Harnessing the Media Revolution
to Engage the Youth Market

by Jacquie Goetz and Christopher Barger

Abstract

Few audiences are more difficult to reach than members of
the youth market who have grown increasingly skeptical of
traditional media and who have come to rely on new media
outlets for information gathering and sharing. This article
will discuss the still emerging realm of social media and
illustrate how it can be used to engage the youth market.
Specifically, this article will examine two innovative marketing
communication programs executed by Weber Shandwick
Worldwide on behalf of General Motors Corp. to engage and
communicate with the youth market through the use of
social media.

At 80 million strong, the baby
boomers are outnumbered
only by their offspring at 85 mil-
lion (Tapscott, 1999). Generation
Y (Gen Y) is the moniker by which
these 5- to 25-year-olds have come
to be known. Collectively Gen Y
has more spending power at an
earlier age than any of its gener-
atonal predecessors. Known also
as the Echo Boom generation, Mil-
leennials, and the Net generation,
members of Gen Y have never ex-
perienced life without the comfort
of computers.
They grew up during a time of
dramatic technology change and
are getting their messages and me-
dia from a larger number of sources
than ever before. They are on the
go. They do what they want. They
take risks. They expect technology
and services to keep up with them,
not the other way around.
On average, Gen Yers spend
more than 70 hours a week us-
ing electronic media on their
 cell phones, iPods, BlackBerries,
laptops, or similar devices (IPG
Emerging Media Lab, 2007). Gen
Yers are the pioneers of Facebook,
MySpace and YouTube. They are
the first generation to have grown
up with the Internet and consider
downloading music, using instant
messaging technology and dial-
ing up their friends on their cell phones to be the norm.

In their lifetime, they have seen the introduction and proliferation of MP3 files and players, text messaging and digital cameras, the wide acceptance of Google as a verb, and the introduction of Web 2.0, which popularized the online world of sharing and collaborating via sites like MySpace and Facebook. Ninety-seven percent of Gen Yers own a computer. Ninety-four percent own a cell phone. Thirty-four percent use Web sites as their primary source of news. Twenty-eight percent have a blog, and 44 percent read blogs. Seventy-five percent of students have a Facebook account, and 90 percent of college students have a MySpace account (Junco, 2007).

In short, Gen Y truly is the wired generation. Considering the upbringing and current technology-based habits of this huge segment of the population, corporations would be remiss if they did not consider and, where appropriate, include social media and other Web-based interactions in their integrated marketing communications mix.

A key tenet of integrated marketing communications espouses the merits of a consumer-centric approach. How this translates to reaching young consumers is quite simple: speak their language. Go where they already are and tell them your organization’s story in a compelling and relevant way. Enter social media.

Social media, or social networking, focuses on the building of online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities. Social networks provide ways for users to interact, chat, share photos and video, network, keep in touch and meet others. It’s the sum total of people who create content online (all 48 million of them) and the people who interact with it or one another (McConnell, 2006). Social networks connect people for little to no cost and are not difficult to navigate.

Social media has risen so much in popularity that Time magazine’s 2006 “Person of the Year” was you—and me—and all of us actually. That’s because social media gives individuals a platform, a voice and free reign to express themselves to the world. And the trend continues to grow: Technorati tracks 104.5 million blogs, MySpace has 120 million users and Google’s acquisition of YouTube cost $1.65 billion (Mattson, 2006). And it’s not only individuals, but also corporations, that are getting into the game.

An Icon Joins the Conversation

Early in 2006, Chevrolet began to explore creative and compelling ways to support the launch of the 2007 Aveo sedan. The subcompact Aveo is appealing to college students because of its size, affordability, fuel economy and unique features such as its auxiliary input jack for connecting an MP3 player.

The growing popularity of social media did not escape the notice of public relations firm Weber Shandwick and Chevy Communications representatives as planning for the Aveo launch began. They paid particular attention to statistics for Facebook, a popular social networking site second only to MySpace in traffic volume. Facebook was originally developed for college and university students but has since been made available to the general public. Facebook’s name is a reference to the traditional paper “facebooks” containing student photos and information that colleges give to incoming students.

