Social Media Insights

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Change the Conversation:
How to use Social Media to Co-Create Brand Success

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When reflecting on **"How Social Media is Changing Brand Marketing,"** eMarketer noted that four in ten brand marketers globally think social [media] creates new challenges to maintaining brand integrity.[1] eMarketer went on to say that social media is scary for brands because "marketers are no longer fully in control of the message." But, did marketers ever really have full control of their message? Possibly not.

For example - wanting to make their brand more modern and contemporary, Gap introduced a new logo in October 2010. The organisation was hit instantly with negative feedback. The new logo did not at all reflect the brand that consumers identified with – "their brand" had a 'classic' Serif look, not Helvetica. After a failed attempt at online crowd-sourcing to develop an alternative, less than one week after launch, Gap reversed its decision.

It has never been a one-way conversation from brand to consumer. As long as marketers have asked consumers to make a brand their "own" – which was long before social media – consumers have joined the conversation. Levi Strauss & Co. holds hundreds of "letters to Levi's" about consumers' love of the brand, collected over the company's 150+ year history, and which are now used as design inspiration.

Consumers join in, because a brand isn't necessarily the tangible product or service that is marketed. It is the 'marker' to the associations and experiences about the entity that consumers hold in their head or heart, together with the promise of an emotional benefit from using it. And, of course consumers, not marketers, own and control those associations and experiences (which is why it is important to understand and measure them).

Marketers are accountable for the brand's business results. And to achieve growth, they might need to envisage a new brand image or identity, thereby creating new associations and experiences for consumers. But, consumers will determine what that change means to them, and whatever it is, it must be relevant. If not, they will jump into the conversation and resist the change.

Looking at Gap, one could argue that the brand marketers focused on the wrong thing, and in doing so forgot the consumers' role in the brand. They focused on what they were changing – the logo – and neglected what the change would mean for the brand and its consumers. The marketers had assumed they would and could control the change and the brand promise in-market. They had not thoroughly assessed how consumers would perceive the change, and interpret what it would mean to shaping their brand experiences. They had overlooked what was most meaningful and iconic to their loyal users. And they had forgotten that consumers, in the end, owned the relationship to the brand.

So, if consumer influence is not new, what has been the impact of social media?

Firstly, it has enabled an instant feedback loop between the brand and the consumer – in a very public and visible environment. Now consumer influence can instantly impact, and even redirect, decision making. But perhaps more importantly, consumers believe in their ability to influence, and are demanding a response.

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Brand marketers should believe in their influence as well. Social media has provided the forum in which passionate consumers can easily and positively co-create, rather than just disagree. The two-way conversation is now possible. For example, Dell operates *Ideastorm.com | Dream it. Share it. Make an impact.* which has received over 10,000 consumer ideas. Dell also provides a monthly "Ideas in Action Update" to let its contributors know what ideas have been fully or partially implemented.

Secondly, social media is a supplementary source of real-time and unfiltered information to understand how consumers are talking about brands. Co-creation and ideation can come from detecting trends. A recent example of this is Nike's MAG (Magnetic Anti Gravity) shoe launch – "the most famous shoes never made" (back4thefuture.com). The MAG shoes are inspired by Marty McFly's footwear, designed by Nike for Back to the Future II.

The development of the shoes was not an internal Nike decision; it was catalysed by the 2005 grassroots fan campaign "McFly2015." It took six years, and a few missteps to get to the September 8, 2011 launch. And what Nike learned along the way from communicating with its consumers, was that the "power laces" showcased in the movie were iconic.
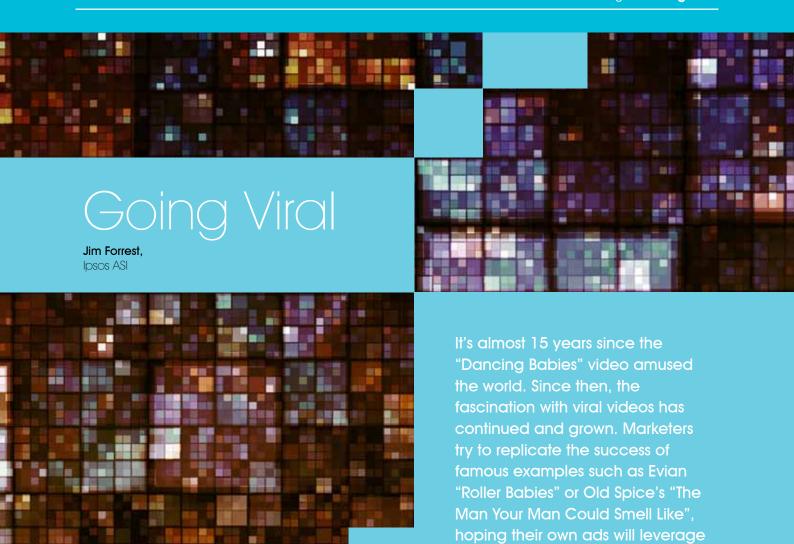
Embracing the co-creation power of social media and leveraging consumers' vision for the brand is a good thing for marketers – it means they alone do not need to constantly re-invent the brand. After its 2009 packaging event, Neil Campbell, president of Tropicana North America did acknowledge that consumers can communicate with marketers "more readily and quickly." Seeing the positive in the situation, he noted that "for companies that put consumers at the centre of what they do, that is a good thing."

