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

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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.

Table 1.   Participant descriptive statistics

Participant	Primary Industry Type	*Years of Experience in Managing*:	
		Marketing Functions	Social & Digital Channels
Janna	Agency, Consumer Packaged Goods	20	7
Sarah	Agency, Wireless Technology	14	7
Isabella	Women's Undergarments	5	2
Ray	Railroad	20	8
Geof	Agency, Variety of Fortune 500 firms	28	4
Adam	Eyeglasses	25	9
Chad	Agency, Variety of Fortune 1000 firms	10	8

Particular emphasis was given to understanding nuances between agency managers and brand managers in addressing social media opportunities and issues. A summary document of the findings was shared with participants; all concurred that the summary accurately reflected their own experiences, further validating our study.
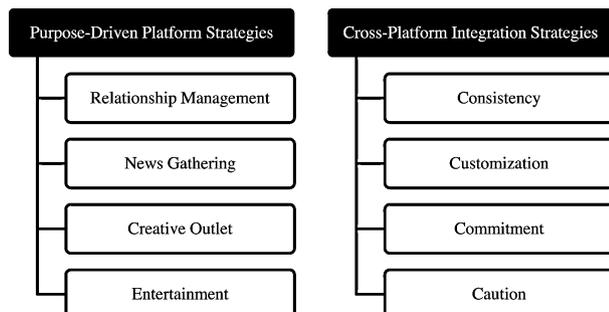
3. Insights revealed in our interviews

Though participant knowledge was informed by a diverse set of industries, analysis of transcripts identified a number of common themes. Figure 1 provides an overview of our findings. Participants recognized four primary customer engagement strategies for social platforms: relationship management, news gathering, creativity, and entertainment. Managers approach these customer engagement strategies by following four principles, summarized as the four C's: consistency, commitment, customization, and caution. Integration is guided by an overarching marketing communications approach in order to create a cohesive brand personality. These strategies and principles are further explicated in the following sections.

3.1. Purpose-driven platform strategies

Our participants suggested that platforms can offer a variety of benefits to both corporations and consumers. The consumer's purpose for utilizing the platform should be a central focus, and firms should build strategies to facilitate each of these consumer goals. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) suggested that social platforms may not distinctly fall into a single category, as they are unlikely to fit all consumer needs simultaneously. Although some platforms are well designed for creating longer-term engagement opportunities with customers, other platforms are better suited for quick bursts of information or providing entertainment to the user. Participants suggested that recognizing the benefits of different social platforms can help firms to implement the right type of campaign for a given platform, consequently resulting in a deeper connection with the user over time. The four consumer-driven purposes identified by participants are relationship management, news gathering, creativity, and entertainment.

3.1.1. Relationship management
Relationship management has been a key facet of marketing for decades, and social media tools offer managers a unique tool for building and maintaining relationships. Adding social media to customer relationship management is unique in that all social media users of a company's website are not necessarily customers (Ang, 2011). This added complexity makes relationship management even more critical within a social platform, as managers must engage customers while also connecting to potential customers. Research shows at least 75% of adults who use the Internet are using social media sites (Stephen & Galak, 2010; Urstadt, 2008), and Facebook is widely utilized as a relationship management site. Ray (Railroad Industry) shared his thoughts on his company's Facebook engagement strategy:

> In social, people are starting to raise their hands and say, "I need help." It is your customers coming to you to start a conversation. And they certainly have the need, and they certainly have a call to action and all that good

Figure 1.   Brand social media strategies

stuff, but they're really raising their hand and saying I need help. Whether it's help that's indirect like, "How do I get this train to stop rumbling behind my house?" or "There's a broken crossing arm that needs to be fixed," or to help with their identity. Maybe they're a rail fan, coming to your social page to join other rail fans. It's more of a hand raising mindset and we should be willing to help further the relationship with those who come to you for help.

