



Social Mediaignore it at your peril!

What should organisations be doing to make sure they effectively interpret and engage with this channel? Ian Farmer sets out a 3 Step Action Plan

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Social Media - Your 3 Step action plan

The continued growth of Social media has resulted in a massive power shift to the consumer. The ability for consumers to voice their opinions is unprecedented in the history of media and the ability to effectively interpret and engage with this channel is often ignored.

Social media cannot be controlled; ignoring it just eliminates you from the conversations. Due to the global scale and the sheer volume of online conversations taking place, knowing how to respond to social media can be a little daunting.

In this article I'll outline a 3 step action plan that will assist you to understand and respond to social media. It will also help you to establish an accurate online brand identity and provide you with the ability to influence conversations, a real competitive advantage for any organisation

So what is Social Media?

I define Social Media as "Open conversations that encourage participation and connect people".

Did you know?

[Technorati](#) currently tracks 113 million blogs

[Youtube](#) broadcasts 100 million videos each day

If [Myspace](#) was a country it would be the world's 3rd biggest

2.2 million Australians are on [Facebook](#) - that's 1 in 5 of those online

The Social Media action plan focuses on 3 areas:

Listen - Engage - Influence

Step 1. Listen

Listen involves the development of a process to both understand the conversations that are present, as well as the implementation of a process to action the insights.

Listening to social media conversations requires a combination of skills.

Online research techniques should be combined with business and marketing acumen, to collate and produce information in a manner that can easily be digested, allowing ongoing insights to be deduced and actioned.

Identifying influential conversations where your organisations should potentially have a voice, is one of the most challenging outcomes of this step. Consideration needs to be

made of the author's reputation, as well as the website reach and volume of conversation.

Valuable insights are also discovered through the provision of opinions in real time, listening will also identify potential gaps or bias in points of view which your business can address.

Early warning of potential risks is another benefit which stems from a social media listening process.

A social media audit is a good first step which involves a broad brush search of the categories where your organisation competes. There are a number of specialist blog search engines such as <http://www.technorati.com> which can provide a quick list of recent blog mentions for a given search string.

Setting up Google alerts <http://www.google.com/alerts> for various keywords of importance is another step that will help gauge the quantity and types of conversations related to one or more search strings.

Once you are listening to conversations, it gives you permission to engage with them.

Step 2. Engage

The creation of a social media participation framework is an important and ongoing process that acts to steer the location, resources and communication style for social media engagement.

Effective social media engagement provides a valuable feedback channel, offering the ability to improve customer service, exhibit leadership and create an innovation stream. Another benefit to social media engagement, which often emerges for organisations and brands, is a deeper self awareness of your positioning.

Leveraging this opportunity requires careful planning and consideration of appropriate outcomes and risks. However, it is important for companies to instil some basic "Rules of Engagement" so that employees know how to engage with social media.

The development of a social media policy should include the following principles:-

- **Engagement etiquette**
Social media is more immediate, more interment and therefore a more casual style is called for. No matter what tone or engagement area, basic communication etiquette should be followed.
- **Transparency**
The most common error organisations and their agencies make is the lack of transparency in their engagement. Companies misrepresenting the truth are regularly found out, with the results being broadcast for all to see. This can cause challenging issues, as happened when the NAB's PR agency engaged with social media to advertise a promotion without declaring their relationship to NAB.
- **Horses for Courses**
Identifying where to engage is a critical step in the engagement process and the broad nature of social media requires that different resources from different departments are required to manage this engagement. For example, engaging in a technical forum is best achieved using technical resources.

- **Incentivise contribution**
Employees are often your best source of information, but many companies fail to incentivise them for their engagement contributions.
- **Responsiveness**
The ability to provide timely engagement is critical to the effectiveness of organisations ability to join the conversations. A good rule of thumb is that engagement should occur within 48 hours.
- **Integration**
Wherever possible, online participation should be aligned with offline communication as it amplifies the message and demonstrates consistency.
- **Communication of the policy**
Many corporations have created a policy and yet their employees have not been informed or are not aware of it. Social media engagement policies should be integrated with induction processes and also updated regularly.

Participation, participation, participation is the new Location, location, location.

Step 3. Influence

Making it easy for people to discover and spread your goodwill is the primary principle behind social media marketing.

Most companies have marketing budgets which are used to communicate messages to their consumers, but using those budgets effectively for influencing conversations is often an afterthought.

Influencing consumer behaviour has always been an objective of marketing agencies, but with the growth of social media, a number of principles should be employed.

- **Measurement**
Investment in social media influence programs provides a unique opportunity to measure the effectiveness of all forms of marketing. As social media grows, so does the ability to establish social media metrics for marketing spend. So listen to social media to measure the effectiveness of your marketing spend.
- **Building loyalty**
Identifying influencers and lead consumers provides a foundation for the creation of ongoing loyalty programs. It also identifies collaboration opportunities that may be useful for expanding the awareness of your product or service through word of mouse!

Influence is all about measuring the impact on social media of your campaigns and using that insight to create and stimulate conversations.

Social media is an exciting new medium, and the 3 step action plan should help you to understand the insights, navigate your engagement, and leverage your marketing spend.

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