And, if brand marketers do not like the consumer conversation, then, as Peggy said to Don Draper on Mad Men, "If you don't like what is being said, change the conversation." Changing the conversation is still mission possible. But brand marketers should have a proper plan and strategy in place to engage consumers. They must embrace social media and learn to participate in a two-way conversation, rather than simply doing a better job researching the right one-way conversation. And, when the right systems are in place complemented with the expertise to focus on the consumer, and what is relevant to them within their vision of the brand, brand marketers can impact change.

1   MiresBall and KRC Research, State of the Brand Report: Building Buzz, Building Brands

Going Viral

Jim Forrest,
Ipsos ASI

It's almost 15 years since the "Dancing Babies" video amused the world. Since then, the fascination with viral videos has continued and grown. Marketers try to replicate the success of famous examples such as Evian "Roller Babies" or Old Spice's "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like", hoping their own ads will leverage the web and social media and take on a life of their own.

But what is a realistic expectation for **what virals can do for a brand**?

Beyond the obvious benefit of free impressions, the two key potential effects are **Engagement** and **Social**.

Engagement Effect

The online environment has unique characteristics that change the way people consume video, relative to TV. From a pure "media reach" perspective, we may not see the levels we see in TV, but in terms of ad recall, it's an entirely different issue. Each time Ipsos ASI has tested an ad that has "gone viral," we have seen some clear indications of the strength of creative to engage consumers.

The three critical trends we see in our dataset are:

(1) Visibility of the ads is very high - if viral ads are anything, they are certainly highly memorable;

(2) The ads generate a powerful, positive emotional response

(3) But the brand can be overshadowed if it is not well integrated into the story;

As is the case for any other type of ad, it is clear that marketers need to launch with a strong piece of creative to engage consumers, but they also need to be mindful of how best to showcase the brand (so that it can truly benefit).

Social Effect

Liking is a very simple social concept – people are more easily persuaded by people, or brands, that they like. Viral ads, used effectively, can bring the consumer closer to the brand, generating such "liking". This supports long term equity and openness to other communication which can drive short term sales effects.

Another simple concept is *Social Proof* - people being more easily persuaded if they think their peers have already been persuaded. So, if someone shares an ad for Brand X, social influence has occurred because the simple act of receiving it implies a level of endorsement for that brand – the recipient has "social proof" that their friend likes this brand in some way. In essence, sharing ads with others is a form of positive word of mouth, and word of mouth is consistently an important driver of positive brand impact.

However, you can't just put an ad or other video up on the web, call it a "viral" and expect it create these effects. Not even Old Spice could do that – follow ups to the initial success did not get the same volume of views.

So – **what makes a video ad become a viral?**

Firstly, we must remember that most "shared" content is shared with only a few people. The more people see an ad online, the more likely some of them will share with a few of their friends. The likelihood of those friends sharing it forward is small, and when shared, it is again shared with only a few people. This has two implications for marketers:

1. Marketers must seed the branded content effectively, using both above and below the line media

2. The ad must be relevant, combining a strong story with a good creative device.

The most viewed content on YouTube tends to be music or user-generated. When ads get to comparable levels of online views, they tend to be movie trailers or ads for video games. Why? Both genres excel at delivering relevant, entertaining stories to fans – in effect, people are already engaged by the content being advertised, so the ad itself does not need to work so hard to engage.

