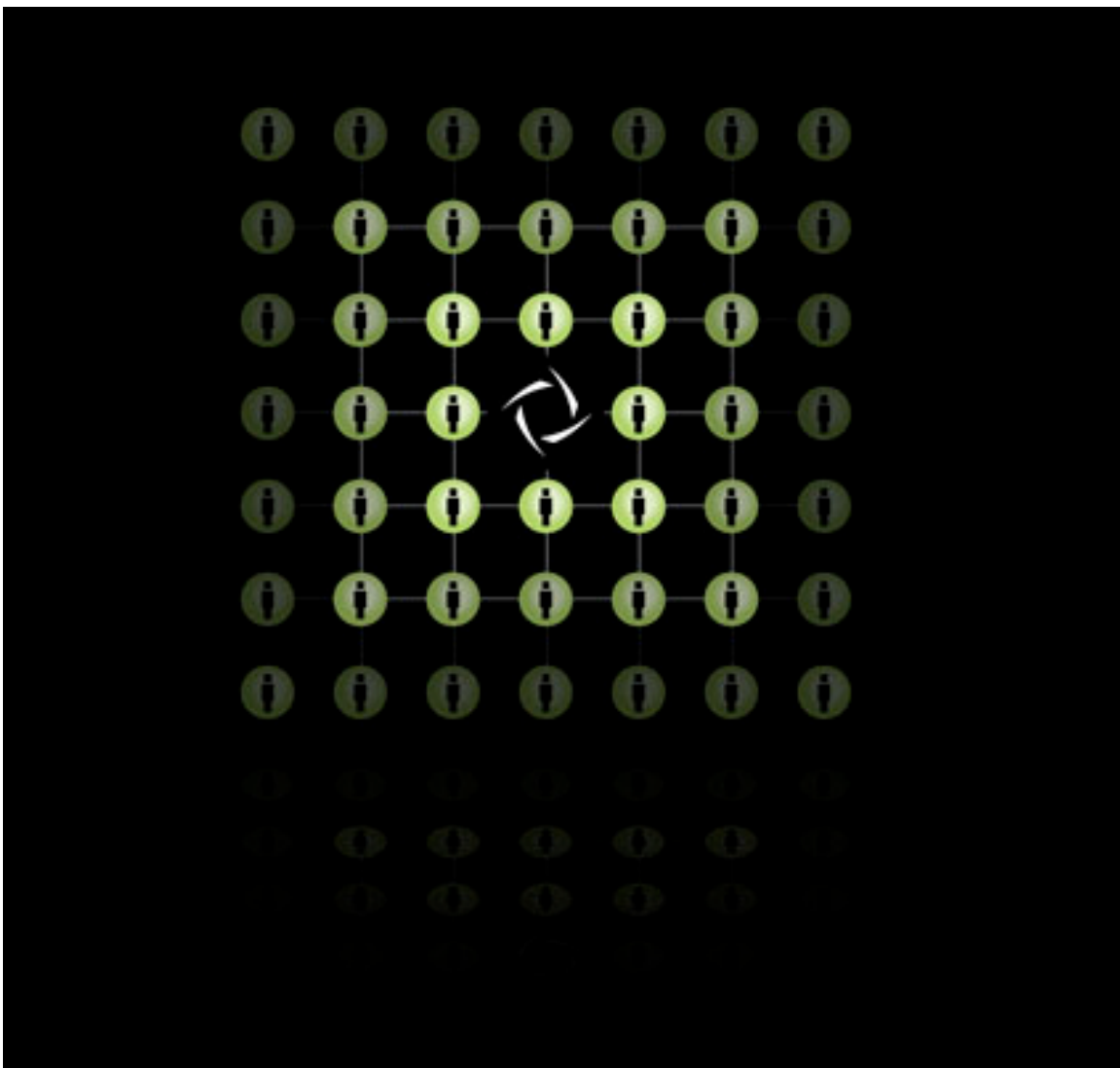

The Art and Science of Social Media and Community Relations

An ebook by Brian Solis of [PR 2.0](#) and Co-Author of [Now is Gone](#) that examines one company's foray into Social Media





