

3 Marketing and the domestication of social media

Kevin Mellet

Introduction

The development of computer-based communication produced a strong surge of interest in the potential of word-of-mouth marketing (Gladwell, 2000; Keller and Berry, 2003; Sernovitz, 2006).¹ Today, online word-of-mouth marketing encompasses a plurality of practices, from media advertising to public relations and customer relationship management. Most of these marketing practices take place on ‘web 2.0’ or ‘social media’ websites such as blogs, content-sharing sites (video, photo) or social network services. These websites provide users with features that allow them to organise and display their social relations (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Moreover, these sites include features (such as embedding, liking and sharing content) that facilitate the social spreading of media material (applications, games, links, videos, etc.). Thus, social media makes the social activity of internet users more visible, measurable and possibly manipulable.

A number of authors have described the development of a ‘viral culture’ associated with social media websites like YouTube, Facebook or Twitter (Wasik, 2009; Berger, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013). Brands are very much part of this phenomenon: commercials appear regularly in the rankings of the most viewed and shared online videos. For example, the ‘Evian Roller Babies’ video ad has gathered more than 86 million views on YouTube since it went online in July 2009. From a slightly different perspective, Starbucks Coffee had over 35 million ‘likes’ on Facebook and more than 8 million ‘followers’ on Twitter as of June 2015. These exceptional figures are often cited in the trade press as examples of the potential of web 2.0 for marketing, and seem to justify the use of the epidemiological metaphor.

Websites promote the circulation of brands and products by offering users access to apparently ‘free’ content that is in fact mainly funded by revenue drawn from advertising and marketing (Beuscart and Mellet, 2008). Conversely, advertisers are attracted by the growing audience of these sites² and the opportunity to place their brands and products at the very centre of online conversations. However, this incentive does not eliminate the uncertainties inherent in an emerging and un stabilised field of activity. This raises the question of how marketing works to ‘domesticate’ social media.³

In 2008 and 2009, when the market for social media marketing services was still in its experimental phase, companies attempted to use social media in a variety of ways that were not always clearly thought out. These ranged from using it for brand-awareness purposes to direct response advertising, public relations and customer relationship management. These companies viewed social network sites as a medium of communication that could not be ignored (due to the large audiences, or because their competitors were there), but did not fully understand how the various functionalities of these sites could help brands achieve their marketing objectives. This chapter focuses on a set of actors who played a crucial role in the domestication of social media by marketing. Most of them are start-ups that were created in the 2000s. I call them social media marketing (SMM) agencies, since the label has gained ground among professionals. The purpose of this contribution is to examine the ‘marketisation’ activities (Callon, 1998; Araujo et al., 2010) carried out by SMM agencies: what are their products, and who are their customers and competitors? How do they market their products? How do they equip and implement their work (advertising formats, monitoring and evaluation measurement instruments)? The chapter relies on a qualitative empirical material consisting of twelve interviews conducted with SMM agency managers (France, June–October 2010) and fifteen interviews conducted with advertisers (France, June–July 2009).

SMM agencies share both the same playground, i.e. social media, and a concern for word of mouth. Their raw material is the ‘social activity’ of internet users – namely the discussions, expressions and recommendations that take place on social media. SMM agencies are not interested in the consumer as described in standard economic theory – namely as an isolated and self-sufficient individual; on the contrary, they consider her as a fundamentally social and talkative being. Agencies seek to market this social activity to advertisers either by indexing it or by provoking it. However, marketisation requires a certain degree of standardisation, including the definition of products and measurement tools with precise and stable contours, in order to comply with the usual qualifications of the advertising market and to achieve a significant volume of business. In other words, these agencies must transform a raw and multifaceted input – the social activities of internet users – into one output which takes the form of relatively standardised communication actions. This work requires them to clarify what the nature of this social substrate is and how it operates. My hypothesis is that the investments made by SMM agencies equip and manipulate representations of the consumer as ‘homo sociologicus’, with these representations themselves (sometimes explicitly) deriving from social theories. The representations concern the nature of social relationships; they take the form of ontologies, that is to say simplified, reductive and somehow exclusive conceptions of the link established between individuals in online social worlds. These figures of social relationships allow professionals to filter among the heterogeneous and uncoordinated expressions of internet users, to give them relief and meaning, and in the end to act on them.

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Analysis shows that the emerging market for SMM services is organised around three specialties: contagion, influence and community. Each specialty stems from a specific feature of social relation, and is translated into a ‘marketing promise’ and embodied in products and measuring instruments. *Contagion specialists* rely on personal relations networks to provoke the fast and large-scale spreading of content such as viral videos or game applications. They belong to the segment of advertising whose purpose is to generate product and brand awareness. These specialists promise advertisers that they will maximise visibility while minimising paid advertising because the spreading of messages is outsourced to internet users. *Influence specialists* concentrate their efforts on the identification and targeting of individuals who exercise an influence on their circle of acquaintances. The support of this figure of social relationships leads them towards a marketing practice which is close to the domain of public relations. *Specialists of the community* are experts in the management of online communities. This specialty consists essentially nowadays in running brands’ fan pages on Facebook. In what follows, this chapter examines the roles of each of these major specialisations in this still emerging industry in turn.

Experts in contagion

The first type of specialisation that we identify is viral marketing in the strict sense. Viral marketing relies on social networks to provoke the rapid spread, on a large scale and through word of mouth, of content such as promotional videos or gaming applications. Experts in contagion connect to the field of media advertising by promising advertisers that they will generate brand awareness while minimising the purchase of advertising space – a promise they fail to keep most of the time because of the unpredictable nature of ‘buzz’.

