'On-demanding': 12 social media trends that are opening up new opportunities for advertisers

Kieley Taylor

is Global Head of Social, for [m]PLATFORM (part of GroupM), where her focus is on streamlining operations, disseminating thought leadership, training, best practices, and advocating on behalf of client interests with key publishing partners. She is the lead subject matter expert within social for GroupM clients. In this role she evangelises an audience-first approach to integrated planning and buying.

GroupM, 3 World Trade Center, 175 Greenwich Street, New York, NY 10007, USA
E-mail: kieley.taylor@groupm.com
Tel: +12122978181

Abstract   In the world of social media marketing, advertisers face unprecedented opportunities and challenges. For this reason, they must understand current trends in social media. This paper describes 12 social media trends to inform advertisers looking to reach not only the most desirable consumer demographics, but how to reach them where they live: on the most popular social platforms and the mobile devices used to access them.

KEYWORDS: social media, content, influencers, mobile

INTRODUCTION

With their 'on-demand' models, the likes of Amazon and Netflix, Airbnb and Uber, Dollar Shave Club and Rent the Runway have empowered consumers. Simply put, in the age of on-demand everything, consumers have unprecedented choice and power over what they want, how they want it and when they want it.

Today's social media platforms are increasingly dedicated to knowing their users intimately and catering to their every mood, whim and desire.

For brands seeking to connect with consumers and meet their expectations, it is essential to identify and understand customer-driven social media trends and the technologies that enable them.

This paper identifies a dozen social media trends that are dominating right now — trends related to content and technology, popular social platforms, and the consumers who use those platforms every day. It will discuss the rise (and stumble) of social media influencers; immersive content technologies like virtual reality (VR) and 360 video; shrinking attention spans and more.

Advertisers should be learning more about new trends and putting them to work. For this reason, the paper will present specific guidance on how to harness the power of the latest social media developments.

1: THE DEMOCRATISATION OF BRAND TRUTH

Brand marketers can no longer simply broadcast their own narrative and expect to resonate with consumers — especially where consumers themselves are driving both the content and the narrative. When one considers the explosive growth in the popularity of online ratings and reviews, not only on shopping sites but also on social

media platforms, it is clear that the truth about brands and consumer experiences has been fully and finally democratised.

Never have consumers had so much power when it comes to shaping a brand's reputation — and never have brands had such an opportunity to connect so intimately with their customers.

There are numerous ways for advertisers to take advantage of this trend:

- Assess the brand's current ratings and reviews to ensure customer concerns are being answered in a timely fashion, that the company is aware of any product issues and that the voice of the customer is being used for research and development.
- View ratings and reviews as a more efficient way to secretly shop both competitors and owned and operated products/services.
- Where possible, append ratings, reviews and detailed product descriptions so consumers do not have to seek out basic information. This has the additional benefit of improving conversion rates for online purchases.
- Focus on optimisation across digital shelves from Amazon to Marks & Spencer to Tesco.

Word-of-mouth remains a powerful tactic for driving brand affinity. According to Nielsen, 92 per cent of consumers value recommendations from friends and family over all forms of paid advertising,[1] while the American Marketing Association reports that 64 per cent of marketing executives believe word-of-mouth to be the most effective form of marketing.[2]

It is no surprise that brands are increasingly recognising the power of their loyal customers and deploying it as an asset in their marketing efforts.

2: FROM VR TO 360 VIDEO — CONTENT GETS IMMERSIVE

Consumers are increasingly demanding immersive brand experiences, whether via 360 video and photo, live video, augmented reality (AR) or VR. Consumers want to be part of the experience, and technology is enabling that.

Beauty brands such as L'Oréal and retailers including Macy's have featured AR in their campaigns,[3] letting curious customers trial new looks, for free, in their own time, leading to more satisfied customers. Other examples of customer immersion include Facebook giving users behind-the-scenes, 360 video content in the areas of fashion and music.[4]

Getting started requires testing that encompasses:

- leveraging these stylistic treatments within the brand's adverts;
- advertising formats such as three-dimensional photos, lenses and interactive video; and
- broadening partner considerations to include niche influencers on Snapchat and Facebook as well as innovative platforms like OmniVR and KERV Interactive.

