



Interactive Social-Media Platform As a Merchandising, Advertising and Brand Management Promotional Weapon For Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises: An Knowledge Outlook

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Abstract: The emergence of Internet-based social media has made it possible for a person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them. Thus, the impact of consumer-to-consumer communications has been greatly magnified in the marketplace. Marketers have tried various means to maintain the brand loyalty of their customers. In the present scenario due to the inherent advantages of Social Media, marketers are testing it in various ways. The study reported in this work is based on review of accessible literature and aims to bring out a classification of social media platforms and the marketing and brand promotion practices on them. Social Media as a Marketing and Brand Promotion tool for SMEs gains more importance in the light of its being a very cost effective and focused medium. The proposed paper also looks into the reasons and advantages of adopting Social Media as a Marketing and Branding tool by SMEs especially in Indian Context in the backdrop of globalization of the business.

Keywords: Social Media, Marketing, Brand Promotion

INTRODUCTION

Change has been one of the most obvious traits of the human civilization, ever since it came into existence on earth. But the pace at which the things changed over past few decades is unprecedented in the whole human history. The world has witnessed this fast paced change in almost every sphere of life be it cultural practices, social and moral values or the general demographics of different geographic areas. These changes have forced the business world to change its theories and practices on how business has to be done and sustained. One of the biggest carriers of this change is the INTERNET that has a potential to link each of us directly to every other individual on this globe. It has given a new meaning to communication. Exhibit-1 [1] shows the statistics of internet users worldwide and exhibit-2 [2] gives a clear idea of how the number of internet users is growing up.

Worldwide Internet users			
	2005	2010	2013 ^a
World population ^[9]	6.5 billion	6.9 billion	7.1 billion
Not using the Internet	84%	70%	61%
Using the Internet	16%	30%	39%
Users in the developing world	8%	21%	31%
Users in the developed world	51%	67%	77%

^a Estimate

Exhibit-1

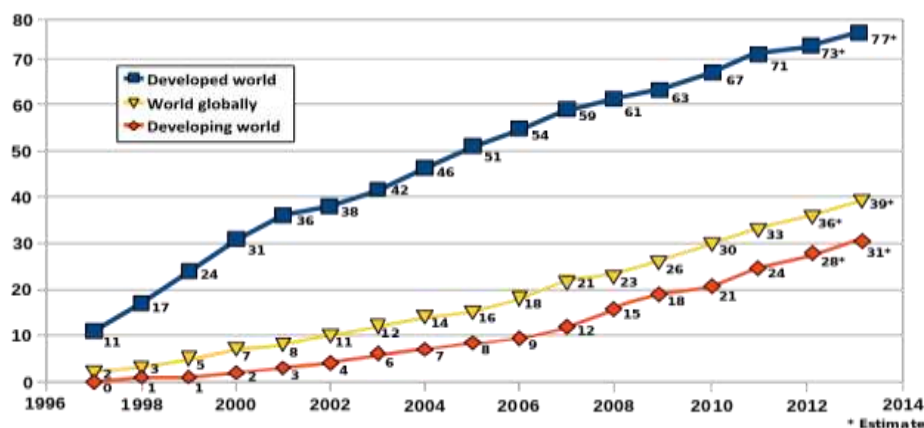
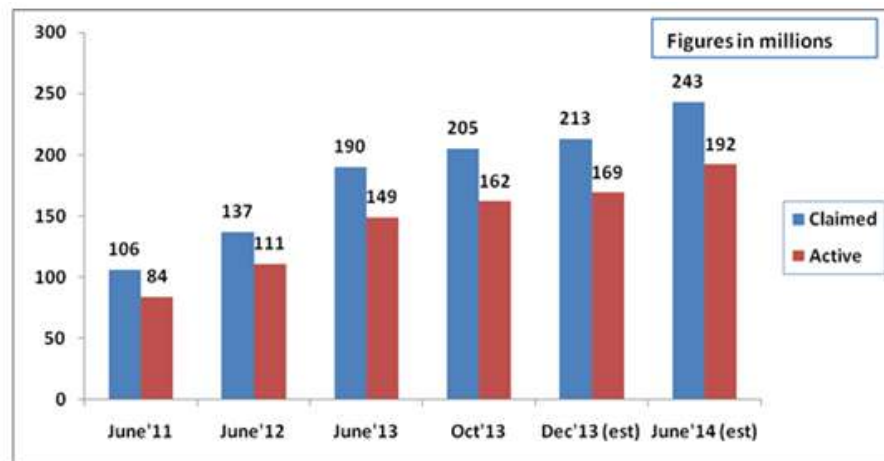


Exhibit-2

Statistics of Internet users in India is demonstrated in exhibit-3. It is quite evident that it also follows the trend worldwide.



