



Social media: What next?

By now, most will acknowledge social media is here to stay. What can we expect and how do companies stay ahead? A digital strategist and former social media manager of The New York Times shares her views.

You only need to look at the numbers to know that social media is here to stay. Two hundred million new users joined Facebook in the last year alone growing the massive social networking site to 800 million active users. Career networking site LinkedIn reported 131 million users last year, Twitter touched 100 million, and there are many other sizable and niche nuanced social media players.

So what next for social media and how do companies and brands engage more strategically amid the plethora of established and emerging platforms?

In a recent marketing campaign, Swedish clothing retailer H&M and a mobile application called GoldRun created a virtual photo scavenger hunt allowing users to take a picture, using GPS-synced smartphones, of virtual items that appeared in front of certain H&M stores in Manhattan. Doing so unlocked a 10 percent discount for an in-store purchase. Then, with photo integration, shoppers could see how they looked in those clothes and upload the altered images onto the social networking site Facebook to share with friends.

Augmenting reality

It's called "augmented reality" and may well be the

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next big wave to hit social media. That's according to Soraya Darabi, a digital strategist and co-founder of Food Spotting, a location-based mobile application which lets users upload and share pictures of their favourite dishes. Augmented reality is feeling virtually connected to something in the real world without being physically present, explains Darabi in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge at the World Knowledge Forum in Seoul. H&M's virtual scavenger hunt is just one aspect of augmented reality as a marketing tool - it really extends to a myriad of services. Add social media and it opens up a whole new set of possibilities.

"It's really the beginning of a location-based information revolution," continues the 27-year old Darabi, noting the growing popularity of geo-location mobile applications such as Foursquare, Social Loop, Gowalla, that share information based on physical location. On Foursquare, you "check in" through your mobile application and friends synced via your social network are immediately notified. Launched in 2009, Foursquare reported a billion "checks ins" through December. "You will be hard pressed to see an application emerge that doesn't have some sort of component that doesn't involve location." says Darabi. Meanwhile, smartphones and mobile technology and applications will continue to be key drivers for social media. "2011 was the first

year there were more smartphones than clean water,” she highlights. “We have to also be particularly cognisant of the fact the developing world is now online for the first time in a significant real-time way. The recent revolutions in the Middle East and the Arab Spring owes itself entirely to the new use of social media on the ground.”

Companies and brands - whether it's a Fortune 500 organisation or neighbourhood retailer - are responding to social media in a big way creating targeted marketing campaigns on social networks and increasing interactions and engagement with audiences. Foursquare, for instance, allows businesses to advertise promotions when a customer checks in; around 500,000 merchants already use the service. Scoot, a budget airline subsidiary of Singapore Airlines, has garnered about 28,000 fans on Facebook since its marketing launch in November. The airline doesn't begin flying until mid-2012 but they are drumming up the brand by inviting fans to participate and then vote on an official slogan challenge. Darabi, who advises companies like General Electric, ABC News as well as start-ups, emphasises the value of social networks to young companies that often lack marketing budgets.

The beta approach

How does she advise organisations on where to focus their social media efforts? “It really depends on the people with whom I work,” says Darabi. “I suggest they test out all the platforms that hit particular verticals of their business. With ABC news, she recommended they participate in all platforms that are garnering the most interest in news. Apart from the social media giants, it included the photo-sharing mobile application Instagram “where people are sharing and viewing photos to understand what's happening on the ground” and Livestream, a video provider for real time event coverage. “What I advise companies to do is think about social media as one big experiment.” She calls this the beta approach. It's “selecting platforms that are scaling quite rapidly, testing [these platforms] lightly, making sure you understand new mediums before other people do, having a first-to-market advantage and ultimately experimenting. There is a niche and nuanced social media company for everyone.”

“Embracing social networks implies accepting their experimental nature,” affirms **Axel Tagliavini**, Associate Director of Communications at INSEAD responsible for the business school's institutional social media. With LinkedIn, for instance, INSEAD is using a new set of tools deployed to develop a customised company page that automatically adapts to each user, displaying relevant INSEAD programmes based on the information in their user

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profiles. INSEAD's programmes are also listed under a 'Product & Services' tab, which allows participants to share and recommend them directly. “Prospective students and participants learn about the INSEAD culture in an authentic manner, straight from the source, allowing the INSEAD experience to go viral,” explains Tagliavini. “These cost-effective media channels generate real-time data and offer unique opportunities to engage with people. They fill the communication gaps of traditional websites by delivering a type of value other institutional channels cannot.”

Does Darabi expect Facebook, the world's largest social network, to be around in 10 years? “Facebook has become the yellow pages of the Internet, our identity begins there and is predicated there,” she responds. Moreover, Facebook Connect - a universal login system enabling access to third party sites with a Facebook username and password - is incredibly relevant, she adds, because it makes Facebook ubiquitous. “It's everywhere. Facebook will be a brand in 10 years, that's for sure.”

At 23, Darabi was hired by the The New York Times to launch their social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube Tumblr, Foursquare, and began experimenting with social media on behalf of the 160-year old institution. With around 420,000 followers on Twitter, some 30,000 subscribers on Facebook and sizable networks in other online communities, one might credit her strong personal brand. She, however, disagrees. “I used Twitter as one of the only voices of The New York Times which is how I [gained] so many followers,” she clarifies. “If I wanted to create more of a personal brand, I'd use these platforms much more as marketing vessels, talking specifically about my clients or a startup I'm advising,” she adds. But being a personal brand is not important, she says, being authentic online is. “I don't think the number of followers one has is a direct measure of success online. It's really about how you engage with your community.”

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