How can leaders promote sustained, positive engagement with a business’s social platform? When it comes to social media, customizing the strategy to the company is key.
Fitting Social Media Into Your Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

How are organizations using social media most effectively? This collection of articles from *MIT Sloan Management Review* examines the value of devising a clear strategy, offering incentives for participants, and preparing for social media disasters.

**From “Twitter Is Not the Echo Chamber We Think It Is”:**

- We are in the midst of a public conversation about whether social media echo chambers facilitate the spreading of fake news or prevent constructive dialogue on public issues. But do Twitter users really exist in echo chambers to begin with? Recent research says no.
- It’s true that the most active and highly followed 1% of users in a recent study are as polarized as past research and conventional wisdom predicted, posting more partisan content than what they read. But the vast majority of active users tended to be less polarized, posting less politically partisan content than what they read, on average.
- This research has implications for marketers. For instance, if your content is distinctive, interested users may enjoy it, but they may not show their interest publicly through posts or retweets.
- Moreover, if you want to identify potential customers on the basis of their activity, you may be better off looking at what they read than at what they say.

**From “Beyond Viral: Generating Sustainable Value From Social Media”**

- Social media has played a major role in mobilizing events of historic proportions, such as the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States.
- But most big social-media-generated events burst upon the scene, capture the public’s attention for a few days, and then fade into the background.
- Organizations may be able to reverse this trend and reap more enduring benefits from social media if they pay more attention to the underlying incentive structures — the hidden network of interpersonal motivations and leadership — that provide the engine for collective decision-making and action.
- Research shows that incentive networks are an important middle layer between ideologies and culture on the one hand, and the simple digital fingerprints left by social movements in online digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, on the other. They are part of what is fueling new areas of business, such as the cocreation of products and brands through competitions and crowdsourcing.
From “When Employees Don’t ‘Like’ Their Employers on Social Media”:

- In their private lives, employees play multiple roles on social media. They are free to share brand-related information, make comments endorsing their organizations’ brands, and display behaviors that are consistent (or at odds) with their companies’ values and promises.
- Many companies, including Patagonia, a purveyor of outdoor clothing and gear, and Pernod Ricard, a Paris-based producer of wine and spirits, encourage employees to become “brand ambassadors” to consumers and job candidates on social networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.
- Companies can help employees become better brand ambassadors on social media.
- At a minimum, employers can remind employees that some behavior on social media can have negative consequences for the company. On the plus side, employees should be sensitized as to how their engagement on social media, such as liking their employers’ posts or sharing the employers’ achievements, can send positive messages to external stakeholders.

From “Turning Content Viewers Into Subscribers”:

- What is the business value of users’ likes and shares?
- Research shows that social activity on a website can increase users’ commitment to the site and their willingness to pay for its services. Content websites can more easily convert visitors into paying customers by prompting them to gradually increase their social engagement.
- To see any real economic benefit from user engagement, a website has to have a clear strategy. One strategy is a “ladder of participation,” where users become increasingly engaged with a website and more willing to pay for its services as the company guides them “up the ladder.”
- User engagement does not operate according to an “if you build it, they will come” model. Many websites that incorporate social features never reach their engagement goals. Websites need to take an active role in encouraging users to climb the ladder of participation and to shorten the time it takes users to move between the rungs.

From “Finding the Right Role for Social Media in Innovation”:

- Social media platforms can be used as resources for innovation and new product development. They are venues where companies can access customer insights, cocreate ideas and concepts with users, and promote new product launches.
- But research suggests that, despite the promise, companies frequently do not achieve the positive results they expected from social media initiatives. Many companies aren’t getting much benefit from incorporating social media into their new product or service development processes.
One reason is “infoglut” — there is so much information available that it can be difficult for managers to know which voices to listen to. There is a danger of listening to the wrong audience.

To take full advantage of the role that social media can play in new product development, product managers must do the following: (1) listen to and learn from user-generated content, (2) facilitate and engage in dialogue with customer innovators, and (3) find an audience of early adopters who can create excitement for new products — and from whom the company can collect feedback about areas where products can be improved.

From “Customizing Your Social Strategy to the Platform”:

- Companies usually focus on the marketing potential of social media, but there are ways to draw new product development insights from social media platforms, too.
- Companies need to take a unique approach to each platform, since people use different social media sites for different purposes.
- For instance, on LinkedIn, companies can be more direct with individuals and groups when inquiring about products and features.
- On Facebook, which is a more personal platform, people are more likely to be willing to share knowledge and ideas about products, brands, and their own future needs, and insights on the competition. Their inhibitions are lower, and this can lead to more self-disclosure.

From “How to Avoid a Social Media Fiasco”:

- Social media crises are more commonplace than most managers realize.
- Companies should devise plans for handling social media emergencies, just as they develop plans for other emergencies such as fires, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. Among other things, the response plan for social media emergencies should identify a senior decision-maker who is empowered to take action in the midst of such a crisis.
- Companies can benefit from social media policies and guidelines for employees. The American Red Cross takes this a step further, offering social media training for all its employees.
- Effectively handling a social media crisis can benefit a brand. People who find a company’s social media presence just because of the fiasco can be converted and made more aware of a company’s strengths.
Twitter Is Not the Echo Chamber We Think It Is

JESSE SHORE, JIYE BAEK, AND CHRYSANTHOS DELLAROCAS

Recent research challenges conventional wisdom about how users share information on the social platform.

We are in the midst of a public conversation about whether social media echo chambers facilitate the spreading of fake news or prevent constructive dialogue on public issues. In a recent interview with The Washington Post, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey said that he was experimenting with features to reduce echo chambers on Twitter by inserting content with alternative viewpoints into people’s feeds. In response, an op-ed in The New York Times predicted that this idea would backfire, citing recent research showing that exposing people to alternate viewpoints only makes them more partisan. The problem with this otherwise important debate is that it assumes that Twitter users exist in echo chambers in the first place. They don’t.

We had the opportunity to study data from Twitter over a period of 12 days to evaluate how users share news across the entire network. (See “Related Research.”) We found localized evidence of polarization, but no widespread evidence of echo chambers. (With polarization, people are aware of the “other side” and in conflict with it; in echo chambers, people are ignorant of other opinions because they are not exposed to them.) Specifically, the most active and highly followed 1% of users, whom we call core users, were as polarized as past research and conventional wisdom predicted, posting more partisan content than what they read, on average. Our data also shows that typical Twitter users received news articles from across the political spectrum and core users followed an even more politically diverse group of Twitter accounts, so neither group lacked exposure to alternate views.

In addition to providing important context for current debates, our findings suggest new ways of thinking about engagement on social media.

Related Research

Understanding Twitter User Behavior

Typical Twitter users — the diverse, quiet, and, on average, moderating majority — turn to the social platform for a variety of personal and professional reasons. They follow friends, family, and people whose opinions and content they find interesting. They post original ideas, but they also like and retweet posts of others. The people they follow do not belong to a single community, so most users are exposed to a range of perspectives, whether they were seeking them or not. Interestingly, however, the articles that typical users choose to post or retweet are even more centrist than what they are exposed to. (See “Range of Political Slant on Twitter.”) For example, a strongly left-leaning user might be exposed to content written for a clearly partisan audience, but post content written for a more centrist (if still somewhat left-leaning) audience. A possible explanation for such behavior is that because a typical user’s followers do not belong to a single community, most users refrain from posting content that some of their followers might object to.

Core users in our study — the very visible vocal minority — include politicians, commentators, and other individuals and organizations whose primary interests revolve around politics and the news. These users exhibit a markedly different pattern of behavior. Although core users follow an even more politically diverse group of Twitter accounts than typical users, they tend to post less diverse and more partisan content than what they are exposed to. Right-leaning commentators, thus, tend to post and retweet content from mostly right-leaning sources (the same pattern is seen for left-leaning commentators). Such behavior constitutes a form of

Range of Political Slant on Twitter

Patterns of incoming and outgoing slant are somewhat different for two types of users. Ordinary left-leaning users share a more moderate mix of news stories than they receive in their own timeline. Left-leaning users in the network core (those who are highly visible and vocal) share a more partisan mix of news stories than they receive in their own timeline.
polarization: reading across the political spectrum but posting only content aligned with one’s own side.

So communication patterns look very different when one examines what is read (that is, tweets from people whom users follow) instead of what is said (that is, users’ own tweets and retweets). This relationship depends on where you are in the network: Core accounts tend to position themselves as more one-sided or partisan than what they are exposed to, while the typical account positions itself as more moderate.

