

# Stop putting social media cart before content horse



Marketers failing to exploit the power of social media should turn the clock back 100 years and take a good look at the Michelin Guide

I have a bit of a bone to pick with social media. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for democratic access to the means of publishing. It may not have rid the world of dictatorship and ushered in a new artistic golden age, but it has given us hours of pleasure watching cute cats ride miniature scooters while their owners reverse expensive cars into elaborate water features.

No, the democratisation of media is just fine by me. What really gets my goat is the downright boring way marketers have attempted to exploit this phenomenon.

According to a recent survey by the Internet Advertising Bureau, only a fifth of marketers in organisations like Coca-Cola, RBS and the COI view social media as a core element of their marketing strategy. One reason quoted by the report is the difficulty of demonstrating return on investment, but I suspect there are other factors at work.

As Marshall McLuhan – whose work is widely regarded as one of the cornerstones of the study of media theory – observed, whenever a new medium comes along our first instinct is to force existing content to fit it, no matter how ungainly the result ends up looking. You know the scenario. Someone at the workshop asks: “And what can we do on Twitter?” The inevitable result is a cut-and-shut of form and content.

My first boss called this kind of thing “the celebration of technique over intellect”. In those days it was about printing your customer's neighbour's dog's name on a piece of direct mail just because you could, but the principle remains the same.

When we're not blindly putting the media cart before the content horse, we're assuming that the customer is as interested in our product as we are. Or rather, that they are as interested in our product as we are being paid to be.

I'm reminded of the wise old planner on a sausage account. After a long evening of focus groups, the planner asked his client what he'd learned. The client thought for a moment, and replied: “People aren't very interested in sausages, are they?”

If, to quote a sacred text of the early internet era, “all markets are conversations”, then we risk being the person whose main contribution to the discourse is: “That's enough about me, let's talk about me.” When the Atlantic Telegraph opened for business in 1856, Oscar Wilde was asked what he thought of this amazing media innovation. His response was as relevant today as it was then – it depends whether they have something interesting to talk about.

For commercial communicators, Wilde's “something interesting” inhabits the overlapping section on the Venn diagram between “the brand thing” and “the customer thing”. This is a devilishly difficult territory to define at the best of times, but anyone who lives in the world of brands and communications should be able to crack it.

Until recently, whenever someone asked me to name my favourite all-time great social marketing campaign, I'd nominate The Great Schlep – the Obama campaign's brilliant grassroots movement designed to mobilise the grey vote in the crucial state of Florida.

However, I've come across another social media case study that is simply staggering in its multilayered genius. It's described in a book by Herbert Lottman called *The Michelin Men: Driving an Empire*. A little surprisingly for a social media case study, the story starts in France in 1900, when brothers Édouard and André Michelin were searching for a cost-effective way to build their car and bicycle tyre brand.

Their solution, as everyone knows, was to publish the definitive travel guide for road users.

What is so impressive is the way in which the Michelin Guide achieved so much of what is great about the best social media a full 100 years before the channel's invention.

It wasn't about tyres, but about something much more interesting to the French – food. Even so, the original Michelin Guide ticked all the social media best practice boxes. It was genuinely useful, it invited participation, it was given away free at petrol stations, and readers were invited to provide corrections and suggestions. They were even encouraged to leave the guide in view when visiting restaurants to guarantee good service. Try doing that by befriending a brand on Facebook.

The idea was capable of magnification via other channels, to the extent that the Michelin Man – or Bibendum – had his own column in a national newspaper. And unlike so many modern social media ideas, it also had a robust activation

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element. The Guide, after all, listed Michelin dealers among its more mouth-watering entries.

I'd like to think the brilliance of this idea had something to do with the unusual division of labour between the Michelin brothers. Art school graduate Édouard looked after the engineering and new product development, while marketing was the province of André, who was the qualified engineer.

Perhaps this perverse approach to HR was inspired. Or it may just have been inefficient. But we'll never know because, in an omission that will disgust social media textbook-writers, the Michelin brothers never got round to starting a company blog. ●

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