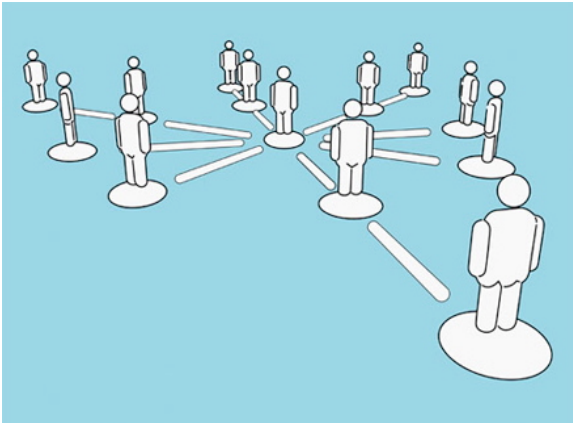
The Art and Science of Social Media and Community Relations

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This ebook is in memory of [Marc Orchant](#), an amazing friend, father, and geek, whom I will miss dearly. Marc was supposed to participate in this discussion. His unexpected passing has us all devastated. Our prayers and support are with his family.

The Art and Science of Social Media and Community Relations



Social networking, and social media specifically, have been painted as the new marketing landscape for businesses to engage with their communities of customers wherever they congregate.

In my view, we're starting to hit a ceiling of discussion versus execution and practicality.

I believe that we've theorized enough. There is certainly no shortage of "experts" who can point to "why" Social Media should work for business and improved communications, however, there IS a shortage of people showing others "exactly" how to do it, how to measure it specifically, and which tools of the trade work most effectively for individual campaigns.

It's time to divide the market of Social Media experts so that we can grow as a group of doers, not just thinkers.

While I will always look to the future to help others evolve, I will also share what I learn and what it means to PR, marketing, sales, and business branding. This

way the information can be analyzed and redeployed within – specific to the goals and culture of the company and the team.



Jonathan Crow of ThinkFree recently conducted “The Great Social Experiment” where he tested and practiced the art of social networking as a strategy for helping his company join the conversation and in turn, evaluate its business implications for doing so. The goal was to examine whether his engagement would increase both ThinkFree’s and his professional network, gain market intelligence both on product as well as the industry as a whole, and expand the company’s market outreach.

Basically, Crow, like many other marketing professionals, are trying to find out how Social Media can help businesses grow and whether or not conversations have real world business benefits. A side note, I would add, is that I wonder if his participation also affected and contributed to his personal brand.

Now, ThinkFree is an interesting company to profile because at the end of the day, it competes against Microsoft Office, Google Docs, as well as other hot Web 2.0 companies. No easy task indeed.

ThinkFree offers an online/offline office suite that is completely compatible with MS Office. The company also created a Social Network of its own, ThinkFree Docs, which is basically a community built around discovering and sharing documents and building a network around content and content creators.

His first step was to jump in.

Crow targeted the following networks:

ThinkFree Docs

digg

del.icio.us

Facebook

Pownce

Technorati

Reddit

Twitter

Jaiku

Newsvine

Flickr

Plaxo Pulse

StumbleUpon

Yahoo!360

MySpace

Friendster

LinkedIn


hi5

orkut

While some of Crow's targets are right on, others are secondary or even tertiary for accomplishing his goals – just by knowing the culture of each community from experience. However, this is his experiment, so what he learns is important to everyone else who may or may not have jumped in yet and to what extent each community applies (or doesn't) to their business. He represents many who are actively seeking ways to engage and/or how.

Crow points out, "It feels like I just went into a single's bar and shouted, 'will somebody be my friend!'"





He continues, “Who is listening and are we talking in an echo chamber? The answer has been a little mixed. Yes, I have met new people, and am having new conversations. Is it as much as I was expecting or hoping for? No. But the lesson I am taking away from this is that if you do want to build new contacts that can help you, and that you can help, it takes time. Social networks are not a magic formula...Like in the outside world, it takes time to get to know people and develop relationships that can lead to meaningful action. I guess I fell into the trap of looking at these resources as a commodification of friendship. And, we really need to break out of that mentality - myself included.”

Jonathan’s observation is perhaps one of the most common realizations of any good and optimistic marketer. And, this is exactly the point where the Social Media market and its practitioners start to fragment.

