

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEARING THE VOICE OF THE CONSUMER

Sponsored by:



American Marketing Association–St. Louis Chapter White Paper #11  
by Lon Zimmerman, Zimmerman Marketing Research

The new social media, they are virtually impossible to ignore. Everywhere you turn, you hear about these new social networking and social media websites: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Digg, and Delicious. It looks like they are taking over the marketing world. And, if you are not already using

them, it's likely your boss is asking, why not?

The St. Louis AMA recently conducted a roundtable discussion with local marketing executives on how they utilize the new social media to hear the voice of the consumer. This discussion was the eleventh in a series sponsored by the AMA.

## PARTICIPANTS IN THIS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION INCLUDED:

*Ms. Katie Chatfield*  
Marketing & Comm. Specialist  
Delta Dental of Missouri

*Mr. Brant Gilbert*  
Marketing Manager  
Land O' Lakes Purina Feed

*Mr. Randy Niederer*  
Director of Marketing  
Unico, Inc.

*Ms. Patt Christie*  
Manager, Interactive Comm. & Tech.  
BJC HealthCare

*Ms. Shelley Hammann*  
Marketing Assistant  
Negwer Materials

*Mr. Jeff Whetstine*  
VP Global Marketing  
AGROTAIN International

*Ms. Terra Corno*  
Assistant Brand Manager  
Triumph Pharmaceuticals

*Ms. Arelia Jones*  
Executive MBA Program Coordinator  
Washington University

*Ms. Debra Williams*  
Executive MBA Program  
Director of Admissions & Marketing  
Washington University

*Ms. Aimee Davis*  
Global Marcom Manager  
Saflex, a unit of Solutia Inc.

*Ms. Rosina Margiotta*  
Director of Marketing  
Paric Corporation

*Mr. Travis Wools*  
Director of Marketing  
TLCVision Corp.

*Ms. Monica Green*  
Community and Media Relations  
Delta Dental of Missouri

*Mr. Rich Muth*  
Director of Marketing  
Triumph Pharmaceuticals

The Roundtable was held June 29, 2009 and was moderated by Mr. Lon Zimmerman of Zimmerman Marketing Research.

## THE NEW SOCIAL MEDIA

Participants in the roundtable agree that the new social media comes in a number of categories. Among them are the following:

- *Social Networking Sites:*  
*Facebook, My Space, LinkedIn*
- *Social Book Marking:*  
*Digg, StumbleUpon, Delicious*
- *Micro-blogging:*  
*Twitter, Blogging, YouTube*

While roundtable participants want to use social media to help them understand the voice of the consumer, currently most appear more comfortable using social media as an outreach tool rather than as an input tool.

*We are pretty much in our infancy with this. At this point I'm just using it as one piece of the puzzle. We are using it for outreach. At this point, it's not big enough for us yet to say, 'Oh, I see a trend so we need to rethink that.' I don't know, is anybody else at that point where you are seeing trends? I'm just not there yet.*

*I am using it for outreach, just a sort of getting a dialogue going. I'm seeing a lot more of that than I am an incoming message. For us it's young, it's developing, it's growing. Eventually, maybe we will get to that point. But I don't think we are there yet.*

## BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The new social media offer users a number of benefits. Among them are the following:

### 1. Opportunity to Dialogue with Consumers

According to the participants, the primary benefit of the new social media is that they enable corporations to open a dialogue with consumers.

*It opens the opportunity for a two-way conversation.*

*You can gain insight into truly what they consider to be important and what they want to talk about, rather than as a marketer, what I want to talk about, my agenda.*

*You get comments going back and forth. You get a feel for what it is they are looking for. We were surprised that we got as much feedback as we did.*

### 2. Instant Feedback

Another benefit is the speed at which companies are able to receive feedback. One can ask a question and get an almost immediate response.

*You can get feedback instantly.*

*It's a continual flow of communication. They are not waiting until twice a year when you do your survey.*

### 3. Targets People Interested in Category

The new media can be a lot more focused. It offers an opportunity to reach out to consumers who have a strong interest in your product category and perhaps even your brand.

*An opportunity to reach so many more consumers and they are usually interested in the topic. So rather than trying to carpet bomb everybody, you are talking to people who are really interested.*

### 4. Opportunity to Respond to Complaints

Another benefit is that it affords an opportunity for service recovery.

*Consider it an opportunity to sort of diffuse a negative experience. You have a customer, instead of telling 45 people about their negative experience with your company, they write about it on the blog and then you have an opportunity to respond and make it right.*

## LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Participants also recognize that social media has a number of limitations. Among them, the following:

### 1. Requires Commitment of Time and Resources

While social media may not appear to require a major financial investment, they do require a major commitment of time and resources, as these sites need to be maintained and closely monitored.

*As much as you can save in terms of budget dollars, you more than spend in terms of time commitment. It's very challenging to explain this to organizations.*

*It's a huge time investment. While the financial investment may not be there, the other problem is tracking results. It evolves to take on time without a clear strategy. It's really difficult to tell what that is giving you in return.*

*You can get feedback instantly but the problem is if the consumer needs a response from you, you have to be on it so that you can respond quickly.*

### 2. Return on Investment Hard to Quantify

Many find it difficult to quantify their return on investment with social media.

*I've got my agency telling me I've got to be in social media but I've got to be in print and I've got to be in magazines and on the radio. I have to ask, 'What is my return?' If I can't justify it, then my boss is going to say why are you spending the money there? Are we getting customers and sales out of it? At the end of the day I can't just tell him I think I am. Is there really a return on this?*

*We are looking at things like You Tube. But again, at the end of the day it's hard to determine whether our action really has any influence.*

### **3. Questionable Veracity**

Many feel it is difficult to accept the veracity of the feedback since one usually doesn't know the individuals and the agendas of those participating in the various social media. This input is good fodder for opening a dialogue but you may not want to base major decisions on it.

