

Likes are not enough: Maximizing social media by building branded communities

How can brands maximize their use of social media?

A social media presence has become an imperative in today's digital environment, but brands cannot simply apply traditional marketing techniques to the online space. Using social media to pump out promotional material misses the point and opportunity of social media, which offers brands the chance to build community and connect with consumers who embody the ethos of the brand.

In this paper we'll explore branded social media communities, thinking about the advantages they confer to brands and the best way to maximize their use. Social media is about fostering engagement around a brand rather than pushing out the traditional marketing message. We'll draw on case studies to illustrate the successful use of these media by a small B2C product, a major consumer brand and a B2B model. And we'll explore the two key steps to making social media effective for your brand. The first step is storytelling: identifying your brand's values and making them manifest through digital content. The next step is to cultivate a forum for interaction and experience that demonstrates and enhances your brand's identity and helps foster and sustain ties between members of the branded community.

It's not about collecting the most likes, but about the engagement and richness of the conversation. The discussion between members can create both emotional and functional connections to the brand, highlighting the way the brand makes users feel, or hearing new or unexplored features and uses of the product from other users. These experiences deepen and sustain members' loyalty to the brand and add new dimensions to their commitment to the brand and its values. This requires content designed with an understanding of who your customer is and how to cater to his or her unique needs, but this is achievable for brands of every type and size.

What does social media offer?

Social media offers brands the ability to deepen customer commitment, create relationships between committed consumers, and develop volunteer brand advocates and ambassadors. For brands of all sizes, products, and target consumers, the use of social media has quickly become not only an opportunity, but a necessity. It is vital to remember, however, that social media is about networks and communities, not traditional one-way marketing and promotion. Social media is a conversation. The shift from the traditional marketing funnel to the partnership model of social media is a big transition, and brands need to enter the social media space with full awareness of the values they want to communicate, and with a deep understanding of the customers with whom they are in conversation. Brands can maximize their social media presence through social media branded communities, spaces in which members connect around the brand's values rather than their products. Consumers not only express but also help shape the brand's values through meaningful interactions with other members, creating strong community ties to which they will return again and again, and to which they will recruit others. That means that the brand has to know the stories it wishes to tell. It means that the brand has to be able to clearly articulate and express its own values. It also means that the brand has to know its customers, the ways that they wish to connect and congregate, and the tools they need to do so.

Harley Davidson

Harley Davidson has been a pioneer in establishing brand community. Faced with bankruptcy in 1983, the company turned itself around with a dramatic overhaul of company philosophy. Following a leveraged buyback, Harley launched a series of activities and lifestyle-based strategies that organized its consumers around the company values. Community-outreach events, focused on the brotherhood of riders, were staffed only by employees who understood the riding ethos. A strong community emerged and evolved, sustaining the company and further strengthening its commitment to the community as the decision-makers and partners in the development and future of the brand. Harley has successfully transitioned its offline community into a strong social media presence that continues to emphasize the values of riding and family, with strong interaction between online networks and offline experiences.



Social media offers an opportunity to learn more about both of those things: who a brand's customers are, and how they understand the values around which they coalesce. In the ideal branded social media space, customers are invited to be co-creators and partners in developing the brand's future. At the core, it's about building community around a shared set of values and beliefs. It's about customers living and publicly exhibiting their identities through the brand itself.

Branded communities

Traditional brand communities hold great benefits for both consumers and managers, providing a space for information sharing and the opportunity for already-devoted customers to enhance their loyalty through experiencing and sharing the brand's values and identities. Social media offers many of these same advantages, with particular challenges and opportunities unique to the digital space. The scale is considerably greater, and the networks and affiliated communities offer the opportunity for far greater reach. And the conversation is ongoing: unlike traditional brand communities, which are often limited to in-person and one-time interaction, the online branded space offers the convenience and consistency of constant access. This continued and sustained presence also serves to strengthen the bond between members and the brand, and deepen the possible audience for interaction. This expanded audience means that social media can be a highly efficient means of building and cementing relationships with committed consumers, but it is important to remember that the medium is not free.

A social media presence operates as a sign of transparency for the brand.

An enormous amount of thought, effort, and care must go into building, supporting, and responding to the brand community. As a brand, by establishing a social media presence, you are making a commitment and creating an expectation that you will be engaged. There is a strong social and interactive context; unlike other online community forums, brand communities are designed around identity rather than anonymity, allowing members to connect in a more sustained way, and lending the voice of the consumers more authenticity and greater reliability. So too with the brand itself: a social media presence operates as a sign of transparency for the brand, leaving it open to publicly viewed criticism. This openness gives the brand the opportunity to respond to feedback and affirm its commitment and pride not just in the product, but the values on which it is built.

