

Social Media: Marketing Public Relations' New Best Friend

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The organizational long term success of promotional campaigns and the integration of marketing communications are affected by the effective use of information communication technologies, including the use of the Internet. Today, the Internet implementation in the marketing process is inexpensive, delivers instant international reach, offers great real time feedback, and reaches millions of people for whom the web is the center of virtually all communications. With social media on a rise, some may say that traditional marketing practices as we know it is phasing out. However, it may also be assumed that they are not necessarily phasing out, but are rather supported by a stronger sibling—that of social media. The aim of this research is to identify and discuss the growing popularity of social media and explore its potential impact on marketing practices and especially marketing public relations.

KEYWORDS *marketing public relations, social media, promotion, consumer generated marketing*

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a natural extension in the communications world. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations ([CIPR], 2010; Kitchen, 2010) define social media as the term commonly given to websites, online tools, and other interactive communication technologies which allow users to interact with each other in some way, either by sharing information, opinions, knowledge, or interests. Social media are often defined in narrow terms (Tuten, 2008) and regarded as synonymous with social networks like Facebook and MySpace. Social media is often characterized as sites where participants can

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produce, publish, control, critique, rank, and interact with online content (Tuten). Examples include: blogs and micro-blogs, video sharing, bookmarking applications, wikis, forums, and opinion sites as well as social networks (Giannini, 2010). What makes social media so popular is the fact that it enables consumers to interact and share information.

With the emergence of social media, companies are now going beyond simply maintaining a website for basic transactional purposes and traditional promotion. They are rather finding new ways to interact with customers, in search of a more long term relationship rather than a once-off sale relationship or one-way communication which most websites may be confined to. According to a research study by a digital communications agency, The Group, 56% of *Financial Times* and Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies now run a corporate Twitter account and the proportion of FTSE 100 companies with a Facebook page has gone up from 25% to 38% (Murphey, 2011).

In the last few years, a number of tools that are typically referred to as consumer-generated marketing or consumer-generated media (CGM) are regarded as the “hottest” tools of MPR. This form of media describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated, and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004). CGM encompasses all the marketing messages and brand exchanges created by consumers themselves which subsequently result in creating word-of-mouth communication and a *buzz* about the brand. The latest trend is for consumers around the globe to demonstrate a preference toward the use of social media in creating messages regarding brands and corporations as well as exchanging them through blogs, video sharing, forums, and social networks. Undoubtedly, social media is a powerful tool that can be used by companies in their integrated marketing communication campaigns since it enables them to interact in an informal and more personal way. Consumers expect brands and their companies to engage with their customers and their *fans*. CGM offers many opportunities to marketers. Increasingly, what marketers are realizing is that social media gives the power to consumers to move from spreading the word about brands from a one-to-one basis to a one-to-hundreds, or even one-to-thousands.

One of the fundamental objectives of marketing is to develop relationships with customers. The internet is no longer only to find information; it is there to enable companies to more effectively engage in relationship building. According to Gummesson (2008) relationship building is the interaction in networks of relationships. The internet can be used to create this network of relationships. Carter (2009) believes that one of the best ways to form relationships and create influencer value is by going socially since now the market has evolved. The Web 2.0, or Marketing 2.0, is a powerful

mix of new and traditional marketing tactics where it allows people to share, collaborate, participate, and co-create forming relationships (Weber, 2007; Tomlinson, 2008; Carter).

The need for this creation of relationships has also brought about the rise of social networks (SNs), one part of the social media platform. Social media networking is not really something entirely new—the foundation is quite old as a matter of fact. It dates back to primitive life when people started to live in groups because they had a need to belong. They lived together, worked together—much like what we have even today. It is a basic biological need to feel belongingness and this feeling can be enjoyed by forming groups. Today these groups are quite more advanced since we belong to a family group, a work group, even a sport group. This advancement has also seen the emergence of these *online* groups. Much like the closeness we may feel within our *real groups*, we may also feel this closeness within our *virtual groups*.