Overall internet users

Exhibit: 3

The users of internet spend a big portion of their internet time on the social media sites as depicted in exhibit-4 [3] for US. In fact over this period of last few decades, social media has emerged an essential part of people’s lives. The picture in India too is no different. As reported in reference [4] for the month of July2014, there are total 106 million social media users in India. Indians are spending 15 minutes on social media for every hour spent on Internet [5].



Exhibit: 4



In this background of growing usage of Internet/Social Media, this paper is an attempt to study the usefulness of the Social Media as a tool for marketing and brand promotion. The paper first presents what exactly is social media and how it is different from Industrial Media. Then an attempt has been made to classify the various social media platforms. Lastly it reports some reasons that make it a suitable platform for marketing and brand promotion especially for SMEs. Finally the concluding remarks are presented with some insight on scope of research in this area.

SOCIAL MEDIA: A GLANCE

In its purest sense, social media includes the vessels that allow its users to broadcast information, carry it from user to user and make it available freely[6]. This information could include news stories, general knowledge topics, personal experiences etc., in fact anything, for that matter. Nowadays the Internet has become the biggest carrier of social content. However, some examples of non-Internet social media such as book clubs (where users share their books, speak about their likes and dislikes on their contents etc.), mobile phone texting (where users send and receive their random thoughts or information about happenings and goings-on etc.) or, readers sections in newspapers/magazines (where users write Letters to the Editor, suggest local stories and submit events that users are holding or planning) etc. also sustain their existence. But, it is beyond doubts Internet is the biggest platform for Social Media [7].

Industrial Media Vs Social Media

A media qualifies to be called Social Media when there is a two way communication between its users [8]. For decades, the industrial media characterized by one way communication was the main form of communication in the society. Magazines, journals, newspapers, radio and television programs fall into this category. Social Media has proved its superiority over the Industrial Media and an exponential growth in its users is reported perennially due to an array of advantages [9].

Internet-based social media has made it possible for a person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them. Thus, the impact of consumer-to-consumer communications has been greatly magnified in the marketplace. Marketers have tried various means to maintain the brand loyalty of their customers. In the present scenario due to the inherent advantages of Social Media, marketers are



testing it in various ways. Whereas traditional marketing is brand generated and the content is completely from brand to the customer, on the contrary, social media marketing is comprised of new features, such as the following [10]:

1. Social media marketing consists of multidirectional dialogs. Brands talk to the customers, customers talk to the brands and—maybe most importantly—customers talk to each other.
2. Social media marketing is participatory. What makes it social is that it depends on user participation.
3. Social media marketing is user generated. Most of the content and connections in social media are created by users, not by the brand. Unquestionably, some content and conversations are generated by the brand, but these kinds of content and conversations are few. The aim is to make users talk [11].

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: A CLASSIFICATION

Being relatively a fresh field of academic research not much academic work is carried out in the broad research area of Social Media. Status of academic literature on the sub-field ‘Brand Promotion on Social Media’ is hardly enumerable. However, there is an abundance of non-formal and non-academic literature in the form of articles/interviews/reports published in Newspapers, Magazines and on various platforms of social media itself. The introduction presented above and the following sections draw its contents majorly from such articles as references [12] to [17].

Some prominent categories of social media sites are compiled below (depicted in Figure 1). The discussion presented below also point out towards key characteristics of these categories with regard to how and what it can offer as a marketing and brand promotion tool.

Forums: It is a portion of a website where its visitors are allowed to interact with each other to express their opinions, seek advice and render help. Forums are typically comprised of people all of whom are interested on the website focus and need a platform to share information and knowledge about it. Therefore, forums are a great way to find and build up relationships with people who have similar interests.

