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On 04/23, [Patrick Hanlon](#) + [Josh Hawkins](#) wrote:

Spawning Online Communities in the New Consumer Republic

Social media is online content that includes consumer-submitted product reviews, blogs, discussion forums, social network profiles, and user-generated videos. Consumers who bluntly reject old-fashioned marketing pitches instead seek out conversational media that enables anyone with online access to rant about how much they love or hate you.

Posted by [Pat H](#) on April 23 2008, [1 comments](#), [Add yours!](#)

People flock to these social outlets because they allow them to be people first, consumers second. Also because they immediately connect with “people like me”, an ocean of information, and constant community chatter from adherents, zealots, fanatics, and detractors for every imaginable product, service and idea.

Posted by [Josh H](#) on April 24 2008, [3 comments](#), [Add yours!](#)

It's real, it's honest—and mostly it's unedited. This unbiased view from a fellow consumer (or data dump from neutral sources) can make me feel good about my choice, or prevent me from making a bad one.

These days, consumers self-select into a media environment of trusted, on-demand sources. Traditional 30-second TV spots, viral stunts, PR campaigns, etc. are subject to reroute through a milieu of online communities that repackage, edit and mash up intended messages for distribution through social networks, search engines, emails and word-of-mouth.

It's within that mix where today's real marketing opportunities are happening.

Rather than spending resources on 30-second spots consumers avoid, savvy marketers develop new strategies and investments to engage consumers in active conversations that invite participation in their brand. Traditional media is a monologue. New social media prompt a dialogue.

How does one engage in this dialogue across the great Internet divide?

When you build a community of passionate advocates who share your beliefs, the dialogue becomes a natural evolution of your customer relationship practices, inspiring trust, relevance and renewed energy around your brand.

The opportunity to build an online community is reinforced by making sure you have created the belief system to support it. Then your online community becomes cross-talk between people who believe in the same things, speak your language, and enthusiastically bridge the gap between manufacturer and consumer.

Stop preaching and start conversing is the message to marketers. Social media is exactly that: social. A dialogue, which may seem daunting at first, is actually a more positive rite for persuading people to become advocates for your products or services. You don't have to be Aristotle to figure out that dialogue offers the opportunity to persuade, something traditional advertising increasingly fails to accomplish.

Below are some examples of how marketers have chosen to influence, engage and excite the online communities that surround their brands.

CREATE YOUR OWN SOCIAL SCENE.

Social media outlets provide a powerful new opportunity for companies to revisit their origins, their reason for being, to expand brand communities.

One such company is DuPont. They launched a social media campaign to communicate their heritage of scientific discovery, innovation and progress to a younger, online audience. DuPont enlisted Amanda Congdon of Rocketboom fame to create a series of videos called “Science Stories.” Each video highlighted a compelling product innovation (such as Kevlar and bullet-proof vests, or Nomex and fire-resistant clothing).

Using Internet TV platform technology, Dupont made the videos available on their website <http://stories.dupont.com>, and distributed viral video clips through blogs, science-related sites, and video portals. The result? Fresh brand buzz and spontaneous in-market awareness for Dupont.

Successful social media campaigns often require brand managers to give up some control. Be not afraid. The Dupont video clips, for example, were embedded in blogs and wrapped with commentary posted by blog owners and readers, creating an authentic dialogue and communal understanding of DuPont, prompting future interactions with their growing online community.

FIND THE CONSUMERS WHO CAN'T BE FOUND.

Increasing numbers of the 13-30-age group (the consumer demographic marketers grapple for) can be found on the Internet.

These self-made media producers ritually scroll through articles pulled to their RSS reader, chat with friends on Instant Messenger, send/receive SMS messages, download tracks to iTunes, update blogs, MySpace pages, social network profiles, monitor responses to updates, post notes on friends' Facebook profiles and “walls,” and grab video clips from TV programs they missed.

Blogs and forums are addicting. The opportunity to see your own words and ideas online for others to praise and challenge is social media's drug of choice. The instant exchange and reshaping of ideas from random and omniscient onliners can be a powerful intoxicant.

The blog ring of fashion sites is so large, it's almost a movement. Head for stylemob.com, iamfashion.com, fabsugar.com, stylehive.com, gofugyourself.com or the focused purseblog.com and you'll find women (primarily) gathering to list their favorite jeans, talk about an upcoming sale, or rant about a new designer.

Peer opinion is the most powerful recommender for the wired generation. A recent survey by Nielsen shows that 78 percent of consumers trust the opinions of peers over all other information sources and advertising. The hair straightener that receives the best reviews is the next one I buy.