Facebook users create their own profiles on which they can post photos, personal information and interests. They can add other users as “friends” and then be able to view information on those users’ pages as well. Every time users up-

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date their pages with a new photo, video or note, their friends are notified of the update. Facebook currently has 25 million members, 85 percent of whom log in at least once a week, and 60 percent of whom log in daily. Equally noteworthy is their average length of visit – 19 minutes (Arrington, 2005).

Cognizant that college students were tuning in en masse to Facebook, Chevy decided to execute a campaign that would use the site to inform students of the Aveo’s compatibility with their lifestyle by enabling them to live large despite a strapped income. The Aveo could fit their friends and their gear for a weekend road trip but still conveniently fit into those tight parallel parking spots around campus. Its fuel economy would be kind on their piggy banks, and they could actually get an Aveo for less than $10,000.

The program was dubbed the Chevy Aveo Livin’ Large Campus Challenge, and was developed to convey these messages via the social networks college students were already using. It pitted teams of two students from seven nationwide universities against each other in a battle for online and text-message votes. The two-person teams lived inside a Chevy Aveo sedan for five days on cam-
pus to showcase the roomy interior of this subcompact vehicle and to demonstrate how they could live large inside it.

Web cams mounted inside each Aveo streamed continuous footage to the www.aveolivinlarge.com Web site, where visitors could check in on the teams all day. Each team kept continuous blogs and posted photos and daily videos from the car, which they could only leave to attend class and for periodic bio-breaks. At all other times, the contestants were required to be inside the car or outside but touching it.

They invited their professors to deliver lectures from inside the car. They hosted their campus’ marching band for a performance. They welcomed college a cappella groups to perform, and then shared the space in their vehicle with friends, classmates and, in a few instances, their college mascot.

Visitors to the Aveo Livin’ Large Web site could cast one vote a day online for their favorite team and another vote by texting in their team’s code. To alert students, administrators, community members and the world about the contest, Chevy Communications and Weber Shandwick representatives asked contestants to tap their large Facebook networks and use the Web site to lobby for votes, embed video from the day, share photos from their experience, and tell the world what it was like to eat, sleep and study inside a Chevy Aveo for almost a week.

Traditional PR and on-campus event-marketing tactics complemented the social networking being done by contestants on Facebook. The participating universities’ Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapters worked with the contestants to promote the challenge on campus and within their own online social networks. PRSSA students contacted local media and also spread the word to classmates and friends on campus.

When all was said and done, 169 universities were engaged via Facebook, and 13 Facebook groups were created with a cumulative total of 6,538 members. At the end of the week, University of Southern California’s two contestants each won a brand new Chevy Aveo as well as one for their university after almost 63,000 votes were cast for them. The program garnered 150 million online and 216 million traditional media impressions, covering the innovative nature of the campaign and its efforts to reach youth through Facebook.

“We were entirely transparent about who we were and what we were doing,” said Terry Rhadigan, Chevrolet Communications director. “Because of this and the fact that the student contestants themselves were the ones posting content to Facebook and adding more friends to their networks, we were welcomed within the Facebook community.”

GM Goes Social on YouTube

Not long after those 14 students exited their Chevy Aveos to resume life as usual, General Motors Corp. again forayed into the world of social media with the launch of its IGotShotgun pilot program.

IGotShotgun creates an intersection of cars, pop culture and entertainment, brought to life through video and social networking Web sites. IGotShotgun is a video entertainment and social networking program that takes people behind the scenes at GM-sponsored events, both big and small. The program recruits citizen journalists or “CJs” to ride “shotgun” at events where they interview celebrities, athletes and other event attendees on film. GM and Weber Shandwick spread the quickly collected video content
Content can be easily distributed and shared through online social networks and popular Web sites.

to a wide audience of young consumers who are avid followers of the pop culture scene and regular visitors to social networking sites such as YouTube. In doing so, GM has demonstrated that it is a part of what is hip and relevant, and is striving to change perceptions young people may have about its vehicles.

The explosion of video sharing online is due largely to the birth of YouTube on the social media scene in 2005. Approximately 100 million YouTube clips are viewed each day, and 65,000 new videos are uploaded every 24 hours. The site sees 20 million visitors per month, of which the majority are 12- to 17-year-olds (USA Today, 2006).

