Social media in the cross-channel marketing strategy

Efficiently using social media to improve the relevance of marketing and communication programs

Summary

The hottest topic in marketing and communication is without any doubt social media marketing. Although many businesses are still testing the waters, many others have successfully integrated social media in their marketing mix.

Despite the hype that surrounds social media, now is the time to start using them on various levels. The reason is obvious: people – and thus customers and prospects – are increasingly embracing social media to connect with each other and businesses, to express their opinions, to gather information and to share.

If our (future) customers use social media, so should we. Especially since social media play a crucial role in pre-sales processes, customer service and even customer acquisition.

But there is more: by using the proper social networks and truly listening to what people say online and by understanding the dynamics of sales and marketing in a connected world, businesses can improve all their marketing programs, including for instance e-mail marketing and CRM, by focussing on relevance and a cross-channel customer-centric view.

This paper looks at the main possibilities social media offer to holistic thinking marketers, how social media can improve your other communication efforts and how valuable social interactions lead to revenue and customer loyalty.

But most of all, it is a roadmap to get started in the social media sphere in an efficient and intelligent way.

The explosive rise of communication channels

Social media is a broad term that encompasses a very rich and diverse landscape of platforms, websites and online tools that enable people to connect, express themselves, interact, comment and share.

People use them both for private information, communication and sharing purposes and to interact with businesses. Or better: to interact with the people that work in those businesses. Obviously, people also use them to talk about firms, brands, products, services and customer experiences.

From the marketing perspective, social media are being used for all possible marketing goals, ranging from customer service, gaining market and customer insights, word-of-mouth marketing and inbound marketing to even direct marketing.

One can divide the social media sphere in a few segments of websites, tools and applications:

1 - Blogs

Weblogs are often called the hubs of the social media world and they are. Blogs are a key element of the social media marketing strategies of many businesses. They allow people within your company or in the ecosystem of your businesses to offer valuable information and interact with others. They are also crucial in inbound marketing techniques such as SEO, provide a more open brand image, offer you the possibility to engage people more personally and can easily be connected with other social media presences and marketing channels such as e-mail. Important features of blogs include RSS feeds, commenting functions and various connection possibilities with the social media described below.

2 - Social networks

Social platforms such as MySpace, Facebook and more local layers such as Netlog, hi5 and many more, are cornerstones in the social media sphere. They offer their users many services to connect with others, say what they are doing, upload images, share things, e-mail with each other and much more. There are also social networks that are more used for professional purposes and of which LinkedIn is beyond any doubt the most popular one. Finally, businesses, organizations or individuals can build their own, more or less private, topical social networks using platforms such as Ning, Xing or SocialGo, all with their specific target groups.

3 - Micro-blogging

Micro-blogging basically enables people to share short messages with status updates, information and links, to connect with others and to communicate both privately or publicly, typically in just 140 characters. The most famous player in this area is Twitter but it certainly isn't the only one. There are also tools that allow organizations and individuals to create their own micro-blogging environment, for whatever purpose.

4 - Social and news bookmarking services

There are hundreds of platforms that enable users to bookmark blog posts, images they found online, news stories or any form of online content. Every platform has its own focus and type of users. Digg for instance is mainly used to bookmark news stories, whereas a platform such as StumbleUpon is used to bookmark all forms of online content. One of the most popular bookmarking services is Delicious. Social bookmarking is the online equivalent of bookmarking links on your computer to save them for later because you deem them useful. Social bookmarking has a sharing component but is also used for many other purposes.

5 - Multimedia social sharing platforms

Whether it's online video on sites such as Vimeo or YouTube, images on Flickr or PowerPoint presentations and PDF files on slideshare: there are dozens of online properties where people can upload, tag and share multimedia content. Most of these sites offer embedding options which basically provides the possibility for other people to include the content, if deemed relevant, on their websites, social networks or blogs. Especially sites with online video, slideshare and – in a lesser degree – image sharing sites are often used for marketing purposes.

6 - Peer review and recommandation platforms

Smart businesses and online retailers or publishers offer their customers the possibility to comment on their products or stories, to "vote" and/or to recommend. However, people do it on other online properties and in online and offline discussions as well. On top of that there are hundreds of sites that have one sole purpose: to allow people to share their thoughts about products, add (and consult) reviews for and by their peers or share their brand experiences. The scope of these sites is sometimes very broad but mostly industry-specific. You might of course want to focus on those that are related to yours in the first place.

7 - Mobile and location-based social tools

Most of the above mentioned social media platforms can be used on mobile devices. But recently new forms of social networking applications have arisen that are based on the combination of people, content and location. Examples are Foursquare and Gowalla. These platforms will be joined by new ones and different mobile social platforms in this fast growing segment that is driven by the increasing sales of smartphones with built-in GPS navigation features.

