

# Put Social Media To Work For You

It wasn't too long ago when marketing was about talking to customers, and corporations got their message across through repetition, repetition, repetition. But over the last couple years, the rise of Web 2.0 tools and social media has fundamentally changed the relationship between corporations and their customers. Consumers are now also producers, writing blogs and creating user-generated videos; they connect with each other through social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. And now, they want to connect with companies too.

According to the 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study, almost 60% of Americans interact with companies on a social media site. Of those, 93% believe a company should have a presence in social media, and 85% believe a company should not only be present, but also interact with its consumers via social media.<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that your company should now create a page on Facebook, start a CEO blog, post videos on YouTube and maybe even create an internal wiki? Well, it depends.

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## What's Social about Social Media?

While some argue that all media is social to a certain extent, "social media" was coined to refer specifically to "a shift in how people discover, read and share news and information and content. It's a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologue (one to many) into dialogue (many to

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Larrumbide, Cone Finds That Americans Expect Companies to Have a Presence in Social Media, September 25, 2008, <http://www.coneinc.com/content1182>.

many).”<sup>2</sup> Social media can be used to create or aggregate content, and to engage and collaborate with consumers. Blogs, podcasts, RSS, widgets, social networking sites, wikis, social news sites, and information aggregators are all examples of social media.

It is easy for companies to write social media off as another technology-driven fad, here today and gone tomorrow. But according to Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff of Forrester Research, social media is “an important, irreversible, completely different way for people to relate to companies and to each other.”<sup>3</sup> They call this phenomenon the “groundswell.” There are different ways that companies can be part of the groundswell and factors that companies should consider before taking the plunge. In this white paper, we will explore these issues by first looking at some case studies.

## Case Study I: Chicago Public Schools Alumni

There are more than 3 million living Chicago Public School (CPS) alumni. However, for some of them, the school they went to no longer exists. For others, they feel loyalty to their school but not necessarily to CPS. As such, CPSalumni.org set out to find a way to reconnect alumni with each other, and also back to CPS.

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They believed that building relationships was the first step in getting alumni to give back, so their objective was not to compete with other alumni associations, but to complement them — to be “conversation architects.”<sup>4</sup>

CPSalumni.org, one of Duo Consulting’s clients, achieved this goal in a number of ways. Every school in CPS history had a unique website featuring: Shared Stories, where alumni could share memories and upload photos; an Alumni News section for alumni to post information about events and reunions; and an Honor Roll to recognize distinguished alumni and

their achievements. With this set-up, there was the potential for each school’s site to be very different, depending on the level of involvement of the alumni themselves. In many cases, CPSalumni.org posted what they had and the alumni actively amended and updated the information.

As can be seen, the CPS Alumni website is not a social networking or social media site per se. Instead, they clearly identified their target audience and objectives, and then used the tools that were most appropriate to achieve their business goals. “The nice thing about this format is that we don’t have to have all the answers. The site isn’t static – it has the possibility to evolve. With these social technologies, we had

2 Brian Solis, “The Definition of Social Media,” WebProNews, June 29, 2007, <http://www.webpronews.com/blogtalk/2007/06/29/the-definition-of-social-media>.

3 Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies (Harvard Business Press, 2008), 10.

4 David Armano, “It’s the Conversation Economy, Stupid,” BusinessWeek, April 9, 2007, [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/apr2007/id20070409\\_372598.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/apr2007/id20070409_372598.htm).

the opportunity to create a space, invite people in, and ask them to help define it,” said Bradley Harbaugh, editor of CPSalumni.org.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the technology provides platforms that facilitate conversation, but it is the conversation that leads to relationships, and relationships that lead to affinity.<sup>6</sup>

So far, response has been good. The site had 3,600 registered users in the first 3 months after its launch and 50-60 registrations per week ever since. Their goal is to have 15,000 registered users by June 2009, and to eventually connect alumni with current CPS students, enabling interaction within this living network of alumni, teachers, students and other related people.<sup>7</sup>

## Case Study II: Ernst & Young

If you are like me, your first reaction might have been: what does an accounting firm have to do with social media? Believe it or not, Ernst & Young has a page on Facebook that has 20,079 fans.<sup>8</sup> The page contains information about their latest conferences, recruiting events and internships, videos, photos, a discussion board, public relations material, and of course, the Facebook wall where users post all sorts of questions and get answers from the company.

