

BY JOSH BERNOFF

SOCIAL STRATEGY FOR EXCITING (AND NOT SO EXCITING) BRANDS

THERE ARE TWO kinds of brands in the world. If you are a marketer, you know what I mean. There are brands people like to talk about and brands they don't.

Brands of the first kind—the brands that marketing thinker Rohit Bhargava calls “talkable”—are uncommon. Apple's iPhone is a talkable brand. So is Harley-Davidson. If you market a talkable brand, you have the luxury of tapping into customers who love you, but you'll have to be careful. Those customers have already decided what the brand stands for, and woe unto you if you go against their wishes.

Brands that people don't like to talk about—I'll call them “boring” brands—are everywhere. If, like most marketers, you market a boring brand, then you're really earning your living. That's because you are trying to get people interested in something they don't really care about.

I've been analyzing social strategies for both kinds of brands and they form an interesting contrast.

Let's start with the talkable brands. In a recent survey, we asked online consumers whether they'd like to interact with various forms of social applications with their favorite brands—42% said they would, but the types of interactions they preferred were varied. About one in four consumers would interact with these brands in a discussion forum, one in five would watch videos and one in six would be interested in connecting with them through a social network profile, like a Facebook page. Only 12% want to read a blog about the brand, which reinforced the earlier research we'd done, showing that blogs are the least-trusted form of communication between companies and customers.

What does this mean for the marketer? It means connecting with those enthusiasts is going to be more than a full-time job. First, examine the applications they've already set up on their own: their discussion forums, their blogs, their own videos and social network groups. Figure out what you want to join up with and what you want to create. And you'll have to create multiple applications because, as this research shows, your customers don't agree with each other about where they'd prefer to connect with you.

As a result, you'll probably have to make sure that all those social network profiles, communities and videos connect with one another and with the sites your fans already have. We recently worked with a B-to-B company that faced this exact problem; its customers use its products, love them and have already set up user groups online. The good news: Whatever the company does, it will have active participation. The challenge is not messing up the relationships already percolating in the existing user group.



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Boring brands have a different problem, but social applications can help them, too. The key with boring brands is to get people talking about their problems, since they won't talk about your brand. In advertising, you can force messages on people watching other things. In a social context, this fails miserably.

Applications that talk about customers' problems create borrowed relevance, since you generate talk they care about, then make yourself a part of it. American Express (credit cards are boring, face it) created the Members' Project, a contest to choose deserving charities, since it realized that charity would generate more passion than credit cards. And in perhaps the most dramatic example, Procter & Gamble knew girls wouldn't talk about tampons but would talk about music, cliques and school, so it created BeingGirl.com as a vehicle to deliver (very quietly) the occasional feminine care products' message.

Borrowed relevance is a versatile strategy. Liberty Mutual (in another boring category, insurance) wrapped itself in relevance by creating the Responsibility Project, a community about moral decisions. Johnson & Johnson built a Facebook page for mothers of ADHD kids because, as with all medications, its ADHD drug is boring, but its sufferers generate interesting problems. Doritos invited its customers to submit self-made ads to a contest to air during the Super Bowl for the last several

years, since an ad contest is more exciting—and more social—than a corn chip.

Regardless of whether your brand is talkable or boring, as you launch these social applications, you'll generate something very valuable: people who care about your brand, or at least the problems it solves. I've begun to ask brand marketers a question: Who are your most engaged customers? I don't want an answer like “women 25 to 34 with at least one child.” I want an answer like: “Emily DiBernardo. She lives in Kansas and she just can't stop talking about us.” With social applications, you'll find Emily.

If your brand is talkable, your social efforts will bring to the surface the brand enthusiasts who have the most influence. If it's boring, your social applications will help you find your rare but valuable brand enthusiasts, or even generate a few. Pay attention to these people because as advertising clutter rises and word of mouth becomes more important, they're about to become some of your most important corporate assets. ■



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