While social networks are often used to manage relationships with current and prospective customers, some participants discussed their use of blogs to facilitate these relationships. Universal McCann (2014) found that 80% of its survey participants read blogs to learn something new, share opinions, and express themselves. Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) found that blogs are the most trusted information source, secondary only to newspapers. Janna (Agency, Consumer Packaged Goods) insists that digital tools such as blogging can also facilitate relationships with customers. She shared her blogging approach for a shoe company:

> For my client, it's all weekend warriors—people who want to continue playing tennis. Though they're no longer in high school or college, they enjoy the sport. We develop content for our client, and our entire strategy is about helping the audience grow their game. So, it's not about what's going on in the Pro Tour or about what's happening with Pro players, it's about how the audience can grow their game: nutrition, fitness, articles about strokes, video stuff. Every once in a while we'll talk about some equipment, but it's not about selling shoes. So the content has been well received.

Although sometimes tricky to manage, creating and maintaining relationships with social media users can be highly rewarding. Most users who are engaging with a company or brand on social media have some level of interest in the company and its offerings. Understanding customers' desire for connection and content is a key component in facilitating deeper, longer-term engagement.

3.1.2. News gathering

Microblogging platforms offer users a condensed way to remain updated on current events. Microblogging sites such as Twitter can also be beneficial to managers in sharing important news and timely information that may be relevant to the firm's customers. According to Universal McCann (2014), microblogging—using less than 140 characters to share your thoughts—is the fastest growing social

media platform today, with more than 50% of survey respondents reporting regular use of microblogging. Several participants use Twitter to encourage immediate action from consumers, and these bursts are often targeted to particular audience needs. Two agency participants utilized multiple Twitter accounts to target different customer interests. Sarah (Agency, Wireless Technology) discussed how her firm manages two separate Twitter accounts in order to tailor the messaging based on the follower's interests:

> We manage two Twitter handles for [our client]. One is just talking about brand engagement initiatives. We want to take advantage of the different conversations that are happening relevant to brand. That handle is very specific to just brand engagement. No product offers are going through that particular handle. There's another handle that is very offer related. There are people on Twitter that just continuously look for deals. This handle is specifically designed for offer-related messaging. We don't want offer-related messaging to collide with engagement type messaging. Twitter is a very personal space. People are constantly tweeting and they've got 140 characters to make a statement. You don't want to ruin that real estate by saying "Check out [our new product] and get $10 off!" We use a different handle for that and it goes after a different type of audience.

Creating separate accounts to manage varying consumer interests can help brand managers to control the conversation and ensure the message content is on target with the user's expectations. However, the greater the number of social media platforms, the more difficult the task of management becomes, as the content related to each account must be regularly maintained.

3.1.3. Creativity

Creativity is quickly becoming a key activity within social platforms, and consumers expect more creative approaches from companies within the social space (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Social platforms such as Pinterest and YouTube allow users to collect, display, and share images with others. Creative approaches in social media could include product demonstrations or contests for new advertisement ideas. These creative outlets can enhance a brand's presence by increasing authority, extending reach, and driving traffic to company-owned sites. Our participants suggested that Pinterest also offers customers a way to emphasize creativity in the context of the brand and provide relevant feedback

for future strategic direction. Adam (Eyeglass Industry) discussed his firm's listening approach via Pinterest:

We need to be comfortable talking to [the customer] wherever she happens to be. So if she's engaged in the dialogue online with Pinterest, we want to be engaging with her in relevant ways—that is the right way. I think the big thing that we look at with our industry is that we've always internally done Look Books of fashion and trends. Our customers, through Pinterest, are doing the same thing. It's a very interesting parallel to how we look at the world. So I think facilitating their interests is something that we are very interested in. Any of the social media should be a two-way street, so we want to give our customers the ability to accessorize their look and feel with Pinterest in a way that defines their personality more uniquely. Universally, we can leverage that same medium to look at how they are accessorizing and help us understand our customers and where they are headed—and make sure that we are in lockstep with the aspirational needs of that group.

Adam's social listening has informed his understanding of differing consumer fashion needs. As a result, Adam's marketing campaigns have incorporated learnings into marketing collateral and communication strategies. Connecting with users through creative outlets facilitates a deeper consumer-brand relationship by providing insights for future business strategy (Levin, 2014).