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It turns out that Ernst & Young has to hire 3,500 fresh college graduates every year in order to keep up with its clients' needs.<sup>9</sup> Since Facebook has an 85% market share of 4-year U.S. universities,<sup>10</sup> Ernst & Young decided to go where their target audience resided. By using Facebook, the company was not only able to create awareness, but it was also able to engage in a conversation with college students, talking with them instead of at them. Moreover, Ernst & Young created a space where students with a similar interest in working at the company are able to interact with each other too. Like CPSalumni.org, Ernst & Young used the appropriate tool to connect with its target audience and became a “conversation architect.”

## Case Study III: Barack Obama

You name it, Barack Obama's new media team has probably done it: blog, podcasts, widgets, viral videos, social networking sites, Twitter, the works. Although it may seem like the Obama campaign just made use of whatever social media it could get its hands on, the use of these technologies was actually pretty strategic.

5 Interview with Bradley Harbaugh, editor of CPSalumni.org, August 7, 2008.

6 David Armano, “It's the Conversation Economy, Stupid.”

7 Interview with Bradley Harbaugh.

8 Ernst & Young Careers, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ernst-Young-Careers/11305051470?sid=fd5d4b97848ca6609b5d1d8b54323c40>, accessed October 24, 2008.

9 Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, Groundswell, 104.

10 Facebook Statistics, <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, accessed October 24, 2008.

For example, a donation widget can be found practically everywhere that Obama has an online presence, enabling the campaign to raise millions of small donations and setting a record in American politics by “garnering \$55 million in donations in a single month.”<sup>11</sup> Official and user-generated videos are posted on YouTube to influence and inspire. In a world where attention and time are scarce, it says a lot that a music video set to an Obama speech has been viewed more than 10 million times.<sup>12</sup> Also, the various social networking sites that Barack Obama is on gives the campaign instant access to a vast network of volunteers who can be assigned appropriate tasks and activated at moment’s notice.

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This is a case of empowerment through social media. “The campaign... became much more of a media operation than simply a presidential campaign, because they recognized that by putting their message out on these various platforms, their supporters would spread it for them,” said Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum.<sup>13</sup> The Obama campaign had a clear objective and used social media to energize people, converting them into Barack Obama’s brand evangelists.

## How to Use Social Media

The case studies highlighted in this white paper illustrate the breadth of social media’s reach and some of the different ways that social media can be used to meet business goals. Companies can use social media to listen, to respond, to influence and to collaborate – each corresponding to a different level of involvement for the company.

Social media is an extremely useful tool for conducting market research, monitoring your brand, and getting a feel for what consumers are saying about your company – in other words, listening. Companies can stick their feelers out and listen to the groundswell without necessarily being a part of it. For some companies though, the natural next step is to respond, to engage in conversations with consumers instead of talking at them.

Companies can also use social media to influence or energize their customers. Research conducted by Edelman shows that people trust their peers more than they trust traditional authorities.<sup>14</sup> What this means for corporations is that having brand evangelists in the social media space will often be more effective than writing press releases. Finally, the highest level of involvement for a company is to collaborate with consumers, tapping into the wisdom of the crowd to harvest ideas and solve problems.

11 David Talbot, “How Obama Really Did It,” Technology Review, MIT, September/October 2008, <http://www.technologyreview.com/web/21222/?a=f>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Derek Creevey, “Trust Shifting From Traditional Authorities To Peers,” Edelman Trust Barometer 2005, January 24, 2005, <http://www.edelman.com/news/ShowOne.asp?ID=57>.

## Before Getting Started

All that said, blindly pursuing “cool” technology is not the smartest course for any company. Before simply employing social media for the sake of it, companies should make use of Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff’s POST method to develop their plan of attack.

POST refers to people, objectives, strategy and technology.<sup>15</sup> Companies need to first identify who their target audience is and what they are ready for. Then, the company needs to reflect on what its goals are (e.g. listening, collaborating, etc.). Next comes the strategy piece, the plan of action. Li and Bernoff warn that you “need to prepare and get buy-in from people within your company who may be threatened by changes in customer relationships.”<sup>16</sup> The last step is to look at the technology and figure out what tools to employ – given the target audience, objectives and strategy. It is noteworthy that technology comes last in this process – letting the latest technology determine the direction of your company’s marketing efforts is a mistake you should avoid.

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## Social Media Is Not For Everyone

Just because your competitors or companies in other industries are using social media doesn’t mean that it will be your panacea. Being in the social media space requires internal buy-in and commitment from the company to follow through. It also requires authenticity – social media strategies should be integrated into the corporate culture and not kept in a silo. If your company’s values do not align with those of social media, it is probably not the right time to take the plunge. What is worse than not having a presence in social media is having a half-hearted presence. Social media should be seen as a long-term investment in partnering with your consumers to co-create value.

Contact Duo Consulting if you have any questions about the corporate use of social media.

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<sup>15</sup> Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, Groundswell, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 68.