Our conclusions are based on analyses of two sets of data. Our main, nearly complete cross-sectional data comes from Twitter’s application programming interface (API), collected during 12 days in 2009. Because of the possibility that 2009 data would not reflect a post-2016 reality on Twitter, we repeated the analysis with sampled data from early 2017 and found consistent results. We compared the political slant of the tweets posted by a given user with the political slant of the tweets posted by the accounts he or she follows. We tracked accounts only by user ID rather than name or handle and discarded message contents except for the URLs of news items being shared.

What This Means for Social Media Strategy

Our study focuses on understanding how information is shared on Twitter, but that has practical implications for how executives, marketers, and their organizations address Twitter in their social media strategies.

1. Typical users may not share distinctive marketing content. If a brand's user base existed in echo chambers, then a strategy of targeting the right users with distinctive marketing content could help make a campaign go viral. This is because in echo chambers, targeted users’ followers tend to have the same interests.

What we found, however, is that the majority of Twitter users follow diverse sources of information and have diverse followers. Even if they are privately interested in a brand’s products, they might realize that some of their followers would find it boring, off-putting, or even controversial to share distinctive, targeted content. People may even refrain from liking especially narrowly targeted content because Twitter now displays likes to followers along with active posts or shares. Bottom line: If your content is distinctive, interested users may enjoy it, but they may not show their interest publicly through posts or retweets.

2. Look at what people read, not just what they say. The flip side of this is that Twitter users’ timelines are filled with less mainstream content than what they post and share. So if you want to identify potential customers on the basis of their activity, you may be better off looking at what they read than at what they say. Rather than profiling Twitter users by the hashtags they post or using machine learning to conduct sentiment analysis on their own tweets, it may be more illuminating to perform the same analyses on the tweets posted by the accounts they follow — especially for users who aren’t influencers themselves.

3. Polarized users are rare. Our findings suggest that the prevailing perception of Twitter as a polarized environment may be due to the outsize prominence of a tiny minority of accounts. The extreme visibility of core users might make Twitter seem like an unpredictable and explosive environment, but it is important to remember
that these influencers are not typical. Does that mean that it is risk-free to engage on Twitter? No. Polarized influencers have a huge reach, offering opportunities for brands that take a stand on one side of an issue (as in Nike’s recent advertising campaign with Colin Kaepernick). But Twitter’s hundreds of millions of active users are diverse; on average, their outward behavior is just the opposite of the popular narrative of polarization.

Privacy and Engagement

When thinking about user behavior, we should also consider how people interact and share in other contexts. For instance, recent research shows that open office plans can backfire and cause people to interact less than they do in more traditional work spaces with private cubicles or offices. A similar dynamic may occur on Twitter: If users know that any engagement with distinctive content will be broadcast to their followers, they may choose not to engage despite having a real interest. As a result, features engineered to promote viral spreading (such as making what users like and follow visible to their friends and followers) might actually undermine that goal. Offering private ways to interact with content might elicit more active engagement. Facebook’s private groups and Twitter’s recently introduced bookmark function (said to be a response to user desire to save content without publicly liking it) are examples of this principle; ephemeral content, used on Snapchat and Instagram Stories, has a related appeal. It is possible to imagine a wide range of additional features on conventional social media (like the option of liking something anonymously). Social media provides fascinating sources of diverse content to engage with, but not everyone wants every engagement to be part of their public persona.

About the Authors

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Beyond Viral: Generating Sustainable Value From Social Media

MANUEL CEBRIAN, IYAD RAHWAN, AND ALEX “SANDY” PENTLAND

Why hasn’t the proliferation of social media resulted in long-lasting social and business change?

We have witnessed social media playing a major role in mobilizing events of historic proportions, such as the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Digital social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are often cited as the facilitators of these mobilizations.

But most big social media-generated events seem to burst upon the scene, capture our attention for a few days, and then fade into oblivion with nothing substantial accomplished. No one — be they a charismatic leader or a raucous crowd — seems able to move people into action for extended periods of time using social media. This is especially ironic at a time when the online, crowdsourced society has reached maturity and is now widespread. Given all we have learned about social mobilization, why isn’t it a more reliable channel for constructive social and long-term business change?

We argue that the rise of both social media and what author Moisés Naím has termed “the end of power” is anything but a coincidence. In fact, we view the confluence of these factors as a techno-social paradox of the 21st century.

We have studied why social media has provided the fuel for unpredictable, temporary mobilization, rather than steady, thoughtful, and sustainable change. In business, this may play out when a new product, company, or service — from phones to startups to games — grabs people’s attention for a single announcement and then flames out.
How can businesses and others reverse this trend and reap more enduring benefits from social media? For starters, it will take a fundamental change in focus.

**The Need for Incentives**

We find that there is insufficient attention on the underlying incentive structures — the hidden network of interpersonal motivations and leadership — that provide the engine for collective decision making and actions.

A number of large-scale social mobilization experiments bear out the importance of incentive structures. Consider our own experience with the scientific scavenger hunt, the 2009 Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) Network Challenge. Our MIT Red Balloon Challenge Team competed with 57 other teams across the country to locate 10 weather balloons tethered at random locations all over the continental United States. None of the other teams managed to create a viral campaign that reached large populations and created awareness, while our team used an incentive scheme that motivated people to recruit their friends. As a result, we recruited over 2 million people in less than two days to help with the search, and we won the contest.

The difference in strategy was not just our emphasis on viral communications, but the way that incentives were matched with the motivations of the participants. Even for the simple task of finding balloons, successful teams tapped into people’s motivation for personal profit, charity, reciprocity, or entertainment.

Our research shows that incentive networks are an important middle layer between ideologies and culture on the one hand, and the simple digital fingerprints left by social movements in online digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. They are part of what is fueling new areas of business such as the cocreation of products and brands through competitions and crowdsourcing.

Ideologies and culture shape what individuals want to achieve as they go about their daily lives, how they relate to each other’s well-being, and how they help each other achieve those goals. These behaviors can be mapped into a network of incentives where each individual payoff depends on the payoffs of others. By contrast, the inability to sustain and transfer bursts of social mobilization into lasting social change or business results is rooted in the superficial design of today’s digital social media — that is, it is designed primarily to maximize information propagation and virality through optimization of clicks and shares. However, this emphasis is detrimental to engagement and consensus-building. Understanding the dichotomy is an important lesson for those involved in online marketing.

**From ‘Likes’ to Actions**

Effective social media is the result of both information diffusion and recruitment incentives, yet most social media has focused on diffusion. From a business perspective, it means that social media is still extraordinarily ineffective at getting people to take action — for instance, by clicking through ads to make a purchase. As an industry, social media is still stuck on how to make people “like,” not on establishing loyalty and stickiness.

One reason behind the emphasis on information virality is a phenomenon we call network measurability bias, which refers to the tendency to focus on processes that are easily observable within digital social networks, such
as retweets. It neglects key latent processes such as the ideological, cultural, and economic incentives of actors.

But that’s the wrong focus. If we shift our efforts toward mapping incentives, we may better determine the suitability of content for action — and create more lasting social and business change in the process.

Social media is an amazing tool that allows social scientists to measure information spread in real time, yet it is almost totally blind to other relevant factors, such as framing processes, reflection, consensus formation, or argumentation processes — which social scientists have found to be important in connecting content to sustained motivation.

Convincing someone of an idea is one thing. Recruiting them to incur costs of substantial time, effort, and risk toward supporting a cause or brand — or buying a product — requires much more commitment. We need new experimental paradigms and tools that spur individual, social, and cultural incentives in social mobilization processes.

Experimentation with these concepts may take time. Incentives are far less visible than message content, and a particular action often results from multiple incentives. When we do develop these models, however, they will help us develop a new generation of social media that can go beyond flash fads and viral memes toward consensual construction of sustained change.

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When Employees Don’t ‘Like’ Their Employers on Social Media

Many managers would like their employees to be active in representing the company on social media, but employees are often less engaged than expected. How can organizations encourage employees to become brand ambassadors?

BY MARIE-CÉCILE CERVELLON AND PAMELA LIRIO

MORE THAN 2 BILLION people worldwide are users of social media, making it a logical platform for companies seeking to attract potential employees and engage consumers with their brands. In addition to sharing information on brand activities through official social media pages or accounts, organizations also are represented on social media through the private social media activity of employees. In their private lives, employees play multiple roles. They are free to share brand-related information, make comments endorsing the organization’s brand, and display behaviors that are consistent (or at odds) with the brand values and promises. For companies, the social media behavior of employees represents both an opportunity and a risk.

