



# Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** The emergence of Internet-based social media has made it possible for one person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them. Thus, the impact of consumer-to-consumer communications has been greatly magnified in the marketplace. This article argues that social media is a hybrid element of the promotion mix because in a traditional sense it enables companies to talk to their customers, while in a nontraditional sense it enables customers to talk directly to one another. The content, timing, and frequency of the social media-based conversations occurring between consumers are outside managers' direct control. This stands in contrast to the traditional integrated marketing communications paradigm whereby a high degree of control is present. Therefore, managers must learn to shape consumer discussions in a manner that is consistent with the organization's mission and performance goals. Methods by which this can be accomplished are delineated herein. They include providing consumers with networking platforms, and using blogs, social media tools, and promotional tools to engage customers.

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## 1. Social media, the promotion mix, and integrated marketing communications

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is the guiding principle organizations follow to communicate with their target markets. *Integrated marketing communications* attempts to coordinate and control the various elements of the promotional

mix—advertising, personal selling, public relations, publicity, direct marketing, and sales promotion—to produce a unified customer-focused message and, therefore, achieve various organizational objectives (Boone & Kurtz, 2007, p. 488).

However, the tools and strategies for communicating with customers have changed significantly with the emergence of the phenomenon known as *social media*, also referred to as *consumer-generated media*. This form of media “describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands,

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services, personalities, and issues” (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004, p. 2).

Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company-sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites, to name a few. As illustrated by Table 1, social media outlets are numerous and varied.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing an explosion of Internet-based messages transmitted through these media. They have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behavior including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, and post-purchase communication and evaluation. Unfortunately, the popular business press and academic literature offers marketing managers very little guidance for incorporating social media into their IMC strategies.

Therefore, many managers lack a full appreciation for social media’s role in the company’s promotional efforts. Even though social media is magnifying the impact consumer-to-consumer conversations have in the marketplace, methods for shaping those conversations have not yet been articulated.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we propose that social media be considered a hybrid component of the promotional mix and therefore be incorporated as an integral part of the organization’s IMC strategy. The second purpose of the article is to compare and contrast the traditional communications paradigm that relied on the established promotional mix, elements which were developed and refined over the past 100 years, with the new communications paradigm which incorporates social media. Finally, we discuss methods by which marketing managers can shape the consumer-to-consumer conversations which are now driving the marketplace to a greater extent than ever before.

## 2. Social media’s hybrid role in the promotion mix

It has long been acknowledged in marketing management circles that successful IMC strategies clearly reflect the values articulated in an organization’s mission statement and contribute to the fulfillment of the organization’s performance goals. To accomplish these objectives, the elements of the promotion mix are carefully coordinated so the information transmitted to the marketplace through these elements consistently communicates a unified message that broadly reflects the organization’s fundamental values.

For example, the promotional efforts conducted by Procter and Gamble (P&G) or General Electric (GE) illustrate the underlying values of these organizations as articulated in their respective mission statements and statements of strategic principles (General Electric, 2008; Procter and Gamble, 2008). When these two organizations entered the social media arena, they carefully crafted their communications with the marketplace to consistently reflect their organizational values. By doing so, both organizations acknowledged the importance of incorporating social media into their IMC strategies and promotional efforts.

GE and P&G’s use of social media demonstrates that this media has two interrelated promotional roles in the marketplace. First, social media enables companies to talk to their customers, and second, it enables customers to talk to one another. Social media also enables customers to talk to companies;

**Table 1. Examples of social media**

- Social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Faceparty)
- Creativity works sharing sites:
  - Video sharing sites (YouTube)
  - Photo sharing sites (Flickr)
  - Music sharing sites (Jamendo.com)
  - Content sharing combined with assistance (Piczo.com)
  - General intellectual property sharing sites (Creative Commons)
- User-sponsored blogs (The Unofficial Apple Weblog, Cnet.com)
- Company-sponsored websites/blogs (Apple.com, P&G’s Vocalpoint)
- Company-sponsored cause/help sites (Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, click2quit.com)
- Invitation-only social networks (ASmallWorld.net)
- Business networking sites (LinkedIn)
- Collaborative websites (Wikipedia)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life)
- Commerce communities (eBay, Amazon.com, Craig’s List, iStockphoto, Threadless.com)
- Podcasts (“For Immediate Release: The Hobson and Holtz Report”)
- News delivery sites (Current TV)
- Educational materials sharing (MIT OpenCourseWare, MERLOT)
- Open Source Software communities (Mozilla’s spreadfirefox.com, Linux.org)
- Social bookmarking sites allowing users to recommend online news stories, music, videos, etc. (Digg, del.icio.us, Newsvine, Mixx it, Reddit)

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