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Utilization of social media in marketing classes

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to highlight how instructors may integrate the different social media into various marketing classes. The paper will address the major social networks, and then follow with discussions of microblogging, media sites, and social gaming. Given that there is a great deal of research highlighting the effectiveness of utilizing social media in academic classes, this paper focuses on providing practical guidance as to how social media could be integrated into the classroom, homework, and project experience.

Keywords: Social media, marketing curriculum, classroom.



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INTRODUCTION

As college students are becoming more immersed into the social media as a personal communications channel, the possibilities abound for integrating many of the social media platforms into the classroom, homework, and project experience. The goal of this paper is to discuss the various social media and highlight how instructors may integrate the different social media into various marketing classes. While it seems logical to use many of the social media in online classes, this paper will focus on the use of social media as a supplement to the traditional classroom experience. This paper will begin by addressing the major social networks, and then follow with discussions of microblogging, media sites, and social gaming. Integrated with the discussion will be examples of how specific social media may be used in the traditional classroom and as a basis for experiential learning through project assignments.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

The discussion will begin with the most popular of the social media: Facebook. At the end of 2008, Facebook finally achieved the number one slot over MySpace in the number of users (Schonfeld, 2008). At the end of 2009, Facebook averaged over 400 million active users, although only around 116 million were located in the United States (Saleem, 2010). By the end of 2011, Facebook was reporting a user base of over 800 million people with eighty percent of its users being outside the US (Facebook Statistics, 2012). The most obvious method for integrating Facebook (and MySpace) into the classroom is to utilize examples of marketers who are using those sites to promote their goods. For example, Target, Sephora, Olive Garden and Jamba Juice are partnering with Facebook to launch the Facebook card, a reusable gift card that can be used at the above retailers (Van Grove, 2013). This is an excellent scenario for a Principles of Marketing class or an Internet Marketing class that discusses the interaction of online and offline promotions, the growing popularity of virtual or online currencies, and the consumer buying process. Considering that Facebook is using a phased roll-out of the gift card offer it would also be a useful discussion in a Marketing Research class section on test markets or in a Principles of Marketing class on new product introduction.

Another method to pull the social media into the classroom is for professors to create Facebook pages for their classes which can aid students in keeping tabs on current events, both class and business topics related. This method works for regular classroom situations, hybrid classes and online classes as well. However, before doing so, the instructor should check with not only their university, but their college and department as well for guidelines or rules for creating and maintaining a Facebook page for educational purposes, especially with the use of any school or college logo as the picture on the Facebook page. Many universities are very strict as to who can have access to any logos or symbols and how they can be used in any material, whether printed or online. This will add another channel of communication between the professor and student, which means that the professor will need to spend the time and effort to not only maintain the page, but to answer messages or questions posted by students and possibly delete any inappropriate comments. If a class has group work, setting up a Facebook page for each group to use to communicate with other group members that the professor also has access to can aid in group communication and interaction.

There are some ethical issues that professors should think through before setting up a Facebook page for their class. First, the instructor must decide whether to require the class to

“like” the Facebook page or whether it is optional for the student to subscribe to the page. This decision will impact the type of material posted on the page. The division between the personal and professional world may start to overlap especially with student postings on Facebook in general since the professor will possibly learn a great deal of detail about the students’ personal lives and school habits due to now having access to the feeds off of their personal pages. Most students do not use any of the filtering tools that Facebook possesses which allow for certain groups to see or not see specific posts, so they professor will see everything that the student posts. Many students like having a Facebook page for a class since it keeps them updated on class announcements (and they are using the social media, with over three quarters of the Millennial Generation having a social media account (Pew, 2010)). For example, what happens when a student posts about how much they partied over the weekend and how hung-over they are and then calls or emails the professor on Monday to say they have the flu? Situations such as this may raise more questions than answers as to whether the benefits of a class Facebook page outweigh the time and effort spent to maintain the page (Stripling, 2010). This kind of situation does provide a “learning opportunity” to review with any class the privacy settings on Facebook (along with the other social media) and how one’s online presence in general may negatively impact one’s professional world. Given that in a current study, nearly seventy percent of human resource professionals had rejected a job candidate due to postings on a social networking site, this offers an excellent opportunity to have an interactive discussion with the class about online screening of job applicants (Repler, 2011) and what should be made public or private on Facebook (or any other social media outlet, blog or website).