IGotShotgun’s access to events, celebrities and athletes makes for well-suited YouTube content. IGotShotgun has covered popular events like the 2007 Super Bowl, Nascar, the Tribeca and Cinevegas Film Festivals, the Grammys, the Indy 500, GM Style and GM Ten, Maxim’s Hot 100 party, the Baja 500, Rolling Stone’s 40th anniversary party, the Detroit Grand Prix and the ESPYs.

The resulting videos include unique, fun and sometimes irreverent interviews with buzz-makers on the pop culture scene. These interviews are set against a background that subtly showcases GM vehicles or GM branding. To date, IGotShotgun has featured interviews with such celebrities as actors Patrick Dempsey, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, Ray Romano, Jason Alexander, Don Cheadle, Kate Walsh, Edie Falco, and Kathy Griffin; musicians Beyonce Knowles, Matthew Good, the Pussycat Dolls, Slash, OK Go, Imogen Heap, and Dave Grohl; athletes Brady Quinn, Shawne Merriman, Reggie Bush, and Matt Leinart; and motor sport greats like Jeff Gordon, Dale Earnhardt Jr., and Milka Duno.

“GM vehicles are not the focal point of these videos,” said Len Marsico, staff director for the GM media bureau. “They’re in the background subtly demonstrating GM’s relevance in entertainment, design, sports and pop culture.”

Videos filmed for IGotShotgun are edited to between 30 seconds and one and a half minutes, and are tagged with important words (e.g. celebrity names, events, etc.) to make them more searchable. IGotShotgun videos are stamped with the program bug in the upper right corner, and the introductory and concluding frames include the IGotShotgun logo, Web site and tagline “Riding with GM.” These videos are often picked up by viewers from YouTube, one of the primary sites on which GM posts IGotShotgun content, and embedded elsewhere, so the IGotShotgun branding ensures that no matter where the videos end up, they will be tied back to GM.

Since the program’s launch in February 2006, IGotShotgun videos have been featured on YouTube five times, on Crackle (formerly known as Grouper) at least 30 times and on Stickam. Featured videos are selected by site editors to be showcased prominently on the Web site.

Still in a pilot phase, IGotShotgun’s videos have been viewed more than one million times on its destination site and on more than 20 social networking sites without any major spending on advertising or banner ads. The YouTube HTML codes for IGotShotgun’s videos have been embedded by users on countless additional sites, extending the reach of the program’s content well beyond those sites to which GM and Weber Shandwick proactively post program content.

“What’s compelling about IGotShotgun in addition to its unique content is the distribution model it employs,” said Chris Perry, execu-
tive vice president of Weber Shandwick’s Detroit office. “We post content to the IGotShotgun site and a set number of video sharing sites. We also offer it to relevant Web site administrators to post on their site. And we tag content appropriately so that anyone who is interested can find it, view it and post it on their own blog or Web site or simply pass it along in an e-mail to a friend. All of this means the content boomerangs around the Web to reach literally thousands, if not millions, of people.”

GM has taken a distinct approach to promoting IGotShotgun. Instead of launching a massive public relations or advertising campaign to announce its program, the automaker has kept communications grassroots, mirroring the viral nature of video sharing itself. Users come upon the content and share links to it with their friends and, in some cases, embed the videos’ YouTube codes right into their personal blog, Facebook profile or MySpace page.

Rules of the Road

An obvious question must be asked when exploring the social media space: Can just anyone play in it? The simple answer is yes, but corporations must bear in mind certain considerations before taking the plunge. These considerations are as follows:

Transparency: Activities undertaken by a corporation in the social media realm should be entirely transparent. Users will tolerate and even welcome companies in the social media realm as long as they are upfront about whom they are and what they’re doing. Transparency is most crucial in social media, where it’s not always clear who’s an individual and who’s not. IGotShotgun is managed by individuals who identify themselves by name as part of the IGotShotgun crew when posting blogs and responding to comments.

IGotShotgun’s profile on all social sites clearly states that IGotShotgun is a GM-sponsored program about the intersection of cars, culture and entertainment.

Relevance: Transparency should always be accompanied by knowledge of the social media space and proper etiquette within it. Posting irrelevant notes on message boards or in discussion forums may lead to a company’s ouster from a social networking community.

