

Most companies don't know what to do about social media

Julian Saunders is the author of "A Practical Guide To Media-Neutral Planning" and "Smart Strategies For The Connected World".



Julian Saunders, CEO, The Joined Up Company

I spend a lot of my time training marketing people in different parts of the world. "What to do about social media" is a hot topic of conversation- more so in the past 18 months - and many companies are not sure how to approach it.

"Why is this?" and "What should be done?" are the two questions I am going to address.

Why companies are struggling with social media.

When you think about it, it is not surprising, really. Social media may be big but they are still very young. It is only in the last couple of years that they have become a mass phenomenon with Facebook passing the 600 million users mark (and users spending quite a lot of their waking hours Facebooking) so these are still early days.

There are big barriers to surmount for companies trying to work out a strategy. Here are the ones I have observed from many workshops with marketers on the themes of engagement and innovation:-

What is social media exactly?

Are they an advertising medium, a source of insight, a means of customer service, a place to talk about social commitments (PR in other words)? The answer, of course, is that they can be all or any of the above and more. This closely links to the second problem.

Who is responsible?

This is a big one. Which department needs to be managing your strategy? Is it customers services, CRM, research?

As most companies are siloed, social media does at last cause UK businesses to confront an issue which they have been ducking for a long time and that is this: - Most (not all) companies are organised around sales and not organised around people. They find it easier selling things than understanding audiences and working backwards.

In truth most other innovations in media have not, till now, demanded a fundamental reappraisal of structure. Database marketing excepted, perhaps. But in the end even database marketing/CRM has turned out to be mainly about sending out messages rather than listening and responding.

Social media finally demand a change of both mentality and structure. This links to the fourth problem

It is too difficult.

Sending out messages (ads/DM) to target audiences may not be difficult but listening and responding to individuals is hard work. "Really listening" is very different to "pretend listening" because our antennae

are well-tuned and can easily spot a brand that is outing on an act.

It takes time

Think about ad campaigns as a firework display versus social media which is more like tending a camp fire. The former is spectacular, costs money and is over quickly and the later is intimate, costs time and once started should not be allowed to burn out.

The whole culture of marketing is geared to running campaigns that have a beginning, middle and an end. But once you have created (say) an active Facebook group, it is very difficult to walk away. Take M&S who set up a fan page to celebrate 125 years and got over 100,000 fans. They lucked into it and then they were stuck with it. (But in a good way!)

So it is more than about time. It raises the question, what is our long-term commitment to social media and are we prepared to stick with it?

Is it worth it?

The chances are that social media will be increasingly important, as recommendation and word of mouth are the most powerful form of advertising.

Surveys show (see NOP) that this has always been true, just more so these days. Too much choice and too little time combined with a decline in trust means that we increasingly turn to friends.

The great thing about social networks is that recommendation is just an easy click and "like" button away. That sounds good and important.

But. But. But.... it may be a lot of effort that with no easily measurable outcomes (e.g. sales/improved reputation etc) just lots of intermediary measures (e.g. numbers of visitors, recommendations and dwell time). Closely related to this is another problem.

Is this good for my career?

Social media cannot be controlled so if you are working for a big and/or risk adverse organization, being given the responsibility for social media may be seen as a poisoned chalice. Somebody from on high needs to give you air cover if things go wrong.

Agency folk may be comfortable with risk and



An advertising campaign is like a firework display. It's spectacular, costs money and is over in a flash.



Social media is more like tending a campfire. It takes time and constant attention to keep it alight.

experimentation but spare a thought for the brand manager who spends a great deal of his/her life reporting upwards and justifying his/her existence to a boss who "doesn't get it" or who demands instantly measurable results to stay in post.

Short-termism militates against effective use of social media.

What should companies do?

The answer is, I think, to do with skills, planning and research. And companies need to address all three to get it right. Here is the advice I give to marketing directors:

Skills

Hire or empower people who are enthusiastic about social media and are actively engaged in them already as individuals.

Attending yet another "Media Trends" presentation from your media agency will not advance the cause. The time has come to open up the channels and experiment. The people you empower will know the etiquette of social media. By all means be informal and conversational but don't let that informality stop you bothering with spell check.

Let them be themselves. Try not to crush their personalities, turning them into corporate droids. When Microsoft (finally) let Robert Scoble blog about their products and what it was like to work for the company, he was sometimes critical of his employer, which drew him huge levels of support.

Planning

It is worth pausing and asking the Meta planning question- How do people choose and buy in this category?

The question looks rational but there is every chance the answer will not be. It may well be that response to your presence in social media is mostly unconscious, the act of purchase no more than the result of having heard the brand name recently.

Beware of the R word. Relationships. Binet and Carter have written about this (Admap April 2011). Most people do not want a relationship with most brands. Once you are clear on this, you can be more precise about the level of engagement people want and therefore how social media fit in.

Research

There are more and more specialist companies setting up, who, from working in the field, are gaining insight into what is useful.

This, for example, is the kind of research that you might find useful

- Network analysis
- Closed network analysis
- Sentiment analysis
- Content analysis
- Discourse analysis
- Contextual analysis
- Key influencer identification & ranking

The value of research is that it gives you a map of influencers and an understanding of what people are interested in and talking about. In other words you can do some active and structured listening.

It means you can prioritise your efforts in a way that is relevant and/or useful to those you link up with online.

You may have different audiences, who require different levels of engagement. Given that most people do not want a relationship with you, that enables you to be more precise about what sort of reward you need to give people in exchange for their time. Such as helpful information, practical support, an offer, access to something exclusive, the chance to chat with like minded souls.

People are either busy or think they are busy, or both. There needs to be some value on their time. Research and planning will enable you to define that value.

In a nutshell, to be successful you need to be more professional and apply some planning disciplines. But the most important thing of all in social media is this. Don't forget to behave like a human being.