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Left at The Station

The great juggernaut that is the "social media revolution" is still running amok through the carefully cultivated fields of conventional wisdom, smashing all prior notions of the role of media and commercial communication, and leaving many of my fellow marketers in various states of wonder and/or panic. Every day, it seems some new corridor to the hearts, minds, and wallets of consumers is being discovered.

It's no wonder we're seeing a revolution; the sheer volume and depth of data being collected on individual behavior is **staggering**; and are providing marketers with highly detailed maps of our buying habits and preferences. And the technology sector has certainly responded; Facebook F8, Google +, the emergence of "big data" and unstructured data analysis - all of these are in some way a response to the availability of vast amounts of on-line behavior data being generated and the marketing free-for-all that is resulting.

So when is the social media revolution going to come to the B2B markets? Is the train ever going to get here? Don't get me wrong; there's no question that there's been an impact, but it's really been nowhere near the extent that B2C is undergoing. For instance, why does a Facebook page for Pringles garner 15 million "friends" (yes, you read that right: a potato chip has 15 million "friends"), while Salesforce.com, one of the most widely adopted business apps, has 58,000?

Sharing Isn't Always Caring

I think the answer is simple, and comes down to one very predictable and very well understood thing: sharing. The broadcast nature of the Internet isn't what I'm talking about here - that's another topic. I'm talking about the thing that puts the "social" in social media. I'm sure we've all heard this before: social media is powerful for marketers *not* because it broadcasts, but because it *self-propagates*. People share things between each other because they like the way it makes them feel (I'm sure B.F. Skinner would have something to say about this). When enough sharing occurs, the effect of a

single outreach is multiplied many times over. That seems simple enough.

But people share for many different reasons in different places and under different circumstances and it's getting these crossed-up that leads to mismatched marketing. This helps explain why your new product demo gets 43 views, while a video of people laying face-down, motionless, on top of other objects goes viral on YouTube. You tried to share something that wasn't appropriate to that environment. Look at it another way: the neighbor at the picnic didn't really want to hear about your new SaaS release; they were just being polite as they slowly inched their way towards the barbequed chicken.

Don't Be That Guy (Or Girl)

Nobody wants to be "that guy," so understand the basics of sharing behavior and you'll be able to better leverage the "social" effect. Of course, that's easy enough to say, but wading through the swamp of information and "expertise" out there is daunting enough to discourage even the heartiest. The world is filled with a legion of self-styled "social media gurus." Each week/day/hour offers yet another "10 Keys to Social Media Marketing Success," post somewhere. While much of the content is thoughtful and well-considered, an awful lot of it has utility more on par with used Kleenex, but without the recycling potential. For example:

"Leverage Email - Email is social. Make sure to include links in your email to make it easy for email list members to connect with your business in social media."

"Learn which bloggers might care about your customer. Learn how to measure their influence."

"Add social bookmark links to your most important web pages and/or blog posts to improve sharing."

Wow. Profound...and sooooo actionable!

A few years ago, I decided that I would throw myself into learning as much as I could about social media marketing. I bought the books, perused the blogs, sat through the webinars, and I finally did one more thing: I called up the CEO of a notable social marketing firm in Baltimore,

R2integrated, to introduce myself (I'm a big believer in the power of face-to-face interaction). Long story short, I became the VP of Marketing there, and spent the next year getting their basic messaging and marketing operations in shape while being given a first-rate crash-course in social media by some of the smartest and most talented young minds I've ever met. What I learned shocked me - not because it was so new and strange, but because it turned out to be so familiar and logical.

Personal vs. Professional Networks

As it turns out, we human want things. Yes, we do.

Sometimes we want to be accepted by others, and sometimes we want success and material wealth, **but we share in order to get things**. In an online social network such as Facebook, we primarily interact with those with whom we share some emotional bond - in personal networks. Friends, family, even the band we like carries some kind emotional attachment. In these networks, **influencing the way others perceive us is the objective**, and the things we share cause others to see us in different ways:

Personal Networks

Content We Share	How We're Perceived
Coupon or Donation	Generous
Joke	Funny
Opinion	Righteous
Advice	Helpful
Sympathy	Kind
Fashion, Movies, Music, Brands	Cool, Stylish
Facts and Observations	Smart