When producing content, brands must be mindful of the following:

- cost of production;
- ratio of production to distribution; and
- mapping key performance indicators and the expected volume of success during tests.

Remember: simply seeing is no longer enough — today's consumers want to be a part of the action, not mere spectators.

3: THE ARONOFSKY METHOD: NONLINEAR STORYTELLING

Available impressions and audience receptivity are along a broader spectrum than ever before. To maximise campaign impact today, storytelling must be more dynamic.

A nonlinear story means either that (a) the story does not follow a progression to a final build and payoff or (b) an element of the story has been distilled and presented absent

from the rest of the story arc. 'Memento', 'Inception' and just about anything by Darren Aronofsky ('Pi', 'Requiem for a Dream' and 'The Fountain') are great examples of nonlinear narrative from the world of cinema.

There are several ways for marketers to test the form, broken down into these three divisions:

- *On-the-go:* The shortest form of nonlinear content encompasses interstitials, GIFs/cinemagraphs, static or lightly animated banners, content carousels, lenses or filters, and may be disseminated via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest or LinkedIn.
- *Lean forward:* Short to medium-sized content might include infographics, product listings, canvases, collections, lead generation, videos, link posts or content carousels and will be disseminated as targeted Facebook or Instagram content, as well as content for Reddit, LinkedIn or Pinterest.
- *Lean back:* Longer content may come in the form of social integrations or extensions with premium content (eg 'The Graham Norton Show', Premier League football, awards shows, etc). Suitable platforms for testing and learning include Facebook in-stream, Twitter premium video and Snapchat shows.

As consumers' media usage becomes more fragmented, a less linear approach to brand storytelling becomes more appropriate.

4: (EVER) SHORTER ATTENTION SPANS

While this trend is certainly nothing new, it continues to present challenges and opportunities for reaching consumers via social platforms.

On average, US consumers across all age groups check their mobile phones 47 times each day.[5] Meanwhile, 81 per cent of

consumers watching television use another device (second screen) while doing so.[6]

Numerous formats can be utilised to capture consumers' attention during their media multitasking — from GIFs, emojis or stickers and :06 video to dynamic posts, link posts and interstitials like the popular Story format.

This presents many opportunities for advertisers to test. With the shift to mobile devices, more advertising inventory is becoming feed-based. Look into best practices from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat to inform the creative brief.

Some intelligence has already been gathered; for example, optimised creative works better than television commercials; it should also be possible to understand advertising without sound.[7] Testing 2.0 is recommended — and essential for distilling the message.

5: INFLUENCERS ACHIEVE CREDIBILITY

Influencers have gained enormous credibility with social media users, particularly younger ones. The stats say it all: more than one-third of adults aged 18–34 who engage with influencers trust what influencers say about a brand more than what a brand says about itself.[8] In addition, 42 per cent of consumers who were exposed to influencer content report trying a product an influencer had recommended, while 26 per cent say they actually made a purchase based on an influencer's pitch.[9]

Among US national advertisers surveyed by the Association of National Advertisers, a decisive 75 per cent reported employing influencer marketing last year 2018,[10] while 43 per cent planned to boost spending on the practice in 2019.[11] Unsurprisingly, Facebook and Instagram were the most popular platforms.[12]

Still, the practice is not without controversy. As Facebook and Twitter clamp down on fake accounts, headlines in publications ranging

from the *New York Times*[13] to *Forbes*[14] warn of the rise in influencer marketing fraud. Duelling documentaries in recent weeks, via Netflix and Hulu, detailed the story of the doomed Fyre Festival and the role played by top fashion models and influencers in promoting the event on social media. 'Beware of bad influencers', warned a recent headline in the *Guardian*.[15] 'How influencer became a dirty word', read another headline on the BBC site.[16]

Generally, influencers are categorised as follows:

- *A-listers*: traditional celebrities like Beyoncé and Katy Perry who have amassed a large social media following;
- *mid-tier media influencers*: internet celebrities with a large following (1 million-plus on YouTube) and emerging media influencers with highly engaged and active followers; and
- *niche influencers*: influencers with a small following but whose communities are especially passionate.

