

The 6C Model of Social Media and Developing a Viral Marketing Campaign

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Abstract

In the physical marketplace different communication tools are used in the buying process of customers. Traditional mass-communication tools (print advertising, TV and radio) can create awareness and this can result in consumers' identification of new needs. From then on other elements of the communication mix take over, such as direct marketing (direct mail, personal selling) and in-store promotion. Unlike marketing in the physical marketplace, the Internet/e-commerce encompasses the entire 'buying' process. Of course, the online markets also make use of traditional mass advertising in order to get potential customers into the online buying process. Market communication strategies change dramatically in the online world. On the Internet it is easier than ever to actually *communicate* a message to large numbers of people. However, in many cases it is much harder for your message to be heard above the noise by your target audience.

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Various strategies for conducting online marketing have been developed in the past several years – from the most common (website linking), to the most expensive (banner advertising), to the most offensive (email spamming), and everything in between. It is almost certain that a continual stream of new market communication strategies will emerge as the Internet medium evolves. How, then, can a Web audience be created? One of the new possibilities in this field is social media marketing. When you sell and buy you will experience that it is part of a social process. It involves not only a one-to-one interaction between the company and the customer but also many exchanges of information and influence among the people who surround the customer. Consumers are much more trusting in friends and colleagues than they are in TV advertising or corporate communication.

Word of mouth (WoM) has shown many more times more effective than traditional print advertising in impacting brand switching decisions. Word of mouth and conversations can take place off-line and online. Like any conversation in a café, the content varies. Some conversations are serious and some fun, some are short and some long, some happy and some angry and intense. In online conversations consumers' experiences with brands and services are often openly discussed, whether companies are involved or not. In this way, consumers are becoming more powerful. Clearly, monitoring the online conversations and intervening, when appropriate, has advantages for brand managers in any B2B or B2C company. Such monitoring can lead to a better understanding of consumer behaviour and feelings of the market mood. It can lead to changes in the different parts of the marketing mix.

Social media

For social media usage and development, the diversity of languages is creating communication challenges on a global basis. Facebook has 800 million weekly users, with more than 70 per cent from outside the United States. To effectively communicate with non-English users, Facebook has 70 translations available on its site, made possible by a vast network of 300,000 volunteers and translators. Facebook and Twitter are mostly interactive social media on an intimate level. As such, these platforms offer direct-selling companies means of communicating with key stakeholders (customers and distributors) in the industry. On the other hand, YouTube, with its more traditional one-way audience communication, appears to be used more effectively for recruiting consumers to become distributors of information or products. One of the 'shooting stars' during the last years is LinkedIn, which is a social networking website for people in professional occupations. Launched in 2003, it is mainly used for professional networking. While Facebook, YouTube and Twitter continue to dominate social media in the USA and Europe, the global scene tells a different story. In Germany, Russia, China and Japan, the most visited social networking site is not Facebook but home-grown rivals. In the old paradigm, the organisation and its agents developed the message and transmitted it to potential consumers, who may or may not have been willing participants in the communication process. The control over the dissemination of information was in the hands of the firm's marketing organisation. The traditional elements of the promotion mix (advertising, personal selling, public relations and publicity, direct marketing and sales promotion) were the tools through which control was asserted.

The twenty-first century is witnessing an explosion of Internet-based messages transmitted through these media. They have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour

including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour and post-purchase communication and evaluation. Unfortunately, the popular business press and academic literature offers marketing managers very little guidance for incorporating social media into their IMC strategies.