3.1.4. Entertainment

Entertainment is perhaps the most critical of all platform purposes. Contests, games, and other entertainment forms are likely to heighten users' interest and engagement with a brand in social channels (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Platforms such as Instagram, Vine, YouTube, and Facebook offer entertainment opportunities for brands to connect with users. Instagram gained 150 million users in half the time that it took Twitter and 2 years less than what Facebook needed to reach the same milestone (Gillett, 2014). Such growth suggests that entertainment platforms fill an important need in the social landscape. Janna (Agency) shared her entertainment approach for a shoe company client she represents:

On Facebook, we spend more time showing funny videos and eye-catching, good photos. Then we engage the audience by asking, "Have you ever hit a forehand this bad?" and then

show some pro blow it! And people love that! On the Facebook page, people love engaging about this.

We have recently seen a surge in traditional media activity encouraging further engagement through social channels. For example, Burger King played a joke by telling their customers that they were discontinuing the Whopper sandwich and then videotaped their reactions. People were encouraged to go to a webpage, whopperfreakout.com, to watch these reactions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Other corporations are using social media to engage consumers after an offline interaction. Janna (Agency) shared another example from Coca-Cola:

A few years ago, Coke built two igloos, similar to bouncy castles except that the igloos are climate controlled. They were looking for festivals like Lollapalooza where there may be 10,000 or more teens. It's 100 degrees outside, so people are going to walk into this igloo that's 40—50 degrees. We gave away a free Coke and had polar bears all over the place so that you could have your picture made with a polar bear. They gave kids a card that showed them how to go to Flickr and download the photo and share it. Kids stumbled upon the igloo at a concert, had a neat experience, and were able to share it with their friends. What does Coke get? Coke now has hundreds of thousands of pictures of teens with polar bears interacting with the brand in context. They are still getting their brand messaging in there, but they provided a good time, the kid got a picture, and Coke gets a little bit of brand mention or brand affiliation.

Today, marketers must focus not only on capturing consumer attention but also holding their attention via engagement (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Adding an entertainment component to social communications can facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship with customers.

3.2. Cross-platform integration strategies

As participants described the operational details of their respective firms, patterns emerged regarding the development and implementation of social media strategies. Similar themes were revealed in each participant's social media philosophy. Four primary themes were identified: (1) the need for consistency and integration across all marketing communications, (2) the need for customization to allow the brand messaging to feel personally crafted for individual audiences of each platform, (3) the need for commitment to relevant platforms, and (4) the need

for managers to respond with caution to consumer commentary in social media. Our themes are summarized as the 4 C's of social media integration strategies: consistency, customization, commitment, and caution.

3.2.1. Consistency

To achieve authenticity (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), a consumer's interaction with a brand in social media must be consistent with other brand-related interactions. A mismatch may leave the customer wondering which interaction represents the true character of the brand. Participants acknowledged that developing a consistent brand image within a consumer-driven platform is challenging. Traditional media (e.g., television, radio) enable a sporadic presence by scheduling flights of media to coincide with specific firm goals (e.g., increased sales at Christmas). In contrast, social interactions must be consistent in message content, timing, and tone. Two participants suggested that managers should be careful not to portray the brand as 'Sybil'—referencing a movie in which the main actor has three distinctly different personalities. Geof (Agency, Variety of Industries) provided an example of how managers must speak to different segments while also remaining true to the brand essence:

> We can't afford to be Sybil in how customers see us marketing ourselves. . . .For instance, right now I'm talking to you in an academic setting. . . .If I ran into you at a pub somewhere, I would expect you to be authentic to who you are, and we probably wouldn't be having the same type of conversation. But I would expect the continuity to be there. And that fabric of who you are would come out consistently.

