



Social Network Marketing

Creating Digital Footprints Your Customers Can Follow



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It just amazes me that so few consumer companies are paying attention to the social network and media phenomena and creating more digital footprints on the Web. As general advertising effectiveness decreases, the importance of creating a powerful Web presence is escalating.

The fact is **the entire Internet is one big social network** and people engage in many different activities that connect them to each other and to the products and services they buy. Some activities such as MySpace, Facebook and Eons participation, more identified as social networks, attract large numbers of people with similar interests to smaller personal networks. Others such as Google Search cater to and a more diverse audience. The Internet has a way of filtering consumer interest to specific niche sites and blogs as well. Some provide valuable information about medical treatments, how to replace tiles in your bathroom and so on, or allow visitors to compare features and pricing of products they are seeking. As a marketer, **one thing is sure; you want to be where your prospective customers are.** More and more, that is the Internet.

Consider these statistics from the **Pew Internet & American Life Project**:

- Internet Penetration for North America is 71.1% of the population
- 88% access the Internet at least once a day
- 87% of U.S. Internet users said they found out about new web pages by following links from other web pages
- 48% of U.S. Internet users use the web to access product information at least once a week

Engaging the Internet User

In order to engage consumers, you first must find them and that means targeting the people you most want to influence. In addition, it means targeting the people who influence your target consumers. This is especially important on the Internet where word of mouth can be instantaneous.

Many traditional advertising messages tend to be idiosyncratic (we are better, we won awards, etc.), while Internet messaging should be more lifestyle oriented.



The Internet is a two-way conversation and Internet users want helpful answers, not platitudes. **Internet consumers are seeking solutions.**

As the statistics show, many people look for specific product information on the Internet, but a lot more are looking for a solution for something that is happening in their life. That solution impacts something that addresses physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging/social needs, esteem needs, or growth needs (Maslow's hierarchy of needs). **If you want to be part of the solution then you have to offer something of value.**

Let me give you a simple example. I am sure you will see how one or more of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was fulfilled by having a product create fond memories. I recently started working with a consumer company whose product touched me in ways I did not expect. The company sells potato chips and was our favorite brand when I was a kid growing up in Philadelphia. It brought back memories of hanging out with my friends in simpler times and it especially brought back memories of a Potato Chip sandwich my grandmother used to make for us. I posted a recipe and a photo of the sandwich online using Google Base and sent it to a childhood friend asking him if he remembered it.

This was his unsolicited reply.

"It has to have a NAN [my grandmother] make it or at least get everything out for you and it must be eaten in the kitchen on a green table with chrome legs and an old cocker laying in the doorway into the shed/cooking area. MY GOD Bud [my childhood nickname] that picture almost brought tears to my eyes just thinking about it.

Phil"

The next day I received an email from Phil's sister, who I had not seen in 40 years. Here is what she said:

"Hellooo Buddy Hallman--On the other side of the Allegheny Ave., the best chip sandwich was as follows - 2 slices of the freshest white bread (usually A&P's brand), mayo spread on both sides and the most Wise Potato Chips that could be kept in the sandwich, after pushing both sides together!!! I wonder how many different "Wise" sandwich stories are out there? You may not know me by Mary McFeeters, but does Mary Gormley ring a bell? Phil sent me something from you so I thought I'd say hi. Hope your life's journey has been kind to you. Each day brings new hope so we all get a new chance.

Mary"



You can bet that they both went out and bought the ingredients for a Wise Potato Chip sandwich. I know I did. If you want to try making one, here is the recipe.
<http://www.google.com/base/a/3430554/D4201175506309479549>

Implementing a Social Network Marketing Initiative

The first task is to create a viable strategy for Internet involvement that goes beyond just placing ads on Google and making a web site. The strategy should include a well thought out plan to influence consumers wherever they go on the Internet, and the message strategy should include tapping into lifestyles.

It is important to realize that **Social Network Marketing is not a 'campaign' and should be looked at as a long-term investment in your brand.** The Marketing landscape has changed and requires a fundamental paradigm shift in order to keep up. Be prepared to go the distance as you embark on this initiative.

Web Sites

One of the major digital media tools you should consider is a Web site (preferably one that is easy to navigate) that reflects the company's image and provides relevant and helpful information. More import is the ability for customers to connect and be engaged through the web site. The web site is the home base where most of your customers who follow your digital footprints will land. Adding blogs and other changing interactive media helps to keep them coming back.

Email

Although email open rates are dropping, it is still an effective and cost-efficient digital communication tool. There are numerous companies that provide excellent email service that allows you to track who opens your emails and clicks on your links. This will give you an indication of what your individual prospects are responding to and allows you to start providing information based on that interest.

Most important is the message you send. Again, if you are just telling them how great your product is, then read and click rates will remain low. If you give them relevant information that affects them on a personal level, you will do a lot better.

Social Network Participation

Some of the most popular social networking sites at this time are Facebook (58 Million members), MySpace (222 Million members) and Eons (600k 50+ members and growing quickly). However, this is an ever changing environment and new sites are cropping up at a fast pace. There is a trend towards niche social networks devoted to specific careers or interests. In addition, we have a movement towards Virtual Environments (secondlife.com) and this should be watched.



Some social networks allow companies to have free profiles, some networks charge, and others have special programs for larger companies to be actively involved in the community. These may be great ways to participate, but you can also participate by influencing people with very active profiles to mention your products or promotions. You can also advertise on most of these social networks. In all cases, you will do best by becoming part of the network and by offering relevant and useful information.