These are the main categories of social media as we know them today. By the time you download this paper, new ones might exist since this market is evolving fast.

Looking at the sheer volume of platforms, sites and services that exist, social media marketing might seem overwhelming. However, the aim of a business should not be to be on all these networks, which is virtually impossible anyway.

Social media marketing is marketing and thus requires a strategic approach that has its place in the cross-channel and customer-centric overall marketing and communication strategy. When choosing the proper platforms, businesses need to look at the relevance of the platform for both their bottom-line and their customers, prospects, brand fans and other target groups such as journalists and so forth.

The choice of platforms will further depend on the marketing purposes you want to serve by using social media.

It should also be noted that all the selected sites and services can be interconnected with your website, blog, each other and interaction channels and tactics such as e-mail marketing, web analytics, search engine marketing, CRM and much more as will be discussed further in this paper.

Finally, it's important to know that in this enormous Web of conversations, messages, bookmarks, links, connections and buzz the social media sphere is, there are ample possibilities to measure, manage and streamline a lot of what happens online and concentrate on what matters for you and your customers. Social media marketing is not overwhelming if done right but it does require the will, time, strategy and mindset to succeed.

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Understanding the essence and challenges of social media

This mindset brings us to the essence of social media and social media marketing.

More important than all the tools and platforms that exist are the ways businesses can use social media to increase the efficiency of existing marketing programs, offer new and relevant marketing opportunities, serve and understand their customers better, become more valuable and trustworthy partners and improve their interactions.

To be able to do this, business need to understand the essence of social media marketing and how to strategically deploy social media in function of their customers, ecosystem of partners and the social media influence sphere.

Social media have brought significant changes upon people and companies, especially in the way we interact, seek information and communicate. However, it would be wrong to attribute all these changes only to social media. Many of the below described essential phenomena to understand about social media and to know what truly matters, already existed or started before social networks such as Facebook even existed.

What social media did do, however, is increase the speed at which these socio-economical shifts that were already happening, further evolved.

Below we look at some of the changes and challenges and we provide some short answers. These will be developed further in the paper.

So, what is the essence of social media and what are the main challenges?

1 - The explosion of opinions and word-of-mouth

People have always talked about businesses, products and customer experiences. It is the essence of word-of-mouth. Since the arrival of the Internet, these discussions, opinions and mentions got a more public character. With the arrival of social media, however, they have grown at an explosive rate and they get shared in an instant. Reputation, comments, opinions, messages and stories travel faster than ever before. Word-of-mouth has found fertile ground in social media to grow exponentially. What people say and share on social media regarding products and customer experiences can have a tremendous impact. Understanding this, responding to it and being more transparent is a must for brands that want to be respected. Not listening and simply letting things "happen" without at least being present and active is a recipe for distrust and criticism.

The challenge: tap into the power of word-of-mouth and deal with negative comments and reputation issues.

The answer: listen, monitor, participate, engage and share stories.

2 - Buyers find vendors more often than vice versa

These days for most businesses, their website, online forms, interactive communication channels etc. are mission-critical and key in their marketing and sales processes. The increasing role of online properties in the way we do business is related to the nature of online media themselves (measurability, speed etc.) but obviously also to the fast adoption of the Internet as an information medium for people and thus buyers. Being found online and converting people that find us to prospects and eventually customers is what we aim to do. Main tactics to being found, reaching out to people online and converting them into buyers include content marketing, e-mail, search engine optimization etc. However, social media have offered many more ways for people to gather information prior to a purchase, consult peer reviews, ask advice and pull the control over the pre-sales cycles and even actual sales towards themselves. People are prepared before they buy, they want to find the information and decide for themselves because they have the tools and channels with social media. And they do use them! This has led to a increase in the pace of the already ongoing shift from selling to buying.

The challenge: people increasingly control the sales process which is becoming a buying process whereby social media are used to find information about products, services and businesses.

The answer: use the social media people consult to inform themselves and offer choice of information channels, enabling them to find your business on the Web and in the social media sphere.

3 - Customer satisfaction equals customer acquisition

In the previous two points we saw how fast customer experiences travel, both "positive" and "negative", and how they call upon social media and advice of peers and experts to make an educated buying decision. The combination of word-of-mouth, the viral reach of social media and the use of reviews and socially shared opinions, forces businesses to completely focus on their customers and prospects throughout their whole organization. The old saying that a satisfied customer equals two is not valid in a social media world. When a satisfied customer spreads the word about his customer experience or becomes a fan of your brand, he equals much more than two. As marketing expert and author Joseph Jaffe puts it: "retention is the new acquisition". Excellent customer service is key in improving the word-of-mouth and perception regarding your business. The result are new customers. Your most satisfied customers will become brand advocates and some of them real influencers in the buying decisions of others.

