

HOW TO BUILD AN ONLINE NETWORK OF INFLUENCERS

A guide to finding, engaging, and building relationships using online social networks



LOOK, LISTEN AND LOVE

As we head into 2011, we can safely say that to be effective within online PR, marketing, and communication we need to be social. It's not that strange. Humans are social by nature. We've been interacting with each other using a set of shared values and expectations since the dawn of civilization, and boiled down to its essence, an online social network is just another medium to advance this instinctual need in people to connect and engage with others of their ilk.

But when companies decide to enter this realm as a brand or corporate entity, this otherwise natural process of engaging in social media can seem a bit contrived and artificial. We've seen that more and more companies are becoming eager to join the social web. Many have indeed taken the plunge only to find themselves in the shallow end with meager results, at which point they either become complacent or get disheartened.

Most companies are not global brand leaders with the ability to attract millions of followers or influencers on the strength of their name alone. They realize they are faced with the somewhat daunting task of actually building their online social network, on their audience's terms. This means attracting influencers and potential brand ambassadors by sharing valuable, relevant, and sought-after information.

Remember to ask why

The problem is that companies often join social networks without actually understanding why they are taking part. It becomes a matter of "everyone's doing it, so we must do it too, and as quickly as possible." And many companies forget that they have to start from their audience's point of view, rather than from their own.

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Therefore, to the outsider, a company's failed attempt to engage their audience in online social networks adversely affects their brand image.

And so, how do you as a company build an online social network of influencers? How can you leverage these influencers to become loyal brand ambassadors in the digital media landscape? There are some fantastic success stories of companies doing just this. They attract influencers using effective "pull" methods, which in layman's terms means engaging your target audience on their own terms.

The responsibility lies with you, the communicator, the PR professional, or the online marketer. You are your company's main link to this social media world and will be one of the faces of your brand in these social networks. Outlined below is a guide to building this network of followers and influencers. Regardless of which platforms you engage your social network on, the process is similar: *look, listen, and love*.

LOOK

Who is your target audience? Where are they interacting?

To build a network of influencers, you need the building blocks, i.e. the people that make up your audience or market. But who are they and where can you find them?

Answering the “who” question is relatively straightforward. Start with your own customers and send out a survey to find out who they are and what they think of you. (Most

companies do this quite regularly and the data may already be available to you.)

Of course, the idea is not to wade through the thousands of names and analyze potential influencers individually. Break down the data in such a way that you can make relevant generalizations about your target audience, both with regard to their demographics and their overall opinion of your company, your competitors, and your industry as a whole. (For example, one of your conclusions can be that women above the age of 45 do not like your product as much as men under 30, but a majority seem to prefer one of your competitors’ products to yours).

Furthermore, keep in mind to look beyond your current crop of customers to find an audience that could become valuable brand ambassadors.

While paying clients are a great starting point, try expanding your scope of potential influencers to:

- Sales leads or potential customers: Do leads and potential customers your sales department encounter like your company?
- Journalists and industry authorities: Do you subscribe to industry magazines and are you aware of the most prominent media figures related to your business?
- Your customers’ customers: If you are selling a B2B service or product, is there a shared end user other than your direct client? Do they know they are using your product?
- Alternative customers: Does an unexpected audience value your product or service?
- University students or jobseekers: Is your company known as a great place to work? Do certain departments within your company require specialist training of their staff?
- Internal customers: Do your own employees promote, use, or value your products or services?

Once you know who your potential influencers are, the next step is finding out where they engage and that’s all about research.

The easiest thing to do is to visit the bigger social networks, search engines, forums, or blogs related to your business or the different potential influencers you’ve identified, and just search for your company name, competitors’ names, certain products and services related to your business, or other areas of interest that can be associated to your brand. If the hits are plenty and it seems the conversation is active, you’ve struck gold!

Here are some useful tools that can help you monitor the various online channels your target audience could be using to engage and interact:

- Google Blog Search, Discussion Search, and Realtime Search: start your search in regular Google.com, but click the different filters listed on the left to go through blogs, forums, message boards, and social networks.
- Technorati.com: searches through blogs.
- Boardreader.com: searches through forums and message boards.
- SocialMention.com: searches through social networks.

Once you’ve found where your potential influencers are active, sign up to those networks and message boards or start following those blogs and forums more closely.

LISTEN

What are they interested in? What are they looking for? What do they think of you?

Before you start putting to paper some sort of strategy on how to engage with your audience in these online social networks, take a deep breath and just spend some time listening to what people are saying about you, your competitors, your industry, or anything else that is associated with your brand image.

It is vital that you understand what your target audience and your influencers are saying before you push your conversation or agenda onto them. These potential brand ambassadors might not know who you are, they might not be satisfied with your product, or they might be loyal to your fiercest competitor. But that doesn't mean they won't be interested in what you have to say. However you have to make sure you engage them on their terms.

"UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE ARE SAYING BEFORE YOU PUSH YOUR CONVERSATION OR AGENDA ONTO THEM."

In order to get a clear idea of how to engage your audience, summarize their interests, conversations, and opinions about you, your competitors, and your industry. You have been researching your audience already to find out where they are. Use the same tactics to find out what they are saying.

Compare this summary with the results from your customer survey to see if the conclusions are similar or not. This will give you a general indication of how your customers compare to the general public and how you can approach or attract them in these networks.

Now you can start engaging your audience. Reply to people's comments on blogs, Twitter, Facebook or other channels, but also offer your own musings on issues related to your company or industry. A great way to get an audience interested in what you are saying is to share articles, news updates, and other information that your influencers will find unique and valuable.

