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Transcending incidentals: key issues for corporate social media

Michael Cassop Thompson offers an introduction to a corporate understanding of social media, pointing out some flawed assumptions and a few suggestions to assist organisational decision-making along the way.

For leaders of organisations each day appears to bring new ways to engage customers through social media. Although these developments stimulate change and can lead to innovative ways of communicating with customers, they also fracture existing organisational practices. In addition, inappropriate social media approaches may hinder rather than encourage customer engagement. Despite this, it does increasingly appear that for organisations to be relevant, appropriate social media adoption and engaging content to support customers' value-seeking endeavours are entwined prerequisites for competitiveness. [1]

It would be easy to feel anxious and unable to orientate oneself in what feels like a tsunami of social media opportunities. Certainly, some organisations appear to be suffering from "the paralysis of too many possibilities" [Bilton, 2007.p.73]. This is evident when one views some organisations' social media efforts whereby in many cases customer engagement – via social media – is non-existent. Tellingly, it also points to a deeper issue. Perhaps some organisations do not even engage with their own staff in social media decisions. For example, staff – often in non-managerial positions – born after 1990 are typically already social media literate and have engagement with friends, acquaintances, businesses and an array of other connections within their personal social media networks. Despite this, these same employees have frequently been unable to exert influence upon their organisations' social media even though it is bereft of appropriate vehicles and content by which to connect with and engage customers. One may doubt whether these employees have ever been included as collaborators in deciding how the organisation should stimulate engagement with value-seeking customers [Cassop Thompson, 2013].

Despite the urgings of those with a vested interest in social media adoption, such as suppliers, consultants and those with working knowledge of the medium, we should not adopt social media as if it is a "neutral technology" [Feenberg, 1998. p3]. When we adopt social media we may exploit opportunities but we may also create problems. One such example is putting the "social media side" in the hands of a communications company [2]. While this decision may have merit, care needs to be exercised as many 'snake oil' companies exist [3]. No sooner have you signed up and have had a number of basic media vehicles assigned to you (and the obligatory social media plan supplied), then, despite assurances to the contrary, media vehicles that have zero or limited content are foisted upon your target audience. Sadly, the media vehicles and content that are provided could have been set up by any keen amateur. Fortunately, a keen eye can easily spot these companies. Check what they do on behalf of their clients from a social media perspective. What media vehicles are used to carry content? Is the content engaging and up to date? Is the content inventive – storytelling, gamification, etc – in attempting to create engagement? Have successful interactive communities been created? Often a website (and forum), Twitter, Facebook, Blog, LinkedIn and LinkedIn pages (or their equivalents) are simply provided and the content carried is very bland.

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“Social media adoption requires the organisation to closely consider the lifeworld of the customer and how their value-seeking should be supported”

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The urge to recruit communications companies must be resisted until a full examination is conducted. Even then, what works in one situation does not necessarily transfer to another organisational context. Although clearly many communications companies are highly professional, these days anyone with a laptop and a keen interest in social media can claim to be able to provide the panacea for your social media ills.

To many of us, technology – of which social media is a recent manifestation – is “omnipresent yet invisible” [Kolb, 1996, p15]. Often we find ourselves in a world where social media is viewed as a unquestioned force for good. Social media, and in particular the media vehicles to be used, are heavily promoted or perhaps even exclusively promoted as being inherently desirable, to be unconditionally embraced and instrumental to customer engagement. However, many fail to question whether social media and its use is actually for our long-term societal and organisational benefit or detriment. These points have become more pertinent as social media has experienced considerable growth during the last decade.

It often appears that little other than preliminary thought is given to the negative impacts of social media. Certainly, this is unlikely to be articulated by those who bring these media -- often for their own gain -- to our attention. In some quarters questioning whether a particular social media choice is leading to more effective support of the value-seeking customer and whether it is preferable to more meaningful human experiences is not up for discussion; at least not without one being open to accusations of being a Luddite. Too often social media is applied without serious consideration of the strategic requirement for it and the synergies between media vehicle and content are not fully considered. It is often used inappropriately simply to cut costs. The illusion is that social media duplicates some real life functions. Often it does not; it is merely an “impoverished substitute for the real thing” [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012].

