

## Thoughts on Social Media: Separating Hype from Reality

By [Brice Blaisdell](#)

Social networking. Web 2.0. User-generated content. Conversational Marketing. These terms have become ever present in the world of marketing communications over the last few years. But what do they mean? And, is this the revolution of marketing that many say it is?

Yes and no. Social media is not a fad, and as online access and usage has exploded over the past 10 years, a large majority of the public is now accessing some form of social media, be it through a social networking site like Facebook, or simply by researching product purchases online by reading user-generated reviews. But while millions of consumers use these new tools every day, their use by businesses seeking to connect with customers should be tempered with a solid understanding of the fundamentals of marketing and communications.

### Defining Social Media: Listening and Responding vs. Simply Talking

Social media, in and of itself, is a group of communications channels, primarily online, that consumers can participate in and contribute to. While there are examples of offline social media such as newspaper editorial sections, community newsletters and even call-in radio/TV talk shows, the internet has provided a platform for this media to take on a global reach. Unlike more traditional media channels that only provide a “broadcast” of a marketing message, social media allows both the consumers and marketers to engage in, comment on and respond to the content. Beyond that basic premise, there are both similarities and further differences with more familiar, traditional media channels.

<b>Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Print)</b>	<b>Social Media (Blogs, Community Forums, Social networks, Customer reviews, etc.)</b>
One way communication	Interaction with audience: Listening and responding
Content generated by marketers	Content generated and modified by both marketers and consumers
Mass communication with varying degrees of audience targeting	Selective, targeted communications, often at an individual level
Measurable through market research, focus groups, surveys	Measurable in real time. Feedback generated instantly by consumers
Messaging controlled by marketer	Messaging shared and changed by both marketer and consumer

## Why all the excitement among marketers about social media?

A couple of reasons: First, because more and more, this is where consumers are. In the past, marketers knew they could reach their audience through a handful of channels – television, radio, the newspaper. Even today, TV viewership is at an all-time high, with the average American watching more than 151 hours per month.<sup>1</sup> But now, consumers are also spending nearly 30 hours per month online, where they are typically engaging in some form of social media.<sup>2</sup> The numbers speak for themselves:

- The share of US adult internet users – 74% of all US adults – who have a profile on an online social network site has more than quadrupled in the past four years -- from 8% in 2005 to 35%, or 52 million as of December 2008.<sup>3</sup>
- Over 133 million blogs are being tracked by Technorati, an online blog search engine<sup>4</sup>
- 94.1 million US blog readers in 2007 (50% of Internet users)<sup>5</sup>
- More than 150 million users of the social network Facebook.<sup>6</sup>

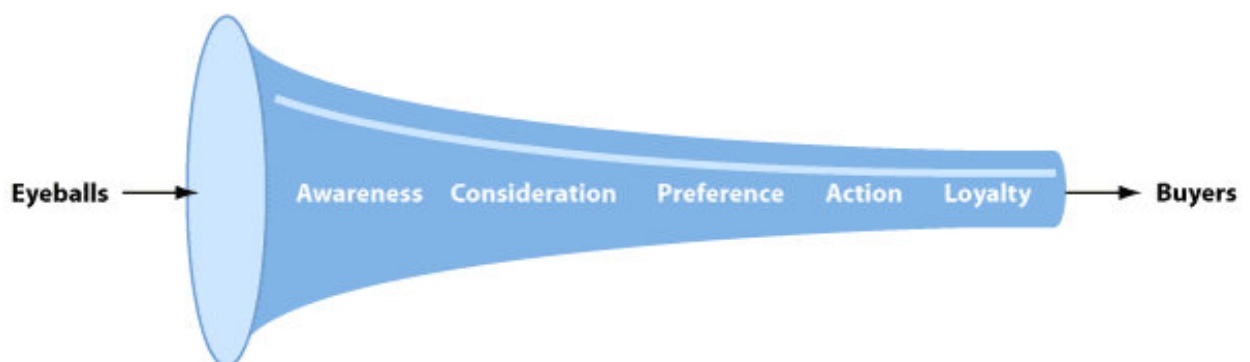
Secondly, this is where consumers are being significantly influenced in their purchasing decisions. People have always sought out the opinions of friends, family and colleagues, and the rise of online channels has expanded this circle of influence. Over 80% of adult internet users research products and services online<sup>7</sup>, and it is the reviews and opinions of their peers that carry the most influence. Whether it's a friend on a community forum, or a customer review on Amazon.com, the influence of word-of-mouth has grown exponentially as a result of the rise of social media.

