

## Anthropology, Technology, The Social Web and Advertising

As we approach 2010 and the new decade, I decided to revisit this essay, one I originally wrote and posted in June of 2008. For much of this decade, social media as an idea, term or simply a phrase, has been willfully bandied around by agencies and social media “consultants” et al, as if it was the cure-all for any brands’ online presence. White noise engulfed common sense; nature, particularly how humans behave in society, was hardly ever considered as marketers embraced what they considered, the white-hot future wrought by technology. That lack of consideration of human behavior on the web when it came to an online brand strategy, I believe, was an early mistake that really muddied the waters.

Just this week, in a post titled “[Texting Isn’t The Distraction, Driving Is: A Parable For Social Business](#)” Stowe Boyd wrote:

*“In the social business context, this is similar to the acceptance of the personal element of social networking online, the acceptance that human life is lived in specific connections with other specific people, not in some generalized business context where workers are interchangeable parts.*

*Management often responds to the adoption of social tools the way that public policy has responded to texting while driving: they make it illegal to be social while working.*

*The far-sighted response will be to make it easier to **gain the benefits of social business, and to rethink the organization and management of work around human nature** instead to [sic] persisting in trying to ‘rise above’ what makes us people in the first place.”*

That last paragraph, linking human nature to the benefits of social business, is a good jumping off point as any for how to discuss an online brand strategy with clients. Social Media has often been offered as a panacea, or a “solution” to a “problem” that doesn’t actually exist. Good strategy requires that hard questions be asked of how people, when using the social web, will interact with your brand. What would they *naturally* do?

What follows is the original post with changes or updates marked as so – [Update] or [Edit]. 18 months is an eternity on the web, but on re-reading this it seems, that with regard to social networking, change has been incremental at best. After all, we are still debating the difference, if there is any, [between digital and traditional agencies](#).

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These days the advertising and marketing world is all abuzz with phrases such as – Social Media, Social Advertising, Facebook Ads, Mass Media Networking Advertising.....etc, etc.. In the last two weeks I have been a panelist at the [L I S A seminar](#) in Portland and the [Hawaii MusicTech Conference in Honolulu](#). L.I.S.A., which is an acronym for Lessons In Social Advertising, was aimed at marketers and advertisers who haven't yet worked out how to advertise effectively in social networks. It focused on topics such as 'What is social advertising?' and 'How do you get young people to recommend your brand?' The Hawaii MusicTech panel discussed how musicians could effectively use social networks such as Facebook and MySpace to reach an audience and communicate with them. Two sides of the table as it were. One group wants to advertise, or push, their messages to a mass audience, while the other wants to create a network of like-minded people who hopefully will pull content such as free MP3s and then "evangelize" on behalf of the musicians by spreading messages by electronic word of mouth.

To understand and embrace social networking is to place the idea that says "technology makes this possible" to one side and embrace the idea of the basic human need to stay in touch with other like-minded people at all times. As [Clay Shirky](#) says "The desire to be part of a group that shares, cooperates, or acts in concert is a basic human instinct." Think about rock concerts for a minute..... Those "experts" that take a position on social networking and advertising come at it from a technological point of view, as in "technology has created the means for everyone to be connected and to stay in touch." I disagree with that statement because it removes nature from the game. It is entirely natural for humans to want to interact as often as possible as we are all social animals. Cities are no more artificial (technological) than the hives of bees, therefore the Internet is as natural as a spider's web. People who believe that technology is driving our online interactions are missing the point, as John Gray, professor of European thought at [LSE](#) has written – "we ourselves are technological devices, invented by ancient bacterial communities as a means of genetic survival." Bottom line – social networking, [edit] on and offline, is as natural as apple pie as we all want to be as connected as possible – we can't help it.

To some, online networks might be seen as mere antidotes to boredom at work, school or college, yet these new social networks do more than simply transmit one-way information about their members, they can change behaviour by propagating moods. These days we can all share "news" really fast, even about ourselves – for example, my [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) status might say "I'm heading to the beach in Waikiki..." and the mood that simple statement makes might become very contagious.

