

Making Sense of Social Marketing

An Allant Perspective



White Paper

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Over the last year or so, we've been focused on better understanding the developing mediums and specifically understanding what social marketing means to you and how to best engage in that space. With our insight, we hope you can better recognize where your brand can have a positive impact in the social space.

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BACKGROUND

As marketers, we all face quite a few challenges in this current economy and of course, making sense of the changing landscape of marketing channels and mediums. Over the last year or so, we've been focused on better understanding the developing mediums and specifically understanding what social marketing means to you and how to best engage in that space. With our insight, we hope you can better recognize where your brand can have a positive impact in the social space.

To start, you need to understand how social networks "work" and how to target dialogues within them. It's very important to follow the dialogue of your customer and to capitalize on it. Because every client is different and every audience is different, there is no "right" answer when it comes to social media/marketing. As the marketplace is evolving, we're watching the development and applications to see where your audience "lives" and how we can interact with them.

Our advice for almost every client is to first monitor the space; either through a listening platform or some social media monitoring and analytical tool. This is important to understand what's being said about you in the various social channels such as social networks (Facebook, MySpace), video sharing (YouTube), blogs, photo sharing (Flickr) and status tools (Twitter). Second, we don't advocate jumping in to the space without a plan. It's time-intensive and counter-productive until you look at being prepared to do so. Once you set-up the platforms, you can integrate them (the right way) for the best SEO to make sure the branding and messaging is consistent. That also means taking the time and resources necessary to train front-line staff and leadership on the various platforms and provide ongoing consultation on best practices, strategy and implementation. At the Allant Group, we work closely with our clients so that together, we'll have to figure out what percentage role we each play for future work.

The big picture engagement and value for clients, is to assist in developing an integrated, data-driven inbound marketing strategy that would include Social Marketing and utilize the tools and audience you already have. Many clients start "tweeting" or creating "fan pages" on Facebook, but don't bring their other resources to bear; customer/prospect database, PR, e-mail, signage, collateral, etc. Our approach includes ideas on how to harness those resources to build the community. "If you build it, they won't necessarily come."

We see three key areas of development in the social networking arena that will have an impact on where the marketing opportunities land in the near future.

We're watching Google's OpenSocial project that allows development of specific applications to work on virtually any social network host. This allows users to port one application or utility to many social network sites in one shot. Facebook APIs (application programming interface) like Facebook connect allow you to port Facebook account information to third-party web sites and share information through that site, back within your Facebook page. And lastly, topically focused social networks that cater to niche interests or motivators are gaining significant momentum and could change the social landscape (examples are Dogster for dog lovers, Rockyou for fledgling bands and Moterus for bikers).

Once you know where to look, you need to master the measurement of response and engagement beyond click-throughs, page views and time on site. Our goal is not only to provide results, but also to learn from those results and do even smarter work next time. One way is to base it on a simple formula that is familiar to most: Actions equal intent; Intent equals Value.

This measure could be unsatisfactory to some since nowhere in the equation does it show the mighty dollar sign, but this is at least one way of showing overall value as it pertains to a measured ROI. Certainly it is not a perfect science, but the take-away is that the higher the level of engagement you are able to create for your audience, the higher the potential level of intent to purchase. There is however one problem: Engagement by itself isn't really a useful measure of success online.

Most people define engagement as time on site, page views per visit or number of clicks - It's really the new way of counting users. While this all sounds useful, chasing engagement tends to be a way to avoid discussing whether or not users are achieving the desired, real-life goals for you and your site. As marketers, we instinctively want massive reach so engagement sounds good: How many millions of visitors did we get? How many friends does our Facebook page have?

As practitioners of social marketing, we offer the following five things that can happen if you replace simple engagement with more specific measures of success:

1. Your creative process and expression will become more focused. It will be driven by consciously chosen list of business and user goals like higher sales, lower costs, higher perceived value and more loyalty.
2. You'll get the credit you deserve, along with bigger budgets because your efforts will be directly tied to the specific value you created.
3. You'll start paying less attention to undeniably interesting, but less actionable, global measures such as the overall number of visitors to your web site. You'll focus on meaningful outcomes in more targeted areas.
4. You'll find it much easier to test and optimize. Today, you can't have a conversation about optimization until everyone agrees on a small number of focused goals.
5. You'll find it much easier to roll out new web sites and products. You can start to focus on getting features right, launching simple but credible user experiences and hitting goals you've established.