People in groups share information because they trust one another; hence, people who join social networks are thus considered to be quite open about sharing information because they too feel they are sharing with their close friends, their intimate group—although the word *intimate* has now expanded to mean a few hundred *intimate* friends for some people. Now, something shared by one of these few hundred friends is likely to be more believable by any form of message that comes from the outside world. You somehow *know* your friends, and you trust them—you may not *know* a company representative and thus surely cannot trust a stranger. Companies have come to realize the fact that basic word-of-mouth principles are even stronger in this online world.

The use of SN creates awareness and ultimately relationship building. It is clear how the marketing mix, relationship building, the Internet, and SNs make a perfect combination when mixed together. Although some may disagree with the notion that SNs may not be suitable for developing business relationships (Hayes, 2008), nonetheless, the supporters of SNs outnumber the critics (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Fulgoni, 2007; OFCOM, 2008). Hearn, Foth, and Gray (2008) state that in social media, communication may occur through both a computer or a mobile phone, and that communication is typically directed from one to many; however, to be effective, in many cases it should be interactive and an engaging process, which can, as previously state, improve relationship building.

According to the E-Consultancy report (2009), SNs exploded during 2007 and 2008, mainly because of the immediacy of the Internet together with the ease of communicating to a huge audience with a strong desire for self-expression. It is this explosion that has caused many companies to realize the marketing potential of SNs. Although this sudden explosion may have taken many by surprise, the effectiveness of SNs may not be as quick

to reveal. Young (2008) believes that just like any other relationship, the relationships formed through SNs take time to show their value, and, thus, companies need to remain committed to it in order to reap these benefits.

Internet technology means that there are changes in the marketing domain of planning, strategy creation, and especially in market communication (Vasiljev, Cvetkoviv, Kancir, & Pantelic, 2007). According to Jefkins (2000), the dynamic development of the internet will affect all areas of a business and, therefore, will have a huge potential for marketing. Internet marketing involves companies' efforts to market products or services as well as building relationships over the internet (Kotler & Armstrong, 2006). Brassington and Pettitt (2007) agree that since more homes and businesses are getting connected, the internet has now become a very important marketing tool.

Currently there are a number of SNs: to name a few, Facebook [as according to Mintel (2008) the leader in the SN market], Bebo, MySpace, Hi5, and LinkedIn. Facebook was the seventh most popular site on the World Wide Web with respect to total page views (Ellison et al., 2007). The SN sites have different focuses; LinkedIn is oriented toward work related contexts; MySpace was mainly created for unknown musicians to get their music heard; Bebo is targeted for young teenagers. Facebook has perhaps almost all the university student population, which was also the original purpose for the formation of this social networking site. A recent report by Mintel (2010) suggests that online social networking is expanding with 248 million unique monthly users in December 2009. Furthermore, the marketing spend on SN sites has also increased by 166% from 2007, thus reaching \$2.4 billion in 2009 (Mintel, 2010). Facebook groups, for example, can grow at an incredible pace, and it has been known for groups to have formed and grown to more than one million members in just one week (Holzner, 2009).

Adding any new form of communication vehicle requires integration into the overall communication and even marketing strategy. Similarly, social media marketing needs to be incorporated into the overall strategy. Social media requires that companies need to interact and engage with their audience but they should also realized that their customers are now the main drivers of conversations (Brown, 2010).

MARKETING PUBLIC RELATIONS

It is a fact that the way people in the twenty-first century communicate is significantly different with how they used to communicate in the last century. Today nearly a billion people have Internet access and subsequently communicate instantly with others. They are able to retrieve and analyze information about people and organizations instantly with a desire to share the information with others. Enabled by Internet-driven new media consumers have become *intermediaries* and have the power to filter the message.

Today, more than ever before, it has become crucial for organizations to find more credible and durable ways to develop a two-way brand relationship with their customers and prospects, one that utilizes both traditional and new media channels. This new emerging environment has led to marketing strategies that use the fundamental ideas and tools of public relations in innovative approaches, fostering interactions between organizations, products, consumers, and the media.

