
Social Media: An Essential Marketing Tool

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Abstract: Social media has acquired unprecedented importance in our day to day lives. The growing usage of social media has strong prominence for marketing. Social media has become an imperative component of promotion mix for marketers. The objective of the following paper is to present a holistic view of social media as a promotion tool and devise steps for a successful social media marketing plan. The paper also traces the history of modern social media. This paper is a significant contribution to growing literature on social media marketing.

Key Words: Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Consumer, Promotion Mix, Traditional Media

1. Introduction

Marketing communications have undergone drastic changes in the last few decades. Internet has altered the way in which marketers and consumers connect and communicate to each other. Consumers are spending a larger fraction of their online time on social networking. As a result, marketers are leaving no stone unturned to engage customers through social media platforms. Marketers are using integrated marketing communications in such a manner that traditional media and social media are used in synchronisation.

Social media is being used for marketing of all products, services, persons, ideas etc. Some famous social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, You Tube, Pin Interest etc. Social media has many implications for marketers. It is a fast and cost effective means of communication with consumers. It can help in consumer engagement and thus can positively impact consumer loyalty. Social media marketing has been found influential in various stages of consumer decision making. Thus, marketing on social media has the capability to impact a company's reputation, its revenue and its market share. Marketers can't be successful in their social media strategy unless they understand this media thoroughly. Therefore, it is important to understand about the popular social media platforms among consumers and why they have gained so much prominence in our lives.

This is a conceptual paper. Secondary data has been collected from various sources such as journals, newspapers, websites etc. This paper is divided into four main sections. The first section of the paper defines social media. The second section discusses the evolution of present scenario of social media platforms. The third section focuses on marketing through social media and the fourth section presents steps for effective social media marketing. The paper concludes with some suggestions for marketers.

2. Defining Social Media

Social media platforms can be of various formats such as social networking sites, ratings and review communities, blogs, picture sharing platforms, video sharing platforms, discussion forums etc. Conceptual clarity is very important for social media to be used as a marketing tool.

Various authors have defined social media in different manner in literature. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Blackshaw (2006) have defined social media as "Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers". Zeng et al. (2010) has explained social media as "a conversational, distributed mode of content generation, dissemination, and communication among communities". The importance of social media is undeniable.

We define social media as forms of electronic interaction that facilitates creation and dissemination of information. Social media is characterised as dynamic medium of communication. Social media users allow consumers to easily share and access information (Chen, Xu & Winston, 2011).

3. Evolution of Social Media Networks

Social media has become the most popular form of social interaction. The history of social media can be traced to 'Six Degrees' which was the first social media website launched in 1997. The website allowed users to create individual profiles for themselves, invite their friends, organize groups, and surf through profiles of other users. The site was discontinued in 2001. The modern era of social networking can be traced to launch of Friendster in 2002 and in 2009, it rebranded itself as a social gaming site in 2011. LinkedIn and Myspace were launched in 2003. LinkedIn targeted a niche market and focuses on connecting members for professional reasons. Facebook was launched in 2004 and since then is the market leader in social media networks. Initially it was launched only in English language but now it is available in more than 50 languages. Twitter was launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and was initially known as 'The 140 character social networking site' due to its character limit which was later eased off. Google plus was launched in 2007. Pin Interest and Instagram were launched in 2010. Pin Interest and Instagram are mainly photo sharing social networks. The number of social media users has been growing very fast. Figure number 1 shows the total number of social media users from 2010 to 2017. Billions of people join social media platforms each year. Investing in social media marketing is the best way to stay connected to consumers of diverse age groups.

Figure 1: Total Number of Social Media Users

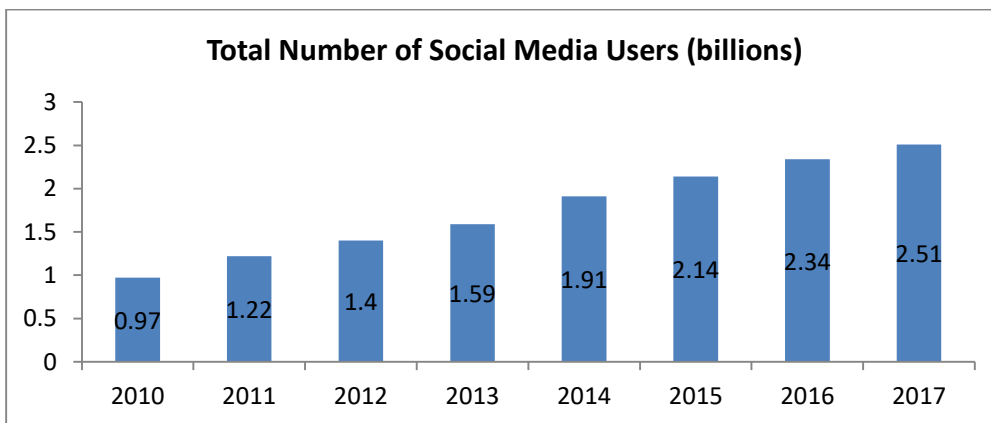


Table number 1 presents the unique monthly users for various social networks. Facebook is the most popular social media network followed by You Tube.

