

Sprout White Paper

Best Practices for Social Media Campaigns

Good social media campaigns resemble the sound when a guitar is strummed: it starts strong, radiating out in multiple directions, and then gradually fades as it moves across the social graph from friend to friend. Because of the interconnectedness and gradual decay in engagement, getting the most from the social graph means regularly “strumming” it so that various types of engagement are continually working themselves through the target audience. This way a brand’s entire base is continually engaged at different levels. Try that with traditional PR or advertising.

According to Adam Sarnier of Gartner, while 75 percent of the Fortune 1000 have undertaken some kind of online social-networking initiative, fully half of those campaigns are failures. Despite phenomenal growth of social media platforms such as Facebook and MySpace, the current advertising mindset is failing to harness the potential of social media. The odd successes seem to owe more to luck than planning as most social media campaigns resemble traditional advertising rather than playing to the “always on” potential of social media.

Brands and agencies thinking that three month planning windows make them nimble must either adapt or die in a world where even yesterday is of little interest. Social media operates in real time. Success is more than just a matter of being fast and nimble as most agencies lack the tools, knowhow, and understanding to effectively design and deploy successful social media campaigns.

Social media campaigns are more than just the latest way to get the news out. Social media campaigns require that you know who you want to influence and the emotional

hooks best suited for causing engagement with a given target audience. Social media works when you are engaging with other people in ways that they carry on and spread the conversation without you.

What is needed is a clear set of best practices for social media campaigns that allow brands and agencies to effectively combine a growing understanding of how to engage with people via social media by adopting a set of new rules for designing and deploying campaigns.

Faster = better; better = faster; faster + better = the new standard

For a lot of big brands today, a well-considered web marketing campaign can take six weeks just to tune the messaging. Sample messages are sent, results are analyzed, and messages are tweaked. Then the process repeats. What emerges is pretty solid messaging—assuming the market hasn’t moved on in the meantime. More resources won’t make it go faster because the serial process is the constraint. Think of this as the static model of advertising.

The static model can’t keep up with today’s fast-moving trends. Fortunately, within reach is a new approach that can accomplish in days or hours what used to take weeks. Welcome to real-time advertising. Where more money can’t compress the static model schedule, the real-time model inherently compresses both time and money.

Putting this level of capability into action takes more than new technology and tools; it takes new thinking regarding: risk, objectives, and measurement.

Risk

The static model is carefully and methodically tuned to minimize downside risk because few brands can afford a big failure. At the same time there is little upside in overachieving to those supporting the brand. Not really a recipe for game-changing behavior.

If you want to change the game, you have to change the rules. Near real-time development combined with real-time data encourages lots of short experiments rather than fewer big ones. Managing the downside risk need not be a function of cautiousness. Real-time data and control means a campaign can be terminated at any time. Brands can now do and try things they would never have dreamed off before. The economics also are changing to reward upside performance as well. The combination is going to rock the advertising world from top to bottom and everywhere in-between. But you have to play by the new rules.

Objectives

The new rules are going to drive new thinking throughout the planning and execution process. This extends beyond the how to the why. With new ways to engage customers with fast-acting, interactive campaigns, everyone from the brand manager to the creative director to the media buyer must be re-aligned in how they work together.

Measurement

Traditional metrics only tell us that we've touched someone. The new standard of engagement

calls for new measures as well. New types of engagement measures allow us to differentiate between eyeballs and true engagement.

Better data ultimately drives better decisions. To leverage the new data, however, we need to re-think the overall process of how campaigns are developed and deployed.

There is also a qualitative component to good decisions. Social media expert Tara Hunt likes to point out that social capital is what makes online communities flourish, not money. Those that help you strum the social graph are very conscious that their tweet or stream of your content needs to build their social capital or they won't engage with you. Use data to understand when and how people are engaging with your content in ways that continues the conversation. If you are getting eyeballs, but not this type of engagement, it's time to shut it down and try something else.

	Static Model	Real-Time Model
Risk	Minimize downside via caution	Mitigate risks via real-time data and fast action
Objectives	Call to action	Engagement to drive further conversation
Measurement	Conversion rate, impressions	Engagement activities completed

Anatomy of a successful social media campaign

Since the goal of social media campaigns is to engage with people in ways that benefit a particular brand, traditional metrics like impressions and conversion rates fall short. If we want to encourage viral conversations, we need to find better metrics. The better you can measure what people actually do after the initial contact, the more you know about what actually works in the social graph. The better you know what actually works, the better direction you can provide to the creative director in terms of target audience, preferred media, and actionable campaigns.

