
What do Voltaire and Social Media Have in Common?



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“We must cultivate our garden.” - Candide, Voltaire, 1759

If Voltaire’s precept was destined to guide his readers to find happiness, it is also very well suited for companies in search of new social media successes. Indeed, a common trait among many of the recent successful social media campaigns is companies’ ability to create and sustain an online culture around their brands – in other words, their ability to “cultivate their own garden”.

Culture is hard to define. Originally coming from Latin cultura (lit. “cultivation”), it then came to reflect in the 18th and 19th centuries the notion that as cultivation in agriculture enhances crop yield, so can education and fulfilment of common aspirations or ideals enhance community members’ “quality”. It mainly consists of three building blocks: a language that supports communication among community members (a social base), a set of goals that community members aspire to (a social engine), and a set of codified interactions or rituals based on shared symbols

that guide actions (a social glue).

A new era of interaction

Before the arrival of social media, the success of iconic brands such as Harley Davidson, Apple, Starbucks or Marlboro often relied on their association with existing consumer subcultures (for example, hippie culture, pop culture, etc.) or strong ideals (for example, creativity and design for Apple). One big limitation in the offline world was the difficulty to sustain brand cultures without direct means of communication between its constituents (i.e., consumers).

But this period is over. The eruption of social media platforms represents a unique tool to keep brands alive. By providing platforms where people interact with one another, social media offers a major opportunity for brands to create and sustain their own culture. In other words, social media magnifies how consumers “live” brands, rather than showcasing brand messages (old, mass media).

Keeping brands alive

The key to success thus lies in companies’ ability to keep brands alive, by creating and sustaining a culture around the product. Brand cultures are now built by consumers and their experiences, not by brand managers. To this point, Coca-Cola’s Facebook page was originally created by individual consumers, and not by the brand itself. The question is thus how brands can connect with consumers on social media to create a culture around their products or services. Often, brands attempt to piggyback on existing cultural successes or trends.

Recently, big brands such as Intel, M&M’s or Red Bull Racing attempted to leverage the worldwide hit “Gangnam Style” video. Intel included a person wearing an Intel shirt doing the similar horse dance as PSY. M&M’s posted a

similar picture featuring the iconic Red character with the caption “Gangnam Style? More like Red-nam style! – Red”. Finally, the Red Bull F1 racing team received a public dance lesson from PSY himself at the F1 Korea Grand Prix. While this approach can gain consumers’ attention in the short term (for example, the Intel man has more than 500,000 likes, 41,000 shares and 13,000 comments since September 2012), it is less clear how these brands will benefit financially from these initiatives in the long run.

A more demanding, yet more rewarding strategy consists of creating a completely new online culture around the product(s). This strategy typically involves undertaking three complementary actions:

Creating a common language

First, companies must create a common language – a social base – for their products and how consumers use them. Some brands, like Old Spice Swagger, chose existing words close to their core value proposition and positioning to communicate confidence in an interactive way. The new product was named Swagger and a number of playful activities were organised around this language to talk about the brand. For instance, consumers could “swaggerise” themselves by registering on a website that would automatically generate (fake) stories about how they managed to save a baby dolphin in the ocean while stopping a fire in the countryside or preventing two trains from colliding in their hometown. Another activity invited consumers to “swaggerise their wallet” by asking them to generate ads featuring the product. Thus, Old Spice’s choice of language was key in implementing a “swagger” culture, to reinforce the idea that the product is about confidence.

At times, brands can also merge with existing language to signal the nature of the culture they create. For instance, Mountain Dew’s “Dewmocracy” movement aimed to reinforce the idea that the product is the “people’s DEW”. Choosing the right brand language is an important step as it will be

key in determining the online momentum of conversations as well as the quality of their content (for example, online videos, conversations etc.). When choosing the elements of language, particular importance should be paid to 1) how easy it will be for consumers to use them (for example, simple sounds and spelling); 2) how easy it will be for consumers to modify them (for example, by using it as a verb) and thus nurture the culture by producing new elements of language derived from the initial ones; and 3) how easy it will be to map new activities based on these elements of language.

Setting community goals

Second, a winning campaign requires brands to clearly specify the common or individual goals for people to pursue within the campaign (the social engine). To do so, companies should carefully take into account individual motivations, as well as craft a goal that is both achievable, and respectful of two parties. This will determine consumers' level of appetite to engage in the community.

This balance is best illustrated by how a young executive, Evan Guttman, once crafted a message online to convince his audience to help retrieve a friend's phone that she had left in the back seat of a taxi. The phone had been taken by the next taxi passenger who had later refused to return the phone when she had been tracked down. This anecdote narrated by Clay Shirky in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008) showcased how Guttman cleverly portrayed the task as a communal endeavor rather than an individual one, publicly noting, "This is not a religious endeavour or a moral endeavour... this is a HUMANITY endeavour. I want these people SHAMED into realizing what they have done." Key to his success, Guttman carefully avoided talking about money and instead talked about a sense of justice.

Like Guttman, brands in social media need to implement goals that achieve such a balance, speak to all but engage individuals on the goal to successfully generate online engagement. When choosing common or

individual goals at the core of the campaign, particular importance should be paid to the following:

1. How easy the goal is for people to understand
2. How easy the goal will be for consumers to modify (for example, by using it as a verb) and thus nurture the culture by producing new elements of language derived from the initial ones
3. How easy the goal will be to map new activities based on these elements of language

Developing a social glue

Third, crafting a successful social media campaign entails imagining the set of codified interactions or rituals on which people will develop and share content (i.e., a social glue). These are based on shared symbols. For instance, as part of Ford's Fiesta Movement, the carmaker put forward seven themes (Technology, Travel, Style/Design, Social Activism, Adventure and Entertainment) as part of its seedling campaign for the car. The company's chosen 100 influencers then had to build short videos featuring the car living the themes. Key to the campaign's success was that Ford chose themes that were aligned with Ford Fiesta's strength (its design, urban, fun and hip look). This triggered the development of thousands of user-generated videos that set the stage for the product's cultural grounding. For example, in several of these videos, users went as far as drawing a series of large mural paintings in metropolitan areas. In other videos, groups of people gathered in a Ford Fiesta and interpreted musical pieces (a mix of classical music and rap).

Another important step in designing the interactions lies in organising the community's hierarchy – how many leaders/influencers are needed? How many tiers should you include in the online community (for example, only

normal and “premier members” or normal, “premier” and “super-premier” members)? Ford only chose two tiers but more could be implemented depending on the nature and goal of the campaigns.

The activities proposed should also have a “ritual” aspect to them, in order to systematise the cultural elements. For instance Blendtec’s viral video, portraying objects doomed to be blended, famously starts by asking the question “will it blend?” with the same music playing in the background each time. Overall, when choosing the nature of interactions for a campaign, particular importance should be paid to 1) what types of activity should consumers engage in; 2) to what extent and how should community members be differentiated; and 3) how should community members be rewarded for engaging in the campaign? (publicly versus privately; monetary compensation versus non-monetary compensation, etc.)

Winning social strategies

In a marketplace where social media hits and misses are often difficult to predict, the cultural approach offers a framework that synthesises the common elements to create winning social strategies. Essential to the campaign is how managers think about their social base, social engine and social glue when designing the campaign. It takes a lot for a brand to create a true culture, which is much more than merely echoing fashion or momentary trends. But there are significant benefits to be reaped. Swagger enjoyed sales growth for years following its campaign, with almost zero support from the company. Blendtec increased its turnover by 700 percent. Given such opportunities, companies should not think twice about creating online engagement. Marketers, cultivate your gardens!



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