Table 1: Unique monthly users of social media platforms

Social Media Platforms	Unique Monthly Users
Facebook	1.9 billion
You Tube	1 billion
Instagram	600 million
Twitter	317 million
Pin Interest	317 million
Linkedin	107 million
Reddit	85 million

The time spent by internet users on social media is increasing day by day.

4. Social Media Marketing

Today, Companies compete for consumer’s attention on social media. Social Media tools can be used for free and very easily in comparison to other traditional promotional tools (Levinson, 2010). The age of social media marketing has arrived and companies cannot survive and grow without active customer engagement through social media.

Weinberg (2009) has defined social media marketing as “the process that empowers individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels and tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional channels”. Social media networks are revolutionising the promotion activities of the companies. However, social media networks in isolation to traditional promotional tools are found to be not much effective (Weinberg & Pehlivan , 2011). The marketers aim to build long term relationship with customers. Companies employ social media analytics to monitor and measure the activities of their consumers on social media networks.

According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media has the ability to impact consumer decision process from information acquisition stage to post-purchase behaviour. Social media marketing is also helpful in increasing customer retention and customer loyalty (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012; Priyanka & Srinivasan, 2015). Information collected from social media activities is also being used to personalize marketing communication for consumers. Personalisation is treating each consumer as individual to carry the “the right message, to the right person, at the right time” (Dangi and Malik, 2017). Companies have realised that the number of social media users is increasing manifold each year.

The next section gives five steps for using social media marketing in an effective manner.

5. Steps for Effective Social Media Marketing

Companies’ social media marketing communications efforts should be carefully planned like other promotion activities (Cohen, 2009). The following five steps are helpful in using social media as an effective marketing tool.

5.1 Set goals for Social Media Marketing

Before being successful in marketing on social media, it is necessary to decide what a company wants to achieve from marketing on social media. The social media goals should in alignment with overall goals of the company. For example- If a company’s overall target is increasing sales, the social media should also target to influence customers to buy the product or if a company’s goal is to expand into new customer segment, then social media activities of the

company should focus to attract the target segment. The social media goal should be achievable and stated in measurable terms. Social media goals can be increase brand engagement, increase brand awareness, grow sales, learn about your customers, boost user generated content etc.

5.2 Audit the Current Situation

Setting goals alone is not enough, the company needs to assess its current social media presence, its competitor's presence, the benefits and challenges of different social media platforms etc. The company can perform complete SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threat) analysis to conduct social media audit.

5.3 Create Content to Fill the Gap

A suitable content strategy should be developed to fill the gap between desired and current social media situation. Company should create or modify their social media accounts to use them as social marketing tools. The company should always try to generate creative content that engages customers and increase conversations about brand. Various social media platforms such as facebook, twitter, instagram, youtube etc should be used in an integrated manner with other marketing tools.

5.4 Monitor and Track Performance Using Analytics

The success or failure of social media marketing strategy can be known only if the social media presence is measured. Various metrics such as conversion rate, brand mentions, total shares, total time spent on website are used to monitor the brand's social media activities. Various softwares such as Hootsuite, Google analytics, Brandwatch, Buffer etc are used for social media analytics. Some companies rely on in-house analytics software to track social media presence.

5.5 Adjust and Adapt

Social media undergoes changes every second. Thus having a stringent path for social media marketing is not advisable. The company should keep on modifying, updating and their social media presence.

6. Conclusion

Today, consumers have digital exposure like never before. Indeed, Social media outreach has expanded in its influence to such a point that that its effect on a company's offering can be far reaching. No marketer can afford to ignore customers on social media platforms. The most insightful strategy is to integrate marketing communications in such a manner that all forms of promotions represent a coherent message. Social media has the capability to provide competitive edge to companies.

Social media marketing helps in improving customer experience and thus boosts customer retention and loyalty. Social media can be used to provide real time personalised support to customers. The marketer can enhance brand awareness and brand exposure. Social media platforms are also helpful in marketing research. The marketer can monitor both the consumers as well as competitors through social media platforms. The present paper establishes social media as an important tool to build and retain customers.

Social media has become an integrated part of companies' marketing communications and has various implications for the marketing strategy of companies. However, there is lack on empirical studies on role of social media marketing especially in developing countries like India. More research in certain aspects of social media such as privacy issues in context of social media will be helpful in widening the domain of literature.

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