

Is Social Media a Fad?

Social media has moved from fad to fashion, from novelty to the norm and is evolving at lightning speed. Radio took 38 years to reach 50 million users while TV took 13 years, the Internet took 4 years, and iPods took 3 years. Facebook reached an astounding 100 million users in less than nine months from its launch.

So if social media is no longer a fad, then what is it?

Very simply, social media involves a shift in *where* we communicate and not necessarily in how we communicate.

Social media is still a conversation powered by people. The conversation can be in a group or one-to-one, and encourage people to share thoughts, influence each other, connect and engage in debate.

Through social media conversations, we can learn, vent, gossip, and be

social

with one another.

Social media is, in a sense, a return to truly open communication.

The fundamental difference in the use of social media as a form of conversation is *where* that conversation occurs.

More than 1.5 million conversation segments are shared on Facebook each day. People continue to power the tools that generate the conversation, but today the tools are online. They are faster, compete for your attention, offer more options and capabilities, and employ multiple senses in the delivery and reception of the message.

The Lure and the Hook of Social Media

Social media is attractive because we are not required to seek out avenues of communication; the avenues of interest come to us and find us based on our social communication patterns. Just think of the “people you may know” links, and advertisements that appear when you are on various social media sites as examples.

While municipalities once communicated in an online monologue format, pushing out information through controlled websites, many are now realizing the power of pulling information and welcoming responses and feedback from their audiences. Social media can be a successful way to manage the volumes of communication that invitations generate.

For social media to succeed as a conversation tool, it must be real, honest, transparent,

relevant and people-driven. The conversation cannot be controlled, organized, exclusive or corporate driven. For a municipality to allow this type of free flow communication, it must trust those engaging in the online conversation. The idea that content is a form of democracy can be a culture shift for some municipal administrators.

Many municipalities express fear and concern regarding the use of social media. Concerns arise over inappropriate content, stories spinning out of control, staff over-engaging in online conversations, and the costs associated with monitoring and maintaining social media channels.

However, social media is a conversation, not a campaign. A municipality does not have the ability to monitor every thought, conversation or comment occurring in the bus stops, beside the water coolers, or across the dining room tables of its citizens. Parlay that conversation into social media, and at the very least the municipality is aware of those conversations by moving them into an open, public format.

The successful use of social media within the municipal setting is the ability to recognize it as a dialogue, and like a good communicator, to simply listen. You are creating a place where the public can share their opinions, and hear the opinions of others, without interruptions in the conversation.

The majority of municipal audiences in Ontario are between the ages of 26 and 59. This

audience, traditionally, does not buy into corporate messages and advertisements. They do, however, care what their friends think, and they find out what their friends think quickly and candidly through social media. While 14% trust the messages that they receive through traditional advertising, 78% trust the recommendations of friends. This is one of the reasons why YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world, and why 25% of search results for the world's 20 largest brands are linked to user-generated content.

In other words, if you want to have your message to reach your audience, put your message where your audience will see it.

City of Kitchener Gets Social and Reaps Rewards

Prior to engaging in social media, the City of Kitchener learned that 40% of its residents used Facebook daily or weekly, while 34% watched videos on YouTube or Flickr daily or weekly.

The results of extensive focus groups, surveys, analysis and input from 2000+ local stakeholders clearly showed that social media was not a fad, but a very solid means to reach a vast majority of the City's audience. As a result, the City of Kitchener received approval from management and Council to pursue social media in the City's daily communications and marketing efforts.

The City's Communications department defined its initial social media channels, and developed simple strategies and guidelines that staff could follow for managing the channels. They also allocated one existing staff person to the position of Online Specialist to oversee all social media communications.

Social media was a no-cost means of engagement that was easy to deploy, and instantaneous in generating results for the City. Its far reaching effects offered an enhancement to their more traditional communication methods. Social media also allowed the City to reach those who were isolated, those with disabilities, youth (a demographic traditionally not engaged in municipal politics), new Canadians, and potential investors.

Start Small and Grow Your Strategy

Social media is all about conversation and like good conversation, it can be started anywhere. Brainstorm what topics your target audiences may find interesting and invite participation. Trust your community, allow for opportunities of ownership, and you will be presently surprised.

Social media is not a fad. Instead, it is perhaps the biggest societal shift since the industrial revolution. And since it's here to stay, why not engage in it? If you want your message to reach your target audience, research where they are spending their time to learn about news in your community, and put your message where they will see it. Start small, grow your strategy, measure its impact and results, and adapt your social media channels over time. Your efforts in creating a place where the public can engage, share and listen will be appreciated, and perhaps, yield some surprising results.

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Author Bio:

Saj's greatest strength is combining his marketing savvy with his ability to listen, engage and understand the target audiences. It is this quality that has been working, literally across this

country from a tourism strategy for the island of PEI to crafting a community driven city brand for Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory.

Saj regularly speaks at events on community engagement, social media and brand. Saj most recently presented at the 2010 Ontario West Municipal Conference in London, the 2010 Municipal Communications Conference in Toronto and will be presenting at the 2011 Ontario Small Urban Municipalities Conference in Niagara-on-the-Lake and the 2011 Municipal Information Systems Association Conference on Brand and Community Engagement.

In addition to his speaking engagements, Saj is a regular guest lecturer and panel member for the online communications segment of the Masters in Local Economic Development program at the University of Waterloo.

Saj brings close to 20 years of marketing, branding and creative experience to the table. Saj has extensive marketing knowledge, working as the Director of Global Branding for an international genetics organization and most recently as a Creative Director with a long standing advertising agency. He has helped create results-generating brands, campaigns, and websites for organizations in the municipal agricultural, automotive, construction, financial, food services, performing arts, public and retail sectors.

Saj is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art & Design and the Executive Business Administration program at the Schulich Executive Education Centre, York University.

