

Where's the Beef?

I hate to admit it, but I'm addicted to Facebook. I am constantly updating my "friends" with (useless) information about my whereabouts, what I'm doing or my opinion about some social issue or news event.

As a marketer, I am acutely aware of the "targeted" advertising that promises me washboard abs or the career of my dreams. But as a consumer, I couldn't be less interested in clicking on some advertising message while I'm busy looking at pictures that my best friend from sixth grade posted of his recent trip to Disney World.

So, I can't help but wonder, why haven't advertisers been successful in reaching me, the consumer, and this captivated social audience online? How do we leverage the exponential growth of online social experiences and networks to build an effective offline social experience in the retail environment? Perhaps a look at a little social marketing history will provide some food for thought.

Tupperware was built on the social experience—the Tupperware Party. Growing up, my gregarious next-door neighbor had Tupperware parties at least once a year. My mother went for the eating, drinking and socializing with friends and neighbors. The sales pitch was inconsequential to her, though she always placed a small order. At the end of the day, everyone was happy—the host (salesperson), the guests (customers), and Tupperware (the marketer). An effective retail sales environment was created in the home through the use of a one's social network.

Avon has had similar success by creating a one-on-one social experience. The "Avon Lady" created a warm and friendly atmosphere outside the traditional retail environment to sell makeup and other beauty products. An Avon representative who identifies on a personal level with friends and family members

(and then hopefully with their friends and family members) can grow a network.

By leveraging a growing network of like-minded individuals, with the help of a personable and knowledgeable sales team, Avon was able to create personal connections with its consumers and sales channels that were steady and sometimes longer lasting and more effective than the ones created in department stores.

So the question now is, can we learn anything from brands that have been successful using social networks offline to drive sales in new and emerging technologies and applications such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter? Or are we better served keeping the two separate and leaving addicts like me sharing memories and insignificancies to themselves?

If we keep in mind that online social groups or networks are fundamentally the same as a house party or club meeting (they provide an opportunity for individuals and consumers to be a part of a community and share experiences and interests), we are bound to find success. Like successful Tupperware parties or Avon representatives, marketers who create an engaging, unobtrusive and friendly consumer experience can be successful with social marketing online.

TARGET SPEAKS FACEBOOK

Target did just that in a successful back-to-school campaign. They kept the sales pitches to a minimum and encouraged interaction by speaking the "Facebook language." They understood the medium and embraced the aspect of sharing, open communication and common interests. Target was successful by having consumers engage in a dialogue about their specials, deals and in-store experiences rather than "hard selling" them.

A Tupperware party without the food and camaraderie and only a sales pitch would never

Is Facebook the new Tupperware ... or is its marketing potential just another new-media whopper?

have worked. Other big retailers have failed by focusing their online social marketing experiences to couponing, promotions, or other gimmicks that provided nothing different than a Sunday newspaper insert. This is clearly not maximizing the medium.

A few technology companies are meanwhile leveraging the growth and scale of online audiences to optimize online advertising performance. Companies like Media 6° are building online social graphs that allow marketers not only to target messages based on consumer behavior, but also on their social relationships. They are taking the successful model of marketing to friends and family based on the sales and buying patterns of their personal networks.

The idea is that if you purchased a product from an online store, your 10 closest friends are more likely to make a purchase there, as well. Results show that social graphing technology outperforms search by a factor of two-to-one, and also shows a greater R.O.I. as compared to a typical media buy that leverages behavioral targeting alone.

So, we now have two very different examples of how to leverage online social networks that, for the most part, have followed the same model as traditional offline social marketing programs. They are not intrusive, rather they look to engage the consumer in conversation and leverage the commonalities of a friends and family network.

THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Bridging the gap by creating effective tools to leverage online communities to not only drive sales on the web but also to increase sales in the store is a logical next step.

To my knowledge, no brand has demonstrated measured success in its capacity to increase sales. A Facebook promotion created for Coca-Cola was successful in swapping more than one-million virtual bottles of Vitamin Water in Slide's "Top Friends" application. While this surely had consumers interacting with the brand, there was no data to show that it had an impact on in-store sales.

Brands have also been very successful in using mobile applications such as Twitter to engage brand loyalists and communicate with their existing customers. Companies such as JetBlue and Southwest

Airlines have used Twitter to update customers on travel conditions and services. And while this provides a tremendous value as a communication tool, it has yet to show its worth in direct sales.

Ironically, Facebook actually pulled the plug on the brand that had come closest to showing some real results. As you've probably heard, Burger King created an application that asked users on Facebook, "What would you do for a free Whooper?" If you sacrificed, or "unfriended," 10 of your Facebook friends, you received a coupon for a free Whooper. Many saw this as a public service (including me). I have too many friends on Facebook and would delete some of them for nothing!

As a result of the campaign, 233,906 Facebook "friends" were removed by 82,771 people in less than a week. However, Facebook cancelled the campaign saying, "...we must ensure that applications follow users' expectations of privacy. This application facilitated activity that ran counter to user privacy by notifying people when a user removes a friend."

I would have thought Facebook would have wanted at least one strong case study under its belt, even if it pushed the boundaries a little bit. If I received an "unfriended" message from a "friend," knowing he was on his way to getting a free burger, I would have just sent him a virtual drop kick and we would have been even.

Of course, just as Tupperware-style parties might not be the best way to sell automobiles, online social marketing might not be the best way to sell toilet paper. And while there has yet to be agreement on the definitive formula for successful marketing utilizing online social networks, it is clear that there is a direct affinity.

As we continue to identify strategic applications of this "new" medium, there is promise of real commercial value. With more testing, we will gain the insight needed to produce real success. ■



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