

Fighting Social Influence Marketing™ Myths

Shiv Singh, October 2008

For something as discussed as Social Influence Marketing, there are a surprising number of myths that still inhibit its adoption. Here some of the more common ones are debunked.

- 1. Social Influence Marketing is about targeting Generation Y.** Some people equate social media with Facebook. They also equate Facebook with a college audience. Both assumptions are false. There is a lot more to social media than Facebook, or MySpace for that matter. And Social Influence Marketing is not just about targeting Generation Y on the social media platforms.

The largest demographic blogging in the country is the 25-34 demographic (36%), closely followed by the 34-44 one (24%). The 35-49 demographic is the largest on LinkedIn, with its 12 million visitors. In fact, LinkedIn increasingly competes with the Wall Street Journal for ad dollars online. For its own part, the Journal and Businessweek have just launched online communities catering to a much older and more affluent demographics. Finally, some of the most successful online communities are ones that cater to niche, older audiences whether they be Patientlikeme.com, Flixtser, A Small World or Café Mom.

- 2. Social is about marketing and advertising only.** With every new digital phenomenon, the digital industry is quick to identify monetization opportunities. Whether these are publishers, advertisers, agencies, social platforms or technology vendors, the companies that push the phenomenon usually push specific business models most strongly and that often translates to how can a brand markets or advertises on social platforms. That's not a bad thing, but it does sometimes serve as a distraction.

Social media matters because it's a fundamental shift in how people use the Internet and how they interact with each other online. It is about how the Internet has evolved into a communication medium between strong ties in a network of people versus just weak or anonymous ones. It is increasingly about people who have strong relationships with each other in the offline world and are using the social platforms to deepen those very relationships.

For a marketer this means that social must be used to understand brand sentiment, listen to customer needs, co-produce products, recruit talent and collaborate with partners. These social influence elements matter as much as the more obvious marketing and advertising pieces.

- 3. Social Influence Marketing fits into a marketing silo.** Many organizations approach Social Influence Marketing as a tactic that needs to be addressed quickly. They get

itches from different companies and invariably ask their PR agency to do brand monitoring and their digital agency to define and execute a few test social advertising plays. That's not the best way to approach this.

The truth is that social media touches every part of marketing and many other parts of an organization as well. Assigning Social Influence Marketing to one or two agencies is not the best way to approach this space. Rather, each team within a marketing department should be asked to explore how social (with its broadest definition) is affecting their relationships with their customers. The marketers should also look at how it is affecting other departments within their company. Using that information as a basis, a cohesive social strategy should be put in place and only then should the agencies be engaged. The only exception to the rule is if you have an agency that can think about Social Influence Marketing strategically.

- 4. Social Influence Marketing has nothing to do with products.** Social media is often focused on what brands can do on the different social media platforms and how they can develop online communities. That's important, as that's where most of the brand's customers are spending a lot of their time. Knowing how to reach those customers and knowing how to allow for positive influence to take place matters. But there's another important opportunity.

And that's around social products. Companies should reevaluate all of their products to determine whether transforming them into social products can strengthen them. Take for example the famous Nike Plus scenario. By connecting the shoe with technology and an online community, the core shoe was transformed. Even if you're a financial services website helping people save money for their retirement, have you asked yourself whether there are social elements harnessing the wisdom of the crowds (or the wisdom of the known peers) to strengthen the digital product? Those are the questions to ask.

In other words, put your digital folks and the product visionaries in a room together and see what develops.

- 5. Your brand is going to be tarnished.** As a marketer, you probably worry a lot about your brand and you should. You've probably spent millions of dollars in establishing and nurturing it. The thought that someone could tarnish it overnight can be overwhelming. But that happens more rarely than you realize.

According to Nielson research, 88% of consumers who write product reviews write positive ones. Now reviews aren't the only form of social media and if you were to scan the social platforms, you'd surely find some negative impressions of your brand. That can be worrying as the social platforms and the blogosphere amplify those opinions.

But when you look at the numbers, how much your brand is being discussed online—the number of posts, comments, video clips and conversation elements that talk about your brand negatively—are invariably miniscule. This is true if you have a normal brand and products with decent reputations. If that's not the case, fix your brand and your products before you do very much in the social space.