Our participants acknowledged that social media responsibilities are often relegated to employees who volunteer to manage the brand's social presence. However, such a strategy may backfire when the volunteer doesn't fully understand the brand's essence (Armano, 2010). Integration is not a new concept in the realm of marketing communications, though social media adds an additional layer of complexity in managing a brand image. Adam (Eyeglass Industry) discussed how his firm incorporates social media in the overall communications plan:

> Part of the goal we have is that we're basically following a process and a cadence around our marketing campaigns. And the basic essence of that is we come up with a big idea. . .and then allow the various functions within the marketing team to [identify ways] they can support that. And one of those will always be a social

channel and how we are tying them together. . . .Because what you want to do is support and strengthen the overall campaign based on how everything fits together.

Social channels should be viewed as an additional, complementary tool in the customer dialogue toolbox. A firm's social media authors should intimately understand the brand's essence and be able to communicate with customers in a manner that aligns with the brand personality. Furthermore, additional efforts should be made to ensure the tone and content is similar across authors when more than one employee is responsible for writing the social media content.

3.2.2. Customization

To generate engagement, social media messages should be tailored and relevant to the customer's present needs, relationship with the firm (i.e., customer, prospect, fan), and strengths of the particular platform. Historically, managers have utilized different media to achieve the same objectives (i.e., build awareness, increase purchase intent) in an effort to move customers through the decision funnel. Social media strategies can support organizational goals by identifying the user's purpose for engaging with the brand and moving the user through the decision process in relevant ways. Social channels serve a distinct benefit, as compared to existing traditional media channels, in that utilizing social media at specific touchpoints can help brand managers direct customers and prospects to an online location matching the consumer's interests and needs. Furthermore, the flexibility of online channels allows brand managers to do this in a more efficient manner. Janna (Agency) emphasized an integrated approach to incorporating social media and a broader digital component into the overall marketing communications plan:

> Sometimes, we'll start with bigger goals and then think about how we're going to execute them. Social may bring an idea to execute against a consumer journey, and we're going to touch this part of it—post purchase, for instance. Right at that post purchase moment, what do we want consumers to do? That is a different place than a TV spot that would maybe be all about bringing a consumer into a journey. So, think about how we might use different media platforms and where it might fall in the funnel. If we look at it like that, it's like matching luggage. Other times, you have socially led campaigns where other media support it—where social is the focus and everyone else is stepping in to provide matching luggage.

The goals of the communication plan are likely to distinguish which media lead an initiative, although the prevalence of social media usage by consumers suggests that this dynamic medium should play a role in every communications plan.

To understand customer motivations, brand managers are identifying unique ways to engage consumers on social platforms in ways that speak directly to their motivations for interacting with the firm. Savvy managers are able to customize social media in such a way that the channel offers added value to the customer. Geof (Agency) shared his personal experience in watching a favorite television show:

> We still want to watch TV with our friends. Nowadays, when I'm watching *American Horror Story*, I've got Twitter up as I'm watching it. It reminds me of like, in college, when women would get together to watch *General Hospital* and all talk about it while it's on. Same thing here. People are making hysterical comments while it's going on. Now it's a community of people I don't know, but we all have the same interests. There's still a need for the TV experience. And there's going to be a need for other media. But it's all morphing into one.

Universal McCann (2014) found that more than 40% of survey respondents utilize multiple technologies (i.e., mobile phones, tablets) while consuming traditional media (e.g., TV, magazine). As social media is woven further into the fabric of daily living, a customized approach to different social media platforms can facilitate deeper connections with customers at different decision points in their purchase journey.

3.2.3. Commitment

Prior to committing to a social platform, brand managers must understand the type of users and conversations that are being conducted within the platform. Commitment reflects a need to commit to both the platform and the audience engaging with the brand on the platform. Simply because a platform is new or interesting does not necessitate a firm's presence on a platform, as infrequent maintenance of content reflects more poorly on the firm than no presence at all. Brand managers interested in developing a presence on a social media platform (e.g., Facebook) must understand that such a commitment requires content to be maintained and updated frequently. Participants acknowledged the challenge of maintaining a presence on selected channels. Janna (Agency) discussed her concerns:

> Just because it's a bright, shiny new object doesn't mean you need to play on it. And it

doesn't mean that you need to commit to it. Because once you commit to being on that [social media] platform, you're going to build relationships and you have to maintain that content. There's nothing worse than building a [web]page and relationships and then not maintaining the content. It looks bad for a brand if the last thing that was posted was 6 months ago. Either commit to maintaining content and managing those relationships, or don't start it in the first place.