When employees talk privately about their brands or the industries in which their companies operate, their comments often have more credibility with their network of contacts than when they speak about them in professional contexts. Depending on the substance of their remarks, this can be a plus or a minus. Many companies, including Patagonia Inc., an outdoor clothing and gear company based in Ventura, California; Société Générale, the Paris-based banking and financial services company; and Pernod Ricard, a...
paris-based producer of wine and spirits, encourage their employees to become “brand ambassadors” to consumers and job candidates on social networks such as linkedin and share the company culture on facebook and twitter. businesses such as l’oréal, the cosmetics company, have even implemented programs to accompany employees, including top management, on their digital journeys and help them communicate creatively and efficiently on social media.

however, our research shows that for many companies, the opportunity to use employees as brand ambassadors has been only partially tapped. although employers expect their employees — especially younger ones — to follow the employer’s brand on social media, share its brand links, recommend its products, and recommend the company to job candidates, we found that on the whole employees displayed very low brand engagement on social media. (see “about the research.”)

at a european consumer goods company we studied, for example, less than half of the employees followed the employer’s brand on social media. managers at several companies we studied were surprised to learn that their employees were not following them on facebook or other popular social media sites such as twitter, instagram, and linkedin. yet when employees are not fans or supporters of the company’s products, this can send an ambiguous message to employees’ contacts and deprive the company of potential supporters.

so what can companies do? at a minimum, employers can remind employees that their behavior on social media can have negative consequences for the company. in addition, employees should be sensitized as to how their engagement on social media, such as “liking” their employers’ posts or sharing the employers’ achievements, can send positive messages to external stakeholders.

unpacking employee branding

Corporate branding involves creating a unique image for the organization and its brand in the minds of key stakeholders. it reflects the organization’s effort to deliver its promise consistently to employees (internal branding), potential employees (employer branding), and customers (external branding). there has been little scholarly work

about the research

Our insights on how employees engage in social media are based on two studies. the first looked at French, German, and Russian/Eastern European employees of a multinational company selling fast-moving consumer goods. the age of the survey respondents averaged 39.4 years, with a minimum age of 22 years and a maximum of 59 years. Overall, 77% of 353 respondents frequently used at least one social media platform; google+ and Facebook were the most frequently used of them. although employers may expect their employees (especially those who are members of generation Y) to follow the employer brand on social media and share the employer brand links, recommend products, and recommend the company to job candidates, we found the surveyed employees actually showed very low brand engagement on social media. this held true for baby boomers as well as members of generation X and generation Y, even when their level of job satisfaction was high.

we discussed the results with the multinational company’s CEO, marketing managers, digital managers, and online-community managers. the results highlighted the importance of employee brand engagement to behavior consistent with brand values. also, we found that the role employees perceive they have on social media was strongly related to their brand advocacy on social media. the French and German samples displayed cultural differences: French employees were more likely to separate their personal use of social media from their professional use. it is likely that encouraging employees to strengthen brand performance on social media will be more effective in countries, such as Germany, where mixing professional and personal information is more common.

we tested the validity of the first study with a second study of employees and managers in France working in private-sector companies with at least 50 employees. Respondents used at least one social media platform. of the 252 respondents, 25.4% were managers, 60.3% nonmanagerial employees, and the rest top management (heads of departments and directors). their average age was 42.8 years old. the most frequently used social media platforms were YouTube and Facebook, with a median usage between one hour and three hours per week.

the results of the second study supported the first study. the propensity of employees to engage in word of mouth was captured through three constructs: giving opinions, seeking opinions, and transmitting opinions. social networks enabled dynamic diffusion of information, with a single person being a seeker, giver, and transmitter of information at once. the employees who naturally shared information online were the ones who were the most sensitive to the endorsement of their employer brands on social media. also, in online discussions, the perceptions of contacts with similar characteristics (“profiles”) influenced the credibility of the information shared within the group.

results were discussed and interpreted with the input of digital managers, marketing managers, and human resource managers from five companies in three sectors. through working sessions and an extensive search of the literature on employer branding and related constructs, we developed a set of recommendations to help organizations foster employee branding behaviors.

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social media
exploring the role of employees in the branding process outside the service sector, where the role of employees in delivering the brand promise to customers is paramount. However, with increased personal use of social network sites, it is becoming apparent that every employee on social media has a relationship with key stakeholders, be they colleagues, current or future clients, suppliers, or potential job candidates. This reality drives the desire to have employees interacting in positive and constructive ways in relation to their employer’s brand, both in professional and private spheres.

Employee branding is a process whereby employees internalize the company brand image and project that image to customers, job candidates, and other stakeholders. It differs from employer branding (which aims to enhance the organization’s image in order to attract and retain talented employees) and internal branding (which focuses on employee motivation to achieve organizational objectives and provide customer satisfaction). What’s more, employee branding goes beyond internal marketing in that it motivates employees to communicate the brand image to multiple stakeholders, as opposed to merely satisfying their own needs in an employee-customer interface. We treat employee branding as the outcome of a process that begins with employees internalizing the brand and that leads them to endorse the brand externally with both customers and potential employees. (See “Understanding Employees’ Role in Branding.”) Whereas corporate branding delivers the organization’s explicit promise to key stakeholders, employee branding conveys the promise when employees internalize it and endorse it either explicitly or implicitly through brand-consistent behaviors.

In the retail and hospitality sectors, research has shown that customer satisfaction is directly tied to employees’ attitudes and behaviors. In addition, employee branding is being examined increasingly in relation to human resources functions. Although the research on employee branding for attracting job candidates is relatively new, a growing number of companies are encouraging their existing employees to use social media to attract new ones. At Pernod Ricard’s wine division, for example, young hires post photos and information about their jobs to an Instagram account (prfuturevintage).

Employees explicitly endorse an employer brand on social media when they comment positively on the brand to their contacts, recommend the brand, share links, pass on information, or endorse the brand’s values. Also, employees might refer to their brands indirectly by discussing relevant issues or through their behavior on social media. For example, when a teacher discusses issues related to education on social media, his opinions might be seen as being endorsed by his employer even if the employer isn’t specifically mentioned.

For our research, we studied employee-branding behaviors on social media based on four dimensions: word of mouth, endorsement, sharing, and culture. (See “Assessing Employee Branding Behaviors on Social Media,” p. 66.) As a starting point, employers can conduct anonymous surveys about employee behavior on social media with regard to the company brand. This can sensitize employees to how their engagement on social media can benefit the employer brand. Surveys can be broadened to include evaluations of employee job satisfaction and employee voice, which we found to be two strong antecedents of willingness to participate in employee branding. However, we found that even when employee satisfaction is high and employee voice is valued inside the organization, most employees are not as engaged as we expected. This raises the question: What can companies do to encourage employees to become effective brand ambassadors?

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEES’ ROLE IN BRANDING
Corporate branding delivers the explicit promise of the organization to key stakeholders. Employee branding conveys that promise to customers or potential hires when employees internalize the brand promise and endorse it explicitly or implicitly, through brand-consistent behaviors.

![Diagram](image-url)
Fostering Employee Branding on Social Media

We identified several factors that stand in the way of employee branding behaviors on social media. First, at the organizations we studied, there was often a lack of understanding among employees of the organization’s social media strategy; many employees were even ignorant of their employers’ social media activity. Second, employees were insufficiently aware of the importance of their role on social media. Most employees didn’t know what was expected from them; one employee out of three could not say whether their company had a social media policy establishing do’s and don’ts for them on social media. Third, there was discomfort around using social media in professional settings. This factor was more pronounced among senior employees (both in terms of age and position within the organization) and among employees who maintained a strict separation between their private and professional spheres. Based on these and other factors, we were able to develop a set of five best practices and recommendations for encouraging effective employee branding on social media.