Checking prices and styles online has become a ritual for many savvy shoppers. Some shoppers buy online, some pre-shop before heading to stores. But that white space between the idea of buying an item and the purchase itself is fertile territory for marketers—if they can join the conversation or locate those who drive it.

QUICK CONCENTRATIONS OF MEANING.

The site where the conversation happens between consumer and marketer is the iconic hunting ground and presents the largest opportunities for marketers in this consumer-generated space.

Social media outlets allow you to steer the dialogue toward your reason for being, and the opportunity to weave new consumer benefits, new promotions, line extensions, and other marketing efforts into your story. Stop & Shop Supermarket Co. recently launched a consumer media campaign, unveiling their new slogan, “Stop & Shop works for me”.

The campaign placed videos with stories from real customers at the center of the campaign. But they didn't rest on customer testimonials. They also used an Internet TV microsite <http://www.stopandshop.tv/> to recruit additional customer video submissions that will be programmed into the marketing mix.

As a result, the retail chain is able to place core consumers front and center – real world stories told by real people about how and why the brand is relevant in their lives.

Judi Palmer, senior director of marketing and communications for the company was recently quoted saying, “For the first time we're actually letting real customers talk about us, rather than us constructing a message” (Daily News Tribune, <http://www.dailynewtribune.com/business/x510086642>).

BRILLIANT BRANDS SPARK BRILLIANT CONVERSATIONS.

A common frustration for marketing executives is that it's nearly impossible to control what people write about a brand online. Rather than complain about this reality, innovators see social media as a new avenue of communication. After all, the benefit of having a brand community is that you can talk with one another. This may seem daunting, but what better way to engage people in your message and the language surrounding your brand, than to engage them in a dialogue about it?

Consumerist.com is a corporate watchdog site with over 620,000 visitors per month that solicits stories from consumers—with preference given to negative experiences. And that's okay. The opportunity for companies on sites like Consumerist, is to directly address issues of customer dissatisfaction. Consumerist.com tends to post follow up stories, so what began as a warning against a certain company can reveal the care and concern by that same company reaching out to invest itself in customer concerns.

Opportunities to reach out even to those who don't like your brand can have powerful positive consequences. Reaching out conveys confidence, accessibility, respect, and authenticity to people both inside and outside of the brand community. Steve Jobs' prescient rebate to iPhone owners earlier this year gained huge credibility and empathy in response to one of the simplest of merchandising techniques—a price cut.

The news of the price cut set the blogosphere on fire with commentary. Regardless of where consumers landed on the issue, the result was a general perception that Apple was responsive and engaged with their community.

EVEN IF YOU CAN'T LEAD, JOIN IN.

Even if you can't always control the conversation, you can join it. That lets you project an image of authenticity and transparency and offers a chance to engage the public.

The annual Haagen-Dazs ice cream flavor search, Scoop, has taken a decidedly social turn in an attempt to grow their community. Haagen-Dazs recruited video submissions from ice cream enthusiasts demonstrating new flavor recipes. The online video channel, <http://scoop.haagendazs.com>, encouraged word-of-mouth promotion by online foodies through viral email features, link sharing and RSS feeds for consumer videos.

From thousands of submissions, the online community voted to select final flavor candidates. The winning flavor, caramelized pear and toasted pecan, just hit the freezer sections of grocery stores across the country.

Leaders and senior management can relate with their brand community by writing about the company's culture, plans, and concerns – and field comments from the customer side.

Corporate blogs often have direct c-level involvement with high-level industry perspectives, PR announcements, and thought leadership. Sometimes these sites have PR or legal oversight. Other times, blog mavericks like Bob Lutz and GM's Fastlane blog, <http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>, have a slightly more direct flow of communication (social personal finance site Wesabe lets customers call their CEO four hours a day, seven days a week in their Talk To Jason program). Corporate blogs can provide a useful platform to quickly address issues, level-set and respond to consumer concerns.

Social media, whether it is executed in the form of blogs or the upcoming .mobi, treats marketers with a new opportunity to engage and excite the communities that surround their brand with people who care. In today's commoditized world, where apathy and skepticism run wild run free, social media are one more opportunity to become a part of the conversation and keep consumer loyalists talking about you through product iterations and company lifecycles, and link them with others who feel just as passionate about you. (Making online friends makes them think twice about ever leaving the brand fold.)

Brands who leapfrog into the future will be those enabled with a community that feverishly praises you and pummels your competition. Embrace this brave new dialogue and your brand zealots (sometimes even your detractors) will reward you for it.

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