

## **Social Networks and Brands**

**Social media is for people, not brands** 2 September 2010 | By Mark Ritson  
(Marketing Week)

An MBA student asked me last week what my problem was with social media. She'd just completed my 12-week Brand Management course throughout which I had been openly hostile to the idea of social media as a communications revolution for brands. The way she had asked me suggested that she thought it was a simple case of 40-something fogeyishness driving my antagonism toward Twitter and the rest.

To be fair, I have no doubt that social media is changing the way that people communicate with each other. But where I deviate from popular opinion is in the relevance of social media for most brands. Over the weekend I looked again at big brands and their application of social media.

The results, when compared to the **industry buzz** we keep hearing, simply do not stack up.

I took Brand Finance's 2010 report on Britain's biggest brands, covered exclusively in Marketing Week (29 July), as my starting point. I drew the line at the top 20 and reviewed each of these brand's Twitter activities. The reality versus the myths of social media might surprise you. Did you know, for example, that five brands, including big players like Morrisons and Barclays, don't use Twitter at all? How do we reconcile that with the apparently essential nature of social media for 2010 marketing strategies?

And many of the brands that do use Twitter are having very little impact. Forget the hype for a second and just look at the numbers. Of the 15 brands in the top 20 that tweet, several of them - including BP, Vodafone and BT - have fewer followers than tweets. Have you ever encountered a successful mass-communications strategy that involves more messages than audience members? In the particular case of BT and Vodafone, it also prompts the question, given the business they are in and the fact that both have more tweets than followers, why they didn't just pick up the phone and call their customers instead?

To be fair a couple of the brands on the list, like O2 and Sainsbury's, have got a more decent number of followers on Twitter. But the figures, relative to their actual market sizes, are still infiteously small - in both cases their followers represent less than 0.5% of their customer base. It's going to require one hell of a viral effect for Twitter to have any meaningful effect on either brand's market. And what about Tesco? It's arguably Britain's biggest and best run brand and yet it has a grand total of 281 followers. Are you starting to see my point?

Peter Andre has more followers on Twitter than the top 20 British brands between them. If there is one killer stat that proves that I am right on social media's inequity for most brands, it's a new calculation that I have called "the Peter Andre factor". The ex-pop star and ex-celebrity husband is hardly one of Britain's biggest stars. And yet he has more followers on Twitter than the whole of the top 20 British brands. In fact, his 520,000 followers mean he has more than five times the followers that Britain's 20 biggest brands can muster between them.

What does Peter Andre have that brands lack? The answer is simple. He is human. Forget what the marketing experts tell you about celebrities being brands. That's rubbish. Celebrities are people and social media works on a person-to-person basis. Hence the huge numbers of followers on Twitter for pop stars and footballers. **Where it does not work is when cold, hard, lifeless organisations start trying to spark interactive social media conversations. It's not welcome. It's not valuable. And it's not working.**

The reason I am being so stringent and negative about all this is because that's exactly the way marketers are supposed to be when it comes to spending money on communications. The whole idea is to query the value of everything to make sure that you don't get suckered into spending your company's hard-earned cash on **something that is not going to give you a return on investment**. And right now I question just how many marketers engaged in social media are actually able to justify their investment.

See Mark Ritson appear at The Annual, Marketing Week's new conference on 29 September 2010 [www.theannual.co.uk](http://www.theannual.co.uk)

The problem with the social media crowd is that they are way too positive and biased towards its potential for every brand, in every situation. Of course they would be positive because it's not their money they are spending, it's yours. **And it doesn't do any harm that compared to all the other potential communication tools that they could recommend for your brand social media is very high margin stuff.**

**So let's get social media into perspective. It's a new and relatively insignificant communications tool that has limited potential for a very small proportion of brands. As such it joins the integrated marketing communications mix as an interesting, but probably unjustifiable, alternative to other more established and effective tools like PR, interactive and advertising.**

**And if anyone tries to tell you any different they are suffering from Insania.**

## Big Society already exists - it's called social media

Wed, 1 Sep 2010 | By Mark Choueke (Marketing Week)

**If you're a regular follower of our columnist Mark Ritson, you'll be used to him using a blend of well balanced arguments and frank no-nonsense views to convince you that he is right.**

And in case he can't persuade you the first time around, he's more than happy to weigh in and continue an argument with anyone willing to take him on through the comments sections of his columns on [www.marketingweek.co.uk](http://www.marketingweek.co.uk). So, with full knowledge that he's going to spend the rest of the week hauling me over the coals with 10 different types of watertight evidence that my arguments suck, I hereby state that I disagree with his column this week on the uselessness of social media to brands.

