

Can social media marketing skills be taught?

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OPINION

With the launch of the GetSmarter and UCT Social Media course in late 2012, many posed the question: can social media marketing skills be taught? It's a valid question, given the volatility of the social media landscape and a certain X-factor quality that many online influencers possess. Social platforms are in a constant state of flux and marketers are often left wondering whether an update or redesign will throw their best intentions into disarray. Furthermore, many agonise over the quest to secure more likes and followers, searching desperately for the elusive recipe to make people like their brand online.

The number of prominent self-made bloggers and PR representatives on the internet can create the impression that social media is a territory reserved for a few elite, tech-savvy influencers. While having a large existing network and some technical skills can certainly be used to anyone's advantage, social media use has evolved to a point where certain best practices have emerged. These principles can certainly be learnt and utilised for the benefit of a personal or business brand.

Navigating the current social media landscape

To give some context to this discussion, it's helpful to consider the state of social media platforms today. In a year, perhaps even a

month, this may have changed – but even this fact is useful in illustrating this discussion.

As it stands now, in 2013, Facebook has exceeded the one billion user mark. It's an achievement that few people would have imagined when Mark Zuckerberg started the company in 2004. Of course, the platform's immense success offers no guarantee that it will continue to enjoy an upward trend. The company went public in May 2012 and, since then there has been a distinct shift towards monetising the platform. Facebook has adjusted its ad platform and algorithm as well as its design, which has left a flood of promoted posts and sponsored stories in people's news feeds. It's becoming quite difficult for users to avoid the constant barrage of marketing messages, and some have predicted that the platform could experience a decline in the same vein as AOL. The reason for this could quite simply be that people didn't sign up for what they're receiving now. Previously, Facebook was a personal space, used to connect with people who they know, but now there is so much marketing noise on the platform that individuals may start looking elsewhere.

In South Africa, the Facebook tapering-off trend is evident. SocialBakers, a social media monitoring company, indicates that nearly one million users failed to log in to the social network in the last six months, from October

2012 to May 2013. Some believe that this is due to the introduction of new platforms as well as the increase in advertising content on Facebook. Whatever the reason for the decline, it's something that insightful marketers know to watch in the weeks and months ahead.

To illustrate the flip side of the proverbial coin, one just needs to look to Twitter, which has experienced immense success in the last year and shows no signs of slowing down. What some considered a platform for 140 characters of pointless babble in 2006 is now seen as a catalyst for political revolutions, a channel for breaking news and an important way of organising searchable conversations online. Although Twitter has roughly half the number of users boasted by Facebook, the platform exceeds Facebook in mobile ad revenue. If one had to examine the increasing trend towards mobile adoption, it's evident that the platforms that are more tailored towards mobile usage are going to continue to see more success.

Holistically, the social media landscape is as varied as it is volatile. Relatively new platforms – Google+ and Pinterest – have come onto the scene and are vying for some of the action. Are they getting any? Well, yes and no. Looks can be deceiving in this digital playground. Even though Google+ saw 10 million sign-ups in less than three weeks, and now has over 500 million members, it still hasn't caught on broadly with consumers. In early 2011, digital analytics leader comScore released a report that stated that Google+ users had spent an average of just 3.3 minutes on the platform in the month of January 2011, compared to the 7.5 hours spent on Facebook in that same month.

These collective facts demonstrate that social media is not static. It is ever-changing and, although trends should be closely monitored, nothing is set in stone.

A social media marketing skill set

Having examined the current social media landscape, one could deduce that a lasting social media marketing skill set cannot be attained, so why have GetSmarter and UCT launched a course? The success of the course lies in the fact that students are completely immersed in social media tools, techniques and marketing principles. The premise is that social media is constantly changing, and thus social media marketers are required to keep up to date with emerging trends. Marketers are concerned with target markets, and this requires them to follow their audiences to new and emerging platforms should they decide to move on from an existing platform. A case in point: MySpace dominated the social media space some years ago, and then users moved elsewhere. The 2013 redesign and launch has proved so far to be too little, too late to get users to recommit to the platform. The lesson to take from all of these shifts and movements of the social media tectonic plates is that a social media strategy cannot remain stagnant.

As the writer of the UCT Social Media course, I can vouch for the fact that our content has to be overhauled before every presentation of the course. This in itself is an indication of the rapid changes that occur every three months. Designs and interfaces change, algorithms are tweaked, new management tools are introduced and fresh creative strategies come to the fore. If there's one lesson that every social media marketer can take from this, it's that you cannot dip your toes into the world of social media. Total immersion is what is required.