Micro or Niche Web Sites

Consumer companies are well advised to create their own mini social networks or micro information web sites. These do not have to be multi million dollar extravaganzas. What they must do however is follow the rule of providing relevant and useful information and not hard sell your products. Of course, the process of creating relevant information requires that you really know your consumers.



A niche site like this should be about the lifestyle. For instance, if you sell a food product that tailgaters like to use at their parties, you might have a site that provides ideas for making a tailgate party better. You may have a product that is used in a number of lifestyle activities. In that case, you might want to create multiple niche sites.

Blogs

The growth of Blogs has been incredible, and they are well accepted by the Internet community as a source of valuable information. You should certainly create and maintain a Blog on your Web site and on any niche sites you have. Blogs provide fresh news on a daily or weekly basis and get people to return for more. In addition, Blog entries are great subjects for emails and other advertising. A Blog is different from a newsletter in that it can be made interactive by allowing comments from readers. This provides you with a direct link to customers, and acts as an informal market research tool.

Online Promotions – User-Generated Media

There seems to be a big push on user-generated videos, and programs like this can be effective, but keep in mind your audience. Are they more likely to send you a single photo or perhaps a product story or recipe? You should make it easy for the majority of people to participate. Keep in mind that the point of a user-generated



media program is to engage people, and having them do a commercial about how good your product is will not be as good as a story about how they solved a problem using your product.

Product Review and Posting Web Sites

Google has a new product site, as does Yahoo and a number of other product comparison sites. Some charge and some don't. The point is that each listing is another digital footprint that can lead consumers to your site or at a minimum provide a branding opportunity.

Google's new service actually goes well beyond just uploading products. It allows you to upload a variety of types of information, many of which are lifestyle oriented. As of the writing of this white paper, it is still in beta, but my experiments using the service have been very encouraging.

Search Engines

Search engine optimization is an excellent way to attract people who are looking for a specific product or a product that will solve a problem for them. Therefore, it is important that your web site include words that reflect the various lifestyles of your consumers. Try to think or do research on how your consumers use search engines and be sure to include those phrases.

Another important part of SEO is having inbound and outbound links. This is another value of niche web sites because you can link to and from them. Consider having a links program where you swap links with relevant but non-competing organizations.

Previously I talked about a recipe for a potato chip sandwich. It takes 5 products to make that sandwich. Most, like mustard, bread, and lunchmeat will not be competitive to chips, and this recipe helps sell bread and mustard as well as chips. This is an opportunity to swap links.

Contextual Ads

Contextual ads using search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN can generate a high volume and low cost stream of traffic. Contextual ads can be used like you see on Google on the right side of the page when you make a search, or they can be embedded in articles.

Either way, this type of advertising requires continual monitoring and fine-tuning to optimize results.

The screenshot shows a Google search result for a recipe. The title is "Northern Comfort Food - Potato Chip Sandwich". Below the title, it says "Posted on Feb 15, 2008 8:24 am PST". There are links for "Contact the author", "All items by Harry Hallman", and "Report bad item". The page is divided into sections: "Details", "Description", "You will need:", and "Instructions". The "Details" section lists: "Main ingredient: Potato chips", "Cuisine: American", "Course: Main course", and "Meal type: Sandwich". The "Description" section says: "Although potato chips go well with almost any sandwich, there's one that stirs the fond memory of my childhood in Philadelphia and brings me a certain comfort I cannot get with Mac and Cheese. That is the Wise potato chip and Lebanon bologna sandwich. It must be assembled in a certain way with the exact ingredients. Here they are:". The "You will need:" section lists: "A loaf of rye bread (large slices)", "A bag of Wise Classic Potato Chips", "Del sliced white American cheese", "Garden of Eatin' Spicy Brown Mustard", "Del sliced Lebanon bologna (Or regular bologna will work if you are not in an area that has Lebanon bologna)", and "One Kosher Pickle". The "Instructions" section starts with "Take two slices of rye bread and spread the mustard on both." and continues with "Place the bologna (you decide how much) on one of the slices.", "Place the cheese on top of the bologna.", "Slice the pickle into rounds and place 4 slices on the cheese.", "Now add the secret ingredient. Put an ample supply of Wise Classic Potato Chips on top.", "Place the second slice of rye bread on top of the chips.", "Now this is important! Press the sandwich with your hand so nothing falls out.", "Slice in half if you have to. Not diagonal! Or better yet just eat it as is.", "Now experience Nirvana on rye.", and "The Wise Potato Chip Sandwich goes well with a cotta or a beer." On the right side of the page, there is a "Pictures" section with a photo of the sandwich and a "View all photos" link. At the bottom right, there are several small thumbnail images and a "View all photos" link.



Blog Relations

Just as a PR Agency helps to build relationships with the media; you should develop relationships with bloggers. There are services that allow you to pay bloggers for a write-up, but they will only do it if it makes sense to their audience.

You can also provide bloggers with products in hopes that they write it up.

Remember, every blog mention is another digital footprint and these footprints will be around for a long time.

The benefits of creating digital footprints via social networking are endless:

- Generates increased revenues
- Increases customer touch points
- Increases branding opportunities
- Puts you in the same space as your consumers
- Increases Search Engine Optimization
- Facilitates consumer interactions
- Increases your range of messaging
- Process is cost-effective



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Download Octane's Social Network Marketing datasheet.