

White Paper

Learn and Earn

A B2B Social Media White Paper from Microsoft Advertising

The Gift of Collaboration

In the last 18 months, the social media phenomenon has delighted, confounded and concerned marketers and advertisers all around the globe. They have had to learn quickly that the different ways consumers access the internet across multiple time zones, networks and devices is forcing them to change the way they do business.

Traditionally, if a customer was unhappy with a product or service, they'd have to write a letter or call a company's customer service line to register their complaint. Now, the immediacy and ubiquity of the web means sentiment about the release of a new gadget, TV show or sports team's latest performance can be measured, and the reaction to it assessed almost in real time.

Marketing manna you'd think, right?

But the increasing numbers of people of all ages joining social networking platforms, and the plethora of devices that utilize multiple screens to tap into and connect millions of consumers every day, seem to have stalled the learning curve for some companies, and social media appears to many to be too complex a minefield to negotiate.

At Microsoft Advertising, our Community team has been using social media as a vehicle to listen to, educate, support and market to our customers and potential customers since 2006.

Over the next few pages, I'll outline some of the issues we have faced, the action we took and how we've measured success in this web 2.0 world, helping us evangelise our message, make our products and services better, increase revenue and lower costs, all while striving to help our advertisers deliver their dreams.



Defining Social Media (Marketing)

We recently interviewed Tamar Weinberg, community director of the popular social media news web site Mashable.com, and asked her for her definition of social media:

"Social media is, quite simply, the collaborative tools used for communication. It relates to the media—that is, those storage/transmission tools that relay data—but refers to that which allows users/members to be social and interact with one another. That said, social media in the online world relates to any online application that empowers two or more people together. In the age of the social internet, we refer to the tools and content that are created by people using these interactive technologies as 'social media.'"

So social media isn't just about Facebook and Twitter. There is no doubt that with 400 million Facebookers and nearly 20 million Twitterers worldwide, the volume of interactions and the functionality of both platforms have contributed enormously to social media breaking through into mainstream public vocabulary.

But what about search engines? What about blogs? What about forums? What about email?

In September 2009, UK comScore data has 21.5 percent of Facebook's traffic coming from Windows Live Messenger and nearly 4 percent coming from Hotmail.

Consumers' propensity to discover and share means we'll use any tool that comes to hand in order to find information and let our network know what we want them to know.

So if social media is defined as the collaborative tools, then social media marketing should be thought of as the discipline. Not a channel, but a discipline that should permeate across all departments. From marketing and PR to product development and customer services, social elements must be etched into the processes, campaigns and outcomes of all your business' activities.

Over the past couple of years, there have been a number of high profile examples of brands embracing social media to great effect. Comcast, Dell, Whole Foods and Zappos in the United States and Virgin Atlantic, Marks & Spencer and others in the UK, have all been able to utilize the tools and instil the discipline throughout their workforces, demonstrating that social media marketing can provide tangible results.

Whether it's \$6 million in sales of computer equipment by Dell, or hundreds of internet and TV customers whose service issues were successfully solved by Comcast, having a conversational presence and collaborating with customers and potential customers online has proved fruitful.

Our Story

Way back in 2005, when Microsoft launched its paid search tool—Microsoft adCenter—Twitter didn't exist and Facebook was a fledgling start-up causing excitement in the corridors of Harvard University.

At its beta launch, adCenter was met by the search engine marketing community with some consternation. It seemed that excitement at a potential rival for Google Adwords, coupled with an expectation that Microsoft would deliver a

comparable user experience right out of the gate, led some detractors to start writing on blogs and forums that Microsoft didn't know what it was doing, that it was subversively forcing advertisers to use Internet Explorer as adCenter was not compatible with rival browsers, and that a software company could not possibly compete or react quickly enough in such a fast-changing environment, given its background in 2- to 3-year cycles of product releases.