No discussion of social networks is complete without a look at LinkedIn, the business social networking site. Students tend to not be aware of it, but it would be useful for them to be knowledgeable of its benefits as part of career networking. An assignment to have a student setup a LinkedIn account would be an excellent career tool since nearly half of human resource professionals look up applicants’ LinkedIn accounts (Repler, 2011) and it is expected of a job applicant in the social media world to have a professional LinkedIn account, especially since there are situations of students finding work through endorsements through LinkedIn contacts (Wecker, 2012). Examples of marketing related groups on LinkedIn include the American Marketing Association Group with over 9,700 members who have discussions on everything from how to explain social media effectiveness to their upper level managers to job and internship openings along with dealing with AdWords campaigns and other relevant professional topics; however one must be a member of AMA to join the LinkedIn group (one must supply a valid AMA member number to be allowed to join). More specific marketing related groups include the eMarketing Association (nearly half a million members), Digital Marketing (over 40,000 members), Advertising Professionals (nearly 90,000 members), Logistics and Supply Chain Network (with over 110,000 members), and Macy’s Alumni Group (with over 7,000 past and present employees) (LinkedIn, 2013). The alumni organizations and career services of many colleges tend to have a presence on LinkedIn as well.

The newest entrant online the social networking scene is Google+ (Plus), launched in 2011 which features different “circles” and allows the user to select what content each circle sees or does not see (Kaste, 2011). The numbers are rather sketchy due to Google’s forced sign-up process, but it is reported that ninety million users have signed-up to the new social media site (Bodkin, 2012). Along with the international social networking sites such as Orkut and VK, there are multiple niche social networks in operation: Best of All Words (aimed at the top 1% of Internet users), MapMyRide (for cyclists), and Battlenet (for gamers) to name a varied few

(Arno, 2012). For an overview of the various social media highlighted in the paper, refer to Table 1 at the end of the paper.

MICROBLOGGING

Are you twittering? Have you ever posted a tweet? Twitter answers the question: what are you doing right now? One then has 140 characters to post (or tweet) the answer to that question. In January 2010, over 75 million people visited the twitter site, with 23.5 million of them being U.S. visitors, which amounts to around 50 million tweets posted a day (Wilhelm, 2010). Over a year later, the 50 million tweets a day have grown to over 140 million tweets a day (Twitter Blog, 2011). Coming into the forefront in 2008 was microblogging, which is blogging done with size or space constraints by posting brief message (Merriam Webster, 2013). Many of the large companies have a twitter presence: Coca-Cola (@CocaCola with 650,000 followers), Starbucks (@Starbucks with over 3.3 million followers), Dell Outlet (@DellOutlet with 1.5 million followers), Ebay (@Ebay with 183,000 followers) as compared to Etsy (@Etsy with 1.8 million followers), and Kraft Foods (@KraftFoods with 44,000 followers) to name a few. Many companies also have multiple Twitter accounts based on usage, products, or geographic areas. @StarbucksUK has almost 200,000 followers to go along with the main Starbucks account- the @Starbucks Card even has 47,000 plus followers! Amazon has two twitter accounts; one it uses for general purpose information (@Amazon with 433,000 followers) and one for information on sales, promotions and discounts (@Amazondeals with 330,000 followers) (Twitter Searches, 2013). Marketers also use twitter to post about new products, new videos posted on YouTube or Vimeo (it allows a short url address to be in the “tweet”), coupon codes or links for purchasing at their e-commerce sites, charity functions they are involved with, recipes using their products, and many others. Panera Bread is currently offering a hidden menu that is only available to specific customers through their MyRewards program and social media sites such as twitter (Solomon, 2013). Customers then can walk up to the retail counter and say that they want to order off of the hidden menu and what they want to order. This requires that Panera integrate the online and offline operations of their company so that retail personnel know what the customer is ordering, an interesting discussion to have in many marketing classes or a services marketing class. Companies also have to be prepared to monitor and respond to tweets since many customers use it to complain about anything from lousy customer service to bad food and out of stock items.

Twitter can be accessed (and searched) without having to sign up for an account which makes it simple to demonstrate a firm’s twitter page in class. A professor could also set-up a twitter page for any marketing class to send announcements and reminders, much as can be done with a Facebook page as well. A hashtag could be set-up for each class or section, for example #MKT351 would be used to tie in all of the comments and questions for that class. Since most of the mobile apps for twitter are free, students are able to know what is going on with the class without having to pay money for the product (although depending on their service plan, they may have to pay for each text message received on their phones so be careful when making it a requirement for the class to have texts sent to them).

Tumblr has come onto the social media scene as one of the fastest growing microblogging sites, moving from a \$3 million dollar valuation in 2007 to an \$800 million valuation in 2011. It is different from Twitter in that nearly half of the posts on Tumblr are photographs. Nearly forty percent of all of Tumblr’s post come from around two percent of its

users (Mashable Tumblr Numbrs, 2011). A class Tumblr account would be well-suited to an advertising and promotion class for posting advertisements or to retail class to post pictures of displays and fashion items. Like with the other microblogging sites, Tumblr will also expose students to the use of hashtags. A good example to use in class would be the hashtag of #Superbowl to promote specials or advertisements tied in with the SuperBowl.

