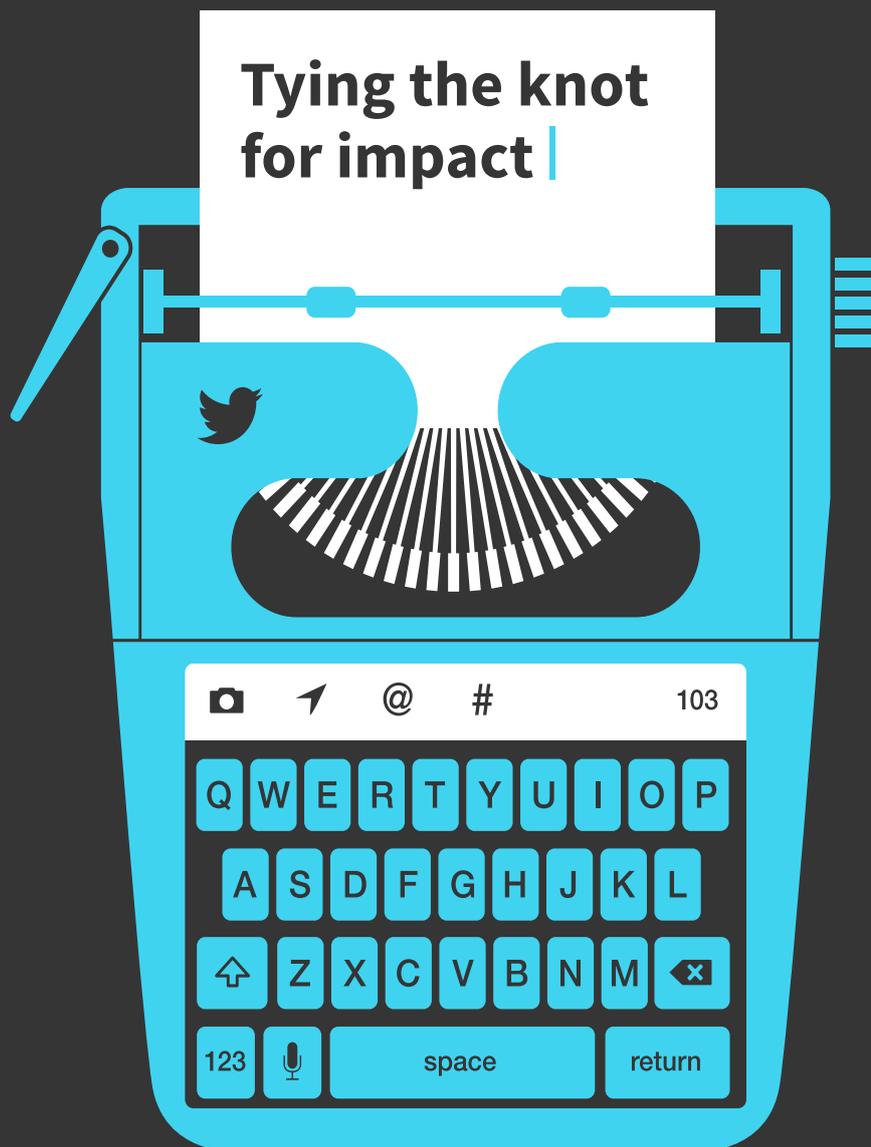


Social vs. Traditional Media



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There's no argument that sophistication in social media marketing is on the rise and creates unprecedented opportunities to connect with customers and constituencies. What once was a low-cost channel seeking simple results such as Facebook "likes" now is a more polished discipline: one that builds by word of mouth through complex interactions and enables a better understanding of who influences whom and how tipping points are reached.

In all the excitement, however, a major question has remained vexingly unanswered: how does social media integrate with multichannel communications programs that include traditional media? The prevailing wisdom often sees social media as becoming the way to spread the word, influence customers and drive sales: it is a powerful parallel to traditional media such as newspapers and television. Traditional media, on the other hand, plays a supporting role by virtue of its reach but only as long as its business models survive.

But the prevailing wisdom flirts somewhat with reality. A 2012 study by business school professors at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon, for example, found that while discussions happen in social media, their influence on sales is far less than imagined. By analyzing media mentions and sales data, these professors discovered that a "unit" of traditional media publicity accounted for nearly 900 sales from new customers and 400 from existing ones. A blog mention, on the other hand, garnered only 90 new-customer sales and 63 from existing clientele. Mentions in an online

community drove the weakest results: only 99 new sales and 48 sales from repeat customers¹.

These findings make sense in light of what often is said about online communities. Although individuals do strongly rely on the opinions of others when making a purchase decision, online communities are just as known for their echo-chamber effects. Opinions frequently are spread among the like-minded, but social media doesn't necessarily change or influence them.

I discovered this first-hand during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. While on leave from FTI Consulting, I consulted for Gov. Mitt Romney's presidential bid where we learned a great deal about how to use social media in conjunction with traditional advertising and news media outreach. We saw how the interplay of these media can profoundly shift public opinion. The lessons we learned in the political arena can be applied to corporate communications campaigns and shed some needed light on the complicated question of how social and traditional media work best together.

