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A few years ago, I found myself sitting in the crowded audience at a social media conference. I distinctly remember hearing speaker after speaker claiming that the world I knew was about to change completely. Needless to say, I was skeptical. After all, how could a social network where my old high school buddies joke about the good old days become the largest B2B marketing tool available today? How exactly was a video site going to overtake the #2 search engine, Yahoo? And, what the heck was a Twitter, and if I get one, how do I fix it?

Needless to say, the world of a marketing department has dramatically changed over the past five years. Conferences covering social media concepts and best practices are not only commonplace, but practically required for today's marketing professional.

As I sat in the conference, I was not just taking in best practices. I was also evaluating the options I faced in my career. What if this social media craze was a phase, a theory still being spewed even today by many a social media pundit. How exactly would this change the marketing experience for users, and how would it change my chosen career field?

For the previous eight years, as a small business owner of a website design firm, I'd been preaching the necessity for search engine optimization to dozens of small business customers. I would explain in great detail how the shift in push to pull marketing will change things. I frequently said that it wasn't enough to just have a website, but how will people find you? At the time, I was also training people how to use email marketing to their advantage as they pushed their message to the masses versus traditional print media. It was even more difficult to convince prospects that having a blog that told stories about their daily lives and hobbies would help their customers engage.

How Social Media Changed the Marketing Landscape

Social media's early adopters paved the way for businesses across the board to embrace the phenomenon as a component of an effective interactive marketing strategy. The principles that changed marketing are fairly straight forward:

- **Customers who engage with a brand can become the biggest brand evangelists you have.**

If they love your brand, they tell their friends. And so on. And so on. That type of endorsement has far better reach than an understaffed sales team, better publicity than a billboard, and a more powerful sales tool than the cold call.

- **People don't like to be marketed to.** This really hasn't changed, but the tolerance for it has. After all, when is the last time you received an unsolicited email and thought, "Yes! I must have this. Thank you for sending this out of the blue. I'll take it!" Savvy buyers do not buy into spam, and it is increasingly difficult for marketers to predict a need that a customer may have at the ideal time they have it. Instead, buyers prefer to do their homework by researching online and asking their friends for advice. The key to social media effectiveness is being in those spaces where prospects are researching and asking questions.

Companies facing the rise of social media instantly feared the worst. What if letting our customers tell us what they *really* think backfires and makes us look bad? We are basically giving them a soapbox and just asking them to complain? Legal teams and cautious executives braced themselves. Blogs were set up in droves, and Twitter accounts were claimed and sat unused because nobody quite understood what to do with them. Workshops like the one attended were selling out. Development of corporate websites were placed on the back burner, while the push to capitalize on the social media phenomenon took over.

Unfortunately, while pursuing social media as the latest and greatest marketing trend, the majority of companies suffered decreased effectiveness in other channels of online marketing, such as company websites and paid and organic search optimization. These channels require maintenance, and with resources directed elsewhere, rankings and results dipped downward.

The Best Things In Social Media Aren't Free

As marketing budgets came under review, social media became perceived as a "free" marketing platform. That's not actually completely true. Yes, any company can set up a Twitter account, Facebook page, or LinkedIn group, but there are definitely cost considerations involved in an effective social media campaign.

One of the lessons most large companies learned fairly early on is that, without a dedicated internal resource focused on building an effective social media strategy, there was no way to actually build a presence in the social media environment. This didn't necessarily need to be an internal employee creating and developing the strategy from scratch, as I had been in my previous role with [SafeNet](#). A company need only have an internal evangelist for the concept of social media who brings in outside expertise if the skills don't exist internally.

Regardless of how it gets accomplished, starting social media campaigns need strategy just like all other marketing media. Simply because the platforms are free does not mean companies won't have to invest in overhead to accomplish this.

Core Elements to an Effective Social Media Strategy

When I built SafeNet's initial social media strategy several years ago, we were effectively starting from scratch. We'd been trying to make the case for blogging for the past several years, and found little internal support. Without internal support, it is difficult to make the case for budget and resources for social media.

After finally gaining some support from our C-suite, I was required to create and execute on this strategy. Here are the top elements I considered first and foremost:

1. KPIs

The primary element that needs to be considered in building a social media strategy is selecting the relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for your reporting. Measurement of social media marketing's effectiveness is a topic that is debated daily online. For example, if you are seeking to increase brand awareness, what are the elements on each platform that are important to you? On Facebook and Twitter, effectiveness would be measured by the number of followers you have. For evaluating brand engagement, counting the number of "Retweets" and Facebook "Likes" works best. When selecting the KPIs that matter to your business, be sure to take into consideration that social media is, to some extent, is still in its early stages. Currently, it serves more like a public relations and brand awareness tool than it does as a measurable lead

generation tool. It won't be long, however, until this changes.