With knowledge of the campaign's objectives, the next stop for the brand owner ought to be the media buyer. The data-driven media buyer is a tremendous resource that should be engaged early in the process and long before the creative is spec'd out. Since what works for a print ad is very different from what works for a social media campaign, engaging the media buyer and/or publisher early in the process lets the creative director work within a tighter focus. Gartner echoes this but from the perspective of media companies, advising them to build core disciplines around understanding and predicting consumer trends by mining social media.

The media buyer knows what works and how much it costs. If social media is included, the media buyer can select the appropriate platform and set requirements and expectations. Platform capabilities are constantly evolving, so the media buyer is likely to loop the platform into the process. Since the media buyer is going to need metrics around the specific activities the campaign targets, these will get baked into the requirements as well. Requirements and expectations developed this way allow the creative process to serve the practical goals of the campaign.

One of the interesting developments is that a few (soon to be many) media buyers are demanding performance guarantees... and getting agreement. Here's how it works and why it makes sense.

Big Brand is running a campaign to where users create a customized ensemble using a Flash application. They are willing to pay \$250,000, but only if they are assured that they will get 75,000 people to engage with the application, or \$3.33 per user. They drive a hard bargain. They want people who take the time to complete an ensemble.

These days, it makes sense to say OK. Sprout, for example, drives traffic to the application with paid placements, paying distributors per user.

Pretty traditional except for the development savings—but that savings already puts us ahead. Where we win big is that many of the initial users will recommend the campaign to friends, either by forwarding a personalized widget or posting it in activity feeds for friends to see. Not only is this a deeper level of engagement—so Big Brand is happy—but we don't pay to recruit these additional users. Our profit increases because Big Brand pays for additional completes that we source for "free." The greater the viral leverage the bigger the upside is for both Big Brand and us.

Example 1

Making your own serendipity: increasing the odds that your campaign goes viral

No one can predict the next viral campaign. Historically, viral campaigns generally turn on a fluke of some sort. A campaign planned over six months that serendipitously reflects a breaking news event is great, but can you increase your chances of being in the right place at the right time? Have you ever had a great idea for a campaign, but it would only work if you could do it now?

Real-time advertising capabilities won't necessarily make your ideas successful, but for the first time it makes them actionable—and at little cost or risk. A hypothetical example will make the point.

In October 2008, a disgruntled Iraqi legislator threw his shoes at President Bush during a visit to Baghdad. The story made news worldwide largely because the quirkiness of the "attack."

Imagine yourself as a brand manager for specialty shoe maker Shoe Co. Within hours of waking up to the news you use the Sprout Platform to deploy an interactive, Flash-based widget and engaging social

media application that allows users to “throw” shoes at a world leader of their choice. Users get to:

- Choose from a selection of world leaders
- Upload their own face as the thrower
- Choose from a selection of shoes to throw

Users make their selections, throw a few shoes at their preferred target, and then are encouraged to forward it to their friends. The level of interactivity drives viral adoption and within hours the news coverage shifts from the original incident to how your campaign is sweeping the Internet.

For a very small investment, the brand manager succeeded in:

- Getting tons of free publicity for Shoe Co.
- Subtly exposing enormous numbers of people to the Shoe Co. brand for an average of five to eight minutes. Reports tell him how many people engaged, for how long, and how many forwarded it to friends or added to their Facebook stream. He can also see demographic data on participants (via Google analytics and from social networks) so he knows who the key influencers are on social networks.
- Reinforcing the quirky, non-conformist personality of Shoe Co. in ways millions of dollars in advertising couldn't match.
- Gaining real-time insights into user reactions by monitoring campaign reporting, Twitter and similar services. He can even update the campaign in real-time in response to the buzz.
- Managing his risk because if it didn't take off—or worse yet created a negative reaction—he could have pulled the campaign before it got wide awareness.

While this story is hypothetical, the premise is completely plausible and all the required services and tools are commercially available today. Even if Shoe Co. had to buy paid placements to initiate the campaign, the viral leverage makes the overall cost extremely attractive.

Example 2

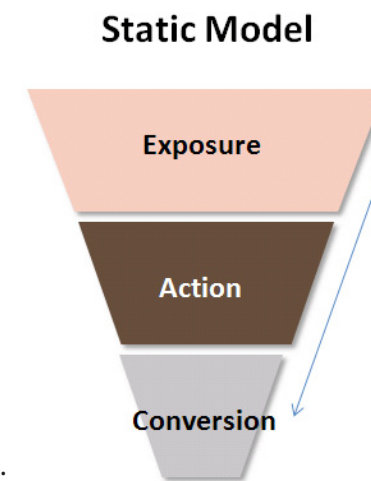
How the new thinking trumps the old ways
A leading movie studio came to us to create an engagement campaign to reward the 500,000 fans of the film on Facebook. The community had been building since the release of the first movie of the series in 2001. But there was low activity in the group and little evidence they were doing more than just becoming fans of the movie and then leaving the page. There was no way to harness this group and help them spread their love of the movie online.

