



# Targeting college students on Facebook? How to stop wasting your money

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**Abstract** While Facebook usage has seen explosive growth, scant research has explored returns on advertising dollars marketers invest in this emerging medium. Our two-stage study of 18- to 25-year-old college students suggests that many of the advertising dollars consumer goods firms spend on Facebook are likely wasted. This study highlights that, in addition to staying in touch with friends and relatives, Facebook users are primarily motivated by three desires: (1) to voyeuristically peer into others' lives, (2) to create a distinctive identity for themselves, and (3) to act on their inner narcissistic tendencies. These motivations also make them poor prospects for advertisers, as users seem disinterested in Facebook ads and disengaged from marketers' attempts to build brands. Herein, we discuss challenges for marketers, as well as opportunities for building brands and driving sales via Facebook.

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## 1. Facebook: Popular, but useful for advertisers?

Marketers interested in connecting with existing and potential customers are likely to find the descriptive statistics of Facebook highly attractive: 750 million active users with 94 million from the United States alone, half of whom log on every day (Burbary, 2011). Investors also seem impressed: Facebook has raised

\$1.5 billion in capital with the help of Goldman Sachs, it generated \$2 billion in revenue for 2010, and it is reportedly worth \$50 billion (Rusli, 2011). This online behemoth has triggered societal change, and not just in the way marketers reach their customers. In 2009, *Fortune* magazine suggested that Facebook is taking over our lives (Hempel & Kowitz, 2009). By 2010, together with texting and Twitter, Facebook emerged as a principal way by which informal communication occurs among peers; even independent bloggers have begun migrating to this social network in search of interested eyeballs (Kopykoff, 2011).

The prospect of capturing a share of 770 billion page visits, half of which come from users aged 18 to 34, is understandably irresistible to many marketers

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(Burbary, 2011). However, it remains unknown whether the dollars advertisers invest in Facebook are well spent. While much is written about pages that garner a lot of 'likes' and fans, the extant literature is mostly silent regarding Facebook's effectiveness as an advertising medium and the strategic challenges of managing the complex marketer-Facebook user relationship. As such, there are very few practical implications for marketers interested in connecting with current and potential customers and building brands via Facebook.

This article presents findings from a two-stage exploratory study of Facebook usage behaviors among 18- to 25-year-old college students and aims to address this knowledge gap. Based on these students' voices, we traced individuals' motivations driving their Facebook usage and identified the key challenges for marketers interested in employing Facebook as a medium for building brands and driving sales. We also develop a propositional inventory to aid future research, and propose practical implications for harnessing Facebook's power.

While Facebook is astonishingly popular, we learned that almost no advertising works on the 18- to 25-year-old demographic, which represents 26% of all users: approximately 50 million in the United States and 188 million worldwide (Burbary, 2011). This segment accesses Facebook not just to connect with familiar people on their own terms but also to indulge in their voyeuristic, narcissistic, and exhibitionist tendencies. These users often multitask while on Facebook and are, thus, disinterested in cognitive engagement with advertisements. Furthermore, high-intensity Facebook users create their own content to promote themselves and utilize Facebook as their personal TV channel to broadcast details of their lives. As such, they compete effectively with marketers having similar intents. This strong emotional involvement is characterized by a willful suspension of disbelief whereby factual information about brands is labeled as intrusive and irrelevant.

The present challenge for marketers entails engaging Facebook users who are tone-deaf to advertising, deeply skeptical, and largely disinterested in building a relationship with marketers. Effective engagement is more likely, we propose, when marketers take the following steps. First, marketers must come to terms with individuals' motivations driving their Facebook usage and the challenges these present. Second, they must learn to work with users to jointly produce entertaining, emotion-laden content with voyeuristic, titillating value. Third, they must help users satisfy not only their need to connect with others, but also their deep-seated need to brand themselves and broadcast their online identities to social network friends.

## 2. How we derived our inferences about Facebook usage

In the first stage of our study, we collected data from students enrolled in three courses taught by one of the co-authors at a business school. In one class of 25 students, two focus groups were conducted. Of the two co-authors present, one primarily led the focus groups, while the other took notes. Each focus group session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The co-authors asked the following questions during the focus groups:

- Why do you use Facebook?
- What do you think about advertisements and firms' efforts to connect with you on Facebook?
- Inquiries related to their 'liking' of brands and their experience with brand pages, brand introductions, and contests.

The other two classes the co-author taught had 47 students, and they were engaged similarly. After the classes, we conducted a content analysis of the transcripts from the focus groups and class discussions, as well as from notes made by the instructors present during these activities.

In the second stage of our study, we collected data via an open-ended online survey. We posed the following question: "Tell me a little bit about why you use Facebook and the role you think Facebook plays in your life. Write as much as you want, but a minimum of five to six sentences is required." The link to the survey was emailed to 93 students registered in three separate undergraduate courses taught by another co-author. In total, 69 responses were collected: 42 from females (61%) and 27 from males (39%). We used the content analysis results from the focus groups and class discussions to identify themes of Facebook usage and underlying motivations, distill the nature of the problems posed to marketers, and conceptualize a comprehensive strategic solution. Responses from the web survey were primarily used to illustrate the themes we developed.

Participants reported an average of 534 friends, with a high of 2,000 and a low of 40. Each day, these individuals checked their Facebook page an average of 5.38 times, made 3.47 comments, and wrote 3.67 status updates. They spent an average of 1.36 hours per day on Facebook, which far exceeds currently reported estimates of 31.9 minutes (Gillette, 2011). The highest and lowest reported usage times were 5 hours and 15 minutes, respectively. Before we delve more deeply into our findings, two caveats are in order. First, the results presented relate

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