## Original Article

# Social media in branding: Fulfilling a need

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**ABSTRACT**   The author, who has worked on the Internet since 1990, and used social networks such as Facebook and Twitter soon after their inception, looks at how these new media can impact on branding.

## INTRODUCTION

WEB 2.0 AND SOCIAL NETWORKS have been hailed as the next media for marketing, its proponents pointing to the presence of politicians and actors on Twitter and Facebook. As mainstream media pointed out that actor–writer Stephen Fry was on Twitter, there was a sudden growth in subscribers in the United Kingdom. A fur-ther mention on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* saw some talk about an 'Oprah effect' on Twitter, spurring growth Stateside. The most complimentary publicity for Twitter, however, was for then-Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign, with some crediting the service for his success.

Each one of these statements has an element of truth to them. There is no doubt that celebrities have managed to harness social media to broadcast to their fans, bypassing the press and setting the record straight. Fans feel somehow connected, as though their idol is talking to them directly.

The Obama campaign, meanwhile, tapped in to a group of voters who are computer savvy. The campaign managed to mobilize people who might not have voted, giving the senator an edge that his principal opponent, Senator John McCain, did not consider.

But how real are these phenomena and how do they impact on branding?

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The author has practised in the social media sphere, and has advised clients on how to build up their presences. This article sets out ideas for future research based on his direct involvement in the field, examining blogs and social networks and their impact on brands, and what organizations need to consider in building their brands using social media.

## WHY BRAND ONLINE?

The case for online branding has been set elsewhere, with the conclusion that most of the same rules apply. Brands still need to be differentiated and communicated to audiences, and it was found that successful online firms in the late 1990s tended to have strong CEO involvement in their websites (Yan, 2001). As the Web main-streamed, countless exceptions emerged: there was no longer a talent vacuum when it came to managing website relations with consumers, and CEOs could step back from answering feedback forms. Staff who grew up in the Web era understood how to deal with online questions; databases with copy and paste answers were developed; and, in some cases, 'knowledge bases' looked for keywords in a submitted question and fielded prepared answers without human intervention.

In essence, the promise of the 1990s' World Wide Web began disappearing: once seen as a democratizing force where stake-holders could speak directly to company heads, especially in the small- to medium-sized enterprises that went online in the early days, it became just another medium.

Blogs were seen as the next step: Chua and Parackal (2009) have done some incisive research into CEO blogs, which give some leaders a chance to provide audiences with an idea of their philosophy. But, in an era of competing media and short attention spans, Facebook updates, fan pages and Tweets became part of the branding toolbox.

Facebook's commercial potential was always present, from the minute founder Mark Zuckerberg took the service away from its North American college-campus roots and allowed non-students to create profiles in 2006. It has become more commercialized (and arguably less concerned with user privacy) (Krishnamurthy and Willis, 2009) since then, in order to capture business and profits through advertising. Originally a site that aimed to connect friends and contacts, Facebook broadened to include groups and fan pages for organizations, creating a closed network of 500 million (and rising) users who advertisers might wish to pitch.

Many flock to the service. Facebook allowed blogs to be imported, forcing more users to stay on the site rather than go to the source. It gave the impression of direct engagement: companies could, for instance, communicate directly with their supporters. It attempted to bridge the gap between organization and audience again, much like the Web and e-mail once did.

The author has observed the growth of the designer Tamsin Cooper, whose Facebook page, set up during the first quarter of 2010, has brought 1118 fans at the time of writing. Cooper lives in a town, Arrowtown, New Zealand, of 1700: the Facebook page has been a way for her to centre her international marketing activities, complementing her website and online sales. Importantly, it allows Cooper to interact directly with her supporters and clients.

On the other end of the scale, Oprah Winfrey, setting up her own television network, has secured, within a week of its launch, nearly 360 000 fans. It can be easily argued that Winfrey's name recognition saw to the speedy growth, but the lessons for her are the same: the Facebook page is now a way for the TV host and producer to centre her marketing, or at least market to an audience of self-professed 'fans'.

Both Cooper and Winfrey tap into a growing use of social networking sites, especially with millennials (18–33 years old) (Zickuhr, 2010), and an even more fascinating trend: the tendency for one group, in this case young women, to use Facebook as a 'core' website. Although netizens have tended to go from one website to another – the idea of Web surfing – this group will spend time on Facebook by default (Watkins and Lee, 2010). Both genders, and netizens under 45 years of age, will tend to visit social networks heavily as part of their daily online usage (Zickuhr, 2010, p. 9), with Facebook the most popular (Lawler and Mollusso, 2010).