Marketing Public Relations (MPR) refers to public relations activities designed to support marketing objectives (Harris, 1993) such as raising awareness, informing and educating target audiences, gaining understanding, building trust, giving consumers a reason to buy, and motivating consumer acceptance. According to Kitchen (2010), MPR has a potential to be a leading tool in integrated marketing communication due to the general ability of public relations (PR) to contribute in achieving marketing objectives. MPR is a program that aims at protecting or enhancing the image of a brand and building the brand sales by encouraging a number of intermediaries (connectors) for example the traditional mass media, the electronic media, opinion leaders, and consumers to voluntarily pass a message about the firm or product to their target audiences.

The MPR program is a late twentieth century phenomenon with a wide coverage in the public relations, advertising, and marketing press. It is a tool often used to complement and extend the reach of advertising in reaching niche markets where it may be expensive to advertise. It is also used at certain periods in the product's lifecycle in order to generate interest and excitement. MPR can also enhance the impact of personal selling by instilling trust and long-term relationships with the customers. It can provide that linkage with the customer that nourishes loyalty and continued usage. What was a long-time ago considered to be product publicity, integrated in the public relations effort has evolved into a package of techniques and tools that aim at increasing a company's sales of its products a services. Armstrong and Kotler (2009) stipulate that a number of marketing tools classified as consumer-generated marketing (CGM) have evolved over time, one of which is MPR, in which consumers voluntarily create and share messages and other brand exchanges themselves. The literature reviewed refers to these messages and exchanges as word-of-mouth and buzz. The essence of MPR is that it requires the marketer to hand over his or her promotional message to an intermediary in order to reach the ultimate customer. The intermediary will then voluntarily pass a message about the firm and its products to their audience of businesses or consumers.

Henry (1995) describes MPR as: "a comprehensive, all-encompassing, public awareness and information program or campaign directed to mass or specialty audiences to influence increased sales or use of an organisation's product or service" (p. 3). Giannini (2010) defines MPR as: "any program or effort designed to improve, maintain, or protect the sales or image of a

product by encouraging intermediaries such as traditional mass media, the electronic media, or individuals to voluntarily pass a message about the firm or product to their audience of businesses or consumers” (pp. 4–5).

MPR AND THE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS MIX

The use of MPR has the potential to enhance the impact of promotion in the marketing efforts of a firm and it can complement the more traditional tools such as advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, and direct marketing. This is primarily due to its focus on creating consumers and media buzz which can extend the impact of advertisements beyond the thirty seconds. MPR's media mentions and considerable word-of-mouth communication can assist the firm's sales promotion efforts by generating publicity, can instill trust between the salespeople and the customers, and can overcome the customer's inherent resistance to the salesperson's and direct marketing efforts. Essentially, MPR can work effectively with the traditional promotional tools to generate immediate response, foster long-term relationships, spread word-of mouth, and elicit media mentions.

It is important to recognize that the traditional promotional tools are paid for by a sponsor, usually an organization. At the same time a firm in using these tools does not use intermediaries to spread the message, which is at the heart of MPR. It usually uses the media and for this reason the messages are often faced with suspicion and criticism by the target audience. On the contrary, in the case of MPR, where the messages are spread voluntarily, they tend to be more believable and the target audiences are more receptive to them since they are characterized by a third-party endorsement. This is the most valuable contribution of MPR to the traditional promotional mix.

Media are not the only vehicles for disseminating a promotional message to target audiences. The use of non-media connectors (NMC) to reach out to consumers and create word-of-mouth communication through both live and electronic means is gaining popularity (PQ Media, 2007). A non-media connector is active in a given brand or industry. It can either be a professional in a specific field or simply a consumer with a love for a brand, product, or organization. NMC can be bloggers, experts and opinion leaders, celebrities, but also ordinary people who have a passion for a product, industry, issue, or an organization (Giannini, 2010). NMC can be used by organizations to create a buzz, to spread the word, to create excitement through conversations, blogs, live events, and social media (Voight, 2007).