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The challenge: since the sales cycle is more controlled by the customer and peer recommendations and word-of-mouth play a crucial role, customer retention and customer service are key in customer acquisition.

The answer: introduce a cross-departmental customer-centric attitude whereby customer satisfaction, retention, loyalty and customer service are the main targets. Consider if customer service should not fall under marketing or if you need a 'customer manager', overseeing the customer interactions as they occur across all divisions. Identify and engage brand advocates and influencers.

4- Content and context rule in a world of sharing

One of the main aspects of social media is the interconnection between various platforms and services, enabling people to share content, bookmarks, opinions etc. over several networks and with different people. What they share over all these platforms gets shared by others on their favourite networks or where they have found, thus potentially resulting in a snowball effect whereby one piece of content can show up on several media and in unexpected ways. Sharing and the use of sharing tools that technically allow people to do so is one of the keys of social media. Obviously, offering sharing possibilities is not enough. People only share things they find on Twitter, blogs etc. over their social networks if they think those things, we call them content and they can take any form, are share-worthy in their eyes. The decision to share content – or not – is determined by various psychological and other motivations. To be shared, content must at least be relevant in the context of how people use it. The context in which content exists is defined by the life cycle, needs, interaction channels etc. of the (potential customer). Content and context are the king and queen of social media, just as they have always been in lead generation, e-mail marketing etc. If content, whether it's written or audiovisual, is extremely relevant it can become a story that gets spread fast via word-of-mouth. Note that the content people create can be just as valuable – and sometimes more – for your business. Content is about getting found, sharing but also engaging in what we call conversations.

The challenge: the sharing of relevant and valuable content is very important in social media. To get shared, content has to be perceived as valuable and relevant. Content also should lead to conversations.

The answer: Understand the content needs of customers and prospects (channels, types of kind, formats etc.), create compelling and relevant content in various formats for various social networks and purposes. Monitor and interact with the content your customers "produce".

5 - Dialogue prevails over monologue when people have control

Marketing and communication have long been sitting in a one-way mass broadcasting sphere, among many others, driven by the focus on reach, mass consumption and mass media. Social media marketing is strongly built on the so-called "long tail", micro-communities and –platforms and personal dialogue. On top of that mass media are increasingly losing power in a world where people control the interaction and a certain fatigue and disbelief regarding broadcasting and traditional advertising exists. Communication is per definition based on a two-way interaction and it used to be like that. Businesses forgot it in the mass media era and are now forced to change again. Sending out marketing messages obviously still works but only if relevant and personalized. In e-mail marketing for instance the focus is increasingly on the recipient and his personal needs. Businesses start looking at the people behind their e-mail addresses. People have more control and thus businesses should engage in dialogues instead of monologues. Social media marketing is strongly based upon this although in reality it is not a black and white matter as we will see further. Social media is not by definition the end of broadcasting and certainly not of direct marketing. It is the end of irrelevant broadcasting without taking into account the recipient. And the end of monologues. Listening and responding is key.

The challenge: people control communication more than ever. Untargeted, irrelevant and product-centric one-way broadcasting does not work anymore. Direct marketing tactics are changing to remain efficient.

The answer: listen to what people say, look beyond e-mail addresses, social media connections and the people in your lists. Learn from feedback to engage in more relevant and two-way dialogues.

Social media in the marketing mix

As this paper clearly shows, social media marketing is a broad term that covers a rich range of many different networks, media, evolutions and tools.

That diversity is also reflected in the marketing purposes that social media can serve. It is thus wrong to categorize social media marketing as a specific form of marketing that is limited to one or a few goals, like many people do.

A simple example can illustrate this. What are you really doing if you are monitoring and identifying trends on social media networks to send a topical e-mail or to find new keywords for your search engine marketing strategy, based on real-time trending: social media marketing or trying to improve your e-mail marketing or search engine marketing?

Since one of the characteristics of social media marketing is being customer-centric and listening closely to the needs of people, social media marketing by definition is part of your global cross-channel marketing strategy. On top of that, the combination of social media with for instance e-mail has proven to be effective for the overall results of e-mail marketing campaigns.

Before looking more in-depth at the ways social media can be used to improve cross-channel interactions, have a better view on the customer and even improve direct marketing strategies, below is a non-exhaustive list of common marketing purposes that are being served with social media.

● Trend identification and research
● Gathering market, customer and competitor insights
● Customer service via specific accounts
● Raising brand awareness and a more "human" brand positioning
● Search engine optimization and traffic building
● Viral marketing, word-of-mouth and influencer marketing
● Reputation management
● Providing information in pre-sales cycles
● Lead generation and nurturing
● Customer acquisition
● Customer retention, loyalty and community building
● One-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many conversations
● Public relations

When looking at the above mentioned uses of social media marketing, it is immediately clear that the main advantages of social media for businesses occur in gaining a better knowledge about their reputation, target groups, markets and competitors, in providing a better customer experience, new interaction and information channels, in acquiring leads and prospects through word-of-mouth and personal interactions and, finally, in inbound marketing techniques such as search engine optimization, link building and traffic generation.