Twitter, which claims to have Senator Barack Obama as a user – though later it emerged that the 'Tweets' were those of his campaign team (Kirkpatrick, 2009) – is less formal. One user Tweets a statement of 140 characters, usually an update of what that person is doing. In terms of the Obama campaign, the Tweets pertained to the senator's political speeches and campaign ideals, and followers could ask questions and engage with him.

It was a masterful use of the service. Although it was not Senator Obama himself on there, it gave the *illusion* of his presence. It certainly reflected his views. Second, his campaign team was careful to follow back as many supporters as possible – Twitter users can see who has become a 'follower', giving them an option to return the favour. This, too, satisfied netizens' feeling of being engaged: that there was a genuine belief of a two-way street in communication with the senator.

In the wake of the American presidential election, citizens' feeling of alienation could quickly be dealt with through social media (Alani, 2010; cf. Gladwell, 2010).[1]

Far more trivial, though no less interesting from an academic perspective, is the Twitter account of a fictional character, Jim Keats, from the recently finished television show

*Ashes to Ashes* in the United Kingdom. An unofficial account, it was set up in January 2010, long before the character was introduced on the show. After the show commenced, the Keats account (twitter.com/jimkeats) attracted an average of 100 additional followers per week, of fans wishing to supplement their television viewing with Tweeting – even if it was with a fictional person. Unlike regular Twitter accounts, very few of the 1000 followers the account attracted were bots, surprisingly. 'Jim Keats' interacted with other fictional characters on the service, role-played by other fans. It helped take the program's brand on to Twitter and provided viewers with an additional access point to the TV show.

There are obvious limitations to social media on brands. Neither Facebook nor Twitter can be taken far from their default look and feel, with interfaces that have become very familiar with their large user bases. Although an organization might be able to put some limited visual branding on both sites, they still work within the confines of these websites' interfaces, limiting the semiotic effect that traditional, off-line branding efforts might have on users. The visual cue of the brand is greatly lessened.

It is, therefore, necessary for brands to build a connection with users and fostering a sense of belonging through the engagement itself. Organizations must consider their contact with audiences along the lines of the operator answering the telephone or the flight attendant seeing to the passenger.

In most cases, blogs, Facebook and Twitter are helpful in revealing the thinking of the people behind the brands. They satisfy a need: the desire of engagement with a brand they wish to be associated with, or, to put it in Engeseth's terms, to feel 'one' with the brand (Engeseth, 2005). Their motives are connected to the idea of corporate citizenship and how successful

brands promote their ideas (Ind and Bjerke, 2007). The brand is strengthened through participation, allowing external audiences to identify with it, and become involved in it.

Engeseth's theory is that the separate nature of many brand relationships – the 'them' and 'us' – is obsolete. Companies need to collaborate with consumers not just for R&D, but for everyday marketing purposes. Examples he cites includes Linux, where the user base collaborates on developments to the operating system, becoming evangelists in the process. Wordpress, the blogging platform, is another. Engeseth also points out that Michael Dell spends 40 per cent of his time dealing with Dell computer customers directly. As does Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea.

Brands cannot be controlled centrally or in a top-down manner in these circumstances. Coinciding with these developments has been the rise of virtual working, of people expected to unite under a single banner with a uniform brand despite being based in homes or in spread-out offices.

*Beyond Branding* (Ind, 2003) dealt with the growing consumer desire for transparent brands. There is nothing to suggest that that desire has lessened in the last 7 years: anecdotally, it has grown as social media have.

This, too, would suggest, for many organizations, a change in how they communicate, abandoning the top-down process for something that accepts inputs from audiences to drive strategies.

If the traditional notion of an internal audience's commitment is founded on the belief and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, willingness to exert effort for the organization, and a desire to maintain membership with the organization (Steers, 1977), then social media must touch upon these same ideas, but to an external audience. If that external audience is to become a group of brand evangelists, then

its members must have a deep understanding of the brand in order to communicate the values accurately.

There are obvious savings in communicating the same message to internal and external audiences. By being open, every audience has the same potential access to the same information.