It is clear that "content" - primarily content that tells a story or is entertaining in some way - is what achieves the highest levels of "virality." So what creative elements do ads need in order to be considered sharable, if they don't have the advantage of advertising content which is likely to be sharable to begin with? By combining recent academic research with survey questions, biometric measurement of emotional responses, and analysis of the online comments made around the 10 most viral ads in a given week, we can understand the factors which increase the potential for virality.

1. Entertainment value helps:
Whatever its form – a good story, glamour, dance, music, humour, suspense – entertainment value adds potential for emotional engagement, and provides a reason to discuss and share an ad.

2. Emotions engage:
Ads that evoke strongly positive emotional associations, such as pride, motivation and the potential to do better, help to create stronger emotional engagement with the ad and the brand.

3. A point of reference can make a difference
Whether it is a celebrity which can be linked to the culture of a brand, a recognisable character, or homage to a movie scene or existing ad, a point of reference can add to the virality of an ad.

In summary, what do all these findings tell us about ad virality?

1. Scale (i.e. Reach) is an important precursor of virality – not just the desired outcome

Simply putting a viral ad out there on the web isn't necessarily going to be enough. You need to drive a critical mass of people to see the ad via traditional channels (i.e. TV) online channels (through banners, etc), or below the line through PR. That is, marketers need to use more traditional media channels to generate initial views necessary for the ad to "take a life of its own" in social media and thereby generate incremental reach.

2. People share content that will make them, by association, look good.

Your ad needs to be seen as sharable content. In order to generate sharing, ads should generate an emotional response. A surprise factor, or the inclusion of new and interesting information, can both stimulate sharing. Humour, effectively executed, is incredibly powerful way of generating the necessary emotional response – it strongly increases the probability that your video will be shared.
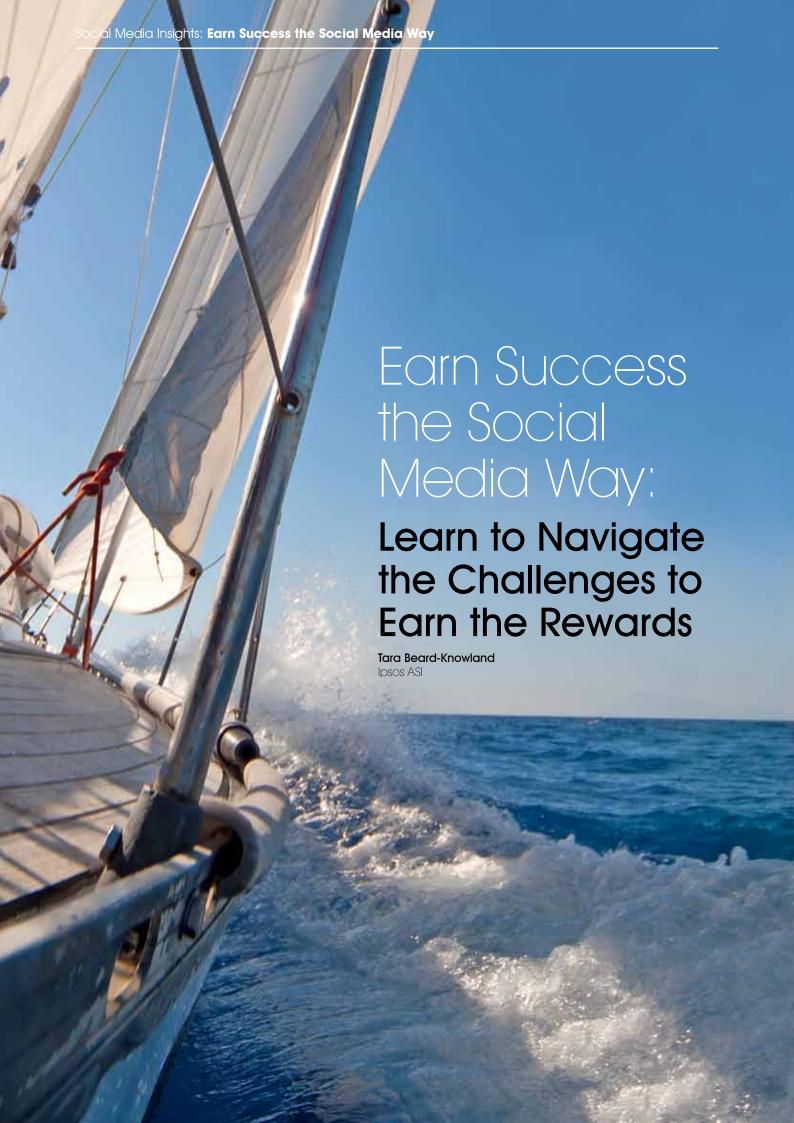
3. Creative is still King – but the brand needs to be integrated.