1. **Empower a stable of employee advocates.**

   Certain groups are more conscious than others of the importance of endorsing their employer’s brand on social media. While young and senior employees alike have embraced social media in their personal communications to some degree, those who were born in the era of the internet — so-called “digital natives” — tend to be more active. Compared with Generation Xers or baby boomers, they typically maintain less separation between professional and personal information. They are also more accustomed to voicing approval and disapproval on social media. Accordingly, young adults are more likely to become brand ambassadors for the company on social media. However, we found that an employee’s age does not necessarily dictate the role he or she plays in promoting a brand on social media. As long as employees understand the role they can play on social media and how to engage with it, brand-building behaviors

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### ASSESSING EMPLOYEE BRANDING BEHAVIORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Companies can map the extent of employee engagement on social media with their employer brand across four dimensions. Top management likely expects employees to be engaging in all 14 items across the four dimensions below. The reality, however, is probably different; in the companies we studied, the vast majority of employees engaged in fewer than seven of the 14 behaviors.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EMPLOYEE WORD OF MOUTH</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I speak (positively) about my employer brand on social media.</td>
<td>2. I praise the achievements of my employer brand on social media.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. When I have a criticism about my employer, I refrain from sharing it online.</td>
<td>4. I do not post comments about my employer online that I might regret later.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>EMPLOYEE ENDORSEMENT</strong></th>
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<td>5. I am a fan/I follow my employer brand on social media.</td>
<td>6. I recommend my employer brand products and services to my contacts on social media.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I recommend my company to potential job candidates.</td>
<td>8. I respond (constructively) when my contacts criticize my employer brand products or services on social media.</td>
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<th><strong>EMPLOYEE SHARING</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>9. I pass along information about my employer brand on social media.</td>
<td>10. I “like” content posted by my employer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I share links to/from the employer brand on social media.</td>
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<th><strong>EMPLOYEE CULTURE</strong></th>
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<td>12. I keep in mind that I could harm my employer brand when interacting on social media.</td>
<td>13. I behave on social media in a way that is consistent with my employer brand values and culture.</td>
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<td>14. I communicate on topics related to my employer’s business in a way my employer would approve of.</td>
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are similar across generations. Across our studies, we found that Generation X and baby boomer respondents used social media regularly, but they tended to be more comfortable using media passively (for example, reading posts) than they were sharing content or posting comments. Consequently, the first step toward building a collective digital culture may be to encourage digital natives to set the tone and help remove the psychological barriers senior employees feel toward social media engagement. This may involve “reverse mentoring,” where younger employees help their colleagues increase their social media competence. At L’Oréal, for example, digital natives work with senior employees to coach them on social media.

Interestingly, the more overlap employees have in their profiles with others in their network, the more likely they are to display brand-building behaviors on social media. Indeed, they are more likely to endorse the employer brand in their personal online interactions because they believe their contacts may have a similar interest in the employer brand. Moreover, they display brand-building behaviors naturally—not out of obligation. Many employee advocates on social media hold off on endorsing their employer brand until some of their contacts make the first move. A powerful example of this can be found in the response by employees and customers to the firing in 2014 of the popular CEO of Market Basket Inc., a Tewksbury, Massachusetts-based supermarket chain. By banding together online (#SaveMarketBasket, #ArtieT), employees and customers were instrumental in reinstating the CEO and preserving the company’s distinctive organizational culture. The Market Basket case highlights the potential effect of rallying key constituencies to endorse the employer brand.

Employees can also play an influential role in shaping the company’s social media strategy. Initiatives on social media that unite employees in relation to their employers, such as employer groups championed by community managers, provide a forum for active advocates. Internal social network platforms, such as Yammer and Workplace by Facebook, can also be useful. Generally, companies should ask employee advocates for their feedback and include them in discussions on how to improve the impact of social media activities.

2. Outline the boundaries of employees’ social media presence. Employees display brand-building behaviors when they understand their role in the branding process. When they feel partly responsible for the company’s success, they are willing to invest in activities to enhance the customer experience. Similarly, when employees perceive they can play a role in the success of the brand online, they are willing to exhibit brand-building behaviors through their digital networks and on social media sites. Curiously, in our surveys, many employees said that they didn’t think it necessary to “like” their employer brand or share posts with their contacts.

Once employees understand they have a role to play, they need to learn social media etiquette for when and how to mention the employer. Often, many employees aren’t aware whether their company has a social media policy. Its guidelines should be outlined and communicated company-wide, with clear descriptions of what managers consider acceptable. Bear in mind, too, that the employees’ involvement in social media can become a liability. For example, in a company operating in the luxury sector, employees had to be reminded that the items they were proudly crafting and personalizing for prestigious clients had to be kept secret and could not be posted on Instagram. Also, spending hours on social media during the workday, including generating posts aimed at creating value for the employer brand, might send a negative message to external stakeholders. In a nutshell, employers should sensitize employees to the risks of blurring their professional and personal spheres on social media (specifically noting statements and behaviors to avoid and issues that employees shouldn’t discuss).

In addition to pointing out risks, companies can benefit by training employees on the basics of social media. For example, many employees are not Twitter-literate. Many employees we observed or met were not endorsing their employer brand because they didn’t really know how to do so. Some of their questions were fairly elementary ones on topics such as how to retweet and what hashtags are used for. Digital natives who were introduced to Facebook when they were teenagers are often amazed when their parents ask them to translate Twitter-speak into English. Rather than expecting older employees to use their own social media
accounts to share information on the brand, they can be encouraged to simply comment on the company Facebook page or on sites such as Glassdoor, where employee feedback is posted anonymously. From instructing employees on the use of social media tools to educating them on social media metrics, different forms of training can be configured to support the digital brand-building activities of different categories of employees. Senior management should participate in the training sessions as well. L’Oréal, for example, trains all managers, including those at the very top, to become proficient in using digital tools.

3. Foster brand engagement. Organizations should foster employees’ identification with their brand by encouraging employee brand commitment, defined as a psychological attachment and loyalty to the employer.19 When employees demonstrate high levels of commitment to the employer, they have internalized the desired brand image. This combined sense of belonging and engagement becomes solidified through the employees’ attachment to the job and to the brand, and by their developing a high level of trust in their ability to safely voice their opinions internally. Employee brand-building behaviors are rarely rewarded. However, they enhance organizational performance and help portray the workplace in a favorable light externally.20

Employee brand engagement encompasses both an emotional dimension, through emotional attachment, pride, and personal meaning,21 and a rational dimension, through internalizing the values and understanding the heritage of the brand. Across our studies, we have found that employees who understand the brand promise and have an emotional attachment to their brand are more likely to invest in brand-building behaviors on social media. Training on brand building might be useful in making the brand platform available to everyone within the organization.

To foster brand engagement, management needs to establish clear expectations regarding employee behavior that are consistent with the “psychological contract.” This contract needs to be grounded both in internal communication (via messages about what the organization feels is important) and in external communication (via awareness of corporate and brand-name communication efforts as conveyed through advertising, public relations, and social media). Here, too, internal networks such as Yammer or Workplace by Facebook are important, helping to create an employer brand community and promote a link between internal and external brand representations.

Having an employer brand community makes it easier for employees to endorse the brand on social media. Nurturing the brand community fosters a sense of belonging and serves to encourage employees to support the employer’s strategic branding initiatives.22 Within the brand communities of academic institutions we surveyed, the most popular posts were related to personal achievement (for example, how an employee did in a triathlon) or social gatherings (for example, an annual company summer barbecue or holiday party). Blurring the boundaries between personal and professional events helps employees spread information about the employer culture throughout social media.

4. Make content relevant and easy to share. Employees perceive their role in social media as important to the company as long as they see the brand as being active. Brand external communication not only affects employees’ image of their company’s brand, it also shapes their brand-building behaviors and encourages them to be active participants. Research shows that a perception of high quality in external communication such as advertisements can positively influence how employees identify with their employer brands; specifically, it motivates salespeople to devote more effort to the brand.23 Thus, a brand that’s perceived as being actively present on social media sends an implicit message to employees that social media is important to building the brand (which, in turn, encourages employees to communicate externally via these networks).

However, being present on social media, while important, is not sufficient. In order to turn employees into brand ambassadors, it’s essential that the company have relevant content to share. Across our studies, many employees regarded their employers’ social media content as not compelling enough to share. To address this problem, companies need to include their employees in brand content generation and invite them to be key participants in brand social media activities. At a minimum, content should be presented in a format that’s easy to share and
communicate in real time. For instance, one employee told us he had discovered an ad posted on YouTube by his employer only after it had already been posted for several weeks. Information needs to be updated frequently and shared with employees. In addition, companies can provide tools and assistance to help employees generate content. L’Oréal Canada, for example, encourages employees to develop creative content on social media using its “content factory,” which maintains an online library of video tutorials, product pictures, product reviews, and testimonials to facilitate employee engagement with customers.

5. Reward employee voice. Research indicates that employees respond more positively to intrinsic psychological rewards such as public recognition than to extrinsic rewards such as bonuses, which can even have negative effects. Moreover, employee branding on social media is effective only if the employee’s voice is seen as authentic and sincere. The most effective rewards are straightforward but often overlooked. They include listening to employee feedback, paying attention to employee suggestions, and congratulating employees on their achievements. The consequences of ignoring these potential rewards can be serious. For example, we spoke to a manager who did not feel she was adequately recognized for supporting her company brand on her personal blog. Her response was to tone down her testimonials and hold off from sharing company news via her blog and other social media platforms.