Here's a list of do's and don'ts you should keep in mind:

- Only deal with matters you are comfortable with and have authority over, but make sure to refer these issues to the right persons.
- Don't flood your channels with commercial messages; keep in mind that social media was created for friends and acquaintances to keep in touch and share thoughts.
- Show your human side by revealing the real persons behind the company or brand name who are active in these social networks.
- Don't just leave comments on blog entries saying how good the article was; you have to take part in the conversation and offer your own two cents' worth.
- Always monitor and keep listening to your audience: do they want more of a customer support channel or are they interested in the latest news, for example?
- Don't talk about subjects that are unrelated to your business or brand. Coca Cola isn't in the business of interior design, and Intel probably doesn't know the ins and outs of the paper industry.

While a concrete strategy with achievable goals can be a good thing when building an online social network, don't over think it too much. Know that you will most likely change things around, involving a lot of trial and error, so keep things flexible. The best thing to do is to write down why you are building an online network, what are the main subjects you will discuss and share with your audience, and perhaps just some goals relating to the number of people in your network over a certain amount of time.

LOVE

Who are your most loyal influencers? How can you engage with them exclusively? How can you coax them to influence others in your market?

Now that you have taken the first steps in engaging your audience and decided on a concrete yet flexible strategy with some achievable goals, you can proceed with growing your network (by repeating step 1 and 2) and identifying the most loyal influencers.

Once you're actively building your online social network, you might notice that among the many casual members of your audience, there are a handful of truly loyal influencers that wear their assessment of your company and brand on their proverbial sleeves. When they love what you're doing, they will tell the world about it. But they will do exactly the same if you do something they hate. However, they will also defend your company to the very end against any contradictory opinions.

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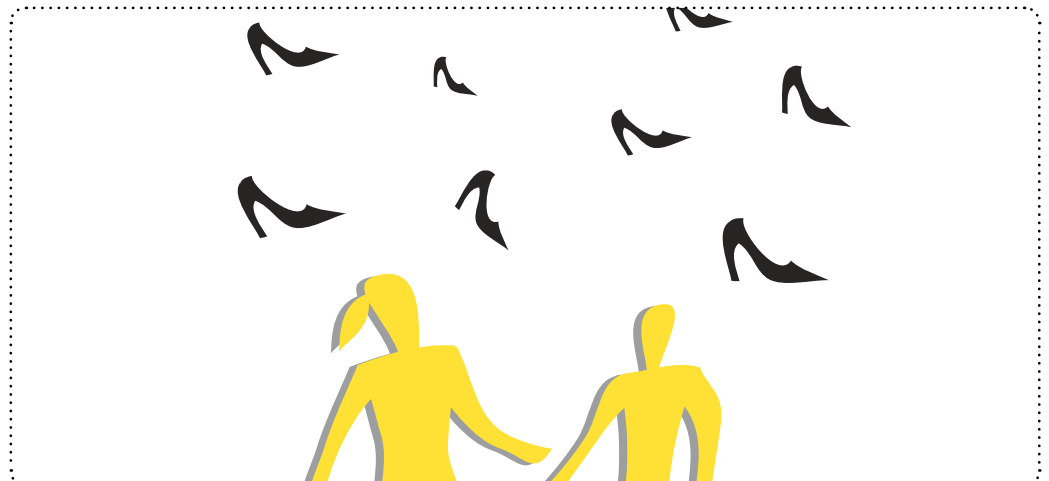
This small group of people is usually quite easy to identify, as they naturally come forward on their own accord. But, don't get blinded by their profession or the size of their online network.

A person with a blog can have as much influence as a professional journalist.

What these loyal influencers crave is recognition for their loyalty and honesty. This recognition can come in the form of rewards, giveaways, or prizes. However, the best way to show your gratitude for their engagement is to treat them with a sense of exclusivity.

Here are some tips on how to engage with these chosen influencers:

- Information is key. Find out as much as possible about your select group of people, including birthdays, email addresses, home addresses, interests, etc.
- Don't ignore anyone's requests, comments, or questions, but definitely not anyone in this group – keep the dialogue open at all times and at a personal level, but keep it on their terms.
- Want to create a buzz around a new product? Send news updates to your small exclusive group of influencers first, before publishing them to the wider audience.
- Send exclusive offers and promotions to this select group, especially in conjunction with a wider campaign where your loyal influencers are offered something additionally.
- Ask members of this group to contribute with ideas and feedback. Always show that you value their input and credit their contributions.



A real-life case of Love

The more you actively treat your most loyal influencers as a privileged group, specially selected from among the masses, the more keen they will be to act as your brand ambassadors. The most prominent example of this occurred when the creation of a Harry Potter theme park was announced. The PR and marketing team behind this significant event did not send out a press release to a massive distribution list or buy vast amounts of advertising space. They contacted just 7 people through Facebook, whom they believed were their most loyal influencers, telling them of the proposed theme park. Within a few hours, the word had spread to hundreds of thousands of people.

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While the strength of the Harry Potter brand had a helping hand in this, the same effect can be recreated on a smaller scale, in your own microcosm. Your relationship with your most loyal influencers, your brand ambassadors, is crucial in today's media landscape. Not only will they promote your brand within their own network, but they will also defend you against negativity, as well as provide you with the most honest feedback you can get.



The News Exchange Site is a place where company content can be exchanged on users' terms – guaranteeing that interested readers are seeing your story.