.S.A. Supporter's Club, built on KickApps social platform (<http://www.realmadridamerica.com/vid/clubb1anco.php>)

For each site that you visit, make a note of the following:

- How visible are you, and what is the role of your personal presence?
- How easy was it to join? To sort out what to do?
- What tools are available? Blogs? Ratings? Comments? Friends? Which of these are appealing to you? Why? Which seem to be getting the most use?
- How is the platform being used? What are members doing?

### Thursday's Wrap-Up

Today you spent time in social communities with a business purpose, an extension of the purpose-oriented support forums you reviewed yesterday. The distinction between the two is found in the degree to which the interaction between members is focused on a specific task — for example, completing the installation of a new router in a home network — versus building relationships between members through friend's lists, shared content items, or personal blogs around community-centric content. Sites such as Dell's support forums (with a more extensive personal profile) and tools like "Who's Online Now" fall in the middle.

As you finish today's exercise, think about how a social community might be used to develop a long-lasting connection between you and your customers *by providing them with a genuine purpose for developing long-lasting relationships between themselves.*

## Working with Social Platforms

Social platforms are one of the three major groups of social media that exist when viewed from a marketing perspective. Shown in Figure 9.8 are the groupings and the

components within each. These groups — social platforms, social content, and social interactions — provide literally dozens of options through which you can correctly add social media elements to your existing marketing programs.

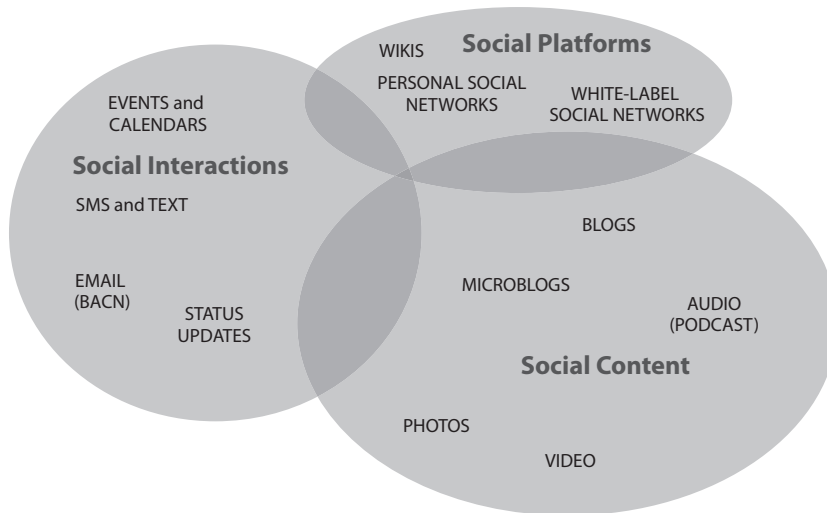


Figure 9.8 Social Media Groupings

If you are working through the exercises as you read this book, look at your touchpoint map and social feedback cycle. The social platforms you’ve covered this week are the “engines” of the conversations that power the social feedback cycle. Each of the touchpoints you’ve identified, combined with the actual product or service experience your firm delivers, sets in motion a conversation that informs *potential* customers as to what a relationship with your brand might be like while at the same time affirming (or calling into question) that same premise on the part of your *existing* customers.

It is in this way that the social spaces play a significant role within your marketing program. Along with your message, there is a conversation going on around you: it involves your customers and your potential customers. This is precisely the point that Forrester authors Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff make in their book *Groundswell* (Harvard Business School Press, 2008). Whether or not *you* choose to participate on the Social Web doesn’t change this: what your decision *does* change is whether or not you’ll benefit from these conversations. By engaging the audience within the social spaces, you can learn from what people are saying. Even if you don’t like what they are saying, and more to the point, *especially* if you don’t like what they are saying, the social spaces and the Social Web in general offer you easy access to the specific things that you have the power to change. If what they are saying is helping — if the conversations are largely having the net effect of building your business — then you have not only the opportu-



nity to further improve (we can all do that) but also to put more distance between you and your competition by engaging the communities that are helping to drive business success.

## Groundswell

Authors and Forrester Research Analysts Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff have written an excellent book on the transformation of markets caused by the social technologies. If you are looking for a reference on the ways in which social media has impacted specific audiences and business segments, I recommend that you read this.



Key to successfully doing this are a few basic rules: be transparent, be sure that whatever you offer is offered for a customer or member-driven reason, and measured either quantitatively or qualitatively. Figure 9.9 shows the BMW Facebook campaign developed by GSD&M IdeaCity and Dotglu. This campaign clearly delivered an experience that participants loved: referring to the associated case study, note that the average participant spent between 3 and 4 hours with the application.