Social networking as a communication tool has two interrelated promotional roles:

1. Social networking should be consistent with the use of traditional Integrated marketing communications (IMC) tools. That is, companies should use social media to talk to their customers through such platforms as blogs, as well as Facebook and Twitter groups. These media may either be company-sponsored or sponsored by other individuals or organisations.
2. Social networking is enabling customers to talk to one another. This is an extension of traditional word-of-mouth communication. While companies cannot directly control such consumer-to-consumer (C2C) messages, they do have the ability to influence the conversations that consumers have with one another. However, consumers' ability to communicate with one another limits the amount of control companies have over the content and dissemination of information. Consumers are in control; they have greater access to information and greater command over media consumption than ever before. Marketing managers are seeking ways to incorporate social media into their IMC strategies. The traditional communications paradigm, which relied on the classic promotional mix to craft IMC strategies, must give way to a new paradigm that includes all forms of social media as potential tools in designing and implementing IMC strategies. Contemporary marketers cannot ignore the phenomenon of social media, where available market information is based on the experiences of individual consumers and is channelled through the traditional promotion mix. However, various social media platforms, many of which are completely independent of the producing/sponsoring organisation or its agents, enhance consumers' ability to communicate with one another.

The 6C model of social media marketing

Social media sites (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) are essentially vehicles for carrying content. This content – in the form of words, text, pictures and videos – is generated by millions of potential customers around the world, and from the company's perspective this can indeed be an inspiration to create further value for these customers.

Company and content

The 6C model begins with the company and the content it creates. Basically, the Internet remains a 'pull' medium, in the way that firms seek to pull viewers to its content, and finally to the company itself. However, before any 'pull' can happen, the content has to be pushed (seeded) forward in the chain. Content can take the form of, for example, a Facebook product or brand page and/or a YouTube video pushed out to viewers. Consequently, content pushed into the social media sphere by a company acts as a catalyst for our model of engagement or participation.

Control

The dashed line denoting control in the 6C model is intended to represent a wall beyond which the company passed over control of its brand to the online community and the customers. In order to accelerate the viral uptake of its brand messaging, the company sometimes gives up the digital rights and blocks in

order to encourage online community members to copy, modify, re-post and forward the content. The content is intended to be copied and/or embedded into people's websites, blogs and on Facebook walls. The key point to this stage in the process is that the company (the content creator) must be willing, and even embrace, the fact that they no longer have full control over the content: it is free to be taken, modified, commented on and otherwise appropriated by the community of interest. This may challenge the conventional 'brand management' wisdom stating that managers must keep control of brand image and messaging.

Community

The company creates content and pushes it over the symbolic border of control to the other side, where a community of interested consumers now takes it up. At this point, communication becomes bidirectional. In its simplest form, it is reflected in the art of commenting: posting reactions, on Facebook or YouTube, to the content. In some cases the company can even learn about 'customer behaviour' in the market by following these online community discussions. In an ideal world, a series of reflexive conversations takes place in the community, independent of any action by the company, which will often have a passive role as an observer. When transferring the 'content' into the online community, the company and the content providers often try to target the market mavens, which are defined as individuals who have access to a large amount of marketplace information and who proactively engage in discussions with other online community members and customers to diffuse and spread this content. Market mavens are typically the first to receive the message and transmit it to their immediate social networks. They function as connectors or bridges between different subcultures, and their network of social hubs can facilitate immediate transmission of the content to thousands of online community members.

Customers and online conversation

The ultimate expression of engagement occurs when a multitude of online conversations circle around the phenomenon and content. The 6C model distinguishes between the online community and potential customers, as the latter are usually a subset of the former. The online community may also include people who have heard of the Web-based initiative but not directly participated in it. In general, there seems to be a growing escalation in participation on the part of customers; a willingness to engage with a brand that extends beyond just purchase decisions at the point of sale.

According to the 6C model, social media further extend the conversations between marketers and customers through a feedback loop, which might happen after some online conversation (blogging etc.) in the community. After a period of online conversation the company may have chats with the online community in the hopes of influencing purchase decisions. Moreover, social media initiatives provide marketers a glimpse into the world of customer-to-customer communication, which represents a significant extension of the more traditional advertising and word-of-mouth communication. Social media provide insights into the behaviour of non-customers too. Most social media marketers try to trigger buzz among prospective customers. This has led to social sharing, whereby online community members broadcast their thoughts and activities to strangers all over the world. This social sharing has opened the lives of individual consumers that companies can then exploit to tailor their offerings to better match preferences.