Jonathan however, is already a lot further along than most. He’s engaging and writing about his experience. He’s calling out to others to examine his participation and to offer advice, insight, and feedback so that he can engage more effectively.

Many companies and Social Media consultants dramatically underestimate the resources, time, dedication, and passion it takes to engage and cultivate relationships across multiple communities. It’s just not the same for any two networks.

However, Jonathan participated and contributed to the communities he wished to engage genuinely. He did not sit on the sidelines; he shared, learned, observed, and also emerged with real world feedback.

For example, in [part three](#) of his series, Crow discusses the different classifications of social networks he observed during his experiment and offered advice for business professionals looking to also jump in.



Aggregators

These pull together feeds from other profiles and sites, keep track of what you and your contacts are doing. Great examples of this are: Flock (as I mentioned already), Plaxo, and Pownce. Somewhat Frank has a great [list](#).

Connectors

These sites connect people, groups, networks, make suggestions based on profile information. The best example is LinkedIn, but obviously Facebook, and MySpace.

Feeders

These sites feed data that is then used in other sites. Typically media based, examples would be YouTube, Flickr, Google Maps, [iLike](#) and ThinkFree Docs.

Publishers

These “sites” are where people come for their entertainment or information. Twitter, Jaiku, and obviously YouTube, ThinkFree Docs, Flickr, etc.

His advice:

1. Start with the sites that best do contacts.
2. Connect with others. Expand your network
3. Get your aggregator sites going.
4. Publish away. Get involved. Don't spam!

Crow's experiment continues and it is both a looking glass into real world obstacles and a crystal ball that will reveal where true opportunities reside and in turn, will define and shape realistic expectations and associated metrics.




Crow summarized, “In the end my expectation of social networking bringing thousands of friends and generating enormous buzz was obviously misplaced. What I found is that it requires just as much effort (maybe even more) as blogging, newsletters, and traditional PR tools (such as email;), but as a marketing manager you need your company to be included in the conversation wherever that conversation occurs. Increasingly those conversations are happening in social networks. It is not an either or proposition. You have to go through traditional channels and these new tools.”

Jonathan is not alone. He has many peers who are wondering what to do and to evaluate if their engagement is on track.

He believes that there’s something in this story for everyone, and I think he’s right.





Therefore, Crow has created a [roundtable](#) of those active in the Social Media landscape to offer feedback, commentary, constructive criticism, and advice for the good of all marketing. Those joining the conversation are [Chris Brogan](#), [Aaron Brazell](#), [Cathryn Hrudicka](#), [Doug Haslam](#), and [me](#).

The discussion will be based on several questions posed by Jonathan:

1. Did I devote enough time to the exercise? More to the point, where should social networking be placed in terms of marketing priorities? Does this change for companies that are more or less mature?
2. How should we be judging the outcomes from social networking activities? Are there tools you recommend?
3. Is social networking the right tool for the tests I created? Are my expectations of social networking in line with what it can do? What is social networking best geared to address?
4. How much of getting social networking to work is the contacts you bring with you? How aggressive should one be in reaching out to new contacts? Should I, for instance, try to befriend Chris Anderson even after I have composed a note meant to appeal to what he is interested in?
5. How can I build better mechanisms into the framework to increase feedback?

Experiments in Social Media – Part I



As stated earlier, Jonathan Crow of [ThinkFree](#) recently conducted what he called [The Great Social Experiment](#) where he tested and practiced the art of online social networking as a strategy for helping his company join the conversation across popular online communities and in turn, evaluate the business implications for doing so.

The following paragraphs are dedicated to answering his proposed questions to help us all learn from his experiment.


Question One (Well 1a, 1b, 1c):

1a-Did I devote enough time to the exercise?

1b-More to the point, where should social networking be placed in terms of marketing priorities?

1c-Does this change for companies that are more or less mature?

Honestly, Jonathan did not invest enough time, effort and sincerity in his quest to



cultivate meaningful relationships within each community of not just peers, but also users. His experiment, while ambitious, was spread way too thin, only allowing for a superficial interaction with very little value for him and also the people who participate in the communities in which he wished to reach.