As no member of the external group is 'on the payroll', then they may not see a duty to further the organizational agenda. The principal avenue open to the organization to 'sell' its values to them is dialogue. In Cooper's case, Facebook fans could offer comments about the fashion products the company sold; in Obama's case, there was less one-to-one communication, but the campaign did make an effort to address comments collectively, furthering a sense of community (Schifferes, 2008).[2] The desired outcome of all this work remains the same as with a traditional offline audience: to boost each component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991), most importantly, the positive brand associations held and the perceived quality of the brand.

Continued dialogue helps with growing brand awareness to others as netizens 'like' (on Facebook) something that the brand offers (which appears on their own Facebook profiles, visible to all their friends) or 're-Tweet' (on Twitter) a message from the organization (again, allowing it to appear on their Twitter accounts, so their followers might see it).

## The nine goals of social media in branding

The aims for brands in any social media strategy must, then, serve the organization both internally and externally. If the lines between 'them' and 'us' are indeed blurred, then the organization must, at the outset, (a) build a sense of membership or citizenship with the organization, (b) encourage the acceptance and communication of brand values, and (c) encourage the audience to

engage in dialogue and promote the brand. Strategically, that dialogue can (d) help the organization find and maintain a competitive advantage; (e) inform the vision behind the brand and build differentiation for it; and (f) act as a check on whether the brand is being properly communicated and understood by the audiences. The consequences are to (g) build positive brand associations, (h) build the perceived quality of the brand, and (i) build greater awareness of the brand to audiences that it has not yet reached.

## THE PRACTICALITIES BEHIND BRANDS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The theory behind social networking is sound. Brands must be genuine. Those that are 'surface' or false are soon uncovered. It is no different from a government offering sound bites that seem pleasant to the public ear, but whose policies differ from the electorate. It then risks being unelected at the polls the first chance voters get.

By going to blogs and social networks, people can understand the personalities behind the scenes. In fact, this can prove more useful for the smaller organization because the principal can be the one who writes, updates the Facebook fan page or Tweets. It allows that organization to be more responsive to audiences and consumer demands. It also allows the chief decision maker (Narver and Slater, 1990; Cadogan and Diamantopoulos, 1995) in the organization to grasp the prevailing mood of the public, especially if that person is the one who mans, or at least participates in, the Facebook or Twitter account (Yan, 2001).[3] They are more cost-effective media than above-the-line advertising or even formal Public Relations (Engeseth, 2009), and go some way to levelling the playing field for small- to medium-sized enterprises. If the organization goes online with these ideas in mind, then it is a modern sign of its market orientation: it becomes a learning organization, getting data from audiences directly, providing it with competitive advantage (Slater and Narver, 1995). The dialogue helps refresh the organizational memory, and if the engagement is sincere, allows the organization to break free from narrow-minded thinking and short organizational memory.

Brands that are unsupported by additional media can fail because they are not letting their stories shine through. The importance of 'legends' inside the organization have been shown by many writers and researchers to be important (Gilmore, 2002), providing a hook for brands to be understood internally and externally. Therefore, even the less well presented company, lacking the budget to look as swish as a richer competitor, might be able to exploit a competitive advantage by telling a story without the interference of a communications' department.

The personalities can come through: a traditional law firm might still Tweet but do so in a formal way – writing in complete sentences, never abbreviating or using Internet acronyms and providing useful knowledge to its followers. It would have to stop short at revealing any privileged information. At the other end of the scale, a musician might provide samples of her work online, downloadable through a blog, and connect that blog automatically onto her Facebook page and Twitter account. Regardless of the situation, a unique voice can emerge, one that is sufficiently differentiated from competitors. Cooper has discovered this through her Facebook page, which has doubled in size in less than half a year, thanks to the impression that her fans are talking to her directly – most of the time they are – and the referrals that that dialogue generates.

The organization manages to solve not only the question of differentiation, but it is also able to acquire new information to help keep it ahead. The engagement not

only fulfils the sense of belonging and citizenship, but also has the potential to increase the audience's identification with the brand that the social network represents.

