



ARTICLES

Social Media: A Tool for Socialising or Advertising?

by Sa'd Q. Abdel Hadi



crolling through my Facebook newsfeed, the information is a combination of my friends' interests and mine, along with many calls to check out a phone carrier's latest offer and posts incentivizing me to "like" the latest sports product because three of my friends have "liked" it. A site that used to be a means for me to socialize with friends has become packed with advertisements. Initially social media was used primarily for the purpose of connecting with other people—old and new friends, relatives, former classmates, and colleagues.

Fast-forward almost a decade since Facebook's first appearance: social media is no longer limited to this purpose. Now social media is used heavily for business-oriented purposes and connecting to larger audiences to advertise products and engage and share information. This shift makes us wonder as users and consumers: How will changes in social media affect marketing usage and experiences on social media platforms in the future?

In 2013, we saw an outstanding growth of users on social media. Since 2011, Facebook has grown from 600 million to 800 million users; LinkedIn from 119 million to 238 million; and Twitter from 200 million to 500 million. Ask any person over the age of ten about social media, and almost all will mention Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. As established social media platforms, the continued growth of these three is no longer due to the novelty of new technology, but because these well-established platforms have developed necessary purposes for their users.

Social media now presents purposeful usage and has opened the door for amazing marketing opportunities. This move from novelty to purpose is transporting social media to a whole new arena — one to pay attention to in the coming few years.

Many companies use social media as a marketing tool, building fans and followers for their brands. Businesses—small businesses in particular—have gravitated towards social media platforms as a marketing tool because it is an affordable means to generate leads and promote their brand. With the increase of social media users, however, social media as a marketing tool has become less about how many overall "likes" are generated, and more focused on the quality of those "likes." In other words,

a brand's return on investment in social media is no longer solely calculated by the sum of "likes" but instead by a complex formula.

Facebook is now capitalizing on this continually updating algorithm of product marketing, forcing businesses to pay for visibility. Social media platform owners have an opportunity to increase their revenue streams by pressuring businesses to invest more financially in their social media presence. Such developments have resulted in job creation as larger companies invest in social media strategists, attempting to capitalize on their social media presence and branding. Such jobs will continue to change and expand as key performance indicators leap beyond simply generating "likes" for their clients.

The increasing challenge for businesses to have a well-developed social media strategy comes from the fact that consumers have less time. Consumers are experiencing content overload, and with limited time to consume it, they are forced to pick the content that directly matches their interest, using title scanning, recommendations, and "likes" by friends to determine which content is worth their time. With consumers becoming more selective about the content they consume from social media, it falls on marketers to keep up with the latest trends, predict what content will go viral, and better capture their target consumers' attention.





Content clutter makes it difficult for consumers to notice and remember a brand's message. Businesses need a lot of creativity to counter this effect through message development and tools.

From Content Creation to Content Consumption

At the same time, social media has become more and more a resource for information. Facebook and Twitter newsfeeds are gradually filling up with shared articles and pages rather than friends' statuses about walking their dog. Newsfeeds are also filling up with suggestions for media, pages to "like" and products to buy—all recommendations based on friends' "likes" and is perhaps an indicator that Facebook's utility will increase for brands and decrease for individuals. The focus then, becomes on brands creating content that is most likely to be shared rather than focusing on the volume of content creation (i.e., actual number of posts).

Facebook, as a leader in social media, may set the model of our social future once again. With Facebook's two newest and biggest purchases—Instagram and WhatsApp, which both fit into a mobile trajectory—new and different channels for marketing and revenue have the potential to open up. Such changes in social media and marketing is promising for Facebook and exciting for users, but presents yet another dilemma for companies as they budget and plan for marketing strategies via social media.

Social media has experienced rapid and dramatic changes since its first appearance. Social media engagement is the opportunity to understand consumers' needs and offer assistance to improve the experience. At the same time it is clear that the importance of content strategy is increasing. Brands are aware that they need their own original content to disseminate better on social media channels—to "go viral" and get noticed. Ultimately, social media creates a real-time path to target audiences and a community in which brands interact with consumers.

What remains to be seen is how businesses and their marketing departments will adapt to the ever-changing environment of social media, and how such adaptation will fit into rapidly moving technological advancements.

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