



# A marketing communications approach for the digital era: Managerial guidelines for social media integration



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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Although social media has become a source of interaction between consumers and their favorite brands, surprisingly little academic research has sought to understand how social media is situated within a firm's existing marketing communications strategy. In the present research, the authors conducted case studies with both managers and agency personnel responsible for making social media decisions in order to understand how managers incorporate social media into an existing marketing communications strategy. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with these managers to understand their approach to social media, the challenges they face, and the solutions they have implemented. Findings suggest that managers categorize social platforms into four categories: relationship management, news gathering, creativity, and entertainment. Though social platforms differ in purpose, a cohesive brand personality is created across each platform by following the four C's of integration: consistency, customization, commitment, and caution. Findings offer insights into how brand managers position social media within the communications strategy and utilize different social media platforms to understand and address individual customer needs. The authors also suggest a number of tools to guide implementation and management of social media communications across platforms.

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“You have an advertising medium that allows the customer and brand to have a dialogue, like buying a car. We tell a salesperson our problems, wants, needs, and pain points, and they try to come up with a solution. The same thing is true with social.” —Glen Caruso, *Rocket Fuel*

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## 1. Introduction

The digital age has modified consumers' expectations of branded communications. Prior to social networks, mass media communication channels such as TV and radio allowed brand managers to 'speak to' customers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). However, the proliferation of social media has instigated a revolution in the communications field, resulting in consumers expecting the brand to interact with them in a medium where the consumer controls every aspect of the conversation: the timing, the channel, and the content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The viral nature of social media offers a great opportunity to brand managers who wish to gain positive traction through word of mouth. Unfortunately for brand managers, this same word of mouth can be detrimental to the brand image when consumers feel they have been mistreated.

The perils of customer service missteps are frequently shared on the evening news and passed around in social media channels (Calderon, 2013). For example, Dave Carroll's *United Breaks Guitars* video went viral on YouTube, making the fledgling singer an overnight sensation while simultaneously vilifying United Airlines, which refused to pay for repairs to his damaged guitar (Bernoff & Schadler, 2010). The YouTube video received 3 million views within 1 week, and the song placed at the top of the iTunes charts during the first week of its release. Although United Airlines later agreed to pay to repair the guitar, the damage had been done. Such an example illustrates the power of social media, and has also led brand managers to question how to protect a brand's reputation when a single poor experience can become an overnight viral sensation. As the popularity of social media continues to grow, brand managers must maintain a cohesive presence while also maintaining a delicate balance between protecting the brand's image, facilitating new customer touchpoints, and encouraging deeper connections between the consumer and the brand.

Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter attract more than 90% of young adults and teens and represent over a quarter of all Internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). As social media continues to dominate both consumer conversations and pop culture, managers are seeking ways to accentuate their brand's positioning in social channels while minimizing negative impacts. This transition has not come without difficulties, as corporations aren't accustomed to consumers having a platform to share their thoughts in a mass medium (Bernoff & Schadler, 2010). Early branded social media communications were often crafted and sent to the firm's legal department for approval prior to being

shared online, though the personal nature of social media suggests that having a lawyer pre-approve communications in social media is tantamount to requiring a lawyer be present for a conversation with a friend. Our research seeks to fill a gap in academic literature by understanding how different social media platforms are being (1) utilized by managers to facilitate customer interactions and (2) integrated into a firm's overarching marketing communications strategy. We then identify a number of tools to guide managers' implementation of a comprehensive strategy across multiple social media platforms.

We approached this research endeavor with a clean slate, seeking to fully examine and better understand each participant's perspective on social media. In the following sections, we discuss the methodological approach and then explicate the themes discussed by participants. Next, we present a model of social media management and discuss participants' approaches to different social media platforms, and we give suggestions on how to integrate social media usage into the broader organization's communications plan. We conclude with a general discussion of future directions in the realm of social media.

## 2. Our confidential sources

To better understand social media strategy, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with two distinct participant groups: senior managers responsible for the digital strategy of multi-billion dollar brands and agency managers responsible for the digital strategy of at least one Fortune 1000 firm. Participants were identified and recommended by business contacts of the first author and no compensation was offered in exchange for participation. Table 1 includes descriptions of each participant's professional experience. Interviews lasted 1–2 hours with the goal of understanding social media usage and communication integration from the manager's perspective.

Participant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Our analysis of verbatim interview transcripts involved an iterative strategy in which we aimed to develop a holistic understanding of participants' views of social media as part of their organizations' overarching marketing communications strategies (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). We began by identifying themes within interview passages, which later merged into broader, more general categories (Spiggle, 1994). Figure 1 illustrates the two categorical themes and related strategies that emerged from our interviews.

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