

## Living Out Loud: Thinking About Social Network Marketing

by **Danny Flamberg** January 26, 2009

Participating in social networks means living out loud. Posting and sharing information, ideas and images that heretofore wasn't public has become the new favorite past time for hundreds of millions of people. Facebook, MySpace and others have taken every-so-often relationships and brought them to the forefront.

Large numbers of people play around on these sites as a daily goof-off default mechanism. So now rather than hearing from that college buddy, a guy you worked with 5 years ago or your third cousin one or twice a year, you get daily updates on their mood, their activities or their opinions often illustrated with photos or videos. It redefines the notion of friendship and often produces way too much information.

Depending on your demographic and how you were raised, telling all can be as natural as breathing or can require a massive change in mindset or sensibility. If you take the daily postings seriously you might get the idea that our millennial generation has become Star Trek's - Borg – a single, global, all-encompassing organism composed of individual units connected to and controlled by a central brain.

The combination of active participation and bemused voyeurism is fuelling continued growth not only among established networks, but is driving the development of new networks and new applications. Facebook has 200 million users and MySpace has 126 million. Blogging sites (Wordpress and Blogger) each attract more than 100 million users and Windows Live, Flickr, Yahoo Geocities and Hi5 all attract more than 50 million users each in the [November 2008 ComScore analysis](#).

Membership in social networks has more than doubled in just three years according to the [The 2008 Digital Future Project at the Annenberg School for Communication at USC](#). Fifty-four percent of members log in daily and 55% say they feel as strongly about online communities as they do about physical communities. Seven out of ten claim membership is "important" to them and is a vehicle for participating in social causes.

The explosive growth of social networks has put social media on marketers' 2009 agenda. Not only do social networks offer a new and potentially efficient media, they also offer the prospect for reaching consumers when they are in the mood for information, sharing, new ideas and interaction. Ideally social network marketing is not intrusive. Messages can be targeted to discrete opt-in audiences in ways that stimulate interaction, two-way communication, loyalty and purchase. So it's not surprising that more than half of marketers in a survey of the [Junta42 community](#) plan to create more content and use more social media this year.

All kinds of gurus are offering tips, guides and insights into these emerging channels. For a basic primer, check out Mark Dykeman's [Social Destinations of the Web](#).

Here are a few things to help you separate the fantasy surrounding social networks from the reality evolving in front of our eyes.

**Be Where You Are Expected to Be.** Customers expect the brands they care about to have an 800 number, a branded URL, a website and a page on their favorite network. If you aspire to customer intimacy, you need to be where your customers and prospects are and where they expect to find you. [Louis Gray](#) says to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, FriendFeed and YouTube are essential starting places.

**Think About Segmentation.** It's a fair bet that the 15-year-old nephew who "friended" me experiences Facebook much differently than I do. He and his pals have an entirely different sensibility about posting personal information and about what feels right in terms of sharing. Similarly there are probably few marketers that want to simultaneously reach me and him and even those few who might probably don't want to speak to us in the same voice. It's not yet clear what data is being collected or used to cue creative executions or suggest targeting, but one size will NOT fit all.

**Pictures Matter.** Social networks have empowered everyone to become a photographer, director and editor. The traffic in images is incredible. Every amateur shutterbug now has an audience. Many of the most successful viral elements have been visuals so as you contemplate a branded message or a lead generation campaign or a product promotion ask yourself if you can communicate the message visually.

**Consider Context.** If you understand how and why people use social media, your positioning and messaging will be much more effective. Social networks are not appointment media. They are frequently used either as default or escapist media that fill time and divert attention from work, school, chores or other imperatives. There is a huge curiosity factor that drives use which is energized by the knowledge that something new is always happening. Many of us are surprised at just how many friends are online at any given time, especially during the height of the business day.

Social networks are entertainment and diversion choices. And while there's been reporting on Obama's skillful use of the Internet, remember that games, videos and even fart sounds are the leading downloads. Brands entering this arena need to take this mind set and use patterns into account.

Participants post things but probably get equal or great entertainment from passively reading what others post or exploring the countless number of games, new applications, etc. some people are quick and eager to tell you what books they've read, what cities they've visited or what drinks they prefer. But my hunch is that social networks are like talk radio where huge numbers listen to the minority who call in. All of this argues for a gentle, phased approach geared to the sensibilities and usage habits of target customers rather than a typical in-your-face advertising approach.

**Privacy is Primary.** Social networks are schizophrenic. There is probably more personal information available in public than ever before. People seem to be very willing to bare their souls and their skin online. And yet the very same people are highly sensitive about how this information is accessed or used. The same person who will bare all can instantly turn on you asking "How did you know that?"

The idea that individuals will have to manage their online images and define the rules for access and use is just beginning to take hold. An etiquette about friending and un-friending people seems to be evolving. We expect the sites to offer users ways to filter posted information and create criteria to limit access. Plaxo sorts contacts as "friend", "family" and "business" connections, each with a different level of information access.

This tactic will spread and will naturally redefine or stratify the notion of friendship. Ultimately online social networks will mirror real life where your BFFs know the whole deal, your family

knows what you want them to know and the general public gets whatever information you choose to share or forget to protect.

Privacy and friendship will also determine how much sharing and virality marketers can count on. We all fantasize about creating compelling campaigns driven by pass-along messages from credible friends that come up to millions of impressions. But there are no rules or best practices we can count on. We assume that people with more friends are more likely to share messages with others. But at this stage, it's not a proven fact.

We are clearly in the early adopter phase where mainstream marketers watch the early experimenters and try to gauge value and effectiveness. Advocates of social media need to help marketers to assess audience sensibilities, target and buy these emerging media channels. We need new ways to help established and insurgent brands make new friends.

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