Not all followers are created equal

It can be tempting for brands to see success in the social media sphere as maximizing the number of followers and likes. High numbers are exciting, but they are also misleading; what matters is not how many followers you have, but what kind of followers they are. Are they deeply engaged in the brand itself? Do they engage actively with the site to express and promote the brand's values? Are they even capable of doing so?

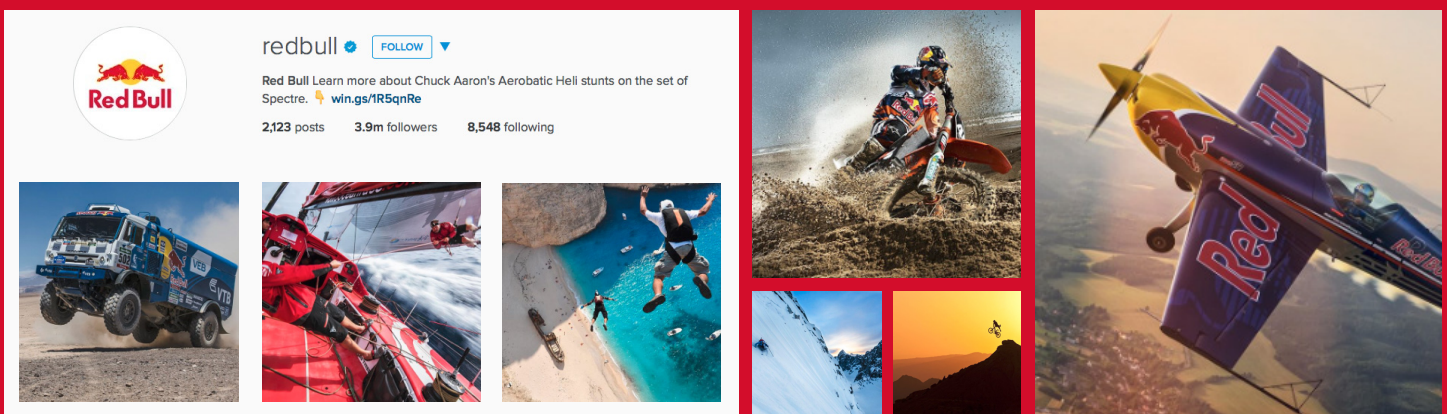
The first lesson of social media for brands is that it's not about quantity, but quality. Followers can often be added rather easily, through promotions and targeted campaigns. But becoming a follower is equally easy for the consumer in question, and may represent nothing more than a click of a button on the site, never to be visited or interacted with again. These followers aren't

a problem, but they aren't an advantage either. A much more important metric is the number of "fully engaged" followers—a metric used by Gallup to describe customers who are emotionally committed and rationally loyal to the company, resulting in greater profitability. The second lesson of social media is that it is a network. A community. People join because they crave interaction with like-minded people. These people represent the core of the brand's customer base, and it is they who are most primed and ready to not only engage with the brand, but live its values both within and outside the branded social media space. It is they who are the brand's true partners. It is to them that the space should cater, and it is to them that the brand should listen. It is for them that the brand should provide content. And the brands will be rewarded by goodwill, loyalty and, of course, advocacy for the brand.

Hay Merchant is a small craft brewery in Houston, Texas with a huge social media presence. The brand uses Facebook and especially Twitter to promote not just itself, its menu and special events, but a wider craft beer culture and community as well. The 12.3K followers of the brand's Twitter account and the hashtag #HMTaps extend far beyond Houston to those interested in craft beer, and have created a community of practice to share their beer consumption, discuss different micro-brewing techniques, and offer feedback about what they like and don't like. Hay Merchant is a highly local brand with a deeply committed, extremely active branded community that has come together not only through the auspices of the bar but because of its commitment to craft beer. Hay Merchant has provided the digital space for these connections, which translates into—and is only enhanced by—meetings and experiences in the bar itself. Hay Merchant is small, but its reach is large, and through its social media presence, it is not only growing and supporting its brand, but craft beer culture more broadly.

The Instagram effect

Images are an extremely valuable contribution to social media content, and Instagram is growing in popularity as a space for brands to build community. Red Bull stands out as an impressive example of using value-based content to cement brand loyalty and identity. While the drink itself is rarely showcased, the brand encourages users to post images that highlight the values of adventure and action, showcasing how Red Bull gives users wings and encourages them to fly.



