



# We're all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Consumers are adopting increasingly active roles in co-creating marketing content with companies and their respective brands. In turn, companies and organizations are looking to online social marketing programs and campaigns in an effort to reach consumers where they 'live' online. However, the challenge facing many companies is that although they recognize the need to be active in social media, they do not truly understand how to do it effectively, what performance indicators they should be measuring, and how they should measure them. Further, as companies develop social media strategies, platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are too often treated as stand-alone elements rather than part of an integrated system. This article offers a systematic way of understanding and conceptualizing online social media, as an ecosystem of related elements involving both digital and traditional media. We highlight a best-practice case study of an organization's successful efforts to leverage social media in reaching an important audience of young consumers. Then, we conclude with several insights and lessons related to the strategic integration of social media into a firm's marketing communications strategy.

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## 1. Marketing myths revealed

Consumers are no longer merely passive recipients in the marketing exchange process. Today, they are taking an increasingly active role in co-creating everything from product design to promotional messages (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, & Kates, 2007). The

rise in interactive digital media has catapulted company and consumer contact from the traditional Web 1.0 model to the highly interactive Web 2.0 world, where consumers are dictating the nature, extent, and context of marketing exchanges. As Garretson (2008, p. 12) so aptly observed, "Consumers increasingly use digital media not just to research products and services, but to engage the companies they buy from, as well as other consumers who may have valuable insights."

Dramatic developments in interactive digital media are revolutionizing marketing, and social media has fundamentally altered marketing's ecosystem of

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influence (Walmsley, 2010). For example, consider the following generally-accepted product and promotion beliefs that are now almost mythical in nature:

- Traditional product/service *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: Brand managers own and orchestrate their brands
- Traditional product/service *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: Phones are for making phone calls
- Traditional product/service *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: The Web is for finding information
- Traditional promotion *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: Companies use marketing communications to control their message
- Traditional promotion *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: Consumers purchase products promoted by marketers
- Traditional promotion *belief*—>21<sup>st</sup> century *myth*: Providing a forum for customers to talk is dangerous and risky

How these myths have altered marketing coincides directly with a paradigmatic shift in the commercialization of the Internet. In the early days of the commercial Web, a firm's focus on technology overshadowed marketing strategy as the central element of business models—models which turned out to be less than profitable (Anderson & Wolff, 2010). The result of this technology-oriented business model was evidenced in the demise of numerous dot-com companies, leading up to the dot-com bust of 2000–2001.

In the new social media-driven business model defined by customer connectivity and interactivity, content goes hand in hand with technology, producing far-reaching effects for the way marketers influence current and potential customers. As noted by Reid Hoffman, co-founder and chairman of LinkedIn, the ability to leverage relationships embodied in social networks will become one of the most transformative uses of the Internet (Ricadela, 2007). Content in the form of social networks and blogs that enable individuals to create, share, and recommend information is extending the spheres of marketing influence, and a wide variety of social media platforms are providing the tools necessary for these influential and meaningful firm-customer exchanges.

With 'influence' as the operative word in social media marketing, our intent here is to consider the platforms which prove useful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

connected consumer marketplace. In Section 2, we describe the social media platforms that can be used in the influencing process. These myriad tools have allowed consumers to connect, share, and collaborate. As such, following discussion of the available platforms for influence, Section 3 describes the way the spheres of influence have unfolded over time. In Section 4, we describe a social media ecosystem in general, followed by a detailed illustration of how the social media ecosystem was utilized to catapult the 52<sup>nd</sup> Grammy Awards to its highest ratings in years (Section 5). Finally, lessons learned from the implementation of the Grammy Awards social media marketing campaign and implications for practice are offered (Section 6).

## 2. Platforms for influence

According to Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011), social media technologies have engendered radically new ways of interacting. To this end, Harris (2009) notes that there are literally hundreds of different social media platforms (e.g., social networking, text messaging, shared photos, podcasts, streaming videos, wikis, blogs, discussion groups), and Anderson and Wolff (2010) highlight the importance of mobile devices for accessing these platforms. Interestingly—and, possibly, confusingly—it is not easy to discern among types of social media platforms. Alexa, a Web information company that provides website traffic rankings, offers broad categories for characterizing social networks, social networking, and social media. Of these, companies such as Facebook, YouTube, Blogger, Twitter, MySpace, and Flickr appear across all categories. According to Alexa (2010), the top 10 global websites by late 2010 were: (1) Google; (2) Facebook; (3) YouTube; (4) Yahoo; (5) Windows Live; (6) Baidu.com; (7) Wikipedia; (8) Blogger.com; (9) Twitter; and (10) QQ.com. Another Web analytics company, Compete, reports that the top 10 websites in 2010 accounted for about 75% of total page views in the United States, up from 31% in 2001 and 40% in 2006 (Anderson & Wolff, 2010).

Because of the myriad social media and networks available, it is not surprising that marketers are actively experimenting on several of the major platforms. Companies such as Zappos, Whole Foods, Dell, and Gap actively connect with consumers on a variety of social networking sites. Blogs are proving to be a useful method of generating sales leads; mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) are facilitating rich two-way interactions with customers with a contextual, location-based richness unheard of just a few years ago; and businesses are creating their own YouTube

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