With decades of experience at Microsoft in managing partner networks and the use of social media already in full flow within the developer circles, the team behind adCenter created a Community Team to leverage that experience; utilize social media to get our message out there; prevent less-favourable PR situations from escalating; and start collaborating with our customers to help them understand the product and our strategy, giving them a heads-up on what was coming next.

“...if social media is defined as the collaborative tools, then social media marketing should be thought of as the discipline.”

Listen and Participate

So where do you start?

Well, how about trying to find out where conversations are happening, and go and introduce yourself? We knew there were a number of web forums where online marketers gathered to ask questions and share knowledge, so we signed up and introduced ourselves as Microsoft employees dedicated to helping answer questions about adCenter and how to get the best out of our platform, feeding back all the sentiment and feature requests to our development team and marketing managers.

There was no point “pretending” to be anyone else, because imagine the negative PR impact of being outed as an imposter. Being open, honest and transparent helped us gain trust with those on the forums and thus began a healthy dialogue of information sharing and actionable feedback.

Although it may not be of relevance to all businesses, we've made a point of having a representative in the UK, as well as the team in Redmond. This means that whatever the issue, we pretty much have 18 hours of the day covered across time zones. While America sleeps, there is someone in Europe keeping a real-time eye on conversations before

handing over the baton to the West Coast as Europe starts turning in for the night.

In the early days, there were two bugs on separate occasions that started causing issues in the GMT time zone. The early warnings from customers' forum posts helped us validate that both issues were of a global nature as we reached out and asked for them to explain exactly where they were seeing problems. Quick action by our London team, coupled with insight from customers online, helped us identify the problem so when the United States team came into work, they had all the data to make a swift decision on how best to resolve it.

Blog Beginnings

Blogs are now ubiquitous—a simple way of carrying a message, be it a piece of interesting news, some pictures of a new product or a video about a new service. They are easily set up on any number of platforms and provide individuals and companies with an official voice, albeit in a more casual and conversational tone.

“A well-written blog, kept up-to-date with regular, accessible and informative posts, can be a gold mine...”

Frankly, consumers are not stupid. Access to information and user-generated content on the web has meant greater choice, not just regarding what content they engage with, but also how they get involved. A well-written blog, kept up-to-date with regular, accessible and informative posts, can be a gold mine of not just great relations with the public, but incredible insight and data that marketers of bygone days could only have dreamt of.

We started our blog back in 2006 as an official voice, our calling card, if you like. If you wanted information or news from the most credible source, the adCenter blog would be where you'd find it first. It served as a tool for telling our story in a world where marketing-speak sometimes just doesn't wash, especially if the tide of opinion is against you. It provided valuable data in the form of comments and links from other posts, which we could collate and feed back to product and marketing teams to show what the real pulse was out there in the marketplace.

As we grew, it became apparent that there were different audiences to cater to, some more technical than others,

some more interested in areas of online marketing other than search. So we evolved with our readers, providing them with what you see today in the Microsoft Advertising Community, a vibrant hub of blogs catering to adCenter clients, API developers and marketers interested in our services for mobile, games, display and social media advertising.

When setting up a blog, there are a few things you have to do before you start:

- Ask yourself what your aims are. Is it about just PR and news, or are you going to provide help and support? We've found that content that's helpful and has a little more interactive substance is more engaging. Be careful your readers don't bounce off the page thinking “so what?” They've taken the time to come to your site, so make sure there's some kind of action involved or they feel enriched in some way for having spent time reading your words.
- Who is going to manage the blog? It must be kept current. There's nothing worse than clicking on a company blog and seeing no new entries for a few months. If you can't be bothered to keep your readers interested, how can you keep your customers happy?
- Once you've set your blogging mantra, how will you measure success? Increased traffic? More comments? How do you define your ROI? What's the return on investment or the return on inaction? We'll talk more on metrics later in this paper, but it helps to have goals as they keep you focused, and help tell your story internally.

Where Else Do You Want to Hang Out?