The Internet confirms what we have all known for a long time – the world is ruled by the power of suggestion but in the case of social networking it is often “influencers” that lead the suggesting. Then suggestions might become “group think.” John Gray writes – “in evolutionary prehistory, consciousness emerged as a side effect of language. Today it is a by product of media.” [Update N.B. - I prefer the straightforward use of the word media, especially re the social web] So, the question currently being asked by companies and advertisers is “how do we market and advertise to social networks?” Having to ask that question suggests the rocky ground that online advertisers are standing on.

For instance, [Jack Myers sees nothing but doom and gloom in online marketing](#): He says “Advertising is simply not a sufficient revenue model to sustain content companies into the long-term future.” And goes on – “I have preached evangelically for nearly three decades about the bifurcation of the media and advertising marketplace into 1) a transactional commodity business model and 2) a relationship-based brand-focused premium marketplace. Most media companies and agencies are investing appropriately in the technology resources required for their transactional businesses. [But] **brand building, relationship-based business models and premium-priced enterprises require completely new and innovative models, and can take years before they generate returns that justify the investments.** Industry realities place enormous pressure on executives to adhere to traditional business models, and companies that foster and advance innovation are often drained of resources before they can deliver the return-on-investment demanded by the stock market, equity rights holders and VC investors. Typically, implementation of new business models must be forcefully imposed by the CEO, need the blessing of investors, and they cannot be managed by executives trained exclusively in the **ways of traditional media and advertising.**”

[Neil Perkin](#) in a slideshow entitled ‘What’s Next in Media’ that can be found here says that today – Social Media is counter-intuitive to communications media. Here’s one of his slides that shows just how counter-intuitive things have become for marketing online:

## COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Space defined by Media Owner	→	Space defined by Consumer
Brand in control	→	Consumer in control
One way / Delivering a message	→	Two way / Being a part of a conversation
Repeating the message	→	Adapting the message/ beta
Focused on the brand	→	Focused on the consumer / Adding value
Entertaining	→	Influencing, involving
Company created content	→	User created content / Co-creation

Meanwhile, the old way of marketing is through one-to-many **push messaging** and therein lies the mistake of many of today's marketing managers. Take a look at this slide to see how things don't stack up nicely into a marketing message or 'drop' that has been long planned waiting its turn on the calendar.

## LINEAR

## NETWORKED

Scheduled	→	On demand
Appointment	→	Whenever, wherever
Sit back	→	Participative
Messages	→	Experiences
Content we think you'd like	→	Content we know you like (because you've told us)
We control the way it is delivered	→	We allow you to play with it, pass it on

The Linear model above reminds me of traditional TV and Print advertising. Too many people in advertising and marketing today still view the Internet as a “channel” rather like TV. Let’s consider another buzz phrase – **viral marketing online**. The success of using YouTube to extend an advertising campaign’s length and reach is now common currency. We’ve all seen the videos, perhaps even this one – [My girlfriend and the Wii Fit](#). - 2.2 million views and going strong.

The “viral” possibilities of YouTube falsely pleases advertisers and marketers because they can high-five each other and take pride in the statistics – 2.2 million viewers, that’s great! Not so quick though. The wise online marketer, **closely following the brand’s digital strategy**, knows that it’s not all about page impressions. A broad use and understanding of metrics is far more important – users, time-spent, interactions and pass-alongs. The Wii certainly got a lot of exposure in that video but how can the results be tracked? Where’s the ROI?

Those YouTube stats don’t show the whole picture. It is clear that the video is very popular and it fits the rules of users, time-spent, interactions and pass-alongs, but there is no clear ROI except in its “value.” By value I mean that the brand is being talked about, the brand via the video is being shared, people are “spending time” with the brand. The ROI though is difficult to judge. Even if Wii sales were to jump by 5% in one week can we really say it was due to this “viral” campaign. Probably not. The video’s value will continue throughout its lifetime on YouTube. Talk of “value” over real ROI makes marketing managers queazy. [Update - social media "experts" talk about 'experiential awareness' or 'online customer sentiment' as well as other vague terms that they say is equivalent to ROI. I prefer to talk about ROI in either real progress or \$\$ terms, as judged by adhering to the brand strategy, set up at the beginning of any campaign, both on and off-line.]