Don't forget to research measurement tools as well when determining your KPIs. Many of these are still in their infancy, but you should be certain that when you select a KPI that you can actually report on it.

2. Choosing Platforms

Where are our customers/prospects looking for us? How do they want to engage with us? Finding the right places to venture into social media takes flexibility, research, and persistence. Here's an example:

While building out the initial blog for LicensingLive (<http://www.licensinglive.com>), the SRM marketing team and I debated at great lengths about where our customers should engage with us. We set up the blog, had created a LicensingLive group on LinkedIn, and also a Twitter feed (@licensinglive). Our initial strategy was to push original content through our blog, and promote it further using LinkedIn and Twitter. We fully expected our followers to comment and engage through the blog and simply become aware of the blog through the other platforms. Well, that's not exactly how it went.

We have managed to keep great content coming on our blog, and in fact, have been able to increase readership over the life of the blog. However, our customers are more actively engaged in the LinkedIn group and Twitter versus our blog.

The lesson here is to be listening in social spaces where your customers actually want to engage, rather than determining internally how you think they will. Choose platforms that are flexible to support a changing strategy.

3. Who, What, Where...You Get The Idea

A strategy only matters if you can execute on it. Who will actually be monitoring social networks, promoting events and materials? Is this a dedicated resource in your organization, or a part of each marketing manager's daily responsibilities?

Be prepared to set guidelines and provide training for all employees who will be interacting with social media. I created a social media boot camp for our staff. I brought in outside experts to validate the importance of engagement, and have made myself available across departments to help evangelize the necessity for social media in the B2B marketplace.

4. The Bigger Picture

How do the social media platforms you select play into the larger interactive marketing strategy in your organization? For example, there are certain social media sites that inherently have an extremely high SEO ranking. In response to demand for results that include social media, Google has been integrating search results from YouTube and Flickr, and as a result, fewer traditionally organic search results appear on Page One.

If your goal is to increase your SEO presence for your brand, and you aren't currently marketing your video and graphic assets on platforms like YouTube and Flickr, then you're potentially missing out on prime Page One real estate.

Similarly, there are many social platforms that use "no follow" links, meaning any SEO benefit from page rank of the referring site is not realized. This doesn't mean not to post on these platforms, which include Wikipedia, Twitter, and many more. It just means the SEO benefit from high quality inbound links will not be achieved from these sites. However, these links are still important when realizing that potential exposure to your site can far exceed link juice.

Social Media and Its Place in Online Strategy

The question then arises, what happens to all the effort (not to mention financial investment) we've put into our corporate websites? I'm not suggesting that every single corporate website is obsolete. In fact, it is the most important element of an effective online marketing strategy. That strategy has to now expand past what marketers considered to be interactive marketing previously, and into somewhat uncharted waters.

Just a few reasons not to abandon the corporate website just yet:

1. **Domain Longevity:** If your company has been around a while, and has owned their domain name equally as long, there is a really good chance you're already seeing benefits from Google. Domain name longevity is just one of the hundreds of factors that go into Google's algorithm, and it's important enough in that calculation to call it out here.
2. **Validation:** Prospects validate their impression of a brand what they find on social platforms and by word of mouth by checking out companies online. Your prospects may find you on social media, but they validate their choice and learn more about you through a more formal corporate online experience.
3. **Integration:** Corporate websites are a great way to introduce your social media presence to your prospects through providing share buttons, blog feeds, video, and forums. Prospects can learn a great deal about a company by reading their blog, especially when they're looking to evaluate a business' expertise in a core competency.

What's Next For Interactive Marketing

Now that social media is here to stay and companies are embracing the technology, businesses are investing in social media increasingly each year. Companies like SafeNet have expanded their social media team to include several staff members solely focused on the effort, and the resulting effect of this change has been impressive.

So what's next? I see interactive marketing heading in this direction over the next two years:

- Marketers will become increasingly aware of the integration between social and other interactive mediums, and will learn that they must all be in sync to work effectively. Social media conferences will continue to sell out.
- Social media monitoring tools will evolve and integrate SEO and core analytics, so that marketers can report back to the C-suite on the effectiveness across all campaigns more efficiently.
- Mobile usage, which has already skyrocketed in 2011, will continue growth. Marketers however will become more keenly aware of the need to ensure their interactive sites are not only mobile ready, but also provide a value add (like mobile apps) so that users stay engaged.

As marketers, we can't ever be sure what trends are right around the corner. The best we can do is stay current, do our homework, and be as flexible as possible to roll with the changes.

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