Many companies use extrinsic reward systems to encourage employees to participate in internal social networks. Some companies award employees points when they post comments or for the number of shares or “likes” they receive on their posts. However, such systems carry a risk that employers will be seen as manipulating employee voice and intruding in employees’ private lives. The power of employee brand building lies in giving employees freedom to express themselves within the boundaries outlined by the organization. For example, employers might find ways to link their social media advocacy to an incentive system for employee referrals. For instance, ShoreTel Inc., a telecommunications company based in Sunnyvale, California, tracks incoming candidates via links employees share through their personal social media accounts. ShoreTel employees report valuing a privileged relationship on social media with top management, and this experience encouraged them to share or retweet information. However, such a system is only possible if top management leads and champions brand-building behaviors on social media.

If employers want employees to be constructive and engaged on behalf of their brands on social media, they need to respect the personal nature of how employees express themselves on social media. The company’s interest in employee branding should not extend to policing employees’ behaviors online or requiring access to their colleagues’ social media profiles. If and when online-community managers encounter anonymous employee comments on sites such as Glassdoor, rather than be defensive, the can address the comments with transparency while emphasizing organizational safety. The foundation of employee branding is mutual trust and respect between employer and employees.

Implications for Companies

During our research working sessions, managers at several companies expressed concern that their employees were neither fans of their Facebook pages nor following their employer brand on Twitter, Instagram, or LinkedIn. In today’s social media-focused environment, employees are often a valuable source of information for both customers and job candidates. At a time when organizations everywhere are encouraging customers and other constituencies to recommend their brands on social media, not being able to present the voice of your employees may communicate lackluster enthusiasm on the part of employees toward the company.

Past research indicates that organizations seeking to become leaders need to clearly state what is expected from employees and train them adequately on brand values and heritage. Further, we recommend that companies find ways to integrate social media into internal branding strategies and training. In branding goods and services, the entire workforce needs to be trained to deliver the brand promise and engage actively with potential customers and job candidates on a day-to-day basis.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

article at http://sloanreview.mit.edu/x/58201, or contact the authors at smrfeedback@mit.edu.

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These days, when almost every website offers social features, a burning question is: What is the business value of users’ “likes” and “shares”? Past attempts at finding the answer have touched on the idea of user engagement, suggesting that users who are more socially active on a site continue to browse and explore it for longer periods of time, contribute more content, and communicate more about the website with others, potentially attracting new users.

Our research in the last five years hints at a more concrete relationship between user engagement and website profitability: Social activity on a website can increase users’ commitment to the site and willingness to pay for its services. Our work suggests that social engagement could actually be used to solve the conversion challenge that so many content websites encounter, in which users enjoy free content that the website provides but are unwilling to contribute to the site monetarily.

The bad news is that it’s not enough to just add participatory options and hope that users will click and interact. To see any real economic benefit from user engagement, a website has to have a clear strategy in place. Our research introduces the concept of the ladder of participation—a framework for strategic thinking about using site engagement to improve conversion. The notion of the ladder is based on the idea that, as users become increasingly engaged with a website, they become more willing to pay for its services—and the website must take an active approach to engage and interact with its users, guiding them “up the ladder.” To do this, website managers must understand the current user community, identify how they would like that community to evolve, and select the participatory features they offer—and the order of their introduction—accordingly.

We empirically demonstrated the relationships between a user’s position on the ladder of participation and his or her willingness to pay, using data on more than 100,000 users from Last.fm. Last.fm is a music-streaming website with social features that enable users to interact with the content on the site and with one another. The website operates under a freemium business model, in which basic service is free but users can pay a monthly membership fee to enhance their music-listening experience. Remarkably, even though these benefits are unrelated to the website’s social features, we found that people who used those social features—that is, participated in the Last.fm community,

(Continued on page 12)
and particularly if they acted as community leaders — were more likely to subscribe to premium services, compared with users who did not participate in the community. (Detailed findings from this study were published in MIS Quarterly. See “Related Research.”) We also found that users who were more active in the community made the subscription decision sooner after joining compared with users who were less active (or not active at all).

To study cases in which a website explicitly asks users to engage in participatory actions, and even requires them to engage in such actions to consume further content, we conducted another series of Web experiments in a specially designed website named “VideoBook,” which provides high-quality video content. While watching videos, users were presented with various “calls to action,” issued at different points in time, and their site behavior before and after exposure to these prompts was recorded. At the end of an allotted time period, users were asked to donate real money, which they were told would be used to improve the website. The first study we conducted showed that users who were given calls to action in the first 10 minutes of usage donated more money to the website than users who were not exposed to such prompts. We found that even one prompt was enough to increase users’ likelihood of voluntarily engaging with the website and to boost the number of contributions. The prompts did not affect users’ enjoyment or willingness to continue using the website. Our next study showed that the sequence of participatory activities is crucial: When the tasks that users were prompted to engage in were not presented in increasing order of effort level, users tended to donate and participate less than when tasks were ordered that way.

Four key management insights emerged from our research on the ladder of participation and its connection to capturing value from users’ social engagement.

1. Understand the many faces of user participation. Many websites tend to treat all forms of user participation as essentially alike, referring to all of them as reflections of “user engagement.” But if we were to ask people whether clicking on a “like” button next to a short video clip is identical to leaving a detailed comment, the answer would probably be a clear “no.” Liking is a way for a user to signal a general affinity toward the content. Commenting, on the other hand, is much more complex. Users can use the comment option to express their opinions but also to raise questions, interact with fellow users, respond to them, and much more. Clearly, commenting on content requires greater cognitive effort and time from the user than liking the content.

We differentiate user participation features into three categories:

- **Content organization** refers to features that require little effort from the user and that help fellow users receive useful information about the content. These features include the “like” button and options such as ratings (star ratings or a numerical scale) or tagging content with user-suggested keywords.

- **Community participation** includes all features that have the potential to create interactions among users on the website. These include chats, forums, internal blogs, comment options, sharing options, social or interest groups, and so forth. These features form the basis of the website’s community and require low to moderate efforts from the user.

- **Community leadership** refers to features and options that put users in the moderator’s seat. These include options to create new social groups on the website, moderate the website’s discussions, and create content channels. It is rare for traditional commercial websites to install such features, but they are common on websites that encourage vast community input, as these websites tend to delegate some, if not all, moderating tasks to users.

When creating a strategy around social features, website operators should decide which types of features to install according to whether the results they are trying to achieve: better access to content, interaction among users, or the creation of a vibrant and sustainable community.

2. Search for your website’s ladder of participation. There is a consensus among researchers in the field of online communities that user participation tends to follow a ladder-type pattern. In most cases, users start off as “lurkers” who passively consume content. These users may later make small contributions to the community, for example, by organizing (tagging or liking) content. Users on the next level make more substantial contributions, such as posting comments to discussion forums. Finally, on the top rung of the ladder are members who take on leadership roles in the community, for example, by initiating or moderating discussions. At each rung of the ladder, the user increases his or her effort and commitment to the website and as a result supplies the website with more value.

Research has shown that users at higher rungs of the ladder are more likely to feel strongly committed to the website. In particular, these users choose to invest time in the website not only because of the benefits they may gain but also because of feelings of belonging and obligation to the community.

In recent years, many analysts have used the analogy of a funnel when thinking about user engagement, capturing the
Website managers who seek to develop a user-participation strategy can gain more by considering participation as a ladder rather than as a funnel.

3. Let your users climb to conversion.
A key finding of our research is that there is a connection between users’ social engagement with a website and their willingness to pay for premium services on the website. In recent years, many websites have been utilizing two-tiered business models, in which basic website service is free, but premium content or services come at a cost. Our data show that loyalty in terms of social participation leads to loyalty in terms of spending on added features and services on the website. In particular, we observe that participatory activities that require higher levels of effort, such as blogging and moderating website discussions, tend to be associated with higher willingness to pay, compared with participatory activities that require less effort from users.

Thus, the third step to seeing returns on your investment in social features is making sure you provide your users with a large enough variety of features (that is, enough rungs) to enable them to climb to higher levels of commitment before you expect to benefit from those features.

4. Don’t be afraid to encourage users to participate.
User engagement is definitely not an “if you build it, they will come” situation. In fact, many websites that incorporate social features never reach their engagement goals. Websites should take an active role in encouraging users to climb the ladder of participation and to shorten the time it takes users to move between the rungs.

Many website operators are reluctant to ask their users for anything for fear of upsetting them or making them leave. However, our results do not point to any significant decrease in users’ wishes to continue using the site or recommend it to friends after being faced with a website’s requests to participate. Our experiments also suggest that when presenting multiple requests to participate, a website should issue these requests starting with small requests and culminating in requests that require more effort on the part of the user. We found that offering the same encouragement but in the “wrong” order may backfire and lead users to like the website less. Therefore, it could be wise to draw users in gradually, instead of suggesting that they invest high levels of effort from the start. One means of doing so might be to observe a user’s activity on the site and slowly prompt him or her to “move up” the ladder. For example, after a user has consumed content, he or she can be asked to tag it. After tagging a content item, the user might be prompted to post a comment about it, and so on. Such prompts might help increase the percentage of users who reach high levels of participation.

