

Social media is a people problem

 By [Roger Hislop](#)

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PR & SOCIAL MEDIA: First the good news: using social media for marketing is not a technology issue; it's not a software issue; it's not even that complicated. Anyone, given a bit of sense and a free weekend to cruise some how-to sites, can learn how to use most of the popular social media platforms like YouTwitFace. Now the bad news: it is a people problem. You could even say it's an HR problem.



Think about it this way. Using social media is intended to engage your audience in a conversation with your brand. You see the problem?

Don't give a flying fig

First - people don't really give a flying fig about your brand. They may love the products, but only the truly sad have a love affair with the abstract organisation that made them. **Rule 1 of Social Media:** people have conversations with people they like, are interested in, or need something from.

Rule 2 of Social Media: Don't forget Rule 1. This is important.

Rule 3 of Social Media: No, really. People have neither the time, nor the inclination, to talk to someone that fails to meet the criteria for Rule 1. If they do, they're trying to sell you insurance, Tupperware or Scientology intro courses.

Rule 4 of Social Media: In a conversation, the opposite of "talking" is not "waiting". It's "listening".

Rule 5 of Social Media: A good conversation is where the person you're talking to responds quickly and relevantly. Who wants to chat to Roger Irrelevant the Thuddingly Slow?

It's not terribly glamorous, but it's true: the technology of social media is amazing, but it's mostly under the covers. But the tech is not the marketer's problem. The marketer's problem is deciding which conversations to have with which people, and

how to make sure the conversation is useful to the people they're talking to.

Single most important thing

So once you've worked out your marketing communications strategy, and how it integrates with social media, the single most important thing to do is work out who is responsible for spending time doing all this conversing.

Having a really clever campaign with amazingly creative visuals and a deeply funky Facebook app is good for the short term, but it's like chatting to the boring, stupid but really hot girl in a bar. It gets tired pretty quickly. "Yeah, she's real pretty," you think, "But this is boring. And pointless. And she's not giving me any good stuff. I'm outta here."

Rapid collapse of interest

And that's what most social media campaigns are: a burst of flash, a spike of traffic, and a rapid collapse of interest.

For the conversation to work, ask yourself: Is there someone tasked with spending a few hours a week posting new, interesting content for the duration of the campaign, and then some time after? Someone checking messages, replying to them, communicating problems to other parts of the business that can fix them, and then making sure the conversation is closed on a positive note?

There's an old aphorism in marketing that an unhappy customer coming to you with a complaint is an opportunity to solve their problem, and then sell them something else.

You can't do that if you don't have specifically identified people with the authority to engage usefully with a person.

It's not easy: it takes time. Lots of it. It takes consistency. You can't be responding within minutes this month, then taking weeks next month. It takes people skills. It takes care and attention: right now the majority of people interacting with brands through digital channels are white-collar professionals that have high expectations, and are more than willing to tear you apart on their blogs or Twitter streams if they don't get it.

Living conversation

The greatest challenge for marketers in the short term with social media is applying enough resources over a long enough time to make it a living conversation, not a trendy tactic. Obviously (and putting on my self-serving agency hat), an experienced partner can take on the time, trouble and diligence that this requires. But if you're talking to an agency, they should be telling you who will be posting content, answering messages, escalating issues - how much time per day, how many new posts, how often, to which channels. Specifics. Not a pretty-looking mock-up of a slick Facebook app.

In the long term, of course, the challenge is harder - how to not let social media become the bastard stepchild of the telephone contact centre, where bored low-level agents "have a conversation" with increasingly frustrated customers.

You can maybe get away with a half-assed approach in a contact centre, where a seething customer can get messed around by a useless, half-trained headset jockey four continents away, because it's mostly in the privacy of a person-to-person phone call. With social media, your ineptly handled conversation is only a couple of mouse clicks away from being shown to the whole world.

So getting back to the basics right now: if you're thinking about a social media campaign, think about the people, not the technology.

ABOUT ROGER HISLOP

Roger Hislop is strategist and lead copywriter at Sentient Communications (www.sentientcommunications.co.za), and heads up Sentient Digital, the new online and social media

division. Born in Joburg, he started off as an electrical engineer before taking a sharp left-turn into technology and business journalism, and then moving further into marketing communications. He is fascinated by how people interact, how they share information, how they link as social creatures, and how the Internet is becoming such an important part of it. Contact Roger on tel +27 (0)21 422 4275 or roger@sentientcommunications.co.za.

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