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Message Trumps Medium in Social Media: Trusted Sources and Messages Carry More Weight



By David Olson, Vice President, ARAnet

When it comes to social media, maybe the medium isn't the message after all. In a new survey conducted by Opinion Research Corp. and sponsored by my company, ARAnet, consumers ranked personal advice from family members or friends as the top influence on what they buy. Coming in last place in the survey? Social media posts, which tied with billboards for the last-place spot.

What's the deal with social media's low showing in the survey, which asked people to rate 14 information sources by how much they influence buying decisions? It's probably not all that complicated, but it is enlightening. My guess is that a good portion of respondents simply attributed the influence to their family and friends, even if it was delivered via a social media platform. Get a tweet from your colleague suggesting a new restaurant to try? Your colleague gets the credit, not Twitter. Your friend writes on your wall that you should get a new shirt at a hot new retailer? Your pal gets the credit, not Facebook.

It may be that as a method of communication, digital is finally turning a new corner, and people are becoming platform-blind. It's not such a surprising concept: We don't attribute information to a phone—it's the person on the other end of the line who makes the difference. For a growing number of people, it seems it just doesn't matter how the message was delivered, only who communicated it.

What it tells me is that people listen to authoritative sources they know and trust, no matter the medium. And the survey unequivocally says that high-value consumers—young, affluent and highly educated people—do indeed trust the people providing information online. Those high-value consumers are far more likely than the rest of the population to be influenced by the messages delivered online, and rated the influence level of search engines, online articles, online ads, email offers and yes, social media much higher than their older, less affluent, and less educated counterparts.

Search engines showed particularly well. Fifty percent of young people rated the influence of search as either a four or five out of five. That's compared to 39 percent of all the respondents. People making \$75,000 or more a year also rated search as very influential, with 49 percent giving it a four or five, compared to 39 percent for the whole sample.

The lessons for PR practitioners? To reach these coveted audiences, take your marketing messages online, and be authentic. Here are four takeaways to keep in mind:

1. Take advantage of SEO. Beef up your search engine optimization capabilities, and help your clients build backlinks designed to increase organic search ranking. While it's helpful to have some expertise in SEO, these days successful campaigns are by no means the exclusive domain of digital agencies. PR generalists can dip their toes in the online water, too, by making sure your news releases, newswire distribution, bylined pieces, or distributed articles all feature links to your clients' landing pages, like [this one](#).

2. Don't forget about newspaper websites. The printed-paper industry may be flailing, but it's thriving online. According to the Newspaper Association of America, newspaper websites drew more than one-third of all Internet users in the fourth quarter of 2009. That's a lot of eyeballs.

4. Consider Web-focused tactics. Old paradigms are falling away, and the smartest content-distribution services are making sure they're well established on the Web. While we at ARAcontent are maintaining our successful newspaper article distribution business, we're continuing to aggressively increase our presence online. The opportunity continues to grow, and we're taking major steps to increase our online profile on behalf of our clients, including signing an agreement to become the preferred provider of lifestyle article content for the 1up! network of more than 650 newspaper and other media websites.

5. Be straightforward. No matter if you're distributing your messages via search engines, online articles, or social media—or via traditional media—be straight with the audience. Transparency will maintain your level of authenticity. The more you're able to build that trust with your audience, the better received your messages will be.

Bottom line, if you trust what I'm saying, it doesn't matter if you're reading this on your smart phone, computer, social media platform or print publication. The media isn't the message—the message is.

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THE LEADING EDGE

Social Media for Travel – Live from NAI Summit in LA



By Sally Falkow

The North American Journeys Summit is a two day seminar in LA for Destination Marketing Organizations. Today a few of the sessions are focused on social media. Martin Stoll is speaking

about using social media to promote to international visitors. He is concentrating on marketing to the travel trade – a BtoB play.

By show of hands, 90% of the audience...

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