Thus, the final step to seeing returns on your investment in social features is to thoughtfully and carefully “nudge” your users up the ladder. Website owners should not hesitate to actively encourage user participation, as long as they don’t ask for too much, too soon — but instead help to support users’ gradual climb up the ladder of participation.

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Finding the Right Role for Social Media in Innovation

Many companies aren’t getting much benefit from incorporating social media into their new product or service development processes. One key to changing that is picking the best approach for your company.

BY DEBORAH L. ROBERTS AND FRANK T. PILLER

SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS STORIES have become widely shared narratives, highlighting the impact social media can have on companies’ fortunes. For example, Burberry Group plc, the London-based luxury fashion brand, relies heavily on social media to reach customers and fans. As far back as 2011, Burberry was spending more than 60% of its marketing budget on digital media. Increasingly, companies are attempting to navigate the social media landscape and use social media as a business tool to enhance performance. This is reflected in reports of increased spending on social media initiatives and the establishment by some organizations of dedicated social media functions. Despite this, there is a significant opportunity that isn’t being tapped: using social media to support innovation and new product development.

Consultants and academics alike have been touting social media as a resource for innovation and new product development — a vehicle for developing customer insights, accessing knowledge, cocreating ideas and concepts with users, and supporting new product launches. Yet our research suggests that, despite the promise, the expected positive results are frequently not realized in practice. To begin with, the use of social media by companies for new product development lags far behind social media use by the general public. Although some companies have been able to use social media to develop new insights that lead to successful new products, many others simply do not know how to utilize social media for innovation. What’s more, some companies have seen their innovation performance negatively affected. For instance, some get distracted by the diversity of input from social media; their traditional filters for screening data, like representativeness or consumer...
NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT: USING SOCIAL MEDIA

demographics, no longer work. Others waste resources by not validating the source and reliability of information; they mistakenly consider the information from social media to be just as valid as information from traditional online databases.

Nevertheless, we believe that social media provides a game-changing opportunity for companies that learn how to exploit it. But taking advantage of the opportunity requires more than having a Facebook presence with a loyal base of “friends” who say they “like” you. In order to use social media for innovation, organizations need clear strategies and objectives.

Several studies have examined how social media can be used for wider business purposes, especially communication, and as a driver of internal interaction and knowledge management within companies. In these realms, social media seems to have become an established part of the corporate tool kit. Our research indicates that acceptance of social media for innovation has been less widespread. Fewer than 50% of companies surveyed use social media during the new product development process. In the development stage, the use of social media to improve the new product development process was also found to be low. Moreover, the use of social media tools can create unexpected challenges for managers. A study of northern European companies found that, for some managers, social media contributed to “info-glut” and made it difficult for managers to know which voices to listen to. In other words, there is a danger of listening to the wrong audience. (See “About the Research.”)

We recently studied the social media practices of large global companies as they relate to new product development, using data from the Product Development Management Association’s 2012 Comparative Performance Assessment Study. The data showed that 82% of the surveyed companies said that they have used social media for new product development. However, only 14.7% of the respondents said they used social media in at least 50% of their projects. Despite the hyperbole surrounding popular social networks, the findings showed that most companies actually use tools such as user forums and blogs much more frequently than sites such as Twitter and Pinterest.

Broadly speaking, we found that for many companies, the results of using social media for new product development fell short of expectations. Although social media did tend to help companies generate customer insights, companies that jumped on the social media bandwagon and invested in social media initiatives without a clear strategy, the right skills, or knowledge frequently did not achieve the results they were looking for. Those that utilized social media sources exclusively to search for technical information saw no improvements in new product development performance; in fact, the effect on performance for these companies was negative (due to information overload and the complexity of processing such information). The companies that benefited the most from using social media for new product development were those that used social media in every stage of the development process; they built organizational processes and structures to support new product development activity.

Before embarking on social media initiatives for new product development, managers need to develop a strategy and be sure they have the right processes and people in place to be successful. They need to figure out if their goal is to understand the latest trends in their marketplace and obtain customer insights, to cocreate with customers to develop new ideas and concepts, or to support the launch of their new products and use social media to create awareness and positive word of mouth among users. To illustrate the various approaches, we use the analogy of summer camp, a setting where children can explore and learn from everything they do. Like parents who aspire to find the right camp environment for their children, companies must consider their social media needs and strategies with care and intelligence. Companies that lack a vision of what they want to achieve by incorporating social media into their new product development process won’t be able to reap the potential rewards.

For the purpose of illustration, we describe three different “camps”: Camp Explore, Camp Cocreate, and Camp Communicate. Each camp offers a distinctive approach to thinking about the different phases of the innovation process and delivers an important skill set required to leverage social media for innovation. To realize the potential of social media for new product development, product developers must engage in three interrelated activities: (1) they need to listen to and learn from user-generated
content; (2) they need to engage and facilitate dialogue with customer innovators; and (3) they need to find an audience of early adopters to create excitement for new products and collect feedback for their improvement. The three activities are not sequential but overlapping. Although listening and learning are important in the early stages of new product development, companies can use the ideas generated during the early stages to cocreate with customers later on. In addition, rather than simply scanning a few social media sites or looking for insights in Twitter feeds, companies need to pursue an integrated social media strategy that pulls together a wide range of different skills, capabilities, tools, and infrastructures.

Generating Customer Insights
When most people think about social media, they think primarily about well-known platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In practice, however, there are many different types of social media, and it is often the lesser-known platforms, such as special user forums or expert blogs, that provide especially valuable information for innovation. For example, for companies innovating in the agricultural products market, there are specialized channels such as the British Farming Forum and the Pig Forum that provide a steady stream of information on topics related to breeding, feeding, and selling livestock. Moreover, there are many different types of users, ranging from active contributors and lead users to passive users (widely known as “lurkers”). To tap the potential of social media, innovators have to determine which skills and competencies they need to be effective in different stages of the new product development process. In the early stages, strong skills in market research and data analytics are critical, whereas later on, the most essential skills are the ability to communicate with different types of potential buyers and the ability to understand and manage the impact of both positive and negative word of mouth.

Typically, obtaining data for new product development has been time-consuming and labor-intensive. However, the data and business intelligence made possible through social media have the potential to transform this area, providing information about trends in the marketplace, intelligence about competitors’ products, and feedback on early concepts rapidly and at very low cost. For instance, bloggers share their ideas and opinions about almost anything with anyone prepared to listen, providing a wealth of information. Facebook and Twitter have facilitated an explosion in self-reporting among users of novel products and services, providing innovators with a huge repository of data. Tools that detect sentiments on products and brands are widely available. The data are both structured and unstructured and may be composed of mixed-media formats that include text, images, and social network information, thereby increasing their diversity and richness. The global scale and speed of information gathering in real time is extremely valuable, speeding up the process and reducing the time to market, while also providing access to unobvious information beyond the traditional search scope of the company.

Consider Nivea, the German personal care brand owned by Beiersdorf AG. The Hamburg-based company is a worldwide leader in research on skin and body care. Yet when Nivea broadened its new product development processes beyond traditional market research techniques such as concept tests and focus groups, it saw significant benefits. For example, by analyzing user-generated content about its deodorants on Twitter, Facebook, and user forums, the company’s development team got unbiased views about problems users were having with the products.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH
Our research is based on two original studies that examined the use of social media tools and sources within the new product development process of larger samples of companies. In the first, we studied how a sample of 209 northern European companies used social media for new product development. Our second study utilized the 2012 Global Comparative Performance Assessment Study data set of the Product Development and Management Association (PDMA), the largest professional organization in the new product development field. This study benchmarks the practices of 453 companies (198 from North America, 149 from Asia, and 106 from Europe). Every few years, PDMA surveys hundreds of innovation professionals about best practices and success factors for innovation management, and the latest survey also asked about the use of social media for innovation. This data showed positive effects for companies that utilized social media in all stages of the innovation process, but it found that companies should have dedicated structures and an innovation culture to capture the benefits. In addition, our thinking about how social media can enhance innovation has been advanced by research and consulting projects with companies in Europe and the United States, in which we help our partners understand which organizational processes, structures, and cultures enable them to interact deeply with their customers via social media, which website design factors enable these conversations; and how companies can tap into unknown and unconventional sources of user-generated content using social media analysis.
Traditionally, product development in antiperspirants had focused on the length of protection, skin irritations, and scent. But social media users weren’t concerned about those features at all — only about stains on their clothes caused by the deodorants’ residues. The comments led to the formulation of Nivea Invisible for Black & White, the most successful new product launch in the company’s history.