In a nutshell, taking your brand social can strengthen your brand like nothing ever before. Just take a look at what it's doing for Zappos, H&R Block and even HP. But if you're a tired brand, don't expect anything different from Social Influence Marketing. It will just amplify what you already are.

- 6. Participation doesn't equal readiness and expertise.** Because we are all a part of the social media phenomena, we sometimes assume that what we know is all that there is to know. Social is the next new thing, and we're all keen to impress our bosses. But a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and participation doesn't equal expertise.

The most successful social media efforts are those run by people who actually understand how social influence works. They're the people who get influence, know what social platforms are good for, have an intuitive (or academic) understanding of social behavior and haven't forgotten the fundamentals of marketing and business at the same time. Look for these people. They're neither the blanket social media evangelists nor are they the skeptic. Depending on the specific initiative and leveraging their expertise and experiences, they'll be one or the other. Not everyone who talks social is like them.

- 7. A one size fits all global approach works for social.** The fact of the matter is that Social Influence Marketing is about a cohesive strategy but also lots of local, tactical executions that need to look and feel different based on the region and the country concerned. An execution that may work well in one market may be completely inappropriate for another one. Furthermore, if you have a strong brand presence with great brand advocates in one country but a damaged brand and disgruntled customers in another, it may not make sense to launch a social media initiative where participants from different countries are encouraged to talk to each other. It can hurt you as much as it may help.

Also remember that culture plays an important role in social media behavior in a specific country. In some cases, social media is considered an alternative culture movement, and in others it is a natural extension of the physical world. And the features that are supported on one platform may not even be available for another. For example, Orkut and Facebook look very different. What you do with Orkut in Brazil should always be different from a Facebook initiative or something social that you're launching on your website.

So there it is, seven Social Influence Marketing myths debunked. There are many more out there, but these are probably some of the most important. Marketing has not fundamentally changed, but Social Influence Marketing is new and requires strategies and tactics not seen before. These need to be brought to life by experts who understand the space. And remember, social touches so much more than just social advertising.

About the Author



Shiv Singh has been with Razorfish since 1999 and has worked in its Boston, New York, San Francisco and London offices. Before that, he ran a small web consulting firm. Shiv helps Razorfish clients leverage digital technologies to develop meaningful and value-driven customer and employee relationships. As Vice President Social Media & Global Strategic Initiatives, he leads Razorfish's foray into Social Influence Marketing and is responsible for capability development, advising clients, partnerships, evangelism and experimentation. In addition to writing extensively on social media, he has also spoken on Social Influence Marketing and Social Media at conferences such as the O'Reilly Graphing Social Patterns Conference, South by Southwest, DMA Leader's Forum, MediaBistro Circus and OMMA Social.

Prior to his current role, Shiv founded and led the Global Enterprise Solutions practice at Razorfish, and, before that, was a user experience practitioner. He completed his undergraduate studies at Babson College and conducted graduate research into social networks at the London School of Economics & Political Science. An active blogger, Shiv blogs at www.goingsocialnow.com and www.theappgap.com. His twitter id: sszd. Please share your insights or thoughts to shiv.singh@razorfish.com.

About Razorfish™

Razorfish is one of the largest interactive marketing and technology companies in the world, and also one of the largest buyers of digital advertising space. With a demonstrated commitment to innovation, Razorfish counsels its clients on how to leverage digital channels such as the Web, mobile devices, in-store technologies and other emerging media to engage people, build brand loyalty and provide excellent customer service. The company is increasingly advising marketers on Social Influence Marketing™, its approach for employing social media and social influencers to achieve the marketing and business needs of an organization. Its award-winning client teams provide solutions through their strategic counsel, digital advertising and content creation, media buying, analytics, technology and user experience. Razorfish has offices in markets across the United States, and in Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Clients--many of them served in multiple markets--include Carnival Cruise Lines, Coors Brewing Company, Levi's, McDonald's and Starwood Hotels. Visit <http://www.razorfish.com> for more information.

Razorfish

821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: 206.816.8800
Fax: 206.816.8808