MPR AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The fundamental difference between MPR and the other types of marketing is the connectors that spread the message. MPR is all about creating a

buzz about a product by encouraging intermediaries (connectors) such as traditional mass media, the electronic media, or individuals to voluntarily pass a message about a product or company to their audience of businesses or consumers. MPR's unique characteristic in engaging another party in the communication process other than the marketer and the receiver creates another dimension in the communication process, which can be both a challenge and/or an opportunity.

Media are not the only communication channels for getting a promotional message across to target customers. Although approaches for using non-media connectors (NMC) have always been used, today they have received a heightened interest. PQ Media (2007) reveals that these techniques whether they are called buzz, grassroots, community, or cause-marketing aim at facilitating word-of-mouth communication through live and electronic means. A non-media connector who can either be a professional or simply a consumer with a passion toward a brand, corporation, or a product category has the power to influence their social circles. Voight (2007) suggests that marketers using NMCs expect them to use their resources in order to exercise influence over their friends, family, professional, and social groups through conversations, blogs, live events, and social media. This, however, implies that the marketer will lose control of the message since connectors usually do not simply transmit messages but they also edit them. As connectors can use electronic media as well as social media to connect with their audiences around the globe marketers have in their hands a great opportunity; to influence their connectors so that they will generate favorable publicity. Social media creates an environment that encourages a two-way conversation that corporations can capitalize on it in a way that can benefit their business and their customers.

Marketers have become increasingly interested in social media since a study carried out by Cone Inc. in 2008 showed that 93% of social media users believe that companies they buy from should have a presence in social media. In addition, 85% share the view that a company should interact with its customers via social media. Also, 56% feel a stronger connection and more satisfaction with the service received by a company when they interact in a social media environment (Cone Inc., 2008).

Social media has become the vehicle *of the day* for connecting marketers with connectors and their audiences. At the same time, it has become a challenge for them since when a marketer shows up in a social network such as LinkedIn or Gather.com this can create a negative reaction among its members. Firms that wish to make a presence in a social network must focus their efforts on creating an interesting content, fostering a community, and engaging with their customers in a more direct, casual, and personal way. Customers embrace and appreciate this and they can become more receptive towards their favorite brands. The change that social media has brought about to communications has been quite significant. Appreciating

this, marketing managers must accept the fact that a great amount of information (either negative or positive) is being communicated by individual consumers to other consumers via social media, and this information is directly influencing all aspects of their purchase and post-purchase behavior. They must also realize that consumers are turning away from traditional elements of the promotion mix, by reducing the reliance on advertising as a source of information. Finally, managers must learn to talk with their customers rather than talking at them which has been the case with traditional media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Furthermore, the majority of public relations professionals state that their job has been made easier because of the use of communication technology by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences (DJ and PRSA, 2007). Social media enables practitioners to directly enter into conversations with their audience, but it is also used to strengthen their relation with them and, hence, their effectiveness. Although practitioners are slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools, they seem very comfortable with blogs and podcasts showing that the future does indeed look digital for them as well (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetster, 2008).

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that traditional marketing has changed. Endorsements are now passed from trusted customers and other third party sources to prospects. Prospects no longer rely on ads solely. They use a multitude of information sources. Marketers must now become brand ambassadors with a real understanding of their brand's value proposition. Word-of-mouth communication and, hence, MPR have not changed. What have changed are the opportunities that enable it. These have increased due to social media. Social media gives the opportunity to marketers to create a buzz about the firm and its products by connecting with people through a dialogue which is more honest and genuine. This brings MPR onto another level—one that has the potential to create stronger bonds with customers, create more positive customer attitudes, and enhance the reputation of the firm.

The literature suggests that there is indeed a development in the way that marketers now communicate with their audience. The authors are hence suggesting that research needs to be carried out in order to support and further develop the literature. A few questions that arise that could be investigated include: do companies also appreciate this development of social media as a communication tool, and specifically as an ally of MPR activities? Do companies use, or do they consider using social media to complement their MPP efforts? How do consumers view social media as a communication tool used by companies?

With social media being in the forefront of today's consumption world, it is imperative that further research is carried out to clarify whether social media is indeed all that it promises to be, or whether it is just another buzz word.

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