Whereas popularity of TV and radio has existed for decades, the popularity of individual social media platforms is likely to change much more quickly. In May 2008, MySpace represented 74% of social networking traffic, with Facebook claiming only 15% of the market share (Catone, 2008). One year later, Facebook visits were double that of MySpace (Cutler, 2009). Pinterest and Twitter were nonexistent in 2007, but now represent two of the top five social media sites (Dugan, 2012). The speed with which a social platform can rise to popularity can also indicate the speed with which it may be replaced. Chad (Agency, Variety of Industries) shared his thoughts on emerging technology:

> There are always going to be social platforms that appeal to broad audiences—like Facebook. However, there will also be niche platforms that come and go with time that offer users different functionality. We don't encourage our clients to get on the bandwagon with every platform that comes along. Decisions about which platforms to participate in should be driven by the number of the client's *customers* using the platform as well as the goals of the firm.

Brand managers are encouraged to utilize a number of social channels in building relationships while keeping in mind that it is less important for a brand to be represented on every platform than it is for a brand to be well represented on a few popular platforms that are closely aligned with consumers' needs and the firm's strategic goals.

3.2.4. Caution

Participants were quick to offer points of caution in crafting a digital strategy, and anecdotal evidence of social media disasters were often mentioned during interviews (Calderon, 2013). A concern echoed by several participants involved reacting to a vocal subset of the customer base, assuming they represent the majority of customers. Although social channels can offer additional insights, the opinions shared on social platforms may not reflect the

opinions of a majority of customers. Adam (Eyeglass Industry) discussed his thoughts:

> It's always interesting to gain insight into how customers on the extreme are speaking. . . .You get this extreme perspective of people who really love you or people who really hate you. Those are the ones that are going to have a dialogue by and large. . . .So you always have to take that into consideration. I ask myself if this is really an extreme view of something or if it's a view that the mainstream would adopt.

Consumers have embraced social channels as a tool to vent personal frustrations in a public space, with an expectation of resolution from the firm. As Adam pointed out, firms must evaluate commentary in social channels to determine whether a change in strategy is necessary. Ray (Railroad Industry) shared his experience in reacting to complaints in a social channel:

> We tend to listen to the loudest voice, and the loudest voice has a much larger representation, although it might not represent the majority. As an example, there was this big outcry because we were advertising on [a right-leaning political program]. Just for fun, I went and looked at who posted. It was people who were fans of [left-wing politics]. I got the strong sense that it was a targeted effort at any brand that was advertising on [the program]. I spoke to my agency, and they saw the same thing happening across other brands that were advertising on [the program]. . . .So we pulled the plug on the program. Then, we had a lot of people who had been silent now saying, "Why did you do that? All you're doing is caving in. Don't you know that most of us listen to [the program]?" There was this backlash for taking action on the vocal minority and the silent majority was now outraged. So now they became vocal. They reached their tipping point and went from silent to vocal because they thought we were caving in.

Ray's example illustrates the challenges that managers face in determining how to respond to customer commentary in social media. Furthermore, because many social media sites allow individuals to post anonymously, managers may believe that similar comments are being posted by multiple individuals when in fact it is only one individual making multiple comments of a similar nature (Patino, Pitta, & Quinones, 2012). Managers must listen and take measured action regarding social commentary.

Somewhat surprisingly, our research found that some firms still exhibit caution incorporating social features into the firm's business model. Isabella (Women's Undergarment Industry) discussed her firm's hesitation to incorporate customer product reviews into its website:

> One thing that we don't have is product reviews on the website. . . .A lot of [our] products are reviewed on other websites, so I've tried to get approval to put the product reviews on our website, because it's going to be said somewhere else anyway, even if it's not said on our website. . . .I'm sure they'll eventually add product reviews on the website, but it's not an easy thing to manage. If you can come up with a list of things that you don't want people to say, things can get filtered out. But it is tedious and time-consuming. Someone always has to keep their eye on it and make sure something doesn't slip through—or someone has to go in and approve comments so that they can go live. It's a big job for someone, and we're a small company.

