



OF COURSE OUR BRAND IS ON FACEBOOK...

SO NOW WHAT?

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What can brands learn from the ways young people use social network sites?

Social networks, such as Facebook, have become the defining communication technology for young people around the world. This research looks at the different roles that social network sites play in the lives of 16-24-year-old Digital Natives, and this paper summarizes some of the study's highlights.

You don't visit a social network site to 'social network'

Before thinking about placing brand communication in a social network site, we must ask ourselves why people visit it, and then create communication to reflect that.

Social network sites are personal spaces and brands must not get in the way of what people are trying to do there. Digital Natives don't visit a social network to 'social network' – they talk to their friends, catch-up on news and so on. Brand communication should help them do this.

Brands should pre-judge their communication like Digital Natives

Particularly when updating their status on Facebook, young people use 'reflective' communication: they consider whether their posts will be interesting, amusing or start a conversation and will not be perceived as egocentric. In short, they aim to engage others and prompt action.

Brands should use the same criteria to evaluate their own communication. Using the social web to raise brand awareness is not enough – we should aim to prompt action with interesting, amusing or conversation-starting brand contributions.

Being good is no good at all

If you're going to get Digital Natives to talk about you, you need to exceed, not meet, their expectations. Products, services and content only generate positive word of mouth when they are *surprisingly* good. If you only match expectations, you won't prompt discussion or recommendation.

Status updates = narrowcasting that looks like broadcasting

The use of reflective communication (rather than the impulsive, emotional communication that sometimes appears on young people's status updates late at night...) is partly because *all* of their 'friends' (which can include parents, teachers and employers) can see their updates, even though an update is rarely meant for everyone.

To get round this, people become adept at writing things in ways that can be understood differently by different audiences; the 'real' message will be understood by a small audience of close or specific friends. But how many brands bother to act like this? Most brand updates on Facebook will only appeal to a very small number of a brand's followers; but many still read like traditional broadcasting. Like their audience, more brands should use social network sites to narrowcast, rather than broadcast.

Why should brands think about their audience's social status?

The criteria people use to pre-judge communication shows they are conscious of how their behavior affects their status within a community: they consider how their posts might give them public recognition and maintain or improve others' perception of them. Therefore, an important role for brand communication is to help people manage their status online.

How can brands help people manage their status?

The golden rule for brand communication on the social web is simple: *always be giving*. Much of Digital Natives' status online is linked to what they contribute to a community. The same will be true for brands: if you want to be a valued participant in an online community, you need to contribute.

In order to play an active part online and manage their status, people need social currency – something to talk about or pass on to others; this is what brands should provide, with contributions and content that users want to share and talk about.

Getting people to 'like' your brand is the easy bit

Like most people, Digital Natives have a handful of close friends and a wider circle of 'Facebook friends': those with whom they have weak ties and would probably not otherwise stay in contact with. Brands fall into this group.

Therefore, being 'liked' is only an *opportunity*: not a relationship, but a form of permission. When someone 'likes' your brand, the message is clear: they are watching you, waiting for your brand to do something interesting. How are you going to start a conversation and develop the relationship?

Having 100,000 or even a million fans is a nice problem to have; but the really hard part is knowing what to do with – or rather, *for* – them...

Is being 'liked' valuable?

The challenge above doesn't mean that being liked is of no value. Recent research showed that social advocacy within online ads improves their effectiveness. When an onscreen ad in Facebook contained a reference to a friend 'liking' that ad, awareness of the ad doubled and purchase intent quadrupled.

CONCLUSION

Always be giving

Above all, brand-owners should recognize that the social web relies on people's contributions; the content that fuels it is freely given by people, with little expectation of immediate return. While this may feel at odds with traditional brand communication, the maxim "Always be giving" should become close to every brand-owner's heart if they want to engage young people on the social web.

Research was conducted using MEC's proprietary online qualitative research tool, DigiFaces™.

Contact

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¹Advertising effectiveness: understanding the value of a social-media impression, April 2010 Nielsen/Facebook