**Camp Explore**

If a company’s objective is to identify market trends and to generate customer insights, the right program may be Camp Explore, where activities are designed to extend the breadth and depth of how organizations search for innovations. Here, people will learn to read the signals from large, diverse, disconnected, and unstructured pools of data generated by users. In addition, they will learn to analyze and convert blog posts, tweets, and user-generated content into valuable insights for new products. Specifically, they will need to acquire skills in computational techniques to unveil trends and patterns within and between the various data sets. Activities will encompass data analytics, machine learning, sentiment and textual analysis, data screening, evaluation, and data privacy. This camp offers experience in learning what can be automated, what requires the human touch, and how to interpret and make judgments about the data. Managers will have opportunities to develop the skills of both a social and a data scientist, so they can assimilate, combine, and utilize data from many different sources. The goal is to sharpen their business acumen and teach them how to communicate the findings to those involved in innovation projects.

**Camp Cocreate**

Companies that know they want to actively engage and involve customers in their innovation process should consider attending Camp Cocreate. The activities here are geared toward developing collaborative skills and facilitating interaction with users to involve them in the development of new products or services. Managers will learn how to work with customers and to cocreate value with them in the new product development process. They will learn how to engage, identify, and select the right participants and develop the right incentives to encourage their participation. Creativity is both an input and an output of the cocreation process. Managers will also develop skills in relationship building and gain experience in the art of conversation and dialogue, a key aspect of collaboration. Managers will learn how to become better facilitators and community managers. They will learn to develop and select ideas and product concepts that are suited to both target and nontarget market customers.

Earlier research has shown that ideas for new product development are often inspired by outliers or people from nontarget markets, so obtaining rich input from unconventional users can be an important factor to enhance the creative process. In this environment, managers can learn to use social media sites to post their own ideas as well as to explore what others are doing and vote on their favorite concepts. Instead of relying on one designer or developer, there’s the opportunity to get dozens or even thousands of motivated users to engage with a task. To attract diverse input, some companies are adding apps to their Facebook pages; others are setting up their own ideation communities, which they either host themselves or through intermediaries such as Boston-based C Space or Munich-based Hyve Group, which maintain and manage dedicated cocreation communities. Relationships between companies and online communities don’t just happen — they must be monitored and managed on an ongoing basis. Traditionally, managers set their own deadlines and work at a pace set by the company rather than by external entities. At Camp Cocreate, however, the party doesn’t stop.

One good reason to consider Camp Cocreate is that several studies have supported the positive effects of collaborating with diverse participants in determining new product performance. For instance, when companies cocreate with customers, their products have been found to be more innovative and better suited to the market, thus making them more attractive to customers and enhancing profits. Recent research has also found that good ideas and designs can come from both expert industrial users and end consumers. Social media presents new opportunities for collaboration and idea generation, not just with selected users but also with a much larger network of users. Users and
the communities that form around social media platforms can be sources of inspiration for new product development and sources of creativity in their own right. Social media allows individuals and communities to share, cocreate, discuss, and modify company- and user-generated content.\textsuperscript{12}

In our own research, we have explored how to cocreate innovation using social media. A project with Ford Motor Co., for example, was aimed at creating innovative vehicle interior solutions for senior drivers, using a cocreation app on Ford’s Facebook page. Although most of the ideas were aligned with concepts from Ford’s own research and development team, some of the insights came directly from the users. In interviews, seniors told us that they appreciated the convenience and “flow” of using Facebook for exchanging ideas with other users.

Dell Inc.’s experience with IdeaStorm offers another example of a company using cocreation for innovation. Its original site, established in 2007, was an online suggestion box in which Dell customers could suggest ways the company could improve products, features, or support; at the time, this was a bold move.\textsuperscript{13} In 2012, Dell added more advanced technology to allow greater collaboration and interaction with users. In a “Storm Session,” company representatives engage users in real-time dialogue about a specific issue. IdeaStorm has served Dell well, both in terms of customer engagement and as a source for innovative ideas: More than 500 submitted ideas have been implemented.

### Camp Communicate

Customer expectations have risen dramatically over the last decade, and companies often face the challenge of launching new products into crowded markets. Simply being innovative isn’t sufficient; new products also need to be introduced in compelling ways. As social media becomes an ever more integral part of people’s work and social lives, people have come to expect communication about products and brands via social media channels. In the past, information about new products was broadcasted to target markets in a linear fashion via paid advertising on television and radio and in newspapers. Social media, by contrast, consists of direct interactions with friends, peers, remote contacts, and the company developing the new product. Attaining positive affirmations (such as “likes” on Facebook or Twitter) can attract attention, which can stimulate interest in the new product launch. This, in turn, can lead to early product acceptance and subsequent demand. Social network sites can provide innovative and

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**CUSTOMIZING YOUR SOCIAL STRATEGY TO THE PLATFORM**

Despite the potential benefits of engaging with users of social media and the communities that form around them, a number of studies show that companies are largely failing to realize benefits for innovation, irrespective of their social media presence or activity. In a recent study of 450 small- to medium-size companies in North America and Europe, we found that most (78%) use social media for marketing activities, and almost 40% of companies reported that Facebook was the most important online platform for their innovation activities. However, we found that what was important to the innovation process was not use itself but the approach taken. Companies that seek to use their social media capabilities to inform their innovation efforts should keep the following recommendations in mind:

**Emphasize the social.** The steep growth in popularity of social media is driven by people’s innate human need for connection, communication, community, and social validation. People come together in these communities to debate issues, make new friends, and interact with family, friends, and business associates across the globe. Our research found that companies that recognized the importance of the “social” and helped to create an environment conducive to socializing — in other words, one that helped people to create or enhance relationships — benefited through people’s subsequent engagement with the company’s online innovation activities.

**Customize your approach to each platform.** To obtain valuable new product development insights from social media platforms, companies need to take a unique approach to each platform, since people use different social media platforms for different purposes. For instance, Facebook is predominantly a platform to enhance interpersonal relationships, while LinkedIn is primarily a vehicle for professional networking. Because Facebook is a more personal platform, people using it are more likely to be willing to share knowledge and ideas about products, brands, their own future needs, and insights on the competition. Their inhibitions are lower, and this can lead to more self-disclosure.

Professional platforms like LinkedIn, on the other hand, should be approached with a distinctly different tactic. On LinkedIn, companies can be more direct with individuals and groups when inquiring about products and features. For example, companies may have specific technology and product groups where specific design needs can be solicited from groups of engineers. Such community groups of specialized expert users can share ideas about new products or services and new markets — ideas that can be readily generated and shared without participants having to give away too much proprietary or personal information.

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interactive means of communicating with customers and trigger interest in a new product.

Nestlé SA, for example, made good use of social media early in 2015 with the launch of its new Kit Kat “Celebrate the Breakers’ Break” campaign to promote its Kit Kat chocolate bar. In addition to utilizing Twitter and YouTube, Nestlé had promotional hashtags molded directly into the chocolate of the Kit Kat bars, thus adding novelty and visibility to an extremely competitive market sector.

If the company’s goal is to generate awareness and publicize the launch of new products, learning how to design and develop innovative product launch campaigns using social media needs to be a core activity. Activities at Camp Communicate will help managers take on this final and often costly stage of new product development. Camp Communicate emphasizes marketing communication skills: how to tell a story that resonates with the target market and, specifically, how to do this via Twitter or other easy-to-consume formats for mobile users. It trains managers in how to identify and connect with opinion leaders and early adopters in a way that resonates with their lifestyle (which may be dramatically different from interacting with conventional trade journalists or public relations agents). At Camp Communicate, managers learn that communication is multidirectional — a steady flow of arguments, comments, and modifications. They also learn that messages can be hijacked and subverted, and that they are not — and can’t be — in full control of communications. One important skill is learning how to manage the risks associated with negative word of mouth and how to use positive word of mouth to the company’s advantage.

A Dedicated Strategy

As we saw in the late 1990s with the dot-com boom, many companies make the mistake of following the herd. In the case of social media, they embrace whatever social media sites and strategies are in vogue without developing a coherent strategy for tying their social media activity to new product development. Having a Facebook page, creating a brand community, or having a social media page dedicated to a new product launch will not, on its own, improve a company’s innovation performance. Although we didn’t ask about it directly, many of the companies we surveyed didn’t seem to recognize the differences and functionalities of different social media platforms and media sources. However, companies need to recognize that there isn’t one social medium — but numerous different platforms and networks. For example, communicating with Facebook fans may be a great way to rally the support of opinion leaders and brand fans when launching a new product. But if a company is looking for latent insights from lead users, it might be better off tapping into a user forum in a related area, where participants are discussing relevant problems in detail.