The main question is how this all fits in a cross-channel data-driven and integrated marketing approach.

And this is where the true power of social media surfaces: in the interaction with other channels and communication tactics and in a holistic and personalized interactive CRM and communication strategy.

The cross-channel CRM and interaction perspective

Social media provide enormous (customer) insights to businesses who systematically monitor what is being said. In order to be able to do that, they need a systematic approach and the proper tools.

The data that are gathered from social media can be used to improve all your customer interactions and even your CRM:

- Identifying the social media accounts enables you to gain additional information about your customers that can be used for existing interactive CRM and marketing programs.
- Knowing what people talk about regarding your product and brand and what people have most influence on other social media users enables you to identify influencers and brand advocates that should be treated as your most loyal customers since they are powerful sources for word-of-mouth marketing.
- Identifying trends and keywords on social media enables you to improve the efficiency of your e-mail marketing by tapping into these trends and to improve your search engine marketing by including the keywords and trends about your business, market and competitors.
- Analyzing what social media your target groups and customers use enables you to offer them information and interaction possibilities via the channels, content formats and tools they use. Furthermore it helps you in selecting sharing tools that you can use in existing marketing channels such as e-mail, your website and blog.
- Monitoring via which social channels and content your prospects find your online properties and enter the marketing funnel enables you to better segment them and provide them personalized information in function of their needs.
- Sharing links to online content and pages via social bookmarking services, micro-blogging and other social networks leads to traffic in both the short and long term to that content. Traffic and being found is the conditio sine qua non to generate new leads.

These are just a few examples on how social media can be used in optimizing your cross-channel communication strategy, improving your brand awareness and offering more interaction possibilities to your customers in function of their actions.

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Let's take e-mail as an example:

- Adding social sharing tools to your e-mails and focussing on share-worthy and relevant content increases the reach of your e-mails.
- Social media presences such as Facebook pages and private social networks can be used to have new subscribers for your newsletters, gain leads via white papers and so on via embeddable forms.
- Professional networks such as LinkedIn offer you the possibility to send mails to your communities.
- When launching a blog you can launch at the same time an extra newsletter that includes the posts on your blog and enables you to reach new audiences.
- Via RSS feeds you can provide updates to the many people who use RSS readers where they integrate their preferred information sources. Furthermore, you can easily offer your RSS subscribers the possibility to get your latest content in their inbox every time something new is added.
- When you offer other interaction channels than e-mail, you can provide inactive e-mail subscribers or e-mail recipients that wish to unsubscribe, another communication alternative via social media.

The conclusion is obvious: the use of social media in your global marketing strategy offers a vast range of new opportunities. When properly planned, managed, measured, connected and integrated, social media marketing offers nothing but benefits.

Social media marketing starts with defining a clear strategy, implementing a cross-divisional approach, defining the right key performance indicators, educating and involving your staff and even employees and, finally, with monitoring and listening to what is being said about you and your market.

The next step is participating, being open for personal interaction, measuring and improving both your social media marketing strategy and other communication activities, in function of the feedback you get.

When being a relevant and valuable partner in the social media sphere you will not only be able to identify influencers and generate word-of-mouth but you will become an influencer yourself.

Obviously there are always people who will say things you do not like. But they do it anyway. And it's better to know it, respond to it, learn from it and improve as you go along

About Selligent

Selligent is a leading provider of conversion marketing and interactive CRM solutions. Selligent offers practical solutions to the challenges companies face in quest to transform into customer-driven organisations. Selligent's customer interaction solutions enable organisations to engage with customers individually and across all channels. The result is increased conversion rates, higher profitability, minimal churn and a superior customer experience.

Marketing departments rely on the Selligent Interactive Marketing suite to establish cross-channel multi-step interactive marketing scenarios. This conversion marketing suite can also be linked to the Selligent CRM modules to offer sales and service departments a 360° customer view and effective individual follow-up.

Thanks to Selligent solutions, companies can effectively turn leads into customers and nurture life-time customers. The benefits are multiple: optimal ROI; minimal churn; lower operational costs; increased staff efficiency; plus maximum automation with optimal orchestration.

Selligent serves customers in sectors such as financial services, telecommunications, travel, media & publishing, retail, automotive, healthcare, manufacturing and many others. Since its creation, Selligent has demonstrated impressive growth thanks to its innovative solutions, its customer-driven service culture and its approach combining agility, pragmatism and implication to deliver results fast.

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