WHAT'S IT COST?

OK! So enough background. What should you do next? While you're contemplating how to "test the waters" in social media marketing, your competitors are already there, or planning to be, and your customers have been there for quite a while. "Everybody's talking about how great social media is for marketing, but nobody's talking about what it costs," cry the CMOs. They say: "Tell us the bottom line."

Based on average industry fees from agencies specializing in social marketing, the budget for an effective social media marketing campaign today begins at \$20K for a two to three-month period. I'm sure companies have spent less, and I know they've spent more. Our market research and peer discussions are telling us a \$50K budget can cover the integration of a multi-media site which becomes the center of an online community; perhaps some widgets to help distribute the content, and the integration of Facebook and/or Flickr, Jaiku, Twitter or other networking group to enhance the community aspect of the campaign. Complex functions add to programming and design costs. A high-yield, highly-targeted blog campaign to kick off and support the program will cost an additional \$15 - 25K a month. Google AdWords, email support, co-registration and other tools that drive traffic also would be additional costs.

Look at it this way: let's say your average customer makes a purchase from you three or four times a year. Now you create an integrated marketing strategy that contains truly engaging content, and not just heavy-handed sales messages. You make the content available through a variety of social media tools. You invite and respond to comments – positive and negative. You give people a variety of ways to create content, and contribute photos, videos, tips and news to your site. You let them rate the content on the site and respond to suggestions. Customers now have a reason to engage with your content several times a week, or even daily. Pretty soon, they start to tell their friends about your interesting and useful content. And soon you can watch this involvement reflected in increased sales referred through your social media marketing.

You can measure results through a variety of metrics, including referral drill downs in your site stats, mentions on blogs and in media, comments on the content, real-time blog advertising results, and click-throughs to your company website.

Is it working in the market today? According to a new study by video stats site TubeMogul, users clicking onto video links sent via Twitter spend significantly longer watching those videos than those arriving from Digg or Facebook, The methodology (below) seems fairly robust, so it may offer a real insight into current Twitter usage: **On Twitter you can follow interesting people, not just your friends.**

The disparity of Twitter vs Digg is quite striking, with people spending less than a minute on the Digg-referred video. Perhaps this is because a link recommended on Digg could be posted with a misleading headline by someone you do not know. With Facebook, you are more likely to know the person posting the link, but maybe your friends don't post interesting links. Facebook video links get one minute and 14 seconds of viewing. For video links shared via Twitter, however, users spend a full minute and 38 seconds watching them. Why? Because Facebook focuses on **who you know**, while Twitter focuses **what you know**. Twitter allows you to follow the millions of interesting people whom you do not know. These people will share great information, but you may never meet them. Facebook, on the other hand, limits your feed to a more restricted circle. This may be interesting for intimate news (Maisie is getting engaged), but the open nature of Twitter allows you to peruse the best written feeds in the world on any topic you like.

USING SOCIAL MARKETING EFFECTIVELY

So, now what? What do we absolutely need to know about social marketing relative to our positioning of Facebook and Twitter and using them effectively?

First, let's look at our objectives for Facebook and Twitter integration:

1. **Establish** your company, your brand, your message as an authority on your business by posting knowledge-based, relevant content
2. **Build** a community of loyal brand advocates who are willing to share that content with members of their own networks
3. **Engage** those fans by posting leading comments that inspire them to participate in a conversation, or take action in some other way
4. **Sell** product by regularly posting promotional offers such as limited inventory sales, pre-ordering opportunities, or time sensitive discounts with links to those offers on your main website or a microsite

What is so nice about Facebook for your small business marketing is it gives you all the tools to evolve a social network into an active community. Social applications and plug-ins from other social sites and networks makes your social marketing automatic. We suggest using Facebook as the primary tool to re-enforce your position as a leading authority on your business by posting a link to each entry on your site or blog to keep loyal fans interested. We also believe you can create immediate sales by posting time sensitive promotional offers that drive fans to the website to purchase (1-2 per month suggested).

Other suggestions might be to post more content that will give first time visitors a reason to want similar content on an ongoing basis, such as: Links to articles on the current website or one or two of the instructional videos that have already been produced. You can also create new product category specific photo albums with 3 or more images in each.

