

Who's driving social media? Initial findings...

The Uploaders – informers for the digital age

We've just completed a first look into who is driving the social media phenomenon. It's an area that fascinates us and one we'll continue to investigate over the coming months, but here are some of our initial findings.

Social media and all that buzz...

We were interested in two trends that are challenging the marketing community at the moment.

- Firstly, there is increasing buzz around buzz. The focus on word of mouth marketing has been growing, largely fuelled by the popularisation of influencer theory, such as Malcolm Gladwell's Tipping Point. Since then, marketers have been experimenting with ways of integrating this into their strategies; e.g viral and stealth marketing.
- Secondly, marketers engrained with a traditional 'reach x frequency' mindset have been treating social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Digg, eBlogger and MySpace like any other media. Sites like MySpace have become saturated with ads and invaded by brand 'friends', whereas in reality people are gathering on these sites to have unmediated conversations.

We felt that the collision of these two trends could create a uniquely powerful force. The digital shelf life of social media means that when people talk about brands, products and services, their voices can be heard globally by thousands and can echo for years, giving them massive potential influence. For example, the Neistat Brothers' iPod's Dirty Secret video exposing the difficulty of replacing an iPod battery was watched by millions in 2003, and is still watched by tens of thousands four years on.

Realising that the minority of people who upload content can have unprecedented reach and influence raised some interesting questions: What impact could this phenomenon have on buzz theory and what was motivating these social media 'uploaders'?

With the help of some experts, we conducted an in-depth proprietary research study into this area. BrandGenetics conducted a quantitative study, and Hall & Partners conducted a digital ethnography study with Samuel Snow providing the video production. We initially focused on the UK market, but are planning future studies of other markets.

The 'Uploaders' – even more influential than we thought

Only 8% of the UK online population - approximately 2.8 million people - regularly upload content (e.g. reviews, blogs, videos) to the Internet. Demographically they are more likely to be male, younger, better educated and better off.

Despite making up only 8% of the population, their influence outweighs their size. Not only are they providing the online content that 92% of the population consume, we have found them to be influential in other ways as well:

They are social leaders, highly connected and brand advocates

As natural social leaders, they are 20% more likely to try out new things and are 20% more likely to enjoy heading a group. They are also twice as likely to be opinion leaders for any given category. For media and entertainment – which 95% are highly interested in – they were four times as likely to be opinion leaders.

Uploaders have a large media diet and are heavy multi-taskers, with 23% being more likely to surf the internet while watching TV. As social hubs they are connected to more people, they average 60 people in their buddy lists, send 3 times as many text messages and are community enthusiasts – belonging on average to four times as many online communities and twice as many offline communities.

They are natural brand champions, are 15% more positive about brands they're interested in and 83% will actively recommend a product or service they like.

The 'Uploaders' – informing communities

Uploaders are driven by dialogue; they love information and ride off sharing and gaining knowledge with others. Looking into their psychographic profile and behaviour revealed some interesting insights:

They are infovores and informers for the People

Uploaders are information sponges. They spend 50% longer online and make full use of the internet's applications. When considering purchase decisions they use 30% more sources of information. However, the most valuable source of information is real experiences from real people. They use online user reviews 50% more and their reliance on online peer reviews has risen by 23% over the last three years.

¹ measured on Childers Opinion Leadership Scale

With such a voracious appetite for information, Uploaders always make informed purchasing decisions for products, services and brands. But this goes hand in hand with informing others to also help them make their decisions.

This sense of community spirit is driven by the principle that when people share views and experiences they get a more transparent idea of a product or service, thus reducing their dependence on spin from the corporate marketing machine. We see this reflected in their greater likelihood to frequently post content (10 times more) and product reviews or comments (9 times more).

Today, we are all drowning in advertising and information. By mastering the means of information and communication, Uploaders are playing an essential role in shaping and informing the consumption habits of a new generation.

Can a brand turn Uploaders into fans?

Uploaders are marketing literate. They talk about advertising but it doesn't rank highly in their trusted sources of information. Engaging with this influential group by tapping into their high propensity to positively recommend a brand – both online through social media and offline – can grow brands in an exponential way. But how should we engage with them?

One way is by treating Uploaders as a resource and not a target audience. We found that by asking Uploaders to become brand advisors, to input on a brand's marketing and product innovation, shifted their propensity to recommend a brand positively by 19 points (measured using the Net Promoter Score), which is relatively huge positive indicator of brand growth.

As Dr Paul Marsden a leading figure in Word of Mouth marketing and the NetPromoter Score says:

“Bain & Co have told us that the Ultimate Question for good marketing is ‘would you recommend us?’. With this study, Agency.com have given us an insight into the Ultimate Answer: Engagement.”

“The big strategic implication of the uploaders study is clear - brands need to think of these digital influencers as a resource, not a target”

There are a number of other ways for a brand to engage Uploaders, but we'll save that for another time. The conversation about Uploaders will continue at www.whoisdrivingsocialmedia.com, so please join in.

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