

Marketing White Paper:
*The business case for content over advertising in
social news feeds.*

Brand building in social: How to generate shareable content.

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Crowded and Busy

Social media news feeds are a constant flood of companies screaming for attention. And traditional media is full of ads crammed into every possible gap in programming. You can't even go to the movies today without being pushed to buy insurance or detergent. Marketers have no choice but to continue to push their product at you more loudly and more often. In fact, on average, people are exposed to over 500 marketing messages every day:

**American
Association of
Ad Agencies:**

600+

**Consumer
Reports:**

247

Texas A&M:

850

**Average of all
three sources:**

566*

*The often-cited Yankelovich study of 3,000+ messages was omitted because it didn't seem reasonable. With it included, the average jumps to over 1,100 messages per day.

Did you know that Facebook sifts through as many as 1,500 stories per day and prioritizes them into the news feed¹? If your brand is trying to be at the top of that heap, beware: "new widget" will get crushed by "new baby."

So what does a marketer have to do to stand out?

There's hope...

Lee Odden, author of *Optimize*, reveals that [67% of B2C marketers have generated leads through Facebook](#)². And according to Nielsen, [92% of consumers trust recommendations from their friends](#)³.

So clearly, social media is a compelling forum to increase customer engagement, sales, and revenue.

Through regular communication, companies can build lasting relationships and make new relationships with friends of friends. In fact according to American Express OpenForum, [for every fan you engage, 34 of their friends are reachable](#)⁴. It only makes sense to try to inject yourself into the conversation.



TMI!

Every day, millions of Facebook users are busy sharing their most intimate personal details, random thoughts and events, and pictures of what they had for dinner last night. To make that deluge of information as interesting as possible, Facebook employs a complex algorithm to rank the stories that people post so that visitors remain interested. Brands must compete for attention among all those algorithmically relevant posts. Unfortunately, I've got bad news for you: last night's dinner is way more interesting than your product. And thanks to a lifetime of email scams and outright lies elsewhere, Forrester tells us that [only 15% of Americans trust social media posts by brands](#)⁵.

So if your ads aren't working, your answer might be to try to appeal to them with a video ad. But according to Analytic Partners, a marketing data analysis firm in New York, [83% of respondents said video ads are intrusive and will be ignored](#)⁶. Granted, that leaves 17% of 167 million Americans⁷ open to in-feed video ads, which is quite a lot, but advertising to non-fans doesn't work. According to Jon Loomer⁸, a Facebook advertising expert, companies must: (1) Build a relevant audience, (2) Don't inundate fans with ads, and (3) Don't waste money trying to appeal to non-fans.

The Right Way

Regardless of the form (image, video, white paper, etc.), content marketing comes down to providing one of two treats for your readers: entertainment or education. You need to either teach them something new or stir an emotion. That's it. No sales pitches. Zero narcissism. Your audience is the sole recipient of the value, at least initially.

When done well, brands can get a tremendous return from free content. In fact, according to a survey of marketers by iMedia Connection:

- [70% say that content marketing has increased their brand awareness](#)
- [59% believe it supports sales growth](#)
- [45% say it has reduced their advertising costs](#)⁹
- [Content marketing costs 62% less than traditional marketing](#)¹⁰

But all that great content is worthless if nobody sees it. So how do brands create content that will be *shared*? That comes down to understanding and incorporating psychology. Research has revealed a few traits that content should include in order for people to want to share it, in alpha order:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">AweCelebrityHumorPractical ValuePublic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Social currencyStoriesTastemakersCatchy TunesUnexpectedness
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From our research, of all these traits, awe and humor are the most powerful. And that's most likely because we experience these things sitting all alone on our phones. When we're all alone, we share things that are emotional because those things act as a proxy for our communications with others; they give us a means to share *feelings* with people to whom we are not physically connected. In other words, sharing such things gives us a means to make emotional connections with others, no matter how distant they may be.

Other traits such as Social Currency and Practical Value cannot be discounted by any means. Each of the ten traits above can play a vital role in telling a brand's story; it just depends on what the audience is interested in, what the brand hopes to achieve, and how the collaborative creative process goes to get there.

Special note: We consider Unexpectedness to be separate from Awe. The brilliant author of *Contagious*, Jonah Berger, lumps Awe, Humor and Unexpectedness into a single Emotion category, which does make sense. However, we believe being surprised is different than thinking something is awesome. Surprise is intense and fleeting while awe takes a while to settle in and lasts longer. And since Humor is so common and sometimes equally powerful as Awe or Unexpectedness, but altogether different, it's tough to assess videos with such traits using a single Emotion moniker. So, we think it helps to separate the three of them.

Advertising's Place

To be sure, advertising will always be with us. Companies will always need to introduce themselves and announce new products. And consumers will always love to hear about deals and offers. I'm not talking about the end of the Super Bowl.

Also, content marketing takes time and the results filter in slowly, but can leave a deep, lasting and emotional connection between the brand and the buyer. Given this, it is critical that brands integrate their advertising creative with

Facebook's recent push toward direct response¹¹ proves the value of content over overt promotion.

their content marketing creative so they don't negate or contradict each other. They have to be cohesive or else both efforts can go to waste.

And don't get us wrong, advertising *does* have its place in the news feed. Companies will always benefit from promoting offers and other deals in social media. And many of the top viral ads of 2013 were successful partly because they were boosted with ad spending. In fact, Facebook's push toward direct response¹¹ proves the value of content over overt promotion. It seems, given content marketing's success, that they've thrown in the towel.

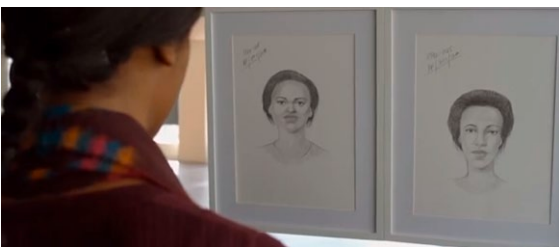
But you'll notice that the top viral ads weren't full of *sell, sell, sell*; they stuck to the simple mantra of providing entertainment or education. And that sole focus of providing the viewer with something of value to *them* ultimately propelled their virality. So some advertising might be necessary to get people to see your content to begin with, especially if your brand currently has few fans.

Some examples

These are a bit dated, but here are some examples of how the psychology of sharing might have helped leading brands to meet their business objectives...

Real Beauty Sketches

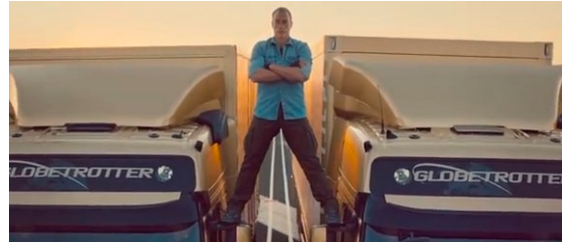
Dove

Possible objectives:	The concept:	How psychology and creative come together to solve the business issue:
<p>To make Dove synonymous with a healthy self-view.</p>	<p>An FBI sketch artist creates two different appearances of the same person: one described by the person being drawn and one from a friend. The resulting illustration that was described by the subject often look less attractive than those described by the friend.</p>	<p>By showcasing contrasting perceptions, Dove illustrates that we are more beautiful than we think, that our beauty comes as much from the inside as it does from the outside. As a result, Dove is "on your side" when it comes to feeling good about yourself.</p> 

Live Test

Volvo Trucks

Possible objectives:	The concept:	How psychology and creative come together to solve the business issue:
To position the brand as being ultra-precise.	Actor Jean-Claude Van Damme stands on the rear-view mirrors of two trucks traveling backward. As they travel, they slightly separate from one another until his legs are split as far apart as they will go. His arms remain crossed, which makes it seem faked.	Some of the viewers think the video is a hoax, though Volvo claims it is authentic. If the video <i>is</i> real, then Volvo clearly delivers a precision product.
To get people to trust Volvo trucks.		If this man is willing to risk his neck clinging to the rear-view mirrors of a couple of Volvo trucks, it's probably good enough for your average trucking company.



Magna Carta Holy Grail

Samsung

Possible objectives:	The concept:	How psychology and creative come together to solve the business issue:
Make Samsung synonymous with cool.	Viewers get a peek into the private world of Jay-Z's creative process.	By making something that is typically private become public, Samsung gives people a window into the life of one of rap music's top superstars during an interesting creative session. By concluding with the Samsung name, Samsung is hoping people connect the company with Jay-Z. The length of the video and depth of content goes way beyond a mere endorsement.



Red Nose Day

Comic Relief

Possible objectives:	The concept:	How psychology and creative come together to solve the business issue:
Raise awareness of their cause.	Pop music sensation One Direction opens up about what they feel about child hunger.	These young mens' powerful emotions cannot be contained. Overflowing grief, coupled with hope, strongly encourage people to donate.



Look in the Mirror

Now take a look at your own marketing pictures and videos. Do they include any of the ten psychology traits listed on Page 4 above? To help in your assessment, you might want to create a table with your top assets listed down the left side and “good, bad, and lacking” at the top of three columns. Fill in each of the boxes based on what you see. If it uses a story, put that in the good column. If that story doesn’t have any emotion, put that in the bad column. If you notice an opportunity to include one of the ten psychology traits above, write it down in the lacking column.

When you’re done, you should be able to use the results to roughly place your brand along the engagement continuum:

Passive Consumers

Active Consumers

Advertising

Shared and user-generated content

Uninterested in you

Engaged (likes, shares, comments, etc.)

If your customers lie primarily on the left side of the continuum, you’re probably considering increasing your ad budget. But boosting ad budgets for promotional advertising in the news feed merely piles more money into yelling at an audience that doesn’t care.

To make a real difference, you need to move them to the right and provide content that will provide lasting value and keep them looking to you for answers and happiness. Sure, it takes more time and the payback is less immediate than promotional advertising, but the results will ultimately mean you can cut back on your ad budget for brand building.

5 Ways to Get More Shares

To increase your chances of getting more shares from your content marketing efforts, consider the following shareability traits...

1. **Be unexpected**

- Show something novel, completely new or a new way to solve an age-old problem
- Creating curiosity will keep their attention
- Songs push messages deep into the brain
- Get out of your comfort zone, people will love you for it

2. **Be funny**

- Just ask any comedian, this is way easier said than done
- Consider a completely different character or setting to make it ironic
- Self-deprecation always works, but only if you know you're not the only one with the situation or condition
- Deadpan also works well, ie. DollarShaveClub.com

3. **Provide Social Currency**

- We feel better about ourselves when we share things that make us look smart, funny, clever, etc. to others
- People also love to be helpful so they share things that provide practical value

4. **Tell a story**

- People lean forward when they are entertained
- We experience personal journeys, not merely watch or read them, so they stick much better than simply describing a product or concept

5. **Leverage others** (known as Influencers or Tastemakers)

- Alignment with your brand is critical
- Consider not the volume of their followers but the quality and applicability to your target audience

In all of these cases, production value is not nearly as important as the content itself. You may need to dig really deep to find the right story, the right way of telling it and the right people to show it. Perhaps a few beers would help get the creative juices flowing. And the perfect hit may not come the first time so be willing to experiment. Some top viral celebrities get by on nothing more than their creativity, drive, and a webcam. What I'm getting at is, you don't need a big Hollywood budget to get more shares, you just need a little brainpower applied in the right way. Hopefully these tips will get you going in the right direction. If you're still stuck, contact us to see how we can help.

Conclusion

While social media is a promising venue to increase your brand's exposure and customer engagement, gaining traction in the busy news feed is very difficult. And in most cases, overt promotional advertising isn't the cure. The answer lies in providing content that people can either learn from or are entertained by. And creating entertaining or educational content that gets passed around requires an understanding of—and more importantly an ability to incorporate—the psychology of sharing. Winners won't see results right away but will slowly earn more and more loyal customers with a lower ad spend.

Endnotes

- 1 [Lars Backstrom, Facebook engineer](#)
- 2 Lee Odden of [TopRankBlog](#)
- 3 [Nielsen](#)
- 4 American Express [OpenForum Infographic](#)
- 5 Forrester; [How to build your brand with branded content](#), March 21, 2013, Tracy Stokes
- 6 [Analytic Partners](#)
- 7 [Facebook earnings report Oct 2013](#)
- 8 [Jon Loomer](#)
- 9 [iMedia Connection](#)
- 10 [Demand Metric](#)
- 11 [eMarketer, "Facebook's New Focus Changes Game for Brand Advertisers"](#)

I'm Dan Clark, the Owner and Creative Director of Interplay Agency. I'm a published author with over 30 years of experience in marketing and visual communications. My entire career has been devoted to creating marketing content and information graphics for the high technology, financial services, and outdoor products industries. I look forward to hearing what you think of this paper...

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