

Closing the loop

LONDON, UK: In the first of a series of three articles, Robin Jaffray from Inferno discusses social media and its role in retail.



Robin Jaffray.

The phrase on everyone's lips is social media. Smart brands have cottoned on to this phenomenon and are harnessing its potential to build brand equity, accrue fans and followers and stimulate social exchange. However, the question is, how can brands now close the loop between social media and the high street? Here, digital expert Robin Jaffray shares his extensive insight into the topic.

Forward-thinking retailers and brands are recognising the potential of social media and integrating it into their marketing and communication strategies, to build a strong virtual presence. A 2009 study by the US National Retail Federation and Forrester Research reports that 12 out of 20 retailers that are performing well ("beating expectations") will increase spending on social media marketing this year.

Push social potential, not product

Social media covers owned media (websites that brands and retailers build), and earned media - news and other information about a brand that appears on other companies' or individuals' websites. Earned media tends to be more valuable than owned media, since this is often where genuine conversations happen and word-of-mouth exchanges spread. Crucially, a brand or retailer hoping to boost its earned media presence should avoid thinking in terms of pushing product and instead focus on enhancing the brand's social potential.

The creation of dedicated platforms and hubs for conversation and advocacy will speed exchanges of information and opinion among enthusiastic and active online communities. This type of word-of-mouth marketing tends to take place in owned media platforms. At Inferno, we have worked for Nokia, whose branded hub page at nokia.com/responsiveness encourages bloggers and social media advocates to air their ideas around Nokia's Responsiveness campaign.

The campaign highlights the use of technology for 'the good of people around the world', and the online hub invites viewers to answer questions like, 'What can you do for your community that has never been done before?' To inspire positive action, thought leaders from TED - the non-profit organisation devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading - are featured in videos describing programmes they've developed to help others, using technology. In addition, participants can upload text documents, photos and videos in response to the TED videos and their stimulating content.

How?

By contrast, earned media platforms are less controlled and predictable, as they require people already engaged in some social media activity of their own to notice and divert their attention to your activity. Search for Nokia's dedicated music blogger, called Gaz, on social networking site Bebo and you will see a great example of a branded presence in social media. Gaz offers Nokia fans exclusive interviews, new music releases and competitions, and uploads pictures and reviews from gigs that he attends. The challenge for marketers is clear, then.

How can a brand or retailer identify and encourage word of mouth in earned media?

How can that word of mouth be used to positively frame the retail experience, stimulate consumers or inspire brand preference?

Moreover, in owned media, how should campaigns be resourced and managed?

Robin Jaffray is strategic planning director at Inferno, an independent integrated creative agency with international clients including Nokia, Electrolux, Unilever, Bauer Media, Auto Trader and MCI. Their campaigns have won awards at Montreux Rose, Creative Circle, One Show New York and the Marketing Society.

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