When most marketers hear the words “social media,” what tends to spring to mind first are Twitter and Facebook. Because the platforms have seen monumental growth both in terms of users and exposure in mainstream media, they are naturally seen as the first ports of call for any campaign or initiation of a long-term social media marketing strategy.

Dig a little deeper, however, and it becomes apparent that decisions need to be made about resourcing, desired outcomes and tactical considerations before suggesting your audience follow you or become a fan.

It takes time to build a community on each and every platform, and the web is littered with stale Facebook pages and dormant Twitter accounts because a marketing department saw social media as a quick win, a viral excuse for hard graft in engaging customers in an authentic and timely fashion.

If you're taking your message off-site, you have to budget for some extra time, education and execution to keep that conversation alive and ongoing.

Twitter

Our plan for Twitter grew organically as we became more successful at creating content that resonated with the online marketing community. We understood that a huge proportion of search engine marketers were using Twitter to communicate, share best practices, and look for news and views that could give them a competitive edge and stay ahead of the PPC game.

We initially set up @adCenter as a means of auto-syndicating content from the adCenter blog onto Twitter, where it had the chance to live on. If people re-tweeted to their audience, it was like a vote or endorsement that our bloggers had provided some helpful and actionable insight.

Just by syndicating via Twitterfeed.com, we were able to achieve a number of objectives:

- Increase our audience reach, pushing out content rather than relying on advertisers to come to our site every day.
- Get real-time stats on who was clicking on the Tweeted links and where that audience was located.
- Understand what content is appreciated most by measuring re-tweets and discussion on Twitter around a particular topic.
- Measure what day and time of day was optimal for our readers to receive content.



We felt strongly that simply syndicating content with no interaction with followers was not really in the spirit of Twitter, and having seen so many great B2C examples of brands engaging so well with their audience, we started replying and reaching out to marketers who wanted to know more, putting them into contact with support teams or other areas of the business they were interested in.

As many of our customers spend so much of their time online and using Twitter, we had for a while seen many instances of "cries for help" issued to followers asking for advice or general statements about adCenter--some good, some bad--that in an ideal world should have received some acknowledgment from us.

@adCenter had become a news, advice and event broadcast mechanism, and we wanted to provide proactive and timely help from our expert support teams for the UK and United States.

So in April 2009, @adCenter started proactive outreach through alerts from Twitter Search, where our customer service reps could help provide support and resources to help advertisers over any hurdles they'd encountered, or simply say thanks whenever someone shouted out they'd had a great experience.

It helps that adCenter is a pretty unique word, so it's simple to search Twitter to find any issues and give assistance in real time without wading through too much irrelevant noise.

The next phase of our Twitter strategy was to create an account for "all things" Microsoft Advertising.

@MSAdvertising

We set our stall out right from the start. This handle was all about news, support, best practices and advertising insight--and not just about Microsoft either. It was important that we share interesting information from across all advertising disciplines. If that meant re-tweeting other news providers' content, then that was OK. An endorsement from Microsoft is no bad thing, and perhaps, given social media's caring/sharing nature, we might get re-tweeted ourselves if we kept pumping out relevant posts and research.

Twitter was not a place for stringent policies on what to say, who to follow and how to evangelise digital, either. It was an opportunity to engage with advertisers, gather valuable, actionable data that could be used to improve our products and services, and the way we market them.

The @MSAdvertising account kicked off on Jan. 9, 2009 and has more than 8,000 followers eager to keep in touch with us where they spend much of their time: social networking.

We get asked all the time whether 8,000 is a good number. There is a lot of “noise” out there and quality is definitely preferred over quantity, but with our consumer brands Microsoft Windows and Bing attracting 60,000 and 35,000 plus respectively, we think our following is very strong. In fact, given that many online marketers already use Twitter for news and networking, we think it will grow even further.

Facebook

With a global audience of more than 400 million users, Facebook would be a hard channel for most marketers to ignore, but setting up and maintaining a Facebook page for Microsoft Advertising needed some careful thought and consideration.