## What this means for businesses

It means rethinking the process of turning potential customers into buyers. With traditional media, the communication is one-way, and the traditional marketing funnel reflects this:

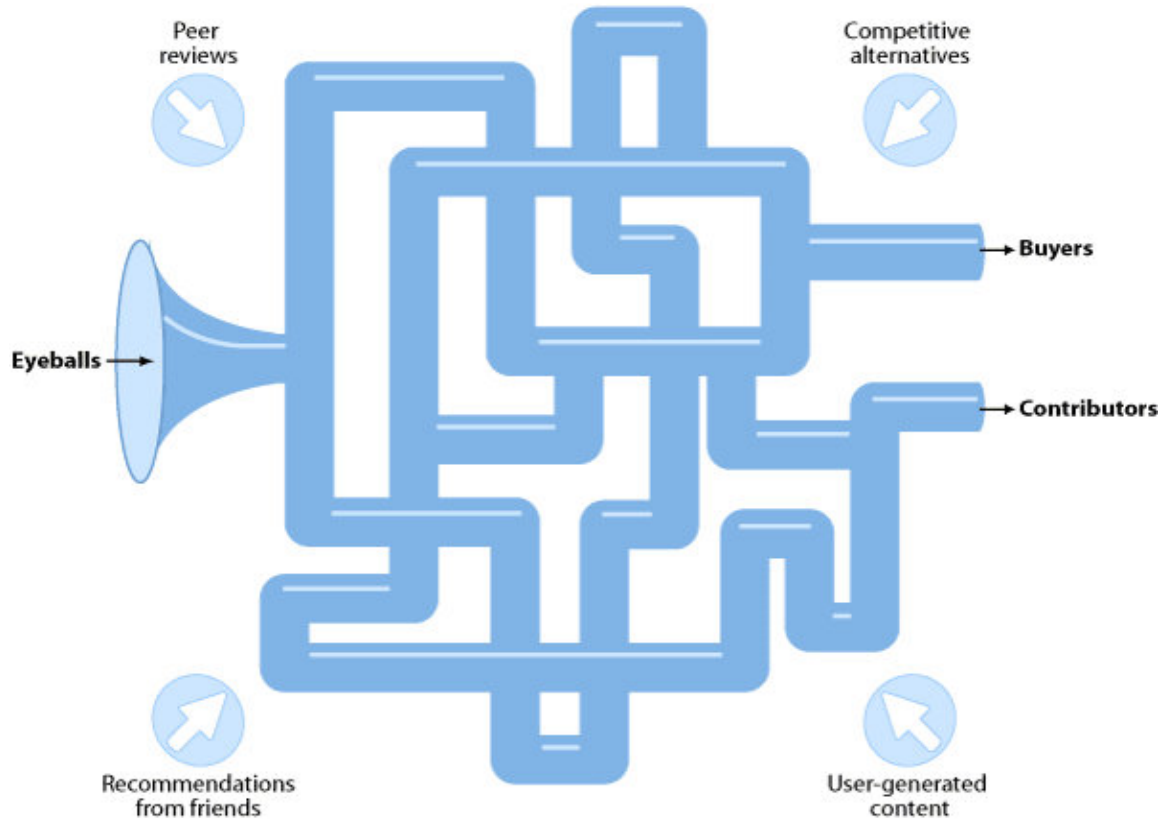
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### 1-1 The traditional marketing funnel



But the rise of social media channels means that purchasing decisions are influenced more and more by sources outside of the traditional one-way communication. It also means that these sources of information are much more accessible, and trusted than ever before.