Priming the Feedback Loop

The experience of both the Romney and the Obama campaigns made clear that social media has the strongest force on public opinion when it is part of a feedback loop that incorporates advertising and traditional news media. During the campaign, the loop typically began with an advertising campaign designed to stimulate social media activity. If the social media conversations reached a certain level, the mainstream media picked up the story. Once that happened, the campaign could reinforce the coverage's impact through additional advertising, press releases and speeches — starting the loop anew.

With this integration of social and traditional media, the influence on public opinion can be profound. Consider the commotion caused when President Obama gave a talk in Roanoke, Va., in

which he used the expression: “You didn’t build that.” At the time of the speech, the comment was little noticed in either social media or mainstream news. But a week later, Gov. Romney’s campaign released an advertisement criticizing the remark as disparaging American entrepreneurship. Social media activity heated up over the following five days, which, in turn, generated mainstream news media coverage on the outrage the statement had caused. According to poll data, this advertising-social media-news media chain reaction directly benefited Romney’s numbers. As a result, the Romney team broadcast more messages, devoting a day at the Republican National Convention to the theme and attained more mileage still.

The feedback loop needs both social and traditional media to achieve impact. But traditional media is the primary arbiter of opinion. Although people fortify their opinions through discussion and dialogue, at least during the last century, mass media news channels have been the strongest shapers of public opinion. Recent research bears out that this continues to be the case. A 2012 Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor poll, for example, found that most people place their highest trust in traditional media: 71 percent for newspapers, 70 percent for cable network news and 64 percent for network news. Blogs and online forums pale in comparison at only 34 percent. But most interestingly, the results were the same for social network users — and only 36 percent of them place a high level of trust in the social networks to which they belong².

The Four-Stage Message Cycle

Based on my experience during the campaign, we developed a framework we called the Four-Stage Message Cycle. As part of our work, we quantified the relationship between advertising (gross rating points), ballot support levels (Gallup Daily tracking poll), and the content and volume of social media and traditional news coverage. Using statistical models (employing vector autoregressions), campaign strategists could isolate the impact of each campaign message on polling numbers over time. The results showed that messages that effectively shifted public opinion progressed through four successive stages:

1

ORIGINATION

Creation of a message to “shock the system” and stimulate dialogue on an issue that otherwise might be ignored. Advertising, speeches and press conferences are used to garner further attention.

2

DISPERSAL

Dissemination of the message by party stalwarts, undecided voters and even opponents who discuss and debate it in social media forums. The campaign used tools such as TargetPoint Consulting’s National Dialogue Monitor. With it, analysts could measure the extent to which social media users were sharing and spreading a specific message.

3

AMPLIFICATION

When a message becomes sufficiently active, it attracts the attention of members of the mainstream news media, who are among the most active users of social networks. If the mainstream media starts to report on the message, the coverage intensifies and validates the theme in ways that can shape and move public opinion.

4

REINFORCEMENT

Once a message has been adopted by the news media, a campaign can reinforce it with additional advertising and speeches.

Historically, the ability of campaigners to influence or predict the stories promulgated by the news media was limited at best. But the 2012 election demonstrated that social media has changed that perception. Social media provides a more powerful discussion platform than ever before, simultaneously connecting everyone with an interest in a topic, regardless of participants' location or time of day. Communications professionals can monitor and measure the activity and predict if and when a message will go to the mainstream media.

During the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, we observed the same four-stage process (Origination-Dispersal-

Amplification-Reinforcement) working effectively for both the Obama and the Romney camps. The Romney campaign gained ground with its focus on the Solyndra controversy — about government funding of a green energy company that went bust. And the Obama campaign later had the upper hand when it turned conversation towards the so-called “war on women.”

Irrespective of political party or the content of a particular message, the ebb and flow of these campaign messages through social media and conventional news media followed a predictable pattern. Within about five days after a campaign advertisement launch, a social media analysis could show whether or

not the message had gained traction. Once a specific message achieved significant momentum and exposure, it had the potential to transition into a traditional news media story, at which point a campaign team could reinforce it with additional communications and advertising.

For messages that did not gain traction in social media, a campaign could attempt to shock the system again with further communications. However, we found that if a particular message had not gained traction in social media within 14 days, it had little hope of ever capturing the limelight. Then campaigns were better served by moving on to a new message.

The Message Cycle in Corporate Communications



This approach has significant potential in the corporate sphere. A couple of examples illustrate this concept.