Jonathan has a full plate of marketing activities to run and therefore can't be everywhere at the same time. This challenge is common throughout marketing departments everywhere. This is why businesses are starting to consider hiring fulltime community "managers" or build community teams to dedicate the required time and resources to cultivate relationships online.

The development of friendships must be based on something meaningful, interaction, basically invested in, before a community can give back. It's just the nature of things.


What's the intent? What value do you bring? What's the goal for participating?

Social Media requires cultivation and a genuine desire to help those around you. It's more aligned with **Customer Service** than marketing I would say.

I've always believed, among **others**, that Social Media shares many principles and beliefs with anthropology. Any in-the-field engagement requires a "holistic" view, observation, and complete understanding based on a "four-field" approach, Biological, Socio-cultural, Linguistic, and Archaeology. Of course, not everything applies, but it's pretty close.

There's much to learn from approaching Social Media and online communities from this foundation because it forces us to think, learn, and observe before we pretend to be part of any new culture. And the only way to truly "go native" is to spend time acclimating into the very culture you wish to join.

You have to start as a person and not as a marketer in order to fully appreciate your surroundings. It requires immersion.



In order for businesses to understand Social Media, it requires a strategy, goals, metrics, and a tactical plan. It all starts with answering one simple question, “Why do we want to participate?”

Is it about trends?

Is your competition devouring customer mindshare?

Is it a new avenue for sales?

Or, is it because you wish to bring value to communities and increase customer service and loyalty?

Should you even be here?

It all starts with why and what you expect to get out of the engagement that helps define how to participate.

The next step is to listen and answer the following questions.


Where are your customers?

Where are your competitors?

Where do key words take you?

Are there conversations taking place about your company, products, and if so, where?

At that point, and only at this point, can you answer the question of where Social Media fits into a company’s marketing hierarchy – regardless of maturity.



But everything comes down to the investment made into each community. You get out of it what you put into it. And, in the era of Social Media, companies will earn the relationships that they deserve.

Experiments and Lessons Learned in Social Media – Part II



Source


Question Two:

2. How should we be judging the outcomes from social networking activities? Are there tools you recommend?

As I mentioned in my [last post](#), in order for businesses to understand Social Media, it requires a realistic strategy, goals, metrics, and a tactical plan. It all starts with answering two questions, why do we want to participate and what do we want to get out of it?

This is usually where traditional media and new media split. Traditional marketing is rooted in tangible results such as press coverage, traffic, revenue and those things should still matter in conversational marketing. This can't be solely driven by experimentation because time is money!

Metrics must be determined before engaging and then actively monitored and analyzed to modify future interactions and targets to stay on track.



However, there is an investment component in all of this that's somewhat comparable to the model of having a great customer service infrastructure. It's actually a significant cost center to all businesses that care about having a global community of happy, satisfied, and enthusiastic customers. The difference is that with Social Media, an outbound element is added to the traditional inbound model.

No it's not a copout for aligning metrics to engagement. It is, though, a different way to look at things. And, it brings the discussion outside of just PR and marketing. Meaningful engagement can also be led by product marketing and customer service.

Last year I discussed the concept of scientifically analyzing the Return on Participation (ROP) or Return on Engagement (ROE), which called for feedback to help determine what it is that matters to businesses in order to justify the expense of running social media campaigns.

The easy answer is as true today as it was then. It's different for each company.

It's also different specific to the campaign you're running.

I think it creates new line items that are separate from traditional marketing and should receive funding and resources from both marketing and customer service budgets.

In general, some of the most effective ways that we've measured success to date include community feedback, trackable conversations, traffic through landing pages, referrals, and also registrations specific to campaigns. Really, it's similar in concept to Web marketing. However, measuring conversations and tracking associated activity is an interesting and creative art.

The tools that we use to track activity and conversations include Technorati, Twitter, blogpulse, Google Blog Search, Compete, Google Analytics, Alexa,



specific social network searches, among others.

What's the value of a conversation?

What's the value of transforming an unhappy customer into an enthusiast?

Many companies can learn from big businesses who are shifting their reward-based strategies from who can take the most calls in an hour to who can create the most enthusiasts.