In *professional networks* such as LinkedIn, or The Microsoft Developer Network, the sharing behavior is quite different. In professional networks, people share with the expressed notion of **getting something specific back - help with our jobs or careers**

. There's more of a tangible quid pro quo at work - one which greatly affects how, when, and what kind of content is shared:

Professional Networks

Content We Share	How We're Perceived
Technical Advice	Helpful, Competent
Industry Knowledge	Experienced, Educated
My Career Path/Experience	Upwardly Mobile
Important News	Up to Date, Plugged In

This is particularly true in a type of professional network sometimes referred to as a *community of practice*

The term itself has a fairly broad meaning, but in general refers to communities which share information and opinions about a very specific set of skills. Many of these are centered on professions which may include buyers and influencers of your product or service. Software development, in particular, is a very common type of community of practice, of which StackOverflow is a prime example.

A developer community started in 2008, StackOverflow already has nearly 800 thousand members and more than 2 million questions, and is a much-coveted audience by software marketers. The ethos of the community and its self-policing nature, however, prevent any overtly promotional content from being directly offered. In other words, **that type of content isn't shared there, much the way your product release wasn't a topic for picnic conversation**

. On the other hand, this community does encourage the sharing content that provides unbiased and practical help for its members.

So the only way to create sharing, the only way to get the elusive "social" boost, is to match

your content with the sharing behavior of the network you target. And as simple as that sounds, otherwise perfectly intelligent marketers miss it all the time. What's more, often the participants themselves are mis-matched. Just as you would never have someone who can't carry play an instrument join a band, you don't want to have non-technical (read: marketing) people act as agents in a developer community. The person delivering the message is just as important as the content. Like many of you, I still have to work to get this right - and sometimes miss - but the taking the basic step of putting yourself into the shoes of the network member is critical.

Leveraging Personal Networks

Remember the chart above that outlines some of the key sharing behavior? Do you really have a message or content that will make someone want to share it? Before you answer, make sure you're not breathing too much of your own exhaust. We all love the products we market (if you don't, find another job) but that alone isn't reason to think that it's interesting enough to be shared on a personal network. Face it, potato chips are fun, most B2B software isn't. Yes, I know **we** think it is, but let's get real. Until you make it fun, until you have information useful for everyday life, it's unlikely to be shared on a personal network. For most B2B companies, there aren't enough clowns in the car to make Facebook much more than an employee chat room. It's the B2C providers who are having the fun there, reflecting monetary, lifestyle, and societal values that resonate in that space and which will get shared.

You have a Facebook page? Great. See if you can make it fun, valuable, or useful to personal networks, but don't hold your breath. However, if you figure out how to make ERP software as exciting - or delicious - as Pringles, please let me know.

(Just for grins, go and peruse the Facebook page of a really big B2B tech company and tell me if you see vast amounts of lead generation and brand equity building going on).

Leveraging Professional Networks

Here's where the payoff for most B2B companies lies. Here we have an opportunity to intercept buying behavior with key messages that can influence decisions. Here's what I try to keep in mind:

1. **Find the right networks.** The developer communities are easy to find, but they exist for a lot of professional tracks: CIOs, marketing, sales, IT, HR, etc. One way is to search on questions your prospects might ask ("who makes the best analytics appliance?") instead of just the key words.
2. **Make sure that your content is written for, and preferably by, someone who fits that**

network . Don't have marketers write content for developers. If you have to, kidnap one of your developers, feed them, and get the content out of them.

3. **Deliver the content via a legitimate member.** We will often ask our developers, who are members of such communities, to offer questions or advice for which appropriately objective content is available. We also actively encourage customers who are happy with the product to mention us in their networks. We ask for sales references all the time, why not technical ones?

4. **Link to content that appears in the preferred media destinations of that network.** Often the content you deliver can simply be a link ("I saw one example of a web-based system here" [link]) to deeper content that is published on another third-party outlet (e.g. InfoWeek, CIO, etc.). If you want to know how to get them to syndicate your stuff, that's another discussion.

5. **Career opportunities do elicit sharing.** We always try to get our latest openings beyond just LinkedIn into other communities of practice.

Back into the Light

One important thing to remember is that all the things we learned as marketers still apply. To find a customer, you have to think like a customer. Remember why they share things and give things to them exactly that way.

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