Based on the above, organizations must consider the following:

(a) how to include this level of transparency into a branding strategy, and whether the organization itself can handle the added work. As a part of the vision setting for the organization, organizations must ask themselves if they desire extra scrutiny. Questions will include whether principals are willing to schedule in regular entries onto a corporate blog, and work alongside their communications' department. The structure is flatter. They might want to consider whether they wish to read the feedback personally. Ideally, they will need to ensure that it is their voice and not one that has been too sanitized by communications. The organization has to consider whether these statements appear in a corporate account or a personal one, and the relationship between the two;

(b) it will have to look at researching its audiences and whether they demand the level of interaction that social media provide. Some businesses might not need it because their audiences are not connected online: those targeting elderly audiences might find conventional media to be more useful. The author notes that a growing number of clients are finding that their audiences are demanding, at the last, a Facebook presence. Social media can, with the examples cited earlier, potentially change the face of politics, delivering greater representation and better government, as the public does demand interaction – and not just in election years;

(c) on the issue of proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991), the organization will have to look at extending the rules surrounding its brand usage in to new media. It will also have to consider whether it is to influence the appearance of personal accounts. If personal blogs and Twitter accounts have already been set up before the organization has created its own, it needs to ask itself how official they are;

(d) the organization needs to consider how to measure the success of branding in social media, either through surveys on whether audiences believe transparency has increased, or using other measures, such as brand equity constructs, revenue, market share, or follower or fan numbers.

## CHALLENGES

Labour malpractices, child exploitation and environmental harm have nothing to do with branding, even if, in the eyes of Klein (2000; q.v. Quart, 2003) the profession is complicit. Equally, the misuse of blogs and social media are not due to any inherent problem with the platforms. If certain parties choose to use Twitter as a one-way channel, then it is their choice: there is no rule book that governs the service. However, it would be a wasted opportunity, doing little to promote interaction and understanding audiences. Instead, those that use the technologies as top-down media risk making themselves look separate, going against transparency and oneness. In an era when both are valued, the brand, whether personal or organizational, is weakened through appearing 'above' one's supporters.

An analysis of some of the top celebrities and politicians indicate that they are not engaging their fan base, undermining the use of the Twitter service. There is little or no engagement by some of the most-followed users of the service, including Ashton Kutcher, Oprah Winfrey and

**Table 1:** Twitter ratios of celebrities and politicians

| Person | Following | Followers | Ratio (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| President Barack Obama | 727 145 | 4 039 841 | 18.00 |
| Britney Spears | 418 874 | 4 951 261 | 8.46 |
| Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger | 110 517 | 1 700 646 | 6.50 |
| Stephen Fry | 53 706 | 1 516 591 | 3.54 |
| Jonathan Ross | 4 160 | 564 824 | 0.74 |
| Keeley Hawes | 13 | 7 368 | 0.18 |
| Ashton Kutcher | 561 | 4 942 007 | 0.01 |
| Oprah Winfrey | 192 | 3 577 350 | 0.00 |
| Al Gore | 9 | 2 129 704 | 0.00 |

Figures obtained 25 May 2010.

Al Gore (Table 1). For them, Twitter is a one-way service, an extra broadcast channel, where the relationship with the audience matters less than their own message. However, President Obama, Britney Spears and Stephen Fry have better ratios, indicating, at least, a greater intention to engage. (The ideal number is 100 per cent, although this is impossible to expect, especially when a Twitter account acquires mass following over a short period of time.)

Earlier, the author pointed out that Barack Obama's Twitter account, during the presidential campaign, was not manned by him. It was once said that modern audiences are more media-savvy and able to detect whether a medium is being deceptive, but on Twitter during 2008, many were unaware that the Obama account was run by the Democratic Party, not the senator. Thus, it is as easy to obscure one's identity with these services as it is with any other medium.

Therefore, there is the problem of having someone other than the claimed person behind the blog, Facebook or Twitter account. The organization should ensure that in the case of a shared blog or Facebook fan page, the identity of the writer is known; but ghostwritten media can prompt criticism; this can only undermine the brand.[4]

Once revealed that the Obama account did not contain the personal Tweets of the President, the Democratic Party changed the background graphic to the Twitter account, noting its role, and the number of followers did not increase anywhere nearly as quickly as it did during the 2008 US primaries and the presidential election.

The 'misuse' of Twitter, or of any social networking site, might be defined as the failure to engage sincerely. Interestingly, this failure damages all nine goals of social media in branding: the sense of membership is gone, the audience rejects the brand and the motive to engage is gone. The utility to the organization disappears and it becomes 'just another brand', undifferentiated. The consequences to brand equity are similarly negative.

## Technological concerns

Another fear with brands in the social networking era is that they will fall into the same traps they did with e-mail and the Web, where the interaction with those in charge is gone. Facebook and Google, two brands that rank relatively highly in surveys, are notorious for being opaque: Facebook's privacy changes frequently prompt criticism, whereas there is virtually no support for the free users of Google, unless they are lucky enough to find a person in authority. They are examples of what not to do when it comes to interacting with audiences – people are beginning to question Google's 'Don't be evil' mantra (Petrie, 2010).