Not all interactions are created equal

Members need something to do. In framing the structure and content of a social media site—be it Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+ or LinkedIn (to name some of the most popular)—brands need to ensure that the content reflects the values and messages of their brand. Members are eager to engage with the values of the brand; that’s why they are there. But they need the tools to do so. That’s where the brand’s job begins, but in a way, it’s also where it ends. The brand needs to prime the conversation and establish the content, but also needs to empower members to continue the conversation about brand stories, experiences with the brand, and broader reflection on the brand’s values. In this way, members’ connection to the brand is deeply enhanced, as they contribute meaningfully and independently to the values that they already share. Even more importantly, the connections between members are deepened, thereby driving even more participation in the site and cementing loyalty between participants and the brand itself. Brands must continue to engage their members through insider tips, responses to compliments and complaints, and invitations to participate in new innovations. You, the brand, cannot lurk or pretend to hide, thereby undermining the sense of transparency and authenticity established by your social media presence. But you also have to respect your role as partners rather than managers. You do not manage the social media site; everyone is equal in this space.

B2B and social media



B2B brands can also use social media extremely effectively. The SAP Community Network (SCN) has over 2.5 million engaged members ranging from huge multinational corporations like Disney to small businesses. SCN capitalizes on the expertise of its membership through incentives and by celebrating contributions that serve to grow the network for the benefit of all affiliated businesses.



LinkedIn is a particularly important B2B social network that really knows what its users want. It has effectively created a community linked by its shared interest in prospecting and generating leads, and has maximized both the structure and the content of the site to further these goals. It is precisely the conversations on the space that facilitate further professional opportunities and encourage members to expand the network in a way that benefits both themselves and the brand.

The branded community is not a promotional tactic but a business strategy

Brands must be very careful to respect the conventions of the social media space. Consumers want content, but they do not want constant marketing. The brand community has to serve the people in it, and in so doing serve the business behind it, not the other way around. The content on the site should not feel like a never-ending sales pitch, but should reflect and sustain the ethos and stories of the brand. People go to social media to interact with people, not with

products. Special rewards and giveaways should be structured to reflect the community aspect of the space by rewarding the members who are most committed and actively involved in the conversation and the brand's identity. What the members of the community have in common in the first instance is the brand itself, and the values it represents. Brand loyalty is the reason the communities form, but it has to be maintained and cultivated by serving the people's—rather than the product's—needs. Continued brand loyalty, advocacy, and networking will be the reward.

Consider the case of figment.com, the online writing community established by Random House Publishing, the biggest trade press in the world. With over 300,000 users between 13 and 18 years old, Figment is carefully and tightly targeted towards a community of like-minded people: lovers of reading and writing. Members come to the site with a very specific set of goals: to read and share novels. The writing gives members a starting point of interaction, but also a set of activities. This is both a community of interest and a community of practice, both of which relate to the brand's core values of encouraging love of the written word and democratizing access to reading and writing.

New members of the community become "featured figs," a way to introduce them to other members and socialize them into the community norms and practices. The brand makes use of contests and promotions, but they are all designed around reading and writing, including #shelfie contests to be posted on social media and writing contests with specific prompts that serve to showcase members' talents through gentle guiding of the brand. Winners are featured and publicly celebrated by the brand and members alike, further cementing community ties and the commitment of the winners to the site and what it stands for. While the 13- to 18-year-old demographic is only a very small part of Random House's readership, the brand recognizes the importance of setting up communities with common interests and providing them with audience-appropriate ways of interacting and connecting, all of which center on reading and writing. Members of Figment are deeply committed to fellow figs and deeply loyal to the site that provided them with a voice. They feel deeply supported in their own projects, and turn to the site to meet their needs as a writing community. The fact that it is a project of Random House, a major publisher, is not obscured, nor is it highlighted; the point of the site is not to sell books but to cultivate writing. But the two are intertwined: members of the site are highly engaged with books and reading, and will likely turn to featured Random House books not only now, but in their long future as lovers of the written word. Members feel celebrated and supported by their fellow figs, among whom they count the brand itself.

To build a successful brand community, brands have to know their stories. They have to know their customers. And they have to use the social media space to know both better.

That's easier said than done. But some brands have done it very, very well. ■

If you are interested in learning more about using social media to build branded communities, please call us at 610.940.9030 or visit www.baileybrandconsulting.com

About this paper

We believe collaboration is the key to achieving successful results—and we put this into practice with both our clients and our internal teams on a regular basis. The paper you just read reflects that philosophy; it was a team effort, created from the observations and combined thinking of both our Client and Creative Services teams.

About the author



As founder and CEO of our firm, Chris Bailey is responsible for overall management and direction, including shaping and implementing our vision and mission. In addition, he authors articles and speaks at national conventions on subjects including brand identity, environmental branding and brand package design.

About Bailey Brand Consulting

Bailey Brand Consulting is a leading strategic marketing and branding firm that has been helping make brands matter for clients across the country and around the world since 1985. Our experienced teams of strategic thinkers, creative problem-solvers and world-class designers work in close partnership with our clients to uncover deep customer insights, develop powerful creative solutions and build effective brand strategies that drive business growth.

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