

The Many Facets of Facebook: Social Platform, Marketing Influencer, Research Community

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Beyond being the world's most successful social media platform to date, Facebook is a major marketing influencer and increasingly the first port of call for brands to start building research communities.

Market Research Online Communities (MROCs) are now perceived as bona fide industry tools for achieving more cost effective, faster research and developing deeper, longer lasting connections with core target audiences.

With its leading communications model and immense global reach, Facebook can be utilised to test pilot marketing campaigns, obtain feedback on new product developments or ask users to complete online surveys. Every check-in or 'Like' is displayed in the individual's news feed, helping opinions to go viral.

While it is the message and goal that matters most in social-media-based communities, the medium needs to be properly understood and carefully handled to generate valuable insights, maintain a thriving community and produce engaging, creative messages that inspire and encourage people to continue connecting.

Firstly, an appreciation of why people use Facebook is a must. Typically it is because they enjoy sharing and interacting with friends and family, although a recent Toluna survey of 3,000 consumers showed that 45% of people also use the web or social to interact with brands. In fact, almost 50% of consumers use social and online sources to keep abreast of the latest brand news and updates. While almost 80% of Facebook interactions are basic Likes, 20% proactively post messages to brand pages.

As exciting as these figures are, the key is to avoid overkill: over 50% of respondents surveyed reported feeling overwhelmed by brand messages on social networks and 75% felt that receiving one or two Facebook brand messages a day was too much. Successful MROCs demand detailed planning, realistic audience expectations, creative messaging strategies and transparent engagement.

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A universal theme should be established at the outset so users know what they are entering into, and it can become a place where open debate and opinion sharing is encouraged. Limit conversations to corporate topics only and watch user engagement levels fall, reducing the flow of rich, spontaneous insights.

Recruit a community manager to monitor online activity, manage queries and keep users tuned in. There is no substitute for the personal touch when it comes to consumer engagement and traditional, static communications will soon give way to productive, two-way conversations between the brand and their audience. Satisfied consumers quickly evolve into brand advocates whose value should never be underestimated.

Keep MROC surveys clear and concise with to-the-point questions in plain English and remember to ensure the format is transferrable to mobile devices as well – latest statistics show that the increase of mobile traffic between 2012 and 2013 is estimated to be around 125%. Online communities will also respond better to messaging that stimulates and invites interaction through fun graphics, gaming and video concepts, and allows them to share their opinions in a similarly multimedia-led way.

MROCs are certainly a full time job and many companies find it difficult to adequately manage their 'always on' activity, but there is help at hand. Community software platforms, such as Toluna's PanelPortal, enable companies to sustain and seamlessly integrate online panels within their own corporate Facebook fan page, to which anyone on the social network can be invited.

As users interact, such platforms enable brands to continuously learn about their customers. All questions asked will be stored, helping you build a more useful social graph that can be utilised for intelligent campaign planning, harvesting fascinating brand insights and uncovering some surprising correlations between consumers and their brand choices.

Assuming the brand is receptive to accepting and acting upon these insights, it stands to gain a much better understanding of brand followers and overall levels of audience responsiveness, which in turn aids precise and accurate targeting in the future. So, if you haven't already, it really is worth taking a closer look at Facebook – it could be the facilitator of a completely new market research strategy and source of valuable customer insight.

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