Isabella recognized that comments are being made about the company's products on other sites, though her senior leadership team is unwilling to facilitate the product review process. Her company's management team feels the risk of damage from a small number of negative comments outweighs the potential benefits of sharing customer reviews on the company's website.

A final point of caution that was shared by many interview participants is related to the messaging shared through social channels. In contrast to traditional media, social media provides companies with an opportunity to listen and respond to customers in an intimate, personalized tone. That being said, brand managers should be mindful that social media is a very private space; sales pitches from advertisers are unwanted and may result in backlash from consumers who feel violated. Janna (Agency) shared her philosophy on developing social media content:

> If we entered every relationship with "I'm gonna try to get you to do something. . . ." we'd be a bunch of lonely people. No one wants to be friends with a bunch of carny barkers: "Step right up; let me sell you something. . . ." We encourage our clients to use social to learn more about their customers so they can respond with products that meet customer needs. Sales should not be the goal of a social campaign.

Our participants echoed Orsburn's (2012) suggestion that no more than 20% of a firm's content should ask the customer to do something; the remaining 80% should be used to inform, entertain, and interact with customers.

4. Tools for social media management

Platform and integration management strategies present a challenge to even the most astute managers. Implementing a social media calendar to manage the ongoing communications should be a basic component of any firm's social strategy. Such a calendar can ensure that the communication plan meets the 4 C's and also offers content aligned with the various audience needs across different platforms. Social media dashboards can enhance the impact of content posted on a given platform and provide metrics to compare effectiveness across platforms. Finally, an escalation protocol and detailed brand essence description can offer a solution for quickly responding to customers in the social sphere. We briefly explain each of these concepts in the following section.

4.1. Social media calendar

A recent CMO Survey (2014) of marketers at top organizations found that social media spending as a percent of the overall marketing budget is expected to more than double over the next 5 years, making its proper management of prime importance. It has been suggested that a successful social media strategy should be monitored to ensure that content aligns with the firm's corporate and communications objectives (Wollan, Smith, & Zhou, 2010). The CMO Survey found that many marketers feel their firm's social media presence is poorly aligned with the company's overall marketing strategy, a finding that was supported by our research.

A social media content calendar can facilitate alignment with the firm's core marketing strategies, ensuring that the engagement tactics employed on social media platforms reflect the firm's overarching organizational and communication goals. Once a firm has established key performance indicators for its social media presence, a monthly calendar with daily detail is beneficial to see the bigger picture as well as specific details. To visualize the relationship between the content strategies and the firm's goals, the calendar should include a section for daily verbatim posts for each platform, as well as key performance indicators related to the social media strategy. With the monthly view, managers can quickly determine communication gaps, ensuring that each platform maintains a consistent presence. Within the daily view, managers can easily assess the customization and caution elements of the content and ensure the content relates to the purpose identified for the platform.

4.2. Social media dashboards

The CMO Survey (2014) found that an astonishing 45% of respondents were unable to demonstrate an impact from their social media strategies. Social media dashboards are a critical tool for insight and direction of successful social media campaigns (Murdough, 2009). Dashboards (e.g., Hootsuite) offer a host of tools that enable users to better understand audience engagement with the content and measure the effectiveness of particular strategies. Hootsuite allows firms to pre-schedule posts in a variety of platforms to ensure that communications are consistent. Built-in dashboard analytics often offer deeper analysis than individual platform metrics, allowing managers to better understand variations in message performance based on time of day, day of the week, audience, and engagement metrics. Dashboards also facilitate comparisons across platforms to ensure that individual social media platforms are delivering appropriate audience engagement.

4.3. Escalation protocols

Social media disasters have become fodder for the evening news, resulting in firms' heightened concern for dealing with disgruntled customers. The CMO Survey (2014) showed a downward trend in internal employees managing social media responsibilities, while external employee management of the same has remained fairly consistent. This trend may suggest that more firms are shifting social media responsibilities to an external entity. If a company chooses to shift daily management of social interactions to an outside firm, managers should seek a firm with specialized knowledge of the local marketplace and ensure that a well-developed escalation protocol is in place to deal with customer issues. Developing a mitigation plan during a social media firestorm can leave employees and the company scrambling for an acceptable response.