Viral campaigns are not just online. [From Adrants](#): Jack Goldenberg tells the story of how he and Kevin Glennon turned a custom-made [Obama for President watch](#) into what could become a fairly sizable viral campaign for the candidate.

*“Most people think of viral marketing as something they’ve seen on YouTube or a similar site. But in reality, a viral is any communication that causes one person to be so affected by “experiencing” the viral that they communicate it to another.”* He also argues that “Happy Meal toys were an in-home reminder of the need to visit McDonald’s. Kids would see two or three of them on their desk in their room and say, “Mom, Dad, we HAVE to go back to McDonald’s. I need 3 more Star Treks Happy Meals to complete my collection.....the Happy Meal was viral – kid to parent-multiplied by the millions of kids who frequented McDonald’s.”

That's an example of an early viral campaign. We can perceive its "value" but we can't [edit] immediately perceive its ROI. And that's why Jack Myers, as I quoted above, says "(completely new, innovative models) can take years before they generate returns that justify the investments."

Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of [Wired Magazine](#) and [edit] author of [The Long Tail](#), has pitched in to the social media advertising conversation with a post entitled [You may be on Facebook But the Money's in the Long Tail](#). He also posits that "[social networks should be a feature, not a destination](#)."

*As Chris says, and I agree, "I've been thinking a lot about how to integrate social networking into websites better. Right now the world is focused on stand-alone social networking sites, especially Facebook and MySpace, and the fad of the moment is to take brands and services there, as companies build Facebook apps and MySpace pages in a bid to follow the audience wherever they happen to be. But at the same time there's a growing sense that elements of social networking is something all good sites should have, not just dedicated social networks. And that suggests a very different strategy – social networking as a feature, not a destination." He has a proviso too – "social networking to me means the tracking of individual preferences and behavior and giving users the ability to draw upon implicit or explicit connections between them and other users to do something useful."*

[Update: Chris posted this to Twitter a few days ago "Remember that the \*Internet\* is the once-a-century invention. The Web is just one application upon it. There are and will be others." Worth remembering, especially as we move beyond the web into mobile connectivity and community.]

Chris goes on to say – *"As I think about the current Facebook craze and the notion of it as an all-encompassing platform, sucking in functionality from other sites across the board, I find myself skeptical. With my Long Tail hat on, I think that one-size-fits-all will fail in social networking, just as it has everywhere else."*

Meanwhile MySpace admits that it is not making as much money through ads as it would like. [See Selling Ads For MySpace is Hard Work](#). MySpace COO Peter Chernin said: *"We remain incredibly optimistic about social media. But there are specific challenges 1) Tons of inventory. Lack of scarcity creates a liquidity challenge. Working on bringing big brands aboard. 2) People who are visiting social networks are there for different reasons, different uses. Figuring out how to target. 3) What's the value of a "friend"? Trying to figure out new metrics to communicate with marketers."*

Bottomline: It's the wild, wild west out there. Anderson points out that ad rates on MySpace go for an astonishingly low \$0.13 cents per CPM (one thousand

impressions.) So that's \$0.13 on a general-purpose social network like MySpace and on his Ning-hosted network DIYDrones he's getting \$7.00. Even with a more generous scenario—\$0.50 on MySpace and \$5.00 on a focused Ning site—the difference is still a factor of ten. He believes that as big networks like Facebook and MySpace struggle to target ads based on the faint signals of consumer behavior in a generic social network, the smart money is going to the niche sites, where laser-focused content and community makes targeting easy. I couldn't agree more. Also see: [Facebook Ads Don't Rock](#) an experiment by Bob Gilbreath, an advertising executive who ran an ad on Facebook. It's a real eye-opener. And another – [Ad CPMs Are Higher In The Tail](#). And of course companies are springing up that think they have the answer to your problems in dealing with big social networks. [Here's one](#).