Facebook provides both pages and groups for companies to set up and communicate with their consumers. It became rapidly apparent that pages were the way to go because of their openness and “brandability.” Our aim was to utilize the page for posting photos, videos, news updates and blog posts, drip-feeding content into our fans’ news feeds.

When we started out, we had a lot of housekeeping to do. As with many other large companies, well-meaning staff had set up pages and groups to initiate discussion. Not realising the time and effort needed to maintain and grow a following, we were left with a veritable Everest base-camp littered with orphaned attempts at social media engagement, which we had to clean up before beginning our ascent.

Our fan base has grown to more than 2,200 with little attrition so, although it’s not proved a direct-response mechanism just yet, it does provide us with the ability to share content with our audience when they’re browsing during, say, their lunch break, giving us a little branding and interaction at the same time.

Now En Vogue

It’s important to reiterate that our team has been engaged with customers for more than four years using social media. But as with many other large companies, it’s really only been within the last year or so that the discipline has received wholesale interest and we’ve been asked to present more and more to marketing teams and PR folks internally about the value of this kind of approach.

Prior to the budget-cutting of the current recession and the phenomenal mainstream success of vehicles like Twitter and Facebook, our team was seen as a support function, very much a “nice to have.”

Now the penny has dropped, and amazing achievements from the likes of Comcast, Dell and our own Microsoft Windows and Bing divisions have re-enforced companies’ resolve to paint each marketing channel with a social veneer, enabling them to listen, collate feedback, track sentiment and react in a real-time way to their campaigns, whatever platform, screen or device it’s running on.

Whereas before, we’d be asked to write, speak or comment on matters related to search engine marketing, we’re increasingly being called upon to attend conferences and events to talk about our experiences, but also to “broadcast” the event.



We've Got it Covered - Social Media at Events

Up until June 2009, we would go to conventions to learn and socialize. Social media success can just as easily be mapped to offline interactions. Building relationships with customers, industry experts and influencers at conferences is all part and parcel of the mutually beneficial social lifecycle that continues online until the next time you meet.

As we'd evolved our community to encompass all Microsoft Advertising's audiences in display, mobile, games advertising and analytics, we approached the Cannes Lions Advertising Festival in the south of France, wanting to do something special.

As headline sponsors, and having cut our teeth on a few smaller events, we decided to create a social media hub: a site where all our activities offline could be translated into an experience our audience online could join.

A robust "on-the-ground plan," which outlined hour-by-hour which sessions we'd be blogging about or Tweeting from and detailed a film schedule of interviews with conference delegates and speakers, as well as our own executives, all helped to bring the event alive in real time for the thousands of interested advertisers, marketers and creatives who could not make the trip.

As the dust settled after a hectic week, we counted more than 40,000 interactions or "brand engagements" with our branded coverage. That's people reading blog posts, watching videos, browsing photos or engaging with us on Twitter.

By the next event, Advertising Week in New York a couple of months later, we'd analysed the Cannes experience, working out we could have done better, and achieved a 50 per cent growth in interactions.

60,000 "brand engagements" with our content from Ad Week proved that event coverage using social media is welcomed as long as it's relevant, and for the most part, actionable insight.

Nuggets of news delivered in innovative ways seem to stick in the mind, resonating with audiences on platforms and devices they feel most comfortable using and at a time most suitable for them.

Search Engines and Social Media

Search Engines should not be underestimated as a form of social media that's crucial to pay attention to, and utilize in your marketing efforts.

Your customers will invariably use search to find information on your products and services, either by your brand/company name or generic keywords associated with what you have to offer.

"You need to know how you rank in search engine results pages and how other web pages talking about your business appear to people searching for you."

What appears in the organic search results under your company name can hugely affect your brand perception.

Let's say someone has had a bad service experience with one of your sales reps and they've written a blog post or posted their dissatisfaction on a forum. That negative sentiment could come up high in search results and be seen by other potential customers looking for your company. This could have a potentially damaging effect on any future business, especially irksome if the rant has no real basis or could be easily explained away.