Like I've said, customer service is the **new, new marketing** and there's a lot to learn from separating (or expanding) engagement from PR to those immersed in the product, its value, benefits, strengths, and weaknesses.

Measurement is a combination of customer service, brand resonance, brand loyalty and bottom line business traction and lead generation.

And like I've always said, businesses will earn the respect, and ultimately the business, of the customers they deserve.

Experiments and Lessons Learned in Social Media – Part III



Source

Question Three:

- 3a. Is social networking the right tool for the tests I created?
- 3b. Are my expectations of social networking in line with what it can do?
- 3b. What is social networking best geared to address?

In order for businesses to understand the value and focus of a valuable social media campaign, it requires a dedicated strategy, goals, metrics, and a tactical plan.

It all starts with answering two simple questions, “why do we want to participate?” and “what do we hope to get out of it?”

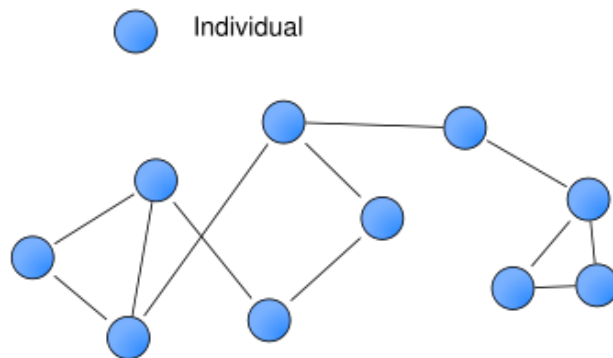
The process of answering these questions will define how and where to participate and how to measure success.

The next step is to listen and answer the following questions.

Where are your competitors?

Where do key words take you?

Are there conversations taking place about your company, products, and if so, where?




Source

You'll find that there are hubs across Social Media that will require your participation. In ThinkFree's case, Facebook, LinkedIn, Digg, ThinkFree Docs, and most importantly, the company blog, would be the areas of immediate concentration. Plaxo, Twitter, and others, might require attention and effort at a later time.

ThinkFree's business would benefit from the promotion of the great content residing in ThinkFree Docs, the capabilities of ThinkFree Office and also the ability to source and promote content from and to the community across other networks.

But it requires time, investment, cultivation, sincerity, and, it is not an overnight process.

Each network represents a collective of various groups of people who orbit an axis of common interests and each group as well as each network maintains its

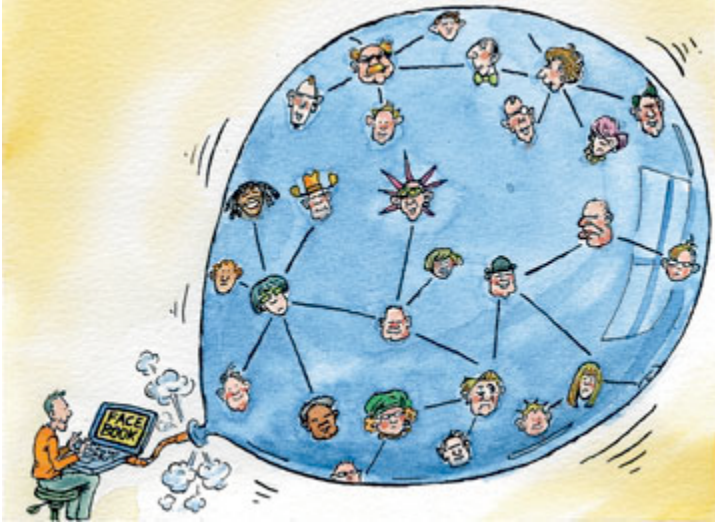


own ecosystem. Basically, what this means is that each community serves a different purpose, not just in who you reach, but how and why. The discussions and the very nature of the conversations are different from network to network.

The point that I can not emphasis enough is that you get out of Social Media what you put into it.

You have to observe before you can participate. Doing so will answer all of your questions and even dictate how to engage.

Experiments and Lessons Learned in Social Media – Part IV



Source

Question Four:

- 4a. How much of getting social networking to work is the contacts you bring with you?
- 4b. How aggressive should one be in reaching out to new contacts?
- 4c. Should I, for instance, try to befriend Chris Anderson even after I have composed a note meant to appeal to what he is interested in?