In 2011, apparel manufacturer Patagonia shocked the system by running a full-page ad in The New York Times with the provocative headline: “Don’t Buy This Jacket.” In the ad, consumers were asked to go online and sign a two-part

pledge. In signing, both the consumers and Patagonia agreed to reduce consumption and waste by buying items only when needed, repairing them when they break and recycling products at the end of their useful life. Striking a nerve with sustainability-conscious consumers, the campaign generated significant buzz in blogs and online communities. That buzz prompted media coverage in

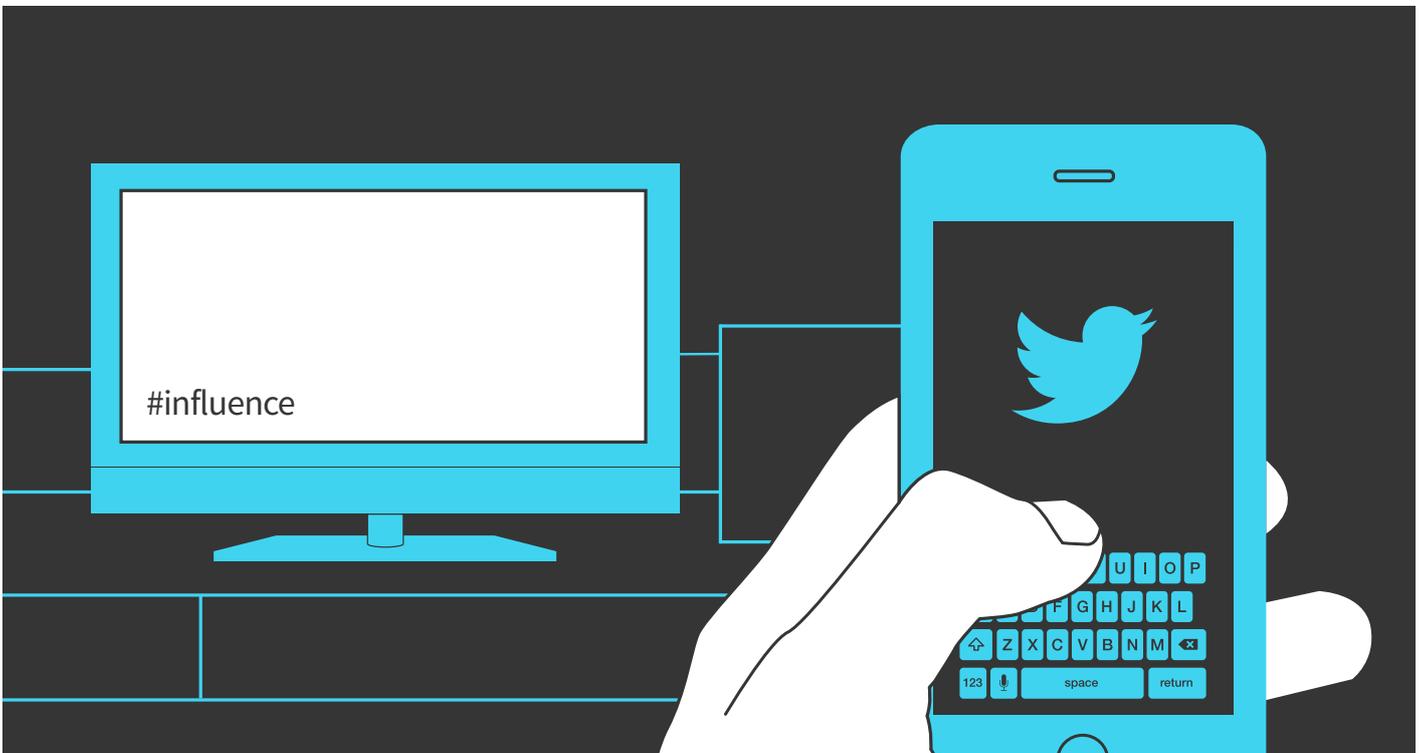
prestigious outlets, including The Wall Street Journal, The Huffington Post and The Guardian in the U.K. The aim of the campaign was to reinforce Patagonia as a high-quality brand that offers durable, long-lasting products. The integration of social and traditional media spread that message, fortified with the clout of traditional media.

PepsiCo also took a cause-related tack and truly shocked the system by announcing that the company wouldn’t be running any ads during the Super Bowl in 2010. Instead, the company launched its Pepsi Refresh campaign and provided \$20 million in grants to fund some 1,000 local community building projects. The Super Bowl news ignited the blogosphere, and more than 6.6 million consumers registered to vote on the campaign’s website. Between the campaign itself and news of the various projects funded, PepsiCo garnered 3.39 billion media impressions in 97 of the top 100 local media markets covering the campaign. The combination of online buzz and traditional media credibility helped realize one of the company’s primary communications objectives: building trust with Millennials, a key segment for PepsiCo products³.

Social Media Opens a Window

In 1952, the campaign to elect Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to the U.S. presidency was lambasted for hiring an advertising agency to help leverage the new medium of television: the commercials were derided for selling the president as if he were a product — such as toothpaste. Ironically, the tables have turned. Companies now can learn to sell products by modeling how presidential candidates are marketed. Social media has opened a modern window through which marketers can watch in real time as a story propagates, opinions form,

the news media takes an interest and minds change. Integrating that capability with their other communications tools can give companies, as well as political parties, another significant capability to shape their stakeholders' opinions. By the same token, not understanding how social and traditional media work together can nullify a company's ability to spot and respond effectively to harmful messages as they build momentum and attract the interest of traditional media. ■



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