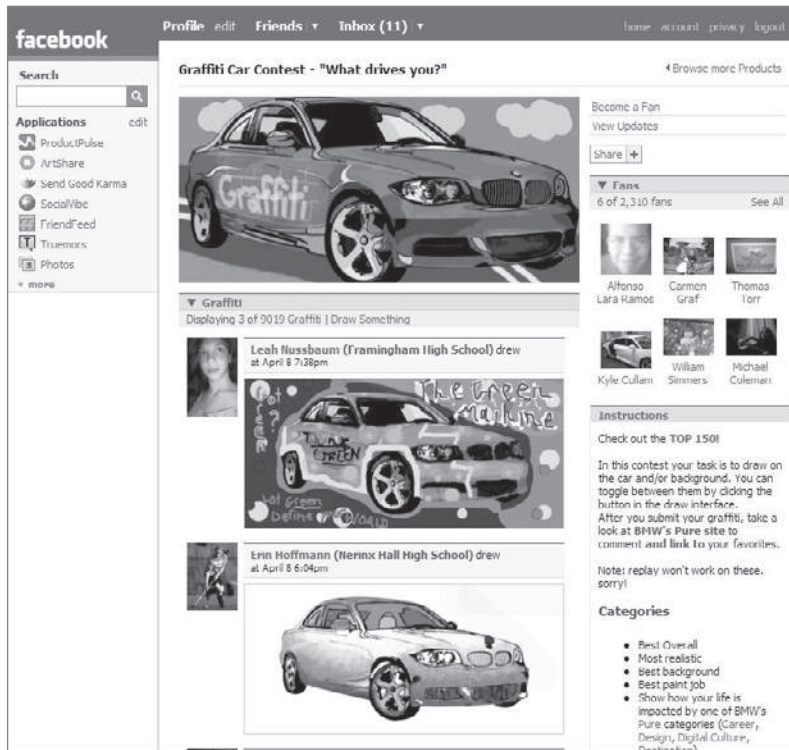


Figure 9.9 BMW Series 1 Launch

### Featured Case: BMW/Facebook Graffiti Wall

BMW's advertising partner, GSD&M IdeaCity partnered with interactive agency Dotglu to create and promote a Facebook "Graffiti" application contest (in partnership with Federated Media) as part of its introduction of the new BMW 1 series. This viral "build your own" application done in conjunction with Graffiti, one of Facebook's most popular applications, allowed users to express themselves while experiencing the design and beauty of the new 1 Series. The top 150 designs were voted on by Facebook members and the winner received a custom-painted model car by a famous artist. Within the first week of the application launch, over 8,400 Facebook members submitted entries, spending an average of 3 to 4 hours each to create and share their own personalized version of the 1 Series.

#### Friday's One-Hour Exercise

Grab your plan, look at your business objectives and your current marketing efforts, and think about how you might tap social spaces. Focus on the following questions that make up today's exercise: write out your answers.

##### Listening:

- What can you learn from existing personal social networks?
- How can you leverage existing business social networks?
- Add the above to your marketing plan: Create a specific initiative for each and connect it to the outreach elements of your current campaign.

##### Participation:

- Low-hanging fruit: Is there an opportunity to use a social tool like Product Pulse, Social Vibe, or a similar off-the-shelf, member-driven social media component? Take a look at the BMW/ Facebook featured case. It was a very smart campaign that used largely existing infrastructure — Facebook and the Graffiti Wall application — and then built on that.
- Add appropriate elements to your plan. Look for points where you reuse or build on current creative or brand assets and where you can integrate these new social elements with your existing program.



**Tip:** The following takes more than an hour, but it's worth it.

### Community Development

- Is there an opportunity to appropriately create a direct presence for your brand in a specific social network? Consider the following: Could your customers increase their own satisfaction through the implementation of a support forum or similar purpose-built community?
- Would your customers readily build durable relationships with you and with each other through a community experience relevant to your brand?
- Is there a current social space that falls short in meeting the needs of your customers now?

If the answers to any of the above are “yes,” then you’ll want to spend more time in considering an investment in an owned social space. For today, identify the connection points between a social platform and your current marketing plan: How would you use a community platform, and how would this change you current marketing efforts? What is the approval process that you would need to go through internally to make this a reality?

Most of the social platform providers either have or can put you in touch with developers able to assist you in developing and launching a social platform of your own. If a community platform or support forum is a promising next step, begin planning for it now and pull in your Operations, HR, and Technology departments so that you are ready to go when the time comes.

### Friday’s Wrap-Up

Pull together the following elements of your plan:

- Social feedback cycle map (Chapter 5, “The Social Feedback Cycle”)
- Touchpoint map (Chapter 6, “Touchpoint Analysis”)
- Dash Board and Report Card (Chapter 7, “Influence and Measurement”)
- Building your Campaign (Chapter 8, “Build a Social Media Campaign”)
- Social Platforms (Chapter 9, this week’s exercises)

You should now have a solid start on a social media plan that fits into or alongside your existing marketing program. Looking at the social feedback cycle map and your touchpoints, look at the types of social media your customers are most likely to use when talking about your brand, product, or service, and the social media your potential customers are most likely to listen to when considering a purchase.

- What are the current metrics that you’ve identified for inclusion on your dash board or report card?
- Which of these lend themselves to the social media elements you’ve just listed?

For example, if your current customers are using video or photo-sharing sites to post content that shows your product in use, there is a good chance that they'd be receptive to a video series or podcast. If you're already collecting web metrics, you're in great shape to collect podcasting data, especially if you've chosen to use the Feedburner service.

Next, look at how you've started to organize your campaign.

- What are the first things you want to try?
- What is your forward-looking plan?
- Are you planning to use off-the-shelf tools to establish a marketing presence in existing social networks?
- Are you going to implement a forum or community of your own?

Add these elements to your touchpoint map, and start thinking about how you will develop a strategy to simultaneously address any touchpoint deficiencies as you add these new social media components.

You've covered a lot of ground now. You've got the basics in place now. As you head into Chapter 10, "Social Content: Multimedia," Chapter 11, "Reviews, Ratings, and Recommendations," and Chapter 12, "Social Interactions," you'll be building the rest of your plan. In Chapter 13, "Objectives, Metrics, and ROI," you'll finalize your metrics and reporting, and then in Chapter 14, "Develop and Present Your Plan," you'll build a presentation and present your plan.

## Chapter 9: The Main Points

- Social networks lend themselves to direct participation.
- Participation and transparency are central to success on the Social Web.
- You can tap existing social marketing applications that operate within leading networks.
- You can use white-label platforms to implement your own community and support services.