Since polls are such a great way to engage fans and keep the relevance we believe is vitally important in social marketing, you should create monthly polls that allow you to collect valuable information about members of your Facebook community. The deeper that your fans engage with you, the stronger the relationship becomes and the more you understand your audience.

You should also remember that with few exceptions a communication should strive to inspire a **call to action**. New fans are not likely to make a huge commitment out of the gate. Make a habit of offering low-risk steps they can take to get more involved with you such as discount coupons, a newsletter subscription, free downloads of value, etc.

Lastly, we suggest you post weekly “happenings” that reflect the brand’s personality and authenticity. Everything points to the success of social marketing stemming from the one-to-one aspect or the “inside view” customers can attain by engaging directly with the company and its personality. That may be best personified by the explosion of Twitter and its appeal to users.

To gain a better understanding of that, let’s start with some data from Twitter directly. Studies show that for many Twitter users, Tuesday is the most active Twitter day. Wednesday and Friday have the second highest Twitter activity. Monday and Saturday are the slowest days. There are also general trends that people will check their Twitter accounts when they first get to work, at lunch time, and/or near the end of their work day.

Twitter is Global. Remember that your Twitter followers are likely from all around the world, so if you post to Twitter from Los Angeles on Wednesday at 12:00 noon, it’s Wednesday 3PM in New York, Wednesday 8PM in London and Thursday 3AM in Beijing. If you’re trying to reach a certain geographic region, plan your posts to match high Twitter activity times in their time zone. A good free time zone tool is available at www.timeanddate.com.

Want to find out the best time for you to Tweet to get maximum exposure and/or clicks on your post links? Try an experiment by reposting a few different high-quality retweet-worthy twitter posts over a couple weeks — reposting them on, say, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday in the morning afternoon and evening — using a trackable url shortener system (ie bit.ly or hootsuite) to determine when your experimental posts are clicked on the most. Repeat the experiment a few times with different content and look for trends. Some suggest it’s worth repeating important tweets up to 4 times in about 18 hours. Typically, that would be evening, late evening, next morning and then the afternoon. But don’t overdo it and turn your readers off, so post carefully and don’t hesitate to ask your readers for feedback.

As for general Twitter “rules of thumb”, we have compiled our Top Five recommendations:

1. First and foremost, you need to know the difference between posting often and spamming. You do not want to spam Twitter. Instead, you are going to want to post meaningful, relevant and readable content that your subscribers are going to look forward to. Spamming is the ultimate mistake that many twitter marketers end up making early on in their marketing endeavors. Twitter is a social network, not a medium for spamming, and if you overwhelm your readers with spam, no one will stop by anymore. It may be tempting to spam, but you will never benefit from it, so do not waste your time.
2. In order to get the most out of your Twitter marketing endeavor, it is vital that you learn how to participate in the community, communicating properly in the process. Twitter is largely a community based social networking site, so while you may be blogging on the site for your own business purposes, you will not get anywhere unless you are willing to participate in the conversation, communicating with other businesses, consumers and other individuals as well to get the word out about your business and to share something of yourself with the rest of the community.
3. Make the most out of your account. Create a profile page with a picture and some information about your company. This allows the people who are reading your Twitter feed to get to know you better, which is what social networking sites like Twitter are really all about. The more your readers are able to get to know you, the more likely they will return time and time again to see what you are writing about.
4. Facilitate conversation. Nobody said Twitter had to be all about sharing information; you can also facilitate conversation by asking questions. Take polls, ask thoughtful questions and come up with other unique ways to get your readers to respond to you in order to better market yourself on Twitter. Conversation is an important part of marketing your company through Twitter, so get your readers talking by asking smart questions in search of smart answers.
5. For your posts to be effective, you need to have followers. Follow relevant Twitter feeds. When you “follow” a new Twitter feed, the owner of that feed is notified. By notifying Twitter feed authors that you’re reading them, you are cluing them in to your existence, which will build traffic for your own marketing campaign as well. Ask your customers to follow you on Twitter. Post a note to your Fan Page asking that they follow you.

Lastly – **HAVE FUN!!!** Make no mistake, social marketing has many aspects of the “wild west”. It’s an experimental and evolving medium with many businesses and individuals learning on the fly. What works for one, may not work for all and we each have unique businesses with our own individual positioning. Get out there, try it and stick with it. Through trial and error, testing and refinement, success will be attained and you’ll find yourself having a truly integrated your marketing program.