There are two main arguments that Ritson and others from the industry seem to level at social media. **The first is that communicating in the social space requires one to be a human being as opposed to a brand to be of any value and the second is that there is no easily applicable measure of ROI.**

**eg**

Let's take those points in reverse order. On ROI: I agree, there is no easy measure. I recently asked a room full of top marketers from a range of travel industry brands for a show of hands; who had worked out what a successful metric of return on investment in their social media activity looked like. Not a single hand went up.

I then asked how many of them planned to invest a greater percentage of their spend in social media by the end of the

All of their hands went up.

Is that worrying? Maybe. If you want to worry about it then go ahead. The marketers in the room however, weren't overly concerned. Each of them had identified one or more serious, valuable uses for their social media.

## O2's giffgaff campaign

Market research, reputation management and PR, customer service; your business carefully allocates spend to all of these and yet none come with an easily identifiable metric. You may have read in last week's cover story on the potency of open or closed branded online communities how O2's giffgaff brand crowd sources its customer service. "The majority of questions customers ask are answered within the community by members within five minutes," says giffgaff's Robbie Hearn. "And if the answer they give isn't correct it will get corrected by someone else in the community, or people will come back and say whether a tip they got worked or not."

What this effectively means is that 'Big Society' - the big idea that acted as a platform for the new Government's strategy - already exists online. It has done for a long time. Disregard the hype and go and look for yourself. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube are full of meaningful conversations regarding things you really care about, professionally and personally. And when you find them you will also find swathe of people addressing any number of other people's requests for information, enquiries for help, pleas for tips. Why? Because they can.

There is very little advantage or return for these people in helping or engaging with others that they will never meet in person. And yet they do. They gather, they share, they talk, they fight and they learn. This is what social human beings do. Unless you've worked out a way to sponsor conversations at parties, looking for a return on social media will get you nowhere.

## Sir Martin Sorrell

The other argument about whether people want to hear from brands or just human beings? Well, brands don't have much of a choice. The way we communicate with one another about pretty much everything is changing fast. This isn't a fad for young people, it's the start of a long term shift. WPP chief executive Sir Martin Sorrell knows it. In our round up of last week's statements by the big marketing services groups and the global trends they reveal, we quote Sorrell describing digital media and consumer insight as the "Premier League" next to television which he says is the "championship" comparatively speaking. And what is social media if it isn't digital media with some consumer insight thrown in?

Mark Ritson distinguishes social media from other disciplines of marketing and he names PR, advertising and interactive (by which he informs me he means digital and email). Anyone who still separates social media out from any of those is, I'm sorry to say, utterly mistaken. **To me it just means you are letting the world move around you and hoping you can get by on what you've always known.**

### Question arises

Surely Twitter and Facebook are nothing if not interactive. Apps are interactive - they join people up with brands and many of them join people up with each other. And the nature of the relationships many of us have with our phones means that that interaction is never far away. 'Dead time', the time we spend travelling on trains or waiting for a Doctor's appointment, is no longer dead.

PR too is now clearly heavily linked with the social media arena. Many of your businesses are spending more and more on PR and the skills your HR departments are looking for include how to engage with an audience through the likes of blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

### example

And as for advertising, I saw the new cinema ad for Spanish beer Estrella Damm at the weekend. I loved all three and a half minutes of it and later searched for it on YouTube to see it again. My search provided other executions which I also watched and later commented on in a conversation with various lager drinkers from across the world. I've never bought or tasted Estrella Damm but it might well be the next new bottled beer I try in the pub.

We have written countless examples of social media being of great use to marketers across a number of sectors and disciplines, from cosmetics brand Barry M to financial services brand LV= to charities such as Save The Children. Even when we are trying to write about things other than social media, the 'T' and 'F' words crop up because marketers tend to link their most successful customer engagement with the likes of Twitter and Facebook.

I do appreciate that the hype of social media outweighs the benefits right now and I think Mark Ritson's view is going to ring true for a lot of marketers. That is because we're not very good at it. Yet. Because I repeat again, this isn't a fad. Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare are just a few early prototypes - some examples of the many new ways that we humans are going to keep up and communicate with one another.

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Good

It's part of my job to monitor the long term shifts in marketing and customer engagement. And because customers are there, you need to be there. The power of television, print and outdoor advertising to build brand will never be bettered. It is far more limited in its scope however for the functions that social media can excel in when used cleverly; CRM, PR, customer insight, targeted interactive communications and so on.

If you as a brand aren't there following the conversations, contributing something meaningful and when you're asked to, guiding a user or fan to transact with you, you're failing.

Of course if you're interested in seeing Mark and me slug it out over this and other issues in person, or if you simply want to listen to him talk about the best and worst brand strategy case studies he has seen, book now for your place on The Annual conference now at [www.theannual.co.uk](http://www.theannual.co.uk)