The studio didn't have a clear idea of what they wanted when they contacted us. They knew they wanted to give their fans a fun, branded experience but didn't assign goals for the campaign since they saw it as loyalty versus awareness campaign. They didn't do a marketing spend against the campaign since it wasn't meant to drive awareness or do more than give existing fans something fun to do.

At the same time, they were spending 25-50% of their marketing dollars on social media sites, but with traditional online ads and takeover ads. They used the static model to reach and engage fans, even though they had the tools to do more.

The campaign we rolled out allowed fans to customize their favorite car, add music, videos and photos from the film, or the fan's collection, and share the personalized widget with friends to see and share on leading social networks.

The results impressed the studio's creative team. By the time the movie launched, about 60,000 people visited the campaign. There was a 26% conversion rate, meaning that more than a quarter of the people who entered the campaign portal published a personalized widget on either their Facebook or MySpace page for their friends to see. What's more, the average engagement time for the 38,000 people that entered the campaign was almost two minutes.



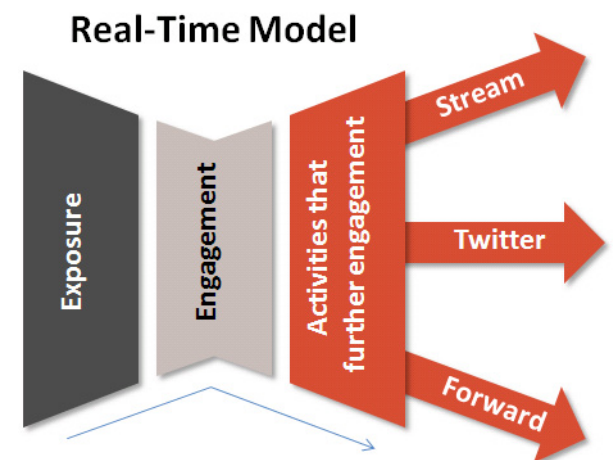
The other online media that the studio placed performed at a far more 'industry standard' rate. There's no doubt that more money spent driving traffic to the engagement campaign would have made it even more effective since each activity spurs more friend activity when the widget is posted. Traditional media can't come close to a 25% response, and it can't spur viral activity.

Best practices

Economics are changing for both brands and agencies. Brands need to do more with less because recessions are no time to go dark and let your customers stray. In fact, recessions are a great opportunity to build share and awareness, so smart brands are looking to do more—even if they don't have a bigger overall budget to work with. In practical terms, more with less means that agencies get squeezed and media buyers have to

show concrete results rather the soft metrics such as CPM or page views. Activities are a flexible and extremely useful metric for measuring social media engagement.

With clear objectives from the brand, savvy media buyers are ascending in dominance because they are best positioned to help agencies design focused and effective social media campaigns that guarantee results.



Guaranteeing results is all about leverage and data. Actually making money with a guarantee is about driving engagement and leveraging the interconnectedness of the social graph—and then being able to measure the results.

Below are eight best practices that will help ensure you get the most from your social media campaigns. These are above and beyond the basic rules of working with social media such as: don't talk down at people, be honest, tell a story, etc.

1. Use the right metrics. Measure activities that represent the type(s) of engagement you seek. If

you want people to spread the word, then good metrics are posts to social networks, forwards, streams and activity feeds, tweets, etc. If the goal is brand affinity, use metrics that measure length of engagement and number of activities.

2. Bake data and metrics into the early planning stages. If you can't define the metrics, you shouldn't be talking creative yet.

3. Leverage the media buyer to help define the creative.

4. Guaranteed engagement pricing models align the interests of brand and agency. Alignment is a prerequisite to doing more with less.

5. Plan for quicker and more frequent campaigns. Social media users are fickle, trend-driven, and shift focus faster than static model planning cycles can follow.

6. Be prepared to turn on a dime. The technology available today allows you to develop and manage campaigns in real-time, but can you keep up?

7. If it's not working, cut your losses rather than waiting for overwhelming or "final" data.

8. Be viral-ready. No one can guarantee a viral campaign, but it's your job to be ready when serendipity strikes, or better yet, manufacture your own serendipity.

The effectiveness of social media campaigns are changing dramatically as new technologies and thinking empower brand managers, media buyers and creative directors to do more with less by thinking in terms of real-time campaigns that measure engagement activities and compress

both time and money compared to traditional campaigns. In addition, they engage in ways that traditional campaigns simply can't. The know how, tools and program design is within reach to regularly "strum" the social graph to maintain nearly continuous engagement with their target audience.