**1-2 Complexity lies at the center of the marketing funnel**



Perhaps the biggest benefit of social media for companies is the ability to engage in conversations with consumers that help show the true character of the company, its employees, the brand. This can lead to greater insight into consumer wants and needs, better customer service, better products and improved brand perception; all of which can lead to greater customer satisfaction and propensity to buy. Social media can be a powerful tool to shift or improve behavior or perceptions about a brand and its products.

### **Examples of successful use of social media by companies**

**Frank Eliason aka @ComcastCares:** As a Customer Service Manager with Comcast, Frank reached out to a few customers via phone after reading their posts to a blog about their negative experiences with the cable company. From there he has gone on to utilize other social media channels, such as the microblogging service Twitter, to monitor and respond to customer concerns and issues about the company in real time. To date, Frank has more than 10,000 followers on his Twitter home page and each day he builds good will with Comcast's customers by helping to solve their problems.

**Dell Computers:** In 2005, Dell faced a rash of negative consumer sentiment regarding product quality issues. One of the most vocal was a series of influential (and highly publicized) blog posts dubbed "Dell Hell". Dell made a concerted effort to change this negative perception by engaging with customers online, both by reaching out to influential voices such as technology bloggers, as well as creating its own online community where customers could find useful content and straightforward, transparent answers to product complaints and issues. At the start of the program, 49% of online blog posts regarding the company were negative. In less than two years, that number was reduced to 22% and the "Direct 2 Dell" online community was receiving over 5 million visits per month.

Beyond customer service and reputation management, companies are discovering a myriad of benefits to understanding and engaging in social media, from product development, to better lead generation, to increased intelligence about both their customers and competitors. An impressive list of these companies and what they are doing can be found here: <http://mashable.com/2008/07/23/corporate-social-media/>

### **How Social Media and Communications Planning Relate**

With the steady rise in the use of social media, as well as the growing recognition of the benefits that these new communications channels can provide for businesses, there is a growing sentiment that social media could replace all other channels for effective marketing communications. I believe, however, that it is important to take a step back and remind ourselves (and you) of the difference between strategy and tactics.

*Social media are tools/communications channels; they are not a strategy in and of themselves.*

What cannot be forgotten is that it is the objectives and strategy that should determine the proper channel, not the perceived popularity or "newness" of that channel. To that end, I recommend a neutral attitude toward social media and focus instead on gaining a total understanding of the consumer. Go beyond gender and age to define each target audience based on their activities, interests, attitudes, and lifestyles — what can be called "differentiating behavior."

A good Communications Planning team within an agency views every day as a series of intersections. These intersections are the places where “real life” crosses paths with information. To achieve client goals, the agency’s job is to sift through the clutter, find these intersections, evaluate the fit, and begin the exchange by delivering the information in the most efficient way possible. This exchange may not always be a purchase, but quite possibly a request for more information and especially today, the beginning of a dialogue. It is this dialogue that social media tools often can help facilitate in a way that traditional one-way broadcast messages frequently can’t, but only if they allow us to make those “intersections” with our target.

Beyond, the “where” comes the “when.” The best plans deliver a brand’s message where and when the target and its influencers are most receptive to receiving it. Behavioral insights, gained through proprietary and secondary research, help find these intersections and insure the relevant message is delivered to the consumer at the relevant time.

### **Social Media and Traditional Media: Content is *still* King**

Some companies believe in the “if you build it they will come” mantra when it comes to reaching consumers online. They see the millions of potential customers on a social network like Facebook, and immediately publish a Facebook page with a company logo, a link to the company’s website...and that’s about it. Soon they find that the only “fans” of their page, are some employees and their advertising agency. But a branded Facebook page is not a strategy-Word of Mouth advertising is.

Any communication channel, be it television, outdoor billboards, or a social network, is only as effective as the content it delivers to the audience. Taking the example above, a company that launches a Facebook fan page might garner a number of consumer “fans” at first, but if they do not begin to provide content that is relevant to this audience, they will soon have a static page that few visit. Companies must resist the urge to dive in to a new “hot” channel, before first understanding the needs of their target audience, as well as where and when they need to deliver content that meets those needs.