*How do I evaluate the veracity of the information as far as impacting my product and making decisions based on this feedback? With a healthy dose of skepticism.*

### **4. Less Control Over Message**

When using social media, one has to be willing to relinquish control over their message, much more than they are used to with traditional media. One has to trust that their customers are going to say nice things about them.

*So there is a level of trust. You can't say, 'okay we are going to be out there' and then try to control the message. You have to really let your customers control the message. So there has got to be that trust that you are confident that your customers are in fact going to say nice things about you.*

*You have to acknowledge that you are going to be relinquishing a portion of the control of your ultimate brand image, your ultimate message that you have been putting out there in traditional marketing ways. When you are entering this world, you are going to be giving up that very concentrated control because you will have so much interaction and so many other voices that are impacting that message. You just kind of have to embrace that.*

### **5. Lacking in Security**

As the social media sites are open to the public, one needs to assume that the competition is monitoring your activity. For that reason you have to be careful of what you post and who you share information with.

*You need to assume that your competitors are out there tracking what you are doing. For instance we are looking at a new package. Even on Facebook, we only have about fifty or sixty fans and we don't know who all these people are, really. The last thing we want to do is send a survey or something out to them showing our new packaging because you just assume that your competition is going to get a hold of it. You just have to be careful what you post.*

*I think on the B2B side too there could be a reluctance for businesses to discuss publicly issues or problems they are having with their product because that can tip off their competition to some of their trade secrets or issues they have with manufacturing processes and things like that. To put down a post about something may give too much information to a competitor.*

### **6. Takes Time and Effort to Build to Scale**

Creating up a bunch of raving fans or followers takes time and effort. Unless one is particularly lucky, it's not going to occur overnight.

*I think you have to be patient to let it grow organically. We want to build this thing. We want a thousand followers and we want it today. The truth of the matter is that it takes time.*

*You can Twitter all you want but if you don't have any followers, it doesn't make any sense. You can have two friends on Facebook. Well, that is not going to get you very far, even if you are saying something every five minutes.*

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AS REPLACEMENT FOR MARKETING RESEARCH**

None of the participants believe that social media is going to replace traditional marketing research, at least not any time soon, due to concerns about veracity and the lack of security. In general they are more interested in using it for input than for testing. They do perceive it as being helpful in raising issues and alerting management to problems and opportunities. A few also see it as a place to screen and potentially recruit target respondents for traditional marketing research.

*I don't think anything can replace some solid market research or focus groups or telephone surveys or whatever it is. You don't know who those people are out there who are your friends on Facebook or who are following you on Twitter. If it's not your demographic, it's not your demographic.*

*I don't think so. You just have to be careful what you post on social media. You need to assume that your competitors are out there tracking what you are doing.*

*I don't know if it will replace everything. The net is a bigger threat for replacing focus groups because you can do some much of this stuff via email or different links where you can go it and go through a series of questions. This is just your group. This is just one big pot of people you can pick from to get that out of.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The marketing executives offered a number of recommendations for those thinking of getting involved with social media.

### 1. Plan on Adding Staff

To be successful with social media, you need to have adequate staffing in place to monitor the sites and respond to any questions or complaints. Having a dialogue with the consumer means having someone there to listen to the consumer and to represent your company in that dialogue.

*You almost have to hire another staff person just to keep up with the blog and everything else you are doing with social media. You don't want your clients to think bad of you if they see one entry and then a month later there is nothing. You will have to hire a new person.*

### 2. Content is important

Having interesting content is crucial. You have to offer content that will encourage people to return to your Facebook page or to follow your tweets.

*You have to be engaging and entertaining, without being in your face selling.*

*You've got to keep the content fresh. If you go away and you don't talk about it, then they are not going to come back to your site. You have to keep feeding them stuff, even if its just little things.*

### 3. Prepare Content in Advance

It typically makes sense to prepare material in advance so it's ready to use. Some report preparing a year's worth of content in advance.

*At the beginning of the year we prepare all the tweets and Facebook posts for the entire year. So as you are putting together a strategy, go to the well one time, would be my comment to you. Make sure that they have it all done. Then you just push the button and have it go out there. We post weekly or bi-weekly with the content we have.*

## 4. Disclose Your Affiliation

To avoid PR disasters it is essential that you be honest and disclose who you are and your affiliations.

*One of the things that we have learned here is that it's important to be honest and disclose who you are and who they are in this process. The reason people are out there is because they don't feel like they are being sold to. They feel like they are interacting with other (product) lovers. You don't ever want to come across as trying to sell them something.*

***For more information about this or future St. Louis AMA Marketers Roundtable Discussions, contact the Roundtable Chair:***

*Dan Diveley, [ddiveley@geileon.com](mailto:ddiveley@geileon.com)  
314-727-5850*

*Lon Zimmerman, [lon@zimmresearch.com](mailto:lon@zimmresearch.com)  
314-961-1131*

**[www.ama-stl.org](http://www.ama-stl.org)**

---

THE ST. LOUIS AMA MARKETERS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION GROUPS

ORGANIZED BY:



GEILEON MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

FACILITATED BY:

**Zimmerman**  
Marketing Research

FACILITIES PROVIDED BY:

**John Cook School of Business**  
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

PRINTING COURTESY OF:

Our technology. Your control.  
**MIRA**  
DIGITAL PUBLISHING