When testing influencer-centred campaigns, advertisers should be aware of the following key steps:

- Use influencers to test new-to-you sites like YouNow, Snapchat or Musical.ly (TikTok), or partner with publishers who have experience in creating influential programmes, such as BuzzFeed.
- Identify the best kind of influencer for the campaign from the three categories identified earlier.
- Beware of 'watch-outs' such as power over final approval and rights to the content created, disclosure of the influencer's post as advertising and the value of true reach versus potential reach.

6: THE RISE OF SOCIAL EXTENSIONS

Traditional broadcasters, lifestyle websites and print publishers are creating experiences within their owned presence on social platforms. This is being offered as a component of a larger partnership or as a standalone offering.

There are numerous ways for advertisers to test:

- contract for in-stream video with such Twitter Newfront partners as Comedy Central, Bloomberg, Bleacher Report etc;
- integrate into a Snapchat show with a content creator such as NBC Universal;
- use SocialFlow to annotate the brand with trending publisher content;
- trial up-and-coming social platforms like Amazon's Twitch or Musical.ly (TikTok) by first partnering with an influencer;
- gain reach with a coveted audience by integrating Instagram Stories from the likes of BBC, Meredith, Hearst etc;
- consider integration with Google AMP [accelerated mobile pages] advertising through a media partner to understand whether AMP-complaint distribution is appropriate for the content.

7: EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE: THE STORY FORMAT TAKES OFF

Those ephemeral, full-screen interstitials popularised by Snapchat and brought to the masses by Instagram continue to be embraced by social media users. Stylistic stories are shot as a 'day in the life' and are generally captured on mobile devices with lower production quality. Stories may include personalisation like stickers, emojis, written overlays, filters or lenses.

There are a number of ways to try the format:

- test Snapchat or Instagram stories, or the more recent Twitter Moments, or organically test WhatsApp status (with advertising opportunities slated for later in 2019);
- test vertical static image, GIFs and short-form video;
- remember, it only takes a tap of the screen to skip an advertisement, so get the user's attention quickly;

- stories run as an interstitial between other stories featuring user-generated content or professionally produced content; so ensure all applicable brand safety measures are taken into account.

Facebook reported that its total advertisement impressions across all platforms were up 34 per cent in Q4 2018, much of that growth driven by Instagram Stories.[17] Everybody has a story to tell — and brands are no different.

8: MAKING THE MOST OF NON-TRADITIONAL SEARCH

Consumers have taken both product research and purchase into their own hands. For this reason, search engine optimisation and site-side analytics are the brand's best friends.

Whether consumers are coming from shopping sites or popular social platforms like Instagram, Pinterest or Snapchat, it is important to know which sites are enabling consumers to find the brand and which are driving traffic and sales.

To understand how non-traditional search is driving business, brands must:

- apply insight from organic search reports and pay-per-click category term campaigns; and
- identify those sites that drive traffic to the brand site; for example, a fast-moving consumer goods brand will want to test social sites like Pinterest and shopping sites like Amazon.

Take into consideration that non-traditional search still needs to be optimised, and inventory management will be required if looking to unlock more e-commerce business.

9: HELLO, ALEXA: VOICE GOES FROM SPACE-AGE TO EVERYDAY

The explosion of voice technology has been nothing short of life-changing for consumers and brands. Voice is not simply a high-tech marketing tool — it has become a communications channel of its own.

Consumers want to be heard, but to fully harness the power of voice there is much a brand must know. A good start is investigating search voice queries and syncing with the call centre, front of house and social listening to understand the voice and the needs of the consumer. This should include word choice and common themes; for example, does the customer use 'auto' or 'car' when doing a voice query? Do not send them into a dead end if they use a word that was not planned within the decision tree.

