

Serendipity online

John Straw examines to what extent companies are diluting their proposition by not carefully managing their brands on the web. Marketers need to be aware of brand users and abusers



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Serendipity is one of the key drivers of success for brands online. Through chance discovery and word of mouth, brands can build communities around their website to further their business objectives. A recent McKinsey study showed that consumers who used online community spaces such as chat rooms, bulletin boards and product reviews, were responsible for two-thirds of online sales despite accounting for only one-third of website users.

But the web is also home to other communities where your brand and its merits are being discussed. These communities are often broader in scope and more discursive than corporate websites. In some cases the users searching for information to support buying decisions and solve problems are finding answers to their queries from other online users.

What is becoming clear is that users don't always search for brand names, they search for related generic terms. A user searching for information about drugs that treat depression will type in 'depression', not the name of a leading drug. The number of pages returned in response reveals the extent of the wider community in which your brand should be playing.

By calculating the number of pages returned versus the number of pages actually owned or influenced by your brand, marketers can quickly discover their Information Market Share (IMS). For some this will be a sobering insight of the extent of their online reach. More sobering still, when you consider these other pages are often ranked on the first two pages of results on search engines such as Google.

For example, of approximately 3,900,000 pages of web information related to depression only 10,500 pages use the name of a leading anti-depression brand name drug. Of these only approximately 500 pages are owned by that drug's parent company, and 300 of those pages are in a language other than English. This represents an IMS of less than 0.1%.

A failure to increase ownership of the web therefore may risk losing potential sales and worse, allow brand detractors to take the moral high ground. This is not to say the web should not provide freedom of speech. It should and it does. But a failure to reply to detractors may allow web users to formulate a skewed perception of your brand. When you consider how fast the web moves, your brand image can quickly become diluted.

A dedicated search engine optimisation (SEO) campaign should be the first step towards increasing IMS. But further steps will be required to manage the impact of the legion of web pages like 'The

Anti Ford Page' (tgrigsby.com/views/ford.htm;) which allows customers to post their complaints about the world's number two car maker.

Monitoring companies can alert you to web pages that step over the line and become defamatory. They should also be able to provide domain monitoring to alert you to the registration of derogatory URLs. Indeed you may wish to buy them yourself. Volvo owns volvosucks.com for example. While litigation should never be ruled out, excessive time spent identifying persistent brand abusers might just distract you from potential allies within the same online communities. Contrary to media hype, potential brand partners are often far greater in number than detractors of your product.

Sites like ford-trucks.com, a self described 'community for enthusiasts of Ford family vehicles', are often intelligent and well designed. By offering a simple exchange like hosting their website in return for a link to a virtual showroom or e-commerce site, brand managers can empower these 'partners' to feel part of the brand community, as well as opening the door to potential sales opportunities.

This is what Volkswagen is doing by embracing the disability community, an unobvious but important market for commercial vehicles. Disabilitynow.org.uk sports a graphic link to the UK micro site for VW's commercial vehicles. Indeed micro sites linked to your main URL, provide an opportunity to register key words with search engines more in sync with the community you are attempting to embrace.

It is not just the well designed sites that represent potential brand partners. Less presentable sites with significant traffic represent opportunities too. Making your brand book available to them, under strict terms and conditions, will offer them the chance to align their site with the object of their admiration.

When Time Warner discovered multiple sites using its cartoon characters without permission, they faced the arduous and expensive task of pursuing multiple litigation. Instead they set up an exclusive site from which these enthusiasts could download better quality images, and receive regular news feeds about their favourite characters.

There are numerous communities relevant to your brand to which you can become a beacon, contributing valuable information to the discussion taking place, while remaining a signpost back to your home site, and core proposition.

The increasing number of consumers turning to the web for decision support is both good and bad news for brand owners. It's good news if you don't bury your head in the sand and recognise that a consumer's first port of call may not be your corporate website. It's bad news if you do nothing and risk them finding a critical website. It's worse if you miss the opportunity of a sale because they tapped into a community site that knew nothing about your brand and may have been willing to help.