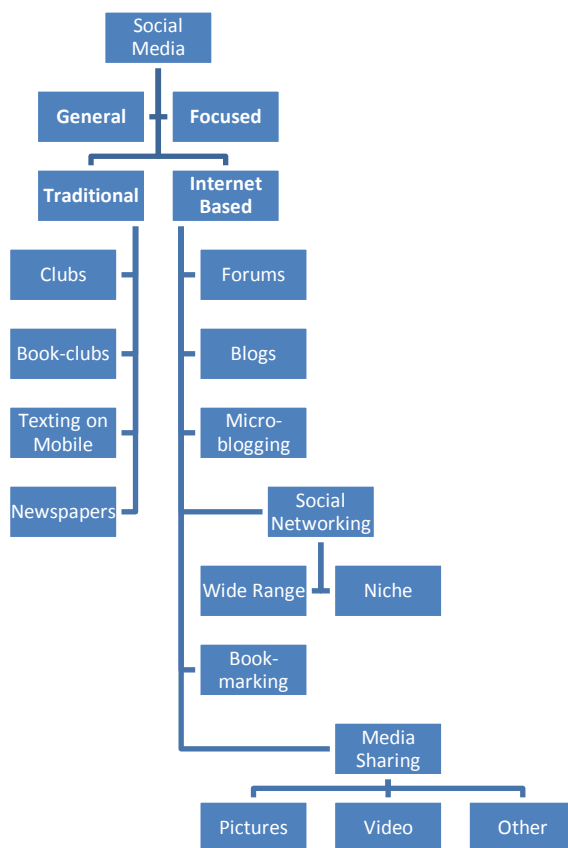


Figure 1: A Flowdiagram showing Various Types of Social Media

Blogs:For the people who like to express their thoughts, feelings, opinions and share their life experiences more openly, internet provides a platform called Blogs. Originally called web-logs, these personal journals have advanced a lot over the years. Blogs are the ultimate form of social media because a writer not only communicates to hundreds, thousands and even millions of readers but receives feed-back and comments. Blogs which discuss a particular niche or interest links people of common inclinations to each other.

Microblogging:Using microblogging people express their thoughts, feelings and opinions as soon as they emerge in their minds and/or share their life experiences, events and happenings immediately but within a restricted number of characters. This is a kind of micro journal of what is happening right now or what an individual wants to share without delay. The best known microblog is Twitter on which within 160 characters, one can update followers on one’s goings-on. This is done through texting posts on mobile phone or directly uploading from the website.



Social Networking: Social networking sites allow users to socialize with people whom they know. Going a step ahead, these sites also offer an opportunity to find and befriend with likeminded people whom you have never met. Most social networks work this way: find a friend, add a friend, read friends notes or scrapes, see what friends are up to with real-time updates and unite with like-minded people. Some of these types of sites are general or broad-range while others have niche focuses and serve to specific group of people.

Niche social networking websites can revolve around sports, dating, culture, hobbies, ethnicity, education, romance, entrepreneurship and more. Face-book, Myspace and Orkut are few of the most popular wide-range social networking websites whereas, LinkedIn and Flixter are examples of niche social networking websites. LinkedIn connects one with people in the professional world. Flixter is geared towards films.

Photo Sharing: Where as social networking sites are known for sharing of messages, photo sharing sites allow sharing photos. A user uploads pictures on to his/her pages on Photo Sharing Sites. Rather than having to send individual pictures to family/friends, he/she sends a single link. One can tag one's photos with keywords related to the image so that people can search for those terms to locate photos of their interest and allow people to comment. Some popular photo-sharing sites are Flickr and Picasa.

Video Sharing: With video sharing networks (for example YouTube) one can watch and share videos online, though one must adhere to copyright laws. Some of the categories of videos are Educational Videos, Short independent films, Comedy Sketches, TV Episodes, Webisodes, Music etc. The list is endless. Keywords are tagged to videos so that people can search for those terms to locate videos of their interest. People can comment if the video owner allows. Videos that many people watch become popular and drive others to watch them. Also these sites recommend to the user videos based on one's previously watched videos.

Bookmarking: The main purpose of these networking sites is the sharing of information. If one finds a web page interesting, informative or inspirational one may choose to bookmark it. By doing this, one is saying that one liked it. Then one's friends will learn what one liked and can choose to read it. Pages that many people bookmark become popular and drive others to that



page as well. Also these sites provide one links based on one's likes and what one has read. Digg, Delicious, and StumbleUpon are very popular bookmarking websites.

Social Media Amalgamation: Over the years a trend towards amalgamation of all the above discussed media is observed. Each site has a major focus and also provides some or all of the other types of social media as alternative ways for its users to have enhanced interaction. Following basic skeleton is used by almost all social media sites:

- Users are allowed to create profile pages and give a personal look to their pages.
- Users are allowed to make/allow friends or followers.
- Comments are allowed with facility to put restriction on who can comment.
- The users contents on the focus of the site appears on the main page along with the links to a choice of other alternatives media.