The figure of social relationships: contagion and epidemiology

Contagion is the figure of social relationships that underlies this area of SMM. The individual is seen as being inserted into networks of relationships; she can infect or be infected by the individuals who are connected to her. She is the vehicle of a form of contamination that extends, step by step, to the whole of society. This is a metaphorical representation of the social world, borrowed from epidemiology, but here that which is transmitted is not an infectious disease or a virus, but information.⁴ Indeed, the web can be seen as a network in which pieces of information (content) move horizontally, following a mechanism of replication. In this digital environment, a video will be classified as viral if it acquires a certain level of notoriety through word of mouth. The goal of the marketer is of course to reproduce this mechanism.

This figure of the social relationship has led to the emergence of a large body of literature in social science, which has later been translated into the science of marketing. Work on the diffusion of innovations (Coleman et al.,

1966; Rogers, 1962; Bass, 1969) has shown that the structure of social networks affects the flow of information, and that a specific class of individuals, qualified as innovators or opinion leaders, plays an important role in the initiation of mechanical diffusion. These diffusion models have been the basis for works that are interested in the mechanisms of viral marketing on the web (Mellet, 2009). A controversial issue in this literature, which had a direct impact on the activities of SMM agencies, concerns the role played by opinion leaders in the initiation of viral dynamics. Some authors (Gladwell, 2000) argue that a small class of individuals, the ‘super-influencers’, play a key role in spreading (or not) ideas and trends online because they are highly connected and have a strong influence on those around them. Advertisers should therefore focus their efforts on identifying and targeting these happy few.⁵ However, research on the online diffusion of innovations or ideas challenges the role of such opinion leaders. For example, computer simulations carried out by Watts and Dodds (2007) reveal that viral diffusion depends essentially on the existence of a critical mass of easily influenced individuals, rather than on a few select influentials.

The marketing field: media advertising

The results of these studies on viral spreading have had two operational consequences. First, they reconcile the viral marketing approach with advertising that uses mass media. From this perspective, it is not necessary to target and tailor a personalised communication to a small number of influentials. Instead, communication should be initiated using many different ‘entry points’, which are what media advertising is usually designed to provide. Second, the challenge of viral distribution lies mainly in encouraging individuals to share the message: the ‘pass-along effect’. Of course, there are a great variety of mechanisms, contexts or strategies designed to encourage the message to spread virally: financial incentives, humour and creativity, an event, mystery, etc. In the context of the internet, social media sites play a critical role in this because they incorporate sharing functions (such as the ‘share’ and ‘like’ buttons on Facebook; ‘retweet’ and ‘favourite’ on Twitter).

Viral marketing agencies’ own practices, as we observed from the interviews, support the case made by Watts and Dodds. Agencies anchor their activities in the field of advertising in order to maximise brand or product awareness. Their approach to viral marketing typically consists first of combining paid media advertising and word of mouth. Viral campaigns always receive a paid media boost at the start and word of mouth is then supposed to take over. The audience gained through word of mouth is, to use a native term, ‘earned media’ and represents money saved on ‘paid media’ or publicity that is purchased through advertising. Second, the expertise of agencies is concerned with the ‘pass-along effect’; that is, the ability to produce content that is attractive enough for individuals to want to share it with those around them.

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These two aspects appear very clearly in the economic equation outlined by this viral marketing or ‘buzz’ agency:

When you make a buzz campaign, you’re going to invest a lot more in content creation, it will cost you more initially. After that, you’ll also buy media, because buzz does not happen alone... The most amazing campaign we have done is what we did for Orange, *Monfestival* [MyFestival] ... We had a budget of €150,000. We took the risk of saying that rather than, for example, putting 100,000 in (paid) media and 50,000 in the creation [of an ad], we would take 150,000 to create really great content. Since Orange has a huge customer database, Orange could already send [it] to a few people, so the ad was sent to 200,000 people. Except that these 200,000 video views have turned into 10 million.

(George, CEO, buzz agency A, twenty employees)

Another example of a viral campaign that had significant success is the 2010 video campaign ‘A hunter shoots a bear’ (by Buzzman agency, for Tipp-Ex): it consists of an interactive video on YouTube (in fact, a custom Flash application embedded in YouTube) which puts a bear and a hunter face to face, offering the viewers the choice of which ending they want to see by erasing the word ‘shoots’ in the title using a Tipp-Ex corrector and replacing it with a word chosen by them.⁶ In order to give as many responses as possible to the viewers’ queries, more than forty different endings were produced and filmed. The campaign is often cited as an incredibly successful viral phenomenon. Over time, its different versions have gathered a total of 30 to 40 million views, and the creative material received multiple awards in professional advertising festivals. A professional who participated in the design of this campaign stresses the importance of the quality of the creation for its future viral success:

So in fact, it really is the social web, for once, that launched it, but we had content that was very strong, which worked very well... We still purchased advertising space on YouTube UK and Italy, it was also a kind of deal with YouTube, since they did something custom for us. And it worked.

(Mick, community manager, Buzzman agency, thirty employees)

The previous two examples cleverly connect the traditional video format with an interactive device that produces a personalised effect. They belong to what one interviewed expert calls content-based buzz (*‘le buzz de contenu’*): ‘So content-based buzz, it’s typically the surprising video. It’s not technique, