

A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MEDIA PLAN
Part I – Online Presence is Mandatory & Strategic
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Online Presence Is Mandatory

Today a brand's communication strategy must include an online presence. A brand has an incomplete and ineffective communication strategy without a corporate website, Facebook page, Twitter account, or Linked-In profile. These online websites are tools that enable such efficient and effective information-sharing between a brand and its customers that use of the tools have become expected. Three benefit examples are:

- A customer can obtain information when he or she desires
- A brand can inexpensively disseminate targeted information
- A brand can create opportunities for customer engagement

New Business Standard

Just as having a corporate website has become a business standard, it is becoming standard for a brand to have a Facebook page at the very least. In *Beyond Likes, Fans, and Followers*, Rory Webber makes it clear that social media participation is an imperative not an elective. This is evident by the fact that over 70% of today's organizations have an active online social presence (Webber, 2012).

The article *Digital Government* shows how even the United States government has concluded that social media participation is not a luxury; it is a logical answer to operational challenges (Stern & Ibarra, 2011). The authors explain that it is risky to view social media as a fad that will eventual fade, as something that can be ignored.

New Breed of Customer

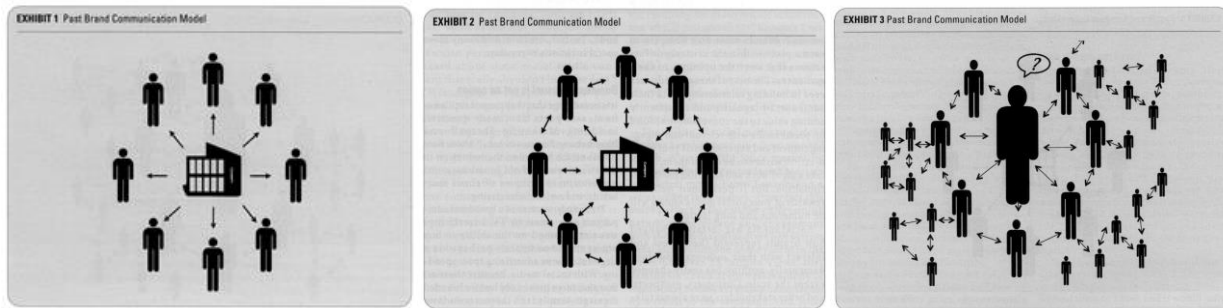
Webber concludes that this new standard is an agency response to the emergence of the social customer. According to Webber, social media enables the social customer to easily and cheaply seek information, solve problems, and voice opinions in a global and highly influential manner. Moreover, the social customer trusts his or her own vast network more than it trusts marketing messages from brands.

Webber believes that every brand has to adapt to best serve this new class of customer, or become irrelevant. Outdated is the brand-centric strategy that pushes a mound of direct mail onto a customer to attain influence. Today's brand must craft its communication strategy knowing that social media cannot be ignored because:

- The scale of the social customer's reach is significantly amplified
- Every brand faces immense competition for the social customer's attention

New Communication Strategy

Webber graphically displays the evolution of the modern communication strategy. Exhibit 1 depicts the old communication style that I have termed the *brand-centric push strategy*. Exhibit 2 illustrates communication during the 1990s when technology began to advance. I dub this the *spoke strategy* because of its resemblance to a wheel spoke; and a play on the word *spoke* to reflect the commencement of large-scale reciprocal communication. Exhibit 3 captures today's dynamic nature of social media with the social customer at its center. This is a *social networking strategy* and it has the most robust interconnectivity to-date.



New Understanding of Social Media

Webber notes a common misunderstanding of the social media concept and its power. The author clarifies that social media is not about the technology itself; but rather the medium that it provides a brand to effectively execute its objectives. Webber prescribes the antidote for a faulty communication model. Simply put, a brand needs to be relevant to its target market; establish and nurture relationships with its key stakeholders; and be the solutions to its customers' incognizant and unarticulated problems. Social media is a tool to achieve these mandates.

The recovery prognosis from operational inefficiencies, unchecked expenses, stagnant growth, customer disengagement, and poor brand management is excellent for a brand that effectively uses social media.

Online Presence Is Strategic

Social media use must be strategic to be effective. In separate works, J. S. Malhi and R. Webber characterize a brand that is active on every online platform as inefficient and poorly allocated. The authors advise that a brand select a few relevant platforms and execute a well-researched strategy.

A well-researched strategy will have these eight components: clear objectives, a comprehensive audience analysis, content guidelines, guest-enhancing functionality, a designated tone, standard operating procedures, measurability, and sustainability (Malhi, Parts I & II, 2013) (Webber, 2012). Both authors suggest asking questions such as the ones below when performing research to obtain inputs for the eight categories.

What does the brand hope to accomplish by being on social media?

Why does the brand's target market use social media?

When and where is the target market most frequently online?

What expectations does the target market have?

Who are the brand industry influencers?

What type of content is popular or preferred among the target market?

Which functionalities add value for the target market?

What image and tone does the brand want to portray?

How will responsibilities be divided among departments?

What metrics will accurately capture results?

How willing is the brand to act on outcomes to maintain and improve its relevance?

Make sure to read our next newsletter for Parts II & III of this social media guide!

References

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