Make sure the brand is integral to the story and encourages positive associations between the brand and the consumer. Only this way we can expect a positive effect on the brand.

There is, of course, no "magic formula" for creating virals. Even if we wanted to create a set of "rules", we know that some great ad would come along and break at least some of them.

However, it is clear that to give your ad the best chance to go viral, you need to give it a leg up through seeding and some paid spend, and above all imbue it with the power to engage the emotions.

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Earn Success the Social Media Way:

Learn to Navigate the Challenges to Earn the Rewards

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There are many theories about the potentially exponential power of social media. However, brands and advertisers need a reality check – such power is merely potential, and examples of it becoming genuinely exponential are rare. And, the execution of communications through social media is not magic – it does require thought, investment and time. With something as many-headed and fast-changing as the generic "social media," it is both inadvisable and impossible to come up with rules to define how brands can best tap into its potential. However, there are some key lessons that can be a useful guide when planning.

It's called 'earned' media for a reason. You have to earn retweets, likes and viral communication. As your mother told you, you cannot expect something for nothing. If you want to get positive earned media, you need to build credibility in other areas and/or have really outstanding content. This will not guarantee that people will want to follow or like your brand, but it is a good starting place.

You also need to look before you leap. You need a clear social media strategy that starts with the outcomes in mind. 'Twexponential' communication is never going to happen if your brand does not have a social presence. Thinking, 'look at the power of this, we should be on Twitter/Facebook/ etc.,' is not good enough. Like any medium you choose, it is necessary to define what you want to accomplish with social media before you leap. Exponential communication is only one possibility. While it is unlikely to result directly in purchase, you might, like the New York Times, use it to idea-generate through crowd sourcing. You might use it to create brand warmth or advocacy. But, unless you know what your goals are, you will never know when you have arrived.

Social is for life, not just for Christmas. To achieve these goals, it needs to be managed. This means that, if you want to exploit what social media has to offer, then you probably need to employ someone to do this (full time). At least one someone. This is especially the case for business-to-consumer brands (or readers or sports fans, etc.). Depending on the volume of traffic, you may need more than one person.

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The ongoing management is important because it has to stay fresh. We all have become accustomed to a faster speed of change. But this is especially important if you're targeting people under 25. As our Youth in Transition research shows, younger consumers have an expectation that there will always be something new: they are looking for the next big thing. If it is not fresh, you are unlikely to outlive the initial forward/re-tweet.

All of this fresh content also has to be simple. We know from our lessons learned on brand communication that simplicity cuts through better. If it is complicated, you have lost most of your audience before you have even started. Given the character number limitations, this is even truer for social media.

Social has to be involving. This is partly about the content – remember fresh simplicity – but also about the category. For example, washing powder is going to have a more difficult time to capitalise on this platform than a fashion brand, which has actively sought new news all of the time.

If you're not using social media yourself, get in! Experience it on a personal level. David Ogilvy once said, 'The consumer isn't a moron; she is your wife.' We should be saying 'The consumer is you.' If you, as a person, think something is not engaging, it is unlikely to be so. When you first sign-up for any of the many social networking sites, you may follow lots of industry-related content. But ultimately, when you get home and put on your dressing gown to relax, consider this: which ones are you really reading? I would bet that the ones that catch your interest most are seldom the brand feeds.

Should your brand be using social media? Absolutely! But only if your presence is supported by thought, investment and commitment to the platform. Do not just throw something out there for the sake of it: if you put nothing in, you will get nothing out. But if you use it well, you have the opportunity to create advocates that repay your hard work and thought by sharing your content with their friends, family, fans and followers.

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About Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI is one of the largest and best known research companies in the UK and a key part of the Ipsos Group, a leading global research company. With a direct presence in 60 countries, our clients benefit from specialist knowledge drawn from our five global practices: public affairs research, advertising testing and tracking, media evaluation, marketing research and consultancy, customer satisfaction and loyalty.

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