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How Social Media and Content Marketing Fail— and How to Fix The Problems



Author's note:

The content below was initially delivered in a conversation with The CMO Club San Diego chapter. It was at their request that I turned this into a more detailed article.

The promise of social media was that brands would have real conversations with their customers leading to genuine engagement, brand advocacy, and millions of “earned” impressions, thus making the whole process unbelievably cost-effective. In reality, only a small percentage of CMOs believe their social media activities are cost-effective and delivering expected results at scale. Before getting to the solutions (and there are several), let's review the failed promises one by one.

1 Conversations: Not the Kind that Brands Hoped For

In the rush to set up social channels and fill up content calendars with cheerful greetings, marketers failed to answer the fundamental question: Why would anyone in their right mind want to converse with their brand? Short of clear answers, consumers decided for themselves, using social platforms primarily to voice complaints and deal with service-related issues—hardly the types of conversations that social proponents had dreamed about.

2 Engagement Lower than the Lowly Email

With conversations out of reach, brands banked on social to spark engagement in the hope that accumulating Likes, Favorites, Retweets, Shares and Clicks, would add up to something meaningful. In reality, engagement rates per post are abysmal on Facebook (.7%) and Twitter (.2%). Even Instagram with its impressive 4.2% engagement rate pales in comparison to the average open rate of a brand-generated email!

3 Advocacy: Social is Not the Cause, It's a Symptom

There was supposed to be a new world order in which brands cultivated an army of advocates (including employees) to spread the good word. In truth, for most brands,

social became more about placating detractors who complain loudly rather than nurturing a posse of promoters. The root problem here is that advocacy is a by-product of delivering a phenomenal product/service experience or having an employee-enriching culture, neither of which are caused by social activity.

4 Earned Impressions: Throttled by EdgeRank & False Fans

Falling back to the old PR standby, promulgators proffered “earned media” as a righteous and reliable metric for social media. Pursuit of this metric encouraged brands to build up their social footprints (particularly on Facebook), often accumulating non-fans hooked with sweepstakes bait. Then, along came the ever-tightening EdgeRank, which now throttles the reach of brands with over 500,000 fans to under 2%, relegating “earned media” to the trash heap of wishful thinking.

5 Cost-Effectiveness: The Jury is Still Out on This One

Initially relegated to interns and junior staffers who were “native” to Facebook and Twitter, it is no wonder that a preponderance of marketers considered social media to be a low-cost option. This perception has gradually dwindled as investments in software, staff and external partners are made to feed voracious content calendars and improve performance. Not surprisingly, only a modest percentage of CMOs today believe social is measurably cost effective.



Content Marketing is Also Under Delivering

As for content marketing, the promise was that if brands created enough content it would drive site traffic, nurture prospects, improve SEO results, and ultimately prove more cost-effective than advertising. For early adopters, many of these promises have come true, but for those just getting started, the situation is a bit grimmer given these realities:

- **There is No Shortage of Content:** With 27 million new blog posts daily, it is easy to get lost in the flood;
- **Creating Your Own Content is Time Consuming:** 69% of marketers say they lack the time to create content, which explains why 55% believe they don't have enough content.
- **It's Tough to Do Well:** Most brand-generated content is flat out ignored regardless of channel or type. Not surprisingly, only 45% of marketers claim to have requisite expertise, while 47% recognize that their content is not good enough to engage readers.
- **Lack of Strategy:** Despite increasing investments in content (8 out of 10 marketers say they plan to spend more on content), only 44% profess to have a documented content strategy, leaving little doubt as to why success has been so fleeting.

As the guy who is grounded in providing solutions not problems, I would be remiss in not offering a solution to how all of the above can be addressed.

Part Two: Five Ways to Fix Your Social and Content Marketing Problems

When I spelled out the failures of social media and content marketing in the first part of this post, the purpose of all this gloomy background data was not to be discouraging, but rather to make the case for a fresh, five-part approach—one that brings social and content together into a strategically sound powerhouse.

1 Develop Content Campaigns

Recognizing that most branded content, regardless of the channel, comes in the form of one-offs replicating “death by a thousand paper cuts,” marketers need to “campaignify” their content. These campaigns will allow brands to focus on one meaningful theme at a time—themes that are relevant to the target and can be reinforced across multiple channels including events, research, PR, email, social and even advertising. Treating content as a campaign increases its potency, turning droplets into tidal waves as numerous marketers, including D&B <http://bit.ly/19VtaCj>, can attest.

2 Create Memorable Content

With millions of pieces of branded content burping out daily, prospects and customers are drowning in the drivel. The somewhat obvious solution here is for marketers to create content that is “memorable” rather than passable. At a minimum, consider applying the Shaq rule <http://on.wsj.com/1xuNbQs> for content (60% entertaining, 30% inspirational and 10% selling) that the former NBA star uses to drive his highly successful approach to social communications, an approach that contributes mightily to the bottom line of his sizeable business enterprise.

3 Focus on Quality Outcomes

The first step here is to reduce the emphasis on growing one's “social footprint”, which is often the result of a promotion that attracts virtually useless fans. Instead, marketers need to concentrate on quality outcomes that align with overall business objectives.

For example, if generating quality leads is a priority, then focus on action metrics including clicks, SEO rank, and names captured. If awareness is a goal, then concentrate on reach-driving shares. AND if the content you are putting out isn't driving any these metrics, then go back to steps 1 and 2.

4 Test More and Adjust Your Content Accordingly

At the risk of being "Captain Obvious," marketers can often solve the problem of ignored content by testing their way to success. Every day, your fans tell you what content they've enjoyed based on the actions they take with it—content that is easily categorized into buckets like culture, events, product, service, etc. By examining the performance of content by bucket, you'll quickly learn that 35-70% of your content is simply irrelevant to your target. Further testing can be done to refine headlines, formats (text, images, videos), and even by adjusting the time of day. Even remarkably engaging content can be improved by constant testing—just ask BuzzFeed).

5 Just Add Media

For too long, marketers have expected social media and content marketing to have an "organic" impact only to be disappointed when their efforts didn't move the needle. Like it or not, the answer here is to banish the word "organic" along with its evil com-patriot "viral," to the Hall of Unreliability. To create reliably effective campaigns, brands should bolster content creation with some form of guaranteed exposure, either paid and/or through the crescendo of PR, events, email and/or website exposure. In sum, marketers need to put the media back in social media and the marketing back into content marketing.



About the author

Drew Neisser is the CEO and founder of [Renegade](#), the NYC-based social media and marketing agency that helps inspired CMOs cut through. He is the champion of Marketing as Service, a philosophy he espouses in his writings on FastCompany.com, PSFK, [TheDrewBlog](#) and The Cut, a much-appreciated monthly newsletter. If you have a CMO success story to tell, let Drew know at dneisser@renegade.com.