An escalation protocol can facilitate quick, effective responses to customers seeking remedy through social media outlets. At a minimum, the escalation protocol should offer examples for positive, neutral, negative, and urgent audience comments, as well as a time frame for responding to each type of comment. Protocols should also include the contact information of senior management to be alerted in the event of an urgent situation. Kietzmann et al. (2011) suggested that the sooner the response, the better, and that expedited management of customer complaints can sometimes result in resolution of the issue before the consumer completes the interaction. Even when firms are

unable to resolve issues immediately, an escalation protocol may help diminish negativity or longer-term repercussions.

4.4. Brand essence description

Brands can be seen as having specific personality traits (Aaker, 1997), and a strong branding strategy will highlight the features that form the essence of that brand (Van Rekom, Jacobs, & Verlegh, 2006). Therefore, we propose that a formal description of the brand's personality traits be provided to the social media team to guide employees' responses on a social platform. The description should be thorough and include suggestions as to response characteristics that are appropriate or inappropriate. Development of a brand essence document can ensure that all entities who shape a brand's online presence are working cohesively to ensure a singular tone and personality reflective of the desired brand characteristics.

5. Integrating the message

Understanding the nuances of a particular social media platform can help managers carefully select the platforms that are most closely aligned with the strategic communications plan, thereby creating a unique opportunity for the firm to interact with consumers in a way that is mutually beneficial. For instance, Pinterest offers opportunities for brand managers in industries that are fashion-focused, though the site may not be impactful for other business segments, such as the transportation industry. Facebook has become a universal 'check box' for firms in the B2C realm, though LinkedIn is widely utilized for B2B interactions. Prior to developing a brand presence within a particular platform, managers must consider the ongoing management of the brand in the space. Customer questions that remain unanswered in a public forum reflect poorly on the brand and can leave customers feeling as though they have been ignored. Likewise, webpages that aren't updated regularly may quickly become outmoded and create consumer concerns regarding whether the firm is fully engaged with consumers.

A firm's social media communications strategy should step beyond a manager's desire to be in a particular social space. Going social requires tremendous involvement and responsiveness to consumers on a regular basis. Even though the challenges of managing conversations controlled by others may seem daunting, the benefits of listening to customers far outweigh any potential risks. Customers are willing to share their thoughts

and experiences through social media, and the knowledge gained from listening to these experiences can help brand managers develop a next-generation product aligned with consumer needs.

The trend in social media management suggests that internal management of social media responsibilities is on the decline (CMO Survey, 2014). Our research found that brand management responsibilities are often divided between digital agencies with specialized social media knowledge and traditional agencies that are responsible for shaping the brand essence and developing an advertising presence in traditional media. While there are benefits to specialized knowledge, managers should be cautious in parsing out brand management responsibilities amongst different agencies; a dual agency approach could lead to integration and consistency issues across media. As such, managers should carefully consider the implications of a dual-agency arrangement and ensure that all parties have a strong working relationship in order to maintain a cohesive presence across all media. Our proposed tools can facilitate cross-agency collaboration and consistency throughout the broader marketing communications framework.

6. Future directions for tomorrow's social media managers

The present research is based on the opinions, strategies, and experiences of seven individuals who have worked in the digital realm for years. While our participants' knowledge base and industry experience is vast, further insight could be gathered from additional interviews. From a strategic standpoint, social media is thought to be in its infancy; new sites and opportunities for firm collaborations are being developed each year. Thus, the evolving nature of social media suggests that the issues raised today may be overcome tomorrow, only to be replaced by new issues. As social platforms continue to develop, niche platforms are emerging. Platforms that were nonexistent 2 years ago now have millions of users. Brand managers must be adept at recognizing the strengths of different platforms and utilizing those strengths to further the customer-brand relationship in this very personal space.

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