It’s important to become part of a community before promoting a particular message, program or product. Community members will appreciate an organization that took the time to establish itself and communicate its intentions. Joining a group and asking within an hour for its members to do something or go somewhere is a surefire path to being reported to the group administrator and possibly expelled from the community.

When posting videos to groups on social sites like Vox, IGotShotgun is careful to share only those videos that are appropriate to the particular group. For example, IGotShotgun content from the Super Bowl was posted to Super Bowl-specific sites or groups and to fan sites for the Bears and the Colts. Similarly, footage of Patrick Dempsey driving the Chevy Corvette pace car at the 2007 Indy 500 was shared with such online communities as “Grey’s Anatomy Lovers” and Formula One racing sites.

Value: When entering the social media space, an organization needs to bring something of value to the user in addition to straightforward product information. Organizations should offer something for users to react to. Most people will never get to be backstage at major events or experience the red carpet. But IGotShotgun enables them to have these experiences virtually and to be there to witness the reactions from celebrities, athletes and other buzz-makers. In doing so, GM is bringing something of value to consumers. IGotShotgun provides unique content that users won’t find elsewhere. It is more than a brand page; it is an experience.

Dialogue: Dialogue and interaction are crucial to success in the social realm. Social media is inherently about sharing, collaboration and open two-way communication. A company establishing a blog or presence on social networking and video sharing sites must allow users a way to share feedback with the corporation and with each other. Chevy’s Aveo Livin’ Large Campus Challenge provided members of the target market with access to the product and ways to initiate the conversation and in turn develop the content.

Feedback should be shared pub-

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licly for all to view and can come in the form of written comments, video responses and rating tools. Feedback, both positive and negative, should be left posted. Users will see through attempts to mask negative feedback, and there could be a major backlash. Dialogue is about back-and-forth communication. Companies can and should respond to negative feedback, defend themselves when necessary and correct inaccurate statements or accusations users may post. Deleting or editing comments, however, obstructs crucial dialogue and compromises the very nature of the space.

**Searchability:** For users to share feedback about content, they must first know content is out there. Tagging is a term commonly used in reference to social communications. A tag is a relevant keyword associated with or assigned to a piece of information (e.g. a picture, article, or video clip) describing the item and allowing for keyword-based classification of the information for retrieval purposes. Said simply, a tag is a category name. Users can categorize their posts, photos and videos with any tag that makes sense (Technorati).

When a user types in or searches for a relevant keyword, tagging allows a company’s content to be among the search results that are pulled up. Most social networking sites allow content providers to associate a few to an unlimited number of tags with their content. This step makes it that much more likely that content is discovered.

**Keeping content current:** Another guideline to navigating the social media realm is to update content—and frequently. Many underestimate the time required to keep up a site, blog or video channel, but if content is outdated, organizations run the risk of losing consumer interest. In addition, if feedback is not addressed in a timely fashion, it can damage a company’s image (Sheng, 2007).

**Patience:** Establishing a strong presence in this space takes time. Building trust in a community does not happen overnight (Estrin, 2007), and if you build it, they won’t necessarily come. Creating compelling and entertaining content takes an understanding of the audience and thoughtful consideration of balancing brand integration. Content should not be perceived as an advertisement, but more as an organization’s contribution to the ongoing dialogue about a topic. Humor, creativity and realism are hallmarks of successful socialized content, but even the best content needs time to be discovered amid all the noise. That is why keeping on top of content and spreading it among relevant groups and bloggers is so important.

**Conclusion**

According to a recent Inc. magazine study, the hype is real. The social media revolution is coming to the business world. In its study of an elite group of the 121 fastest growing companies in the United States, Inc. researchers found that 33 percent of respondents currently use message or bulletin boards, 27 percent engage in some sort of social networking, 24 percent use online video and 19 percent blog. When surveyed on the importance of social media in their marketing mix, 26 percent responded that it is “very important” (Mattson, 2006).

In sum, a growing number of organizations are joining the social media world, and with good reason. Consumers, particularly young ones, are increasingly turning away from traditional media and tossing aside the old model of the passive consumer. Social media is enabling people to talk, discuss, share and find new communities of like-minded people (McConnell, 2006). If organizations want to be relevant participants in the dialogue with the new generation, they must go where these people are and speak their language and on their terms. Those who do it well will be invited to stay.

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Harnessing the Media Revolution to Engage the Youth Market

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