SOCIAL MEDIA: AS A MARKETING & BRAND PROMOTION TOOL FOR SMEs

SMEs with small budgetary provisions for marketing campaigns and other brand promotion tools available on industrial media can connect to their customers through social media due to following reasons [1-17]:

- **Traditional Brand Promotion Means too expensive for the limited budgets of SMEs:**The advertising on Mass Media and other methods of communicating and building relationships with customers are too expensive for the limited budgets of SMEs.
- **Wide Geographical Spread of Markets:**The target markets may have a very wide geographical spread. Social media provides a cheap means to communicate instantly melting all boundaries.
- **Growing Internet Usage:** The exponentially growing number of internet users presents the biggest justification for conducting the present study. Exhibit-1, exhibit-2 and exhibit-3 clearly make it evident.
- **Growing Web Traffic to Social Media:** The justification for the proposed study is further reinforced by the fact the internet users are spending the biggest portion of the time spent on web on Social Media Sites as depicted in exhibit-4.



- **Internet User Pattern:** The internet usage is found to be the most by the age group 18-29 and has an inverse relationship with the rising age as depicted in exhibit-5. This is quite perceivable that it is this segment of the population that has the potential to be markets for brands and businesses.

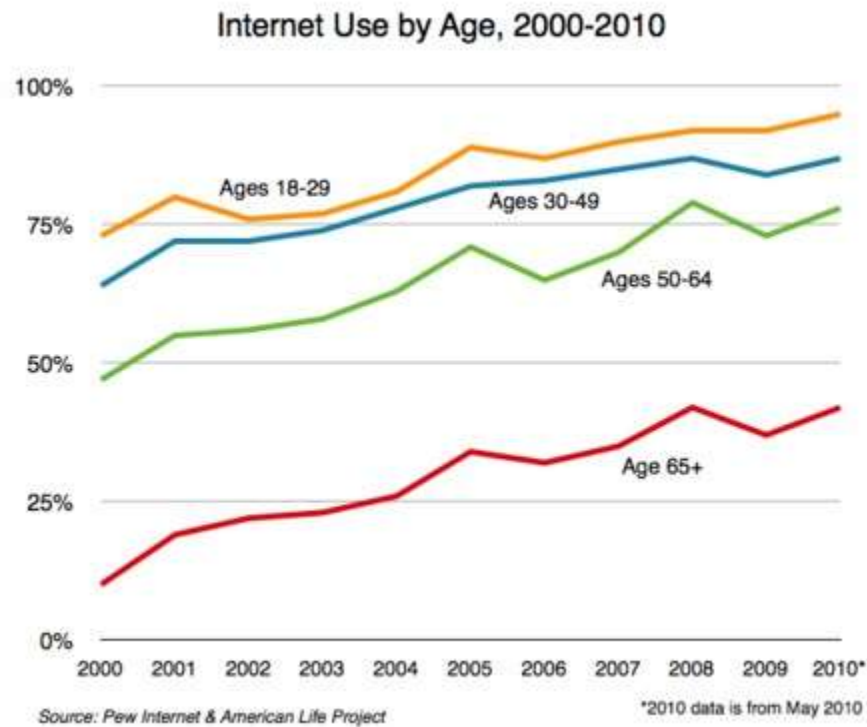


Exhibit-5

SMEs can design their highly focused marketing and branding efforts in the light of reasons pointed out above and taking advantage of its following features:

1. **Inexpensive to produce:** Social media is cheap to produce and products are readily available to someone looking to become involved in social media. With little or no overhead, a person can reach millions of readers or users in a matter of minutes or perhaps seconds.
2. **Multiple Platforms:** As against traditional media, social media may involve the use of text, animations, photos, audio, music and/or video simultaneously in varied possible combinations of user's choice. Traditional media can make use of only one or few of these. For example Newspapers can not use anything except text and photos.



3. Timeline: On social media, a person can communicate about what is happening right now and can track the past chronologically in any order.
4. Reach: Newspapers are limited by circulation; television is limited by viewers. The Internet has information available whenever someone wants to call it up on the computer. Almost everything is just a click away.
5. User Statistics: One can never know the exact number of audience (readers, viewers etc.) of an Industrial Media Users. On internet there are many ways (software solutions) available to ascertain the exact user statistics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In nutshell, Social media as a rising trend creates a marketplace that attracts a wide range of users. The ways in which marketers can effectively use this kind of a marketplace need to be researched [9]. The benefits offered by the Social Media help SMEs to have a level platform to compete with bigger businesses. As there is a huge lack of academic research in this area, it offers a great potential of research in this field of marketing management that may have direct implications to the cause of SMEs.

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