The looming problems are also technological. Each medium starts off being exclusive. The programming that appears on that medium appeals to that exclusive audience. However, as it mainstreams, that exclusivity is lost.

For the most part, there is nothing wrong with this diffusion of an innovation. Television would be useless if TV sets cost the equivalent of a motorcar; motorcars

would have failed to transform society if they remained the playthings of the rich.

However, with the democratization of technologies, they have become utilitarian. E-mail was once exclusive; it is now a tool, with few business people using it for leisure as they did 20 years ago. Along the way, spam threatened to make e-mail useless; e-mail newsletters risk being caught in spam filters.

The same tendencies are emerging in the blogosphere, with some websites generating fake entries. Blogger, the blogging platform owned by Google, has been using a bot to detect fake blogs that are created using automated scripts. A small percentage of legitimate blogs have been deleted including, for a brief period in 2010, one for the respected UK firm Minale Tattersfield, which was out of action for 2 weeks. Vox, the blogging service owned by Californian firm Six Apart, is a target of many 'sploggers' (spam bloggers), and eventually was shut down in September 2010.

Twitter, which is much harder to patrol and easier to manipulate, has its share of fake accounts, with programs adding followers and Tweeting fake messages. Reports of Twitter's growth stagnating surfaced in the technological press during 2009 and early 2010 (Gross, 2010).

Facebook, meanwhile, is turning off a small minority of users fed up with its privacy changes – although the carrot of 500 million users is too great for many organizations to abandon it.

All may well turn users away at some point, especially when they feel they can no longer have the sense of engagement and oneness with the brand.

Therefore, although these tools are useful, they may well be replaced by others in the 2010s. Perhaps those tools will integrate visuals and the person's voice, things that are (at this point) harder to automate. For now, they are real, and they need to be considered in a branding strategy.

## CONCLUSIONS

Audiences have demanded greater ethics from brands for many years. However, that demand has become far louder as audiences found their voices through the Internet, in particular, driving a greater awareness of social responsibility in the 2000s. In addition to those demands have been ones for transparency, forcing organizations to work more closely with their audiences. People want to know that they have some influence over the brands they connect with.

As technologies change, social media are where audiences can interact with those brands. They have their pitfalls, with many organizations not building them into their overall branding strategies, or failing to use them to interact. In neither case is transparency increased. Technological problems limit their appeal.

Nevertheless, if used correctly, social media can provide useful tools for the brand as they allow the organization's voice to come forward. With their growing user bases, they provide a means for audiences to engage and access brands – especially among those who use Facebook as a 'default' site. With the right person using these tools – preferably a top manager or an important decision maker – organizations can give external audiences the same sense of belonging that internal ones have, so that they accept and help communicate their brands' values. They might be able to find economy through communicating similar messages to both internal and external audiences.

In return, audiences can help develop the brand strategy, providing real feedback on how it is working. They provide greater connection with management, with audiences being able to affect the thinking of organizations behind the scenes, giving their brands greater relevance and appeal.

The consequence is stronger brand equity for organizations, principally with better

brand associations, perceived quality and greater awareness.

Organizations seeking to build their brands avoid social media at their peril: we may find that their presence in brand strategy is indicative of whether they have a true market orientation.

## NOTES

1  The subsequent major general election in the Anglosphere, the UK General Election, saw the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties employ Facebook and Twitter presences to a better effect, at least in securing followers, than the incumbent Labour government. No study, so far, conclusively links the larger Facebook followings of the winning Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition with their win, nor can the author comment on the level of engagement.

2  The evidence for this remains anecdotal at this point, as no academic studies have been done. During the campaign, there were signs of the Internet being key to building a community for Senator Obama.

3  An example of a responsive CEO is Christian von Koenigsegg, who made modifications to his company's sports car after criticism on the TV show *Top Gear*. A new model was ready for testing within weeks. A larger company would have added the criticism to a longer improvement cycle and the modification might not have been seen for years. The theory behind using the Internet to 'flatten' the organization – in the context of online feedback forms – was also expressed in this article.

4  Especially in politics: opponents of the two high-profile politicians in the 2008 US presidential election, Barack Obama and Sarah Palin, flung accusations about ghostwriting.

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