As we have noted, social media use does not automatically lead to improved performance in new product development. To achieve that, companies must develop a dedicated strategy that links social media to product development and to their corporate objectives. Managers need to question what they are trying to achieve. Are they seeking insights to develop novel concept ideas? Are they searching for technical information to enhance the company’s technical problem-solving capabilities? Or do they want to enhance creativity by reaching out to users and customers and cocreating new ideas and concepts with them?

Social media can provide input for answering these types of questions. Rather than just eavesdropping on existing user content, many companies will want to engage with users in greater depth. To do so, product developers need to learn how to engage users and how to maintain a continuous conversation with them. This requires understanding the different
types of social media and how they can be used in different ways.

To the extent that the effectiveness of social media for new product development is influenced by so many different skills and competences tied to different functional areas, departments, and individuals, it’s critical that top leadership play an active role by encouraging cooperation and idea sharing among the various players. In some organizations, there may be the need for a “social media innovation leader” whose job is to align the different strategies and tools and help define a coherent social media strategy for new product development. The job would not only be to manage relationships with users and contributors (vital as this is) but also to manage the relationships among the various colleagues in the company’s different social media camps.

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4. Social media can enhance innovation in a company in two ways. First, it is a source of unconventional knowledge and information from current customers, noncustomers, external experts, and also internal colleagues. Using social media to tap into these sources increases the scale and scope of search — a core strategy to increase innovation performance. Second, social media is a way to communicate innovation internally and to facilitate change and organizational innovation within a company. While the latter is crucial for the company’s long-term survival, we focus on the former in this article.


6. D.L. Roberts and M. Candi, “Leveraging Social Network Sites in New Product Development: Opportunity or Hype?,” Journal of Product Innovation Management 31, no. S1 (December 2014): 105-117; also see Kane et al., “Moving Beyond Marketing.” Companies that are more mature in using social media for marketing and communications are also more actively using social media for innovation. In contrast, 71% of those companies that consider themselves as being in the early stage of adopting social media are using it not at all or only very rarely for new product development. Data were calculated using the MIT Sloan Management Review tool kit for Kane et al., “Moving Beyond Marketing”; see “2014 Social Business Interactive Tool,” 2014, http://sloanreview.mit.edu.


8. The PDMA Comparative Performance Assessment Study is a broad international benchmarking survey conducted by the Product Development Management Association. For more information on this survey, see S.K. Markham and H. Lee, “Product Development and Management Association’s 2012 Comparative Performance Assessment Study,” Journal of Product Innovation Management 30, no. 3 (May 2013): 408-429.


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Customizing Your Social Strategy to the Platform
TUCKER J. MARION, DEBORAH ROBERTS, MARINA CANDI, AND GLORIA BARCZAK

Companies that want to obtain new product development insights from social media should customize their approach to each platform.

Despite the potential benefits of engaging with users of social media and the communities that form around them, a number of studies show that companies are largely failing to realize benefits for innovation, irrespective of their social media presence or activity.

In a recent study of 450 small- to medium-size companies in North America and Europe, we found that most (78%) use social media for marketing activities, and almost 40% of companies reported that Facebook was the most important online platform for their innovation activities.

However, we found that what was important to the innovation process was not use itself but the approach taken. Companies that seek to use their social media capabilities to inform their innovation efforts should keep the following recommendations in mind:

**Emphasize the social.**

The steep growth in popularity of social media is driven by people’s innate human need for connection, communication, community, and social validation. People come together in these communities to debate issues, make new friends, and interact with family, friends, and business associates across the globe. Our research found that companies that recognized the importance of the “social” and helped to create an environment conducive to socializing — in other words, one that helped people to create or enhance relationships — benefited through people’s subsequent engagement with the company’s online innovation activities.

**Customize your approach to each platform.**

To obtain valuable new product development insights from social media platforms, companies need to take a unique approach to each platform, since people use different social media platforms for different purposes. For instance, Facebook is predominantly a platform to enhance interpersonal relationships, while LinkedIn is
primarily a vehicle for professional networking. Because Facebook is a more personal platform, people using it are more likely to be willing to share knowledge and ideas about products, brands, their own future needs, and insights on the competition. Their inhibitions are lower, and this can lead to more self-disclosure.

Professional platforms like LinkedIn, on the other hand, should be approached with a distinctly different tactic. On LinkedIn, companies can be more direct with individuals and groups when inquiring about products and features. For example, companies may have specific technology and product groups where specific design needs can be solicited from groups of engineers. Such community groups of specialized expert users can share ideas about new products or services and new markets — ideas that can be readily generated and shared without participants having to give away too much proprietary or personal information.

*This article originally appeared as a sidebar to the article “Finding the Right Role for Social Media in Innovation.”*

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How to Avoid a Social Media Fiasco

GERALD C. KANE

A panel at the 2014 South by Southwest festival highlighted five ways to avoid a social media crisis.

A panel at the 2014 South by Southwest festival highlighted five ways to avoid a social media crisis.

Among the most valuable sessions I attended at last month’s South by Southwest (SXSW) conference in Austin, Texas, was one entitled “Tomorrow Is Another Day: Surviving A Social Media Crisis.”

The session threw cold water on anyone who might believe that social media crises are uncommon things that happen only to other companies. A slideshow of high profile fiascoes offered a compelling view of just how commonplace these events have become.

Here are a few key takeaways I took from the panel for how to keep a company from being the next entry on the steady parade of social media disasters:

Do not try to capitalize on catastrophic events. The number of brands that get themselves into trouble by attempting to capitalize on trending and important topics in inappropriate ways was an eye-opener. Memorials for 9/11, Superstorm Sandy, Pearl Harbor Day and the Boston Marathon bombing are only a few that were mentioned. Just because a topic is trending does not mean it’s necessarily a good opportunity to promote a brand. Companies can express solidarity or sympathy in appropriate ways, but they need to think twice before knee-jerk efforts at pushing their products in similar situations.

Plan ahead for social media fiascos. Just as companies develop a plan for other emergencies — such as fires, earthquakes and other natural disasters — so a company should develop a plan for handling social media emergencies. When these crises occur, they often develop too quickly to respond effectively unless leaders have already thought through how they will respond. A well-considered response may be the best approach to heading...
off a social media crisis before it gets out of control. This includes being aware of situations that have the potential to lead to a crisis, such as making sure you have control of the company’s social media accounts before you announce employee layoffs.

Social media crisis plans may have several important elements. One is to ensure that a company identify a senior decision maker who is empowered to act in such a crisis. Other key decision makers also need to be in place to authorize deviations from the plan to account for a rapidly changing environment. The plan should have the mobile or home telephone numbers where key decision makers can be reached. It may be necessary to wake someone up to deal with a crisis; morning may be too late.

Train employees to use social media in the context of your business. As the old saying goes, an ounce of prevention may equal a pound of cure. In a 2009 piece for Harvard Business Review, my co-authors and I encouraged companies to develop social media policies and guidelines for employees. The American Red Cross takes this a step further today, offering social media training for all its employees. Managers cannot assume that even active social media users know how to use social media appropriately in a business context (see my MIT Sloan Management Review blog post “Strategic vs. Procedural Approaches to Social Media” for more).

Recognize that the world is eagerly waiting for you to make a mistake. Neal Mann of the Wall Street Journal admitted that journalists are on the lookout to identify and exploit social media gaffes by companies. It makes compelling news to watch a company try to manage a social media backlash, particularly if they’re doing it badly. Customers are now empowered to respond on social media, adding their own fuel to the crisis.

Adopting conservative social media behavior to pre-empt a crisis may simply raise the stakes when a mistake is made. The SXSW panelists agreed that companies with strong and engaging social media presences are given greater leeway when minor gaffes are made.

Remember that fiascoes can also present opportunities. The panel highlighted several instances where brands benefitted following a social media fiasco. Burger King, for instance, ended up with greater attention to its social media presence after it had been hijacked by unidentified hackers. The American Red Cross strengthened its online reputation by an effective and humorous response to its own social media crisis.

Effectively handling a social media crisis can prove to benefit a brand. People who find a company’s social media presence just because of the fiasco can be converted and made more aware of a company’s strengths. (Of course, the benefits of social media fiascoes have led some companies to engineer their own social media fiascoes in an attempt to leverage the upsides. I suspect this approach is akin to playing with fire.)

Social media represents a double-edged sword for companies, constituting both an opportunity and a threat. Thinking through and preparing for possible social media crises will help mitigate damage from an inevitable future social media crisis, and potentially turn it to a company’s advantage.
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