What this all points to is that companies should be advertising directly to those niche groups and networks that include people who would like to **hear from their brand**. The brands need to wait until they are invited in. A mass, scatter-shot approach to the large social networks will only fail. Companies also need to consider Radical Transparency. For those unaware of this concept there's a great article here on [Wired Magazine's site](#). I also wrote about it myself when [Wired's web site crashed](#). The basis of this theory is that you open the company's doors [only as much as you like] by creating communication between your company and its fans and detractors. It's a big step and for some, especially executives, it will cause a great deal of unease. Wal-Mart used this approach to great effect. [Here's the original story from the New York Times](#) and here's just one [bloggers' reaction](#). And here is the [Wal-Mart blog](#).

As the NYT article says “Known for its strict, by-the-books culture — accepting a cup of coffee from a supplier can be a firing offense — Wal-Mart is now encouraging its merchants to speak frankly, even critically, about the products the chain carries. This unusual new Web site, which was quietly created during the holiday shopping season, has become a forum for unvarnished rants about gadgets, raves about new video games and advice on selecting environmentally sustainable food. Corporate blogs are nothing new — General Motors, Dell and Boeing have them — but Wal-Mart's site, called [Check Out](#), turns the traditional model on its head. Instead of relying on polished high-level executives, it is written by little-known buyers, largely without editing.” And the key point there is “without editing.”

Once a company opens the doors it can not close them. If a company starts a blog it should not moderate and filter out negative comments. And the CEO and other executives should not be contributing to the blog if they do not have the right “authority” or “voice”. By that I mean authenticity. It's an overused word at times but in the right context it is completely accurate. If a CEO were to jump on the blog to blow her own trumpet non-critically, about a company's service or

product, the readers would see through it immediately. Being authentic means the blog author is a “trusted source” and this trust can never be abused. A blog is a micro social network.

A company’s blogger or bloggers need to have many bases covered if they are going to safely cover the company’s communications through their blog; good content, two-way communication, filtered and trusted communication, quick response to customer problems, etc. Meanwhile the executives have to sit back and allow the comments, both good and bad, begin to flow. They can never interfere if they want the blog to be taken seriously. They will feel insecure and perhaps a little nauseous but if they wait it out it will work fine. It works for Wal-Mart, the world’s biggest retailer. A company with a good blog policy will be listening to its customers and then shaping its communications around that data. It will also create content that is both relevant and hopefully surprising. Influencers will pass along the good stuff creating the viral moment that marketers pray for. Then people in the outer circle of the influencers will also start to talk about the brand, and as they do the company has to make it very easy for its core fans to spread the word. Do not fear negativity, it is just more communication – let it roll. There should never be a barrier to communication or interactivity. Remember, it’s not about technology, it’s about people, therefore it’s a two-way conversation.

[Update: Since I originally wrote this essay (all of 18 months ago) there has been many shifts in the Social Web space. Twitter expanded exponentially, and Twitter's real time search became a real threat to Google's indexed link search methodology. Facebook, not to be outdone, jumped in with many changes to its platform and Google embraced both companies by adding their real time search capabilities into its search results. The race is on.... Meanwhile blogging took a back seat to these platforms as they were more real-time and faster, but I would argue that having a blog is an essential part of a company's communication strategy. Think of it as akin to the [Slow Food movement](#).]

As I said at the beginning of this post, we are technological beings and we are naturally immersed in technology; it can’t be any other way. You can’t enforce social cultures online as there is no central “being.” Facebook’s “soul” is merely the millions of disparate people who are members. Twitter feels the same too, although its platform seems to offer more opportunities in the business world than Facebook. When Facebook and Twitter go away, as they will, those millions will migrate to the next application that allows them to socialize freely and easily.

Whether they want to be inundated with ads and marketed too is another question.

Dave Allen, Co-Founder, [Fight](#).

The following URLs link to people, companies, articles or stories that are referred to in this post:

[Grammy's Hawaii MusicTech Conference](#)

[LISA 08](#)

[Content Marketing = Brand New Marketing](#)

[What's Next In Media](#)

[My Facebook profile](#)

[My Twitter](#)

[My music and technology blog, Pampelmoose](#)

[Clay Shirkey's blog](#)

[Jack Myers' Web Site](#)

[Wired Magazine](#)

[Rawkus, a social network on Ning](#)

[Lotame.com](#)

[WalMart blog](#)

[Why digital agencies are indeed ready to lead.](#)