

Social media: finally the where...

The divide between those that understand social media and those that don't is so wide, one despairs that even the implementation of broadband won't enable the rest to ever catch up. It's concerning when at all these industry events we are still talking about why we should be blogging the regulation thereof; online censorship; whether media owners should join the social media revolution; whether blogs are relevant; whether journalists should blog; and how to convince your clients they need to be online... The process has moved so past these basic debates. The early adopters are already doing it all and making brand capital and revenue out of the process.

 By Louise Marsland 12 Sep 2007

Web 3.0 is already beckoning when there isn't really an understanding in the broader marketplace of Web 2.0 and *where* to go with your service or product.

Web 2.0 was actually a marketing term used to describe the way the internet has changed its culture of doing things. Explains Mail & Guardian Online GM: Matthew Buckland: "Many Web 2.0 features have been around on websites for a long time. It kind of does capture a new wave on the web, a new culture of doing things, it's helped popularise the new way of doing things.

"From a media perspective we are very interested in Web2.0 and exploiting social networks, because it brings us closer to our readers; and enables us to harness the collective intelligence of our readers. We want to use our readers to help us produce content, to share content."

This is not about Facebook!

Of course isn't this the holy grail of interconnectivity for any media owner? To interact and really know your readers?

Despite the fact that South Africa's online population has been severely constricted by the lack of broadband, there is no doubt in any media or technology pundit's view that online connectivity and usage – whether through a computer or mobile phone – will explode once we get high-speed broadband internet access.

The billion-dollar questions is: will you be ready? Will your clients? Or will you be overtaken by savvy media owners and other so-called 'citizen journalists' and bloggers who are interacting (or not) online with your brands as you read this. What is your plan? Do you have a strategy? Which social media sites are you interacting with daily?

This is not about Facebook. Facebook is one little tiny part of the social media revolution taking place. If it wasn't Facebook, it would be something else, and it still might be tomorrow. The point is: understand the impact of social media on media channels, on brands and on social interaction. It's not going away, it's only going to increase.

Commented 24.com publisher, Arrie Rossouw: "Web 2.0 is not exclusive to broadband users, but broadband enables you to do so much more. When a user has access to broadband and it's always on, they tend to use the web 40% more than someone on a dial up connection. People tend to communicate more

and use it as a tool to make business. There are already people talking about Web 3.0... It is exciting and this is where people really get a voice.”

“This is a way to interact with your readers. As editors and journalists we always like to think we know what they think. We think we know better what is the news of the day. What the Web 2.0 environment has taught us is that our readers don't always like what we say.”

Rossouw believes it's not so much about an internet revolution, as a communication revolution. “Social media means to me ease of communications, uploading pictures, sharing news events with many, it opens up opportunities for business. It's not so much a Web 2.0 phenomena, but more that people can communicate better.”

And this provides an opportunity for media owners.

Relationships

Explains Buckland: “Essentially it's about embracing your users, building a much closer relationship between readers and publications. Web 1.0 is 'letter writing' (reader feedback via letters to the editor), Web 2.0 is giving your readers blogs to comment on, allowing you to show story rankings (the most read stories), allowing you to use the web as an application, i.e., to check email, and so on.”

It comes down to knowing who your readers/users are – intimately. And for them to get to know you better and have an impact on how you present your news or brand to them: in the way *they* want to consume it.

The media are traditionally the gatekeepers of freedom and democracy, but as Buckland points out, with the social media revolution and interactive blogging platforms, it is the readers who are becoming the watchdog of the journalists and this accountability is only a good thing for the media industry. Similarly with other industries: if your consumers don't like the way you talk to them, they will not interact with you. And if they are not interacting with you, in a negative or positive way, then they are not buying your products or services... welcome to the black hole of deep dark cyberspace!

So forget the how and the why already: where will you be going with your brand tomorrow?

- Rossouw and Buckland were part of a debate on Web 2.0 and Social Media at the Highway Africa new media conference at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 10-12 September 2007.

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