MEDIA SITES

The major media site would be YouTube, which as of April 2010 had more Google Searches than MySpace, although not quite as many as Facebook (Marshall, 2010), illustrating the rising popularity of both YouTube and Facebook and the declining popularity of MySpace. Many large retailers have their own Channel on YouTube using it to promote their products, show advertisements, and drive traffic to both their brick and mortar and online stores. Blendtec blenders took a relatively unknown brand name and used YouTube videos to attract the consumer market for what was until that time a product used mostly in commercial kitchens (Bernoff, 2007). It succeeded wildly and not only does Blendtec still have their YouTube videos up (one of the latest is placing an iPad into the blender), but has launched their own domain name: willitblend.com. While Flickr does not have the same kind of volume of users as YouTube, it is still very popular with consumers for posting photographs with over 518 million photos uploaded in 2012 (Michel, 2013). Many fashion companies have their own Flickr albums to show off the styles for the upcoming season. Students can also use Flickr to search for pictures that show store logos, layouts, merchandising, and promotions for various retailers internationally without ever leaving the city they live in. Seeing what consumers are using to “tag” both YouTube videos and Flickr photographs can help aid marketers in choosing what search terms to purchase for sponsored listings on Google and other search engines and use for basis search engine optimization (SEO).

Pinterest, which allows its users to “pin” photos on an online bulletin board by specific, user chosen themes has grown to over 28 million users at the end of 2012 since being launched in 2010 (McBride, 2013). A little over 17% of Pinterest users are the age of traditional college students, so it is quite likely a professor will have a few students who use Pinterest in their classes which aids in class discussion although the site does skew to a female demographic (Erickson, 2012). Many of the most popular brands have a board on Pinterest, making it an easy target for discussions on brand equity and the value of referrals to other websites and physical, retail locations. However, Pinterest is not the domain of only Fortune 500 companies as many Etsy (the online hand crafted goods auction site) dealers, small businesses and entrepreneurs are taking advantage of its positive impact upon sales of their products. Beyond classroom discussion, students could be assigned to setup Pinterest boards for class projects- “pinning” the articles, videos and pictures together than align with the homework topic. Furthermore, with permission of the university, students could also set-up Pinterest boards to help market the university to incoming freshmen or to promote school functions or groups. The instructor of an internet marketing class could setup a Pinterest board featuring examples of excellent web design or the instructor of an advertising class could setup their board featuring examples of effective billboards or any other form of advertising media.

SOCIAL GAMES

While many people are logging into the social media to update their status, post pictures or upload videos, over sixty-eight million American consumers are expected to play one of more social games this year (Schreier, 2012). The top three Facebook games by usage in 2011 were: Gardens of Time, Sims Social, and Cityville (Facebook Platform 2012). Over 65 million people each day play one of the popular online games by Zynga: Mafia Wars, Farmville, Café World or Zynga Poker (Gross, 2010). Since there is a good chance that most of the students have played or know someone who plays one of the popular social games, this is an excellent topic to bring up to discuss online consumer behavior and how marketers can use games to pull in traffic, highlight brand benefits, and entertain consumers. Scvngr, a location based game played on mobile devices, teamed up with Coca-Cola and Gamestop in 2011 for a “Happiness in Numbers” challenge game. Players could earn rewards from both companies and could post their activities to their Facebook or Twitter accounts (Katz, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Forrester Research (2009) reported that consumers used the social media to make over 500 billion impressions about products and companies last year with over 95% of those impressions coming through Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or LinkedIn. As businesses become more entrenched in the social media, educators and students will need to keep up to date on the different platforms that people will use to publish, communicate and share content online now and in the future. It is important to note that the use of technology should not be for technology’s sake, but for bringing added value into the marketing curriculum and classroom (Chao, Parker, & Fontana, 2011). Furthermore, as students become more and more accustomed to the social and digital media in their personal lives, they will expect to have social media be a part of their academic (and later professional) lives.

TABLE 1: SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMPLES

Type of Social Media	Explanation	Examples
Social Networking	Share and communicate personal and business information	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Google+, Orkut, VK, MapMyRide
Microblogging	Blogging that is text based (around 140 characters or less)	Twitter, tumblr, microblogr
Media Sites	Sharing various types of media, especially videos and photographs	YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest
Social Games	Games integrated into the different social media	Farmville, Mafia Wars, Scvngr

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