The art of relationships is based on the same principles and intentions online as it is in real life. In Social Media these days, we tend to get caught up in the coolest tools and forget that this is all about people.

Getting Social Media “to work” has less to do with what you have and more to do with who you know, who you should know, and how you communicate with them now and in the future – and it’s ongoing.

Before you can reach out to new contacts, it’s absolutely critical that you monitor where the conversations that matter to you and your business are taking place.

Observe. Listen. Read.

Embrace the unique dynamics that are inherent to each community.


Once you get a feel for it, participate as a person and not a marketer. This is such an important and pivotal step and is both easy and natural to overlook. Marketers are good marketers. But in the realm of Social Media, the community benefits from people who are good listeners as well as those who are helpful and provide value.



Source

It's not about how aggressive you engage or whether or not you're worthy of befriending a-listers. This is about finding opportunities to do so. And, it's an investment of time in communities, conversations, and relationships; an investment that is radically underestimated by most businesses who wish to reap the benefits of Social Media without the due diligence or effort.

This perspective shares more with the principles of good customer service and



relationship building than marketing, popularity contests, or cursory attempts achieving ROI by hollow engagement.

Each community requires dedication and a unique approach to how to find, listen to, and interact with the people that matter to you and to your business. Relationships are based on mutual benefits, so think about what you bring to the table and why before you jump in.

How can you also serve the best interests of the community while they in turn help you? How do you want to be remembered within the social networks you participate? Answer these and then reinforce that impression in everything you do.

Experiments and Lessons Learned in Social Media – Part V



Question Five:

5. How can I build better mechanisms into the framework to increase feedback?

We've all heard that participation is marketing. As well, we've seen the banner that reads conversations are marketing.

Great.

So, what about relationships?

We speak of building mechanisms into frameworks and while we search for the right answers, we're overshooting the very thing that Social Media revolves around, people.

Social Media isn't a catalyst to summon marketing for marketing's sake. It's an opportunity to engage with groups of people by tapping into conversations that

mutually serve the benefits of the very people we wish to reach.

The key is participation and I define participation as the ante that's determined by each distinct community. The minimum investment to play is sincerity, authenticity, trustworthiness, and genuine intent.

Answer the following questions.


What do you want to get out of each network and why should people care about your involvement?

Then identify those you want to reach by monitoring the very conversations you wish to join. They're not lining up to hear from you...I'm just saying.



There must be value associated with the dialog as most are seeds for potential relationships.

But, these things take time, focus, and nurturing. This isn't broadcast marketing. This is one-to-one discussions that can provide incredible value back to you and your company as long as the rules of engagement are clear and not manipulated. Social networks provide the foundation for one-to-one interactions and even one-to-many without losing its openness, as long as the intent is clear and honest.



Basically everything comes down to how you relate to the communities you wish to embrace and in turn, how they embrace you and your involvement. It's pretty natural to enhance feedback when your stature in each community represents your investment.

It takes time, patience, sincerity, and value. This is about relationships and it's much bigger and more relevant than just you and the company you represent.

Again, companies will earn the relationships they deserve.

This is about people and the evolution of business marketing, from broadcast to interaction, from marketing to solutions.



Brian Solis is Principal of [FutureWorks](#), an award-winning PR agency in Silicon Valley. Solis blogs at [PR2.0](#), [bub.blicio.us](#), [WebProNews](#), and regularly contributes PR and tech insight to industry publications. Solis is co-founder of the [Social Media Club](#), is an original member of the [Media 2.0 Workgroup](#), and also is a contributor to the [Social Media Collective](#) and [ConversationalMedia.org](#).

In concert with Geoff [Livingston](#), Solis released “[Now is Gone](#)” a new book that helps businesses learn how to engage in Social Media.

Solis has been actively writing about new PR since the mid 90s to discuss how the Web was redefining the communications industry – he also coined PR 2.0. Solis is considered an expert in traditional PR, media relations, and Social Media. He has dedicated his free time to helping PR professionals adapt to the new fusion of PR, Web marketing, and community relations. PR 2.0 is a top 10,000 Technorati blog and is ranked in the Ad Age Power 150 index of leading marketing bloggers.

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