Therefore, what is lost is human interaction, community spirit, camaraderie and other critical features integral to some organisations' success.

Strategic questions should be considered to reverse dominant thinking that tends to bend – inappropriately – “ends to fit means” rather than means to support ends [Winner, 1977 cited in Borgmann, 1984. p60]. In simple terms, does the use of the social media you are considering lead to increased support for customers and the value they seek? What are your objectives in adopting particular social media? Furthermore, the adoption of social media can bring with it significant resource impacts. Can your organisation meet these resource demands?

Inappropriate social media vehicle selection and content may result in communication not palatable to value seeking customers. For example, some organisations' community pages and forums have been, among other criticisms, suggested as a exploitative where the customers provide their labour free of charge to “produce surplus value that is appropriated and turned into profit by corporations without paying wages” [Fuchs, 2011. p297]. In other words contributors content is “privatised” for commercial or others' personal gain [Willis and Murtarelli 2012. p11]. This may lead to withdrawal by contributors. In addition, few would argue that some organisations use social media vehicles poorly. Frequently, these vehicles provide content which is little more than spam, gossip or shameless self-promotion. This turns off potential customers. Rather than uncritical acceptance of social media, the issues raised here need to be fully considered strategically.

In contemporary business value-seekers are increasingly looking for content via social media and have a range of requirements such as

connection, interesting topics, entertainment, escapism and factual information. They are increasingly finding it through innovative content and convenient media vehicles such as websites, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Some individuals already have interaction and engagement with each other and with their selected organisations. On the other hand, many organisations simply push out irrelevant material that will never create engagement with little thought regarding the selection of the vehicle or content and the synergy between them.

For contemporary customers content and media used to create connection and engagement needs to be relevant and support the value-seeker. To resonate with value-seekers, content and media vehicle selection not only needs to be complementary but content needs to pull people in rather than simply pushing content out. This needs a tremendous effort by organisations that are frequently not configured for the engagement customers seek. Often it is already too late as competitors have already engaged the target audiences with which you seek to connect [Godin, 2008]. The selection of appropriate media vehicles and content needs to enable customers to find the value they seek from your organisation. Those not finding value will seek it elsewhere.

In conclusion, social media adoption requires the organisation to closely consider the lifeworld of the customer and how their value-seeking should be supported. Anything less is what Vargo and Lush (2004) would suggest is an outdated producer approach. At a strategic level, this places the emphasis upon identifying what value the customer seeks from interacting with the organisation via social media. This subtle but important nuance should encourage organisations to consider whether social media is appropriate for their customers and, if it is, which mediavehicles are most utilised by those customers [Pringle and Marshall, 2012]. In addition, what content is most suitable for the value-seekers also needs to be identified. For an organisation attempting to address these points this could be an onerous, costly and a resource-intensive undertaking. It needs to be addressed at a strategic level where media and content can be considered in the broader context. Fortunately, the incidentals of which specific social media vehicles should be selected (and surprisingly the choice is not as vast as may be initially thought) simply becomes a consequence of the organisation's strategic decisions regarding how to reach, support and engage with their target audiences.

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Notes:

1 Other "macro and micro dynamics" issues would also need to be addressed (Willis and Murtarelli 2012. p.8)

2 The term 'communications company' is used in a broad sense to include any organisation claiming to provide social media solutions.

3 All sectors will probably have their share of 'snake oil' companies but for organisations wanting advice concerning social media, low barriers to entry appear to encourage more than a fair share of social media experts. Clearly, there are many highly professional communications

companies but the point is that care in selection is required.

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The Leisure Review, May 2013

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