Other considerations for using voice:

- launch organically to better manage and to iron out unexpected bugs;
- plan an ongoing budget for raising awareness and encouraging continued use; and
- remember that voice is a new communications channel, not a campaign.

More and more consumers are adopting smart speakers (one estimate, from GlobalData, has the number of units reaching 100 million by the end of 2019[18]). Marriott International[19] and Axe[20] are among the brands that have moved beyond mere experimentation to building standalone campaigns around the technology. Maybe it is time to listen in.

10: MESSAGING THAT PACKS A PUNCH

Humans are not lazy — they just want as little fuss as possible. This is why people use messaging technology to, for example, order a pizza from Dominos, with just one simple tweet of an emoji.[21] Suddenly, life's chores are made simple, so we can address what really matters in life.

To see how powerful marketing via messaging apps has become, one need look no further than China. In less than a decade, WeChat, the country's multipurpose messaging, social media and mobile payment

app, has grown to become one of the most popular apps in the world, with more than 1 billion active daily users in China.[22]

Starbucks, Amazon and Gap are among the brands to utilise the technology for marketing campaigns.

There are many ways to take advantage of this technology right now. A luxury or travel brand, for example, might want to test a WeChat campaign targeting in-market travellers or those who live in the UK who use the platform to stay connected with friends and family in China. GroupM's WeChat incubator, which provides geographic expertise and service in real time, has enabled many advertisers to fashion localised campaigns that pack a punch.

Other considerations:

- Start with an objective, then an audience and then contemplate actions, taking into account what the content was designed for, how it is going to be distributed and how it will be measured.
- Threaded messages present an opportunity to cross-sell or up-sell. Now is the time to understand what message or offer will encourage a speedier return shopping trip or will grow the customer's basket size.
- Remember to keep the ethos of the brand, regardless of technology or platform.

11: DYNAMIC ADVERTISING FEEDS BRAND EXPOSURE

Facebook and Pinterest are among the social platforms to heavily promote their dynamic advertising programmes. Dynamic ads are banners with content that changes automatically to speak to each user in the most effective way.

Dynamic advertisements enable content changes of specific relevance to the consumer. Examples include pricing feeds, product catalogues, weather reports, sports scores, stock tickers and geography.

The first step to testing this type of advertisement is to ensure the feed is stable and that you understand how changes in the feed will impact targeting or creative execution. Google's product listing ads (PLAs) are among the best-known such units. Pinterest also accepts PLAs. Facebook offers dynamic retail, dynamic product and dynamic travel advertisements in addition to its local awareness advertisements, while Twitter has partnered with Comprendi to bring dynamic activations to life.

Now is the time to think about unlocking opportunity and getting feeds in order.

12: PRIVACY: THE PITFALLS AND THE PROMISING FUTURE

In the wake of scandals surrounding Facebook and Google, privacy has become the proverbial 800-pound gorilla of all social media marketing. Subsequent international regulations and legislation now have brands working hard to strike the delicate balance between all the valuable consumer data that technology affords them and the protection of customer privacy.

These concerns have only created more opportunity for brands in the social space. As consumers demand to know how their data are being unearthed and how their data will be used, they have become more sophisticated — as have marketers, who are now in a position to engage with consumers without violating their trust.

The privacy controversy has been painful, but the industry has come out of it with a deeper understanding of which data is most useful, as well as the responsibilities of using data wisely.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of which social media opportunities are to be exploited, the following best practices should be borne in mind:

- Communicating what *you* want to say is less important than communicating what the brand's audience will find useful. It is also important to know where the brand's audience spend their time.

- Assume the consumer has not seen every advertisement and will not see the next one — make every impression count.
- As touch points fragment, strive for a singular theme of message association to balance being on brand and relevant to the variety of contexts in which the brand appears.

Social media channels have commanded a place at the very centre of our lives, and brand marketers can continue to utilise all they have to offer by staying on top of the ever-changing technology and trends dominating the space.

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