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A TOOL KIT FOR BUSINESS



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## ENGAGEMENT

The integration of social media into consumers' lives has shifted brand ownership away from marketers and into the hands of the consumer

Guest column • Dr. Aalok Pandit

**T**rust is good, but control is better." That was the principle that underpinned the Soviet Union's system of bureaucracy during the regime of Vladimir Lenin, the architect and first head of the USSR. Arguably, Lenin's principle contributed to the ultimate collapse of the USSR. Well, Lenin didn't belong to the social networking age and today we live in an era where social media interactions are able to overthrow governments.

While social media may be helping brands identify and understand various peer groups, it is definitely creating new challenges for brand managers. Social media is one tool that cannot be controlled. Brands have to understand that the social space is really owned by the customers and if brands choose to be there it will be on the customer's terms. The changing demographic profile of Indians, coupled with the empowerment of consumers, has made the social media marketplace unforgiving. The increasing integration of social media into consumers' lives has shifted brand ownership away from marketers and into the hands of the consumer.

After the purchase of a brand, consumers remain aggressively engaged, publicly promoting or assailing the products they've bought. Consumers are increasingly knowledge-driven and social media works as a ready reckoner for information and reviews of brands. Social media groups, therefore,

can enhance or decimate brand image. Today, controlling brands and its market perception is near-impossible. We have examples of how global brands like Vodafone, Nestlé, Domino's and Nike are finding it difficult to manage their reputations once exposed to the world via Facebook or Twitter.

The Vodafone-Valia or Nestlé-Orangutan-Greenpeace episode asserts the fact that social media is rapidly changing the way brands operate, due to the increase of consumer control.

In the Vodafone case, for instance, the customer Dhaval Valia has emerged as an overnight hero for many Indians battling poor service quality and bad customer service of their telecom providers. Indeed, social networking media would have been an excellent proxy for the Vodafone team repairing the fault to quickly gauge how widespread the issue was, and ensure that it had been rectified. Instead, Vodafone slapped a legal notice on Valia.

Similarly, a wave of protests on Facebook and Twitter groups last year forced Nestlé, which makes the KitKat chocolate bars, to change its buying policy. This was after Greenpeace put out a report on how the palm oil in its confections came from depleting Indonesian rain forests, where orangutans live.

### A two-way street

An effective way to handle social media is by par-

ticipating in conversations and effectively putting forward your point of view. It is not about winning the battles but winning the war. While in the public domain not everyone will be positive but the idea is, can you generate enough positives to drown out the negatives? Social media strategies of most brands are to start a Facebook page or a Twitter account, get likes or followers and promote the brand. They lack the most fundamental building block: How will you engage the consumer? Most brands miss the strategy to engage in the right places, in the right ways and with the right audiences.

**TO CONTROL SOCIAL MEDIA IS IMPOSSIBLE BUT TO USE IT EFFECTIVELY TO BUILD TRUST IS THE NEW HOLY GRAIL THAT EVERY MARKETER MUST ASPIRE TO ACHIEVE**

Most importantly, brands and companies must stop treating social media as a one-way street method of communication and instead increasingly engage their clients. One of the key reasons for the unprecedented success of Isobar in India, in such a short period, in the social media space, has been its ability to engage the consumers with the brands in an interesting manner. The much awarded work of Isobar on Phillips, Adidas and Reebok bears testimony to premise that if you can positively engage the consumer with your brand, more than half your marketing battle is won.

Brands need to define new metrics and tools for real-time monitoring and response to social media platforms. Since brands are being built online, they need to answer the question whether they are addressing the consumer's concerns. What we used to think of as brand preference and loyalty are now more appropriately measured by direct customer feedback and satisfaction.

### Responding to criticism

What must brands that operate in such a hostile and sensitive environment do? To succeed in a world where consumers now control the conversation, brands must actively listen, be transparent and be responsive. Unfortunately, many still lack the understanding of the media and the ways to leverage it, thereby missing greater results they could have reaped. If a customer complains, the brand must listen and choose to respond if the complaint is genuine or ignore the complainant if the accusation is baseless.

In other words, when brands encounter criticism of their services or product offerings, companies must stop and consider first whether it is worthwhile or even appropriate to respond. Brands must know that when they are reacting, the recipient of the comment is not just the complainant or critic, but a larger audience. If the brands choose to respond, they must remain polite and ensure the rebuttal is not mean-spirited. The best policy is to thank the critic or complainant for highlighting a deficient product or service. The broader audience watching is far more likely to remember the attitude of the brand than the actual problem.

Social media is not for brands and companies whose strategy revolves around trying to make their products sound better than they are and certainly not for those firms who don't have the time, passion or commitment to do social media with transparency, credibility and authenticity. For all the talk of brands going social and showcasing their achievements and products launch, bringing their CEO to tweet, nothing can be more transparent than accepting a mistake, taking responsibility for it and keeping the lines of communication clear.

To control social media is impossible but to use it effectively to build trust is the new Holy Grail that every new age marketer must aspire to achieve. 🐉