

The next step for social media

 By [Mike Stopforth](#)

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The honeymoon is over. Much of the hype and noise surrounding social media and its meteoric rise (especially in the USA) has abated. Perhaps owing to the global economic crisis, arguably due to the apparent lack of sustainable business models and possibly as a result of some semblance of reasonable thinking, we're no longer reading about \$1.6 billion investments in YouTube and \$15 billion Facebook valuations.

At the same time social media or Web 2.0 or new media or whatever the heck you choose to call it certainly hasn't disappeared either. On the one (marketing) hand we're seeing significantly higher budget percentages being pushed at below-the-line, experiential and digital (for the purposes of this conversation including online and mobile) channels - a sure sign that business takes the effect that the social media evolution has had on their customers pretty seriously. Agencies are feeling this - a fact that keeps my company and me very busy.

On the other (internal) hand, many organisations have realised the enormous power in leveraging social platforms, tools and technologies behind the corporate firewall (a school of thought dubbed Enterprise 2.0 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enterprise_2.0) and traditional ERP vendors like Microsoft, SAP, IBM and Oracle are actively incorporating social features and functionality into their offerings.

But for you - the marketers, advertisers and brand custodians - social media can only be one of three things. Firstly, you may feel threatened by it, having listened to the doomsday prophets and their "Web 2.0 = the death of traditional advertising" sermons. They're talking crap, by the way, but we'll get to that later. Maybe you consider yourself a technophobe or digitally incompetent. Take heart in the fact that social media has got nothing to do with technology. Or rather very little. Understanding the technology of social media is no more critical to benefiting from it than understanding how to build a cellphone was important to using it to improve your business.

Secondly, you've seen the opportunity in social media but have no idea what to do next. This article is, in fact, written especially for you. That's because the third group I refer to (and they do exist) have embraced the emergence of social media and are watching it add value to their clients and ultimately impact the bottom line.

Over the hype

So assuming you have gotten over the hype of social media and now seek to extract some substance in order to add the aforementioned value to your clients, how do you go about doing that? I'd like to offer a few tips and pointers from my experience running a social and mobile media company for (who would've thunk it) two years now - a company that has endured some hectic challenges carving out a niche in a completely new space. If you're looking for the ROI on social media, or the real meaning behind Web 2.0, or just simple ways to take your agency to the next level, try these:

1. Focus on the WHY, not the HOW

If you get all wrapped up in the 'how' of social media you'll get hopelessly obsessed with technology - RSS this, Ajax that, CMS at the back and CSS in the front - and spend all your time upskilling yourself on stuff you can outsource anyways. Rather spend energy understanding WHY social media is important - and it's important for all the reasons you can read about at sites like www.cluetrain.com. Read it - you won't regret it. Or download some eBooks by experts like Brian Solis or Seth Godin (Google them).

Quite simply - Web 2.0 is important because it gives ordinary people the opportunity to publish content online, shifting power to them, turning them into Prosumers (simultaneous producers and consumers of information) and the collective narrative they produce as a result has simply got to mean something for brands. Web 2.0 is also significant because it maps, often visually, the links between these prosumers in the form of social networks. The ability to see social networks is invaluable.

2. Integrate to Innovate

There is life beyond the 30 Second Spot (to quote Joe Jaffe (www.jaffejuice.com, who wrote a book by the same name), and if you're smart you've realised that. Still, I want to reiterate that the answer to the digital evolution is not scrapping everything you know to embrace everything you don't. It's about finding creative and innovative ways to integrate the new with the old, I mean, traditional. Our markets are smarter, more informed and more connected than ever before and if we don't maximise our chance of grabbing their attention we're wasting our time and our client's money.

I believe social media provides a great opportunity to both sustain and measure the impact of above the line campaigns, while building community around brands at the same time. Conversely, investing in a blog or Facebook presence or whatever it may be without sending people there (one of the best ways of doing so obviously being via ATL channels) can be a frightful waste of time and money too. Succeeding in today's marketing world means having an inclusive, integrated, 360-degree approach to campaigns.

3. Remember it's a 5-day game

My colleague Angus Robinson has many favourite sayings, but arguably his favourite favourite is this "remember that it's a 5-day game". I think many of us approach new technologies and platforms thinking we're in for a whirlwind experience with no structure or predictability.

In our experience of integrating social and mobile media with traditional campaigns, commitment, consistency and sustained effort is the order of the day. Find people within your business that understand the tools and platforms and who care about identifying content from within the business that will capture online audiences.

Start using these three tips as points of departure as you venture into social, new, 2.0 - whatever - and you may just find some value too.

ABOUT MIKE STOPFORTH

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