### **Social Media Rules of The Road: What companies should know**

So, you’ve got great content, clearly articulated objectives and strategy, and have determined that social media may help you reach your goals. Now what? While I have stated that I view social media as a communication channel, just as TV, Radio and Print are channels, it’s important to understand the vast differences in how these channels work, and that the rules of traditional media won’t work here. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these are the basic principles that any company should follow:

#### **Rule #1: Before anything else, LISTEN first.**

One of the best uses of social media is to find out what people are saying- about their wants/needs, about your company, your products, your competitors - in ways that were impossible even a few years ago. The power of this intelligence can help improve customers’ experiences with a company (like Comcast), or it could help a company better understand how to develop products and services that better meet the needs of the consumer (like Dell did with their Direct 2 Dell).

Regardless of how this information is eventually used, before companies can proceed with any strategy using social media, they must first start by listening to what online consumers are saying, how they are interacting. Simply jumping in with a traditional marketing message won’t work.

"Just like going to a cocktail party, the savvy attendee will know how to dress and won't jump into any conversations before understanding the context."<sup>8</sup>  
Jeremiah Owyang, Forrester Research

**Rule #2: Be a human being, not a logo.**

One of the draws of social media is right there in the name: It's social. People connecting and talking with people. To that end, while consumers are accustomed to receiving marketing messages on TV from a corporate voice, they won't be comfortable having a conversation or interaction with that same corporate voice in a social media environment. A human voice, one that is honest and transparent will garner more credibility with consumers than a press release and a logo.

**Rule #3: Provide something useful (aka: Content is *still* King)**

Actually, this isn't so much a rule of social media, but more of a universal rule all brands should follow. Consumers spend much of their time trying to avoid marketing messages, and this is no different when they are using social media. The successful brands provide something of value, be it educational, time-saving, life-improving, or just entertaining-and this is no different in social media.

**Rule #4: It's not all about you.**

This is probably the biggest difference between traditional marketing communications and social media. Companies need to understand that social media is about *interaction*. Online users don't simply broadcast messages back and forth. They listen. They respond to each other. Companies that spend their time online just talking about themselves will soon find no one is listening on the other end.

**Rule #5: It's not a campaign – it's an ongoing process of engagement.**

This doesn't mean sticking with one tactic; if a company finds that its audience doesn't prefer a particular media, then it shouldn't continue to expend resources there. The companies that are successful in social media however are those that are committed to continuing to listen to, talk with, and *learn from consumers*. It is through this ongoing engagement that a company is able to effectively measure the results of its efforts and gain important learnings about what their audience really wants. That is ultimately what it's all about.

As social media becomes more ubiquitous, we are reminded of the predictions of previous times: Television would bring the end of radio; Movies and movie theaters would be killed by the VCR; the internet would spell the end for television. Today, many herald social media as the next panacea, which will render all traditional forms of marketing communications obsolete. While I agree that the opportunities for businesses to connect to consumers through social media are real and many, I won't be declaring the death of traditional media anytime soon. Instead, I believe in continuing to allow business objectives and strategy guide our decisions on which tools to pull out of our "communication toolbox." At the same time, I recognize that these new tools come with a whole new set of rules and their potential is great.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nielsen A2/M2 Three Screen Report*, (Nielsen Online, February 2009) Available at <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> *Adults and social network websites* (Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2009) Available at [http://pewinternet.org/PPF/r/272/report\\_display.asp](http://pewinternet.org/PPF/r/272/report_display.asp)

<sup>4</sup> *State of the Blogosphere 2008 report* (Technorati, 2008) Available at <http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook, Inc. Retrieved on February 13, 2008. Available at  
<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>

<sup>7</sup> *Generations Online in 2009* (Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2009) Available  
at [http://pewinternet.org/PPF/r/275/report\\_display.asp](http://pewinternet.org/PPF/r/275/report_display.asp)

<sup>8</sup> Voight, Joan. *Social Marketing Do's And Don'ts*. AdWeek.com. 8 Oct. 2007. Available at  
[http://www.adweek.com/aw/magazine/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1003654896](http://www.adweek.com/aw/magazine/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003654896)