You need to know how you rank in search engine results pages and how other web pages talking about your business appear to people searching for you. You can reach out to negative posters and offer to have a dialogue offline. Maybe they will write a more favourable post in light of your desire to make amends. If not, you should attempt to increase positive articles and posts about your brand that might push the less-positive PR further down the list.

It's not just the written word that can affect your brand. Video and photos now appear in search results. You have an opportunity to generate more awareness for your brand by creating video tutorials or photo slideshows that teach users, in a low cost way, how to use your products and utilize your services better.

Real-time search is a huge innovation, too. With search engines providing "as they happen" Twitter search results in various guises, the need to stay on top of the conversations about your brand, and try to turn them to your advantage, becomes ever more urgent.

Microsoft Advertising in partnership with the Internet Advertising Bureau in the United Kingdom, will be releasing a white paper on this very subject soon, so keep an eye out for it.

What Could Success Look Like?

While many companies have taken the plunge and others wait on the side-lines of social media, we encourage teams to stop and think about their goals and what metrics they are going to judge their success by.

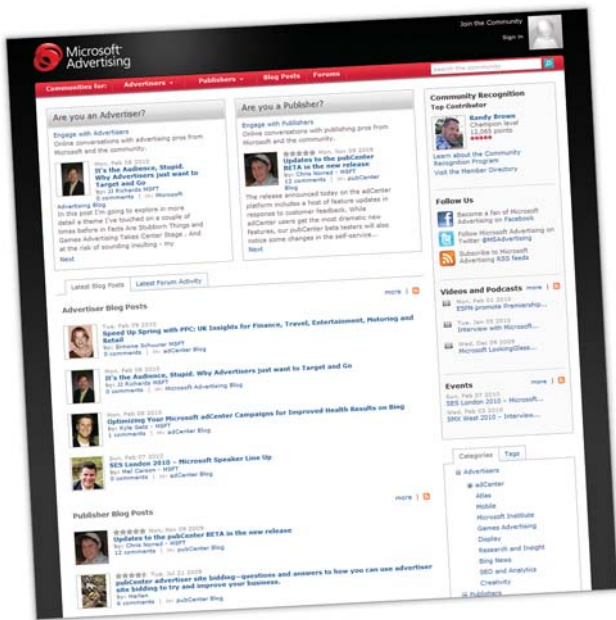
Nine times out of 10, a marketing executive asked WHY he/she wants to start a blog can't articulate more than a couple of reasons that have little or no measurability.

So here are a few ways ROI - "Return on Investment" or "Return on Inaction" - can be tracked:

- Followers, fans, traffic and unique users to your blog, forum, Twitter handle or Facebook page are important as long as they represent relevant growth, i.e., qualified traffic or a following that's pertinent to your industry/product. The more your audience grows, the more people there are to discover and share; your network will tell your tale for you.
 - » We measure the growth, ensure it's relevant and translate it as "reach."
- Think of page views to a blog post about a new product or feature, or clicks on a Tweeted support link as less expensive calls into your call centre. If it costs \$50 every time a member of your staff picks up the phone, imagine 100 clicks from fans or followers on a "how-to video" as a cost saving. You might have data that says 30 per cent of your customers call in for more information—you've just saved \$1,500.
 - » We track and monitor all clicks on links in our Twitter feed, learning what is most popular for future reference, and multiply their number by our call centre costs. Add incremental revenue to that number and you have significant cost savings.
- If your customers are empowered to use your products and services better and more frequently, that has to mean more revenue in your company coffers. Reducing costs and increasing sales renders more profit, so tie in your social media efforts to helping your customer spend more, too.
 - » We use surveys to understand what level of spender is using our social media tools to get their information. We're then able to put a percentage on potential revenue growth if those customers have all the best practices to make it easier to do business with us.
- Consider the notion of "earned media." Your marketing department may spend thousands of dollars in print, TV, radio or online advertising. So put a price on a positive product review from a top blogger in your industry that came about because your social media team arranged a meet-up at a convention. If your latest Facebook discount gets re-tweeted and shared several thousand times, reflect on those as premium impressions "earned" and not paid for. Imagine you've provided some great support information or your product has resonated in your community. The sharing nature of social media has resulted in some great content—sometimes word-of-mouth endorsement is priceless.
 - » Tallying up how often our content is shared and putting a realistic monetary value to how much that exposure would cost in the press is one way of demonstrating the value. Our Twitter following is more than 8,000, but regularly our reach grows to more than 50,000 internet marketers when our followers deem something we've said as worthy of sharing.
 - » The Windows social media team works in this way, too. Being a consumer brand with a huge following, they have many more "impressions" with which to make reasoned calculations as to what their return on investment might be. Marty Collins who heads up that team told us, "In order to compare our teams program against the more traditional digital marketing team we put a value on the impressions we generate each month through our earned media efforts. That value lets us determine the success of the financial resources we are committing to social media and allows us to show a real contribution to the all up marketing efforts for Windows. In the 2 weeks following Windows 7 launch day, we drove over 200M earned impressions."
- Check that your analytics set-up is robust and tells the right story. Random search referrals and links from sites that disparage your brand may not be the most qualified, but may indicate some work is required on the products or service you're building and how you are communicating them. So make sure you can report accurately on where your traffic is coming from, whether it's keywords or links from other sites. Keep track of the positive links and report on them—another example of "earned media." Pay attention to KWs or negative links you were not expecting and feed the sentiment back to your product teams.
 - » We have a full analytics report every month that outlines who is linking to our site and how much traffic they are sending to us. Often we'll reach out and ask them if they want to guest blog or meet at a tradeshow. Analytics provides us with free introductions to industry authorities with which to build fruitful relationships in the future.

"The speed with which news can travel and inaccurate myths spread as a result of inaction can often have a lasting and damaging effect."

- Foster a culture for using social media within your organisation. Not only encourage elements of discovery and “shareability” in all your marketing campaigns both online and off, but also inspire your staff to be proud of and want to articulate your message to their own network of friends and family. Benchmark some success metrics before and after internal evangelism, gathering feedback from within different teams before your next social push. If your employees feel involved, it could have a drastically positive multiplier effect.
- » We’ve embarked on a series of training/learning sessions with teams all over the world and through analytics and surveys to be able to track increases in awareness/evangelism from within our own ranks.



A Final Comment

Our approach to social media marketing is by no means definitive. That’s the beauty of the discipline and the tools: they are so varied there is no “one size fits all” way of collaborating. It takes time and testing to find what works best for your company and employees.

What we’ve demonstrated are the principles behind the approach; the wholesale acceptance that consumers of our products and services have a say in how we do business with them. We could, at our peril, choose to ignore that shift, but we choose to listen.

Knowing who is evangelising your brand is important. Tracking followers who re-tweet your Twitter updates or send traffic to you through posts or reviews helps to build up a picture of what you’re doing right. Reaching out offline to encourage that relationship is a must. Bad news

and negative sentiment are viral properties. Positive PR is much harder to come by, so when it happens, jump on it and say thank you.

Conversely, having mechanisms in place to alert your teams to adverse criticism, tracking that sentiment, drilling down to actionable specifics, and being able to react quickly is crucial to quelling any negativity about your company.

Procrastination has no place in social media.

The speed with which news can travel and inaccurate myths spread as a result of inaction can often have a lasting and damaging effect. Knowing how you want to be considered online is just as important as any brand mission statement.

It’s important to see social media in the context of your other marketing activities. No one is saying it’s the only way to listen to customers and relay information to them. Integration of the discipline is the key.

To quote Lee Odden, the social media and search PR expert behind TopRankMarketing.com:

“Social Media is not a silver bullet for everyone. It’s just another communication platform that depends on a variety of factors to be successful.”

But this method of collaborating is a gift. Use it wisely.

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