The Internet has radically changed the concept of word of mouth – so much so that the term [viral marketing](#) was coined by venture capitalist Steve Jurvetson in 1997. The term was used to describe Hotmail's email practice of appending advertising for itself to outgoing mail from its users. In the Hotmail case, each email sent arrived with the appended message, '*Get your private, free email from Hotmail at www.hotmail.com*'.

Developing the campaign

Viral marketing is by no means a substitute for a comprehensive and diversified marketing strategy. In employing viral marketing to generate peer-to-peer endorsement, the technique should not be considered as a standalone miracle worker. While the messaging and strategy ranges radically from campaign to campaign, most successful campaigns contain some commonly used approaches. These approaches are often used in combination to maximise the viral effect of a campaign. Successful viral campaigns are easily spread. The key is to get your customers to do the hard work for you by recommending your company or its promotional offers to friends and colleagues, who in turn will recommend it to their friends, and so on. An effective viral marketing campaign can get your marketing message out to thousands of potential customers at phenomenal speeds. When creating a campaign, marketers should evaluate how people will communicate the message or campaign to others.

1. Creating compelling content

Creating quality content can be more expensive than simply offering a free product, but the results are often better. 'Fun' is often a vital part of any viral marketing campaign. The general rule of thumb is that the content must be compelling – it must evoke a response on an emotional level from the person viewing it. This fact alone has allowed many smaller brands to capitalise on content-based viral campaigns. Traditionally, larger brands are more reserved and risk adverse to the possibility of negative reaction. Central to the success of these campaigns is one or more of the following: their entry timing (early), their visibility and the simplicity of the idea.

2. Targeting the right audience

If a campaign is skewed towards a certain audience or certain regions (countries), marketers should make sure they seed towards that audience. Failure to do so may kill a campaign before it even gets off the ground. The influence and, in some cases, the power of reference groups or opinion leaders in individual decision making is significant.

3. Campaign seeding

'Seeding' the original message is a key component of a viral campaign. Seeding is the act of planting the campaign with the initial group, who will then go on to spread the campaign to others. The Internet provides a wide array of options for seeding, including: email/SMS; online forums (Google groups); social networks (Facebook.com, MySpace.com); chatroom environment; blogs; podcasts.

4. Controlling/measuring results

The goal of a viral campaign is explosive reach and participation. To measure the success of a viral marketing campaign, establish specific and obtainable goals within a timeframe. For example, you would like to see a 20 per cent increase in traffic to a website within three months or to double your subscriber rate to an email newsletter in one year. Marketers should also be adequately prepared to meet the needs of participants in the event that the campaign is successful. Server space, bandwidth, support staff, fulfilment and stocking should be taken into consideration well in advance of campaign launch. The marketer should have the ability to capitalise on the full success of the campaign. Mass customisation is the capability, realised by a few companies, to offer individually tailored products or services on a large scale. One-to-one

marketing aims to customise a product offering so carefully that it fits the customer perfectly. Both trends mean that the firm has to communicate more and more directly with customers.

Conclusion

A very important communication tool for the present and future is the Internet. Any company eager to take advantage of the Internet on a global scale must select a business model for its Internet ventures and estimate how information and transactions delivered through this new direct-marketing medium will influence its existing distribution and communication system. Social media marketing can be understood as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the foundations of the Web and then allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. Social media are particularly suited for viral marketing, as the community element in them makes it convenient to transmit the marketing message to a large group of people. Viral marketing is by no means a substitute for a comprehensive and diversified marketing strategy. However, viral marketing is a credible marketing tactic that can deliver positive results when properly executed as a component of an overarching strategic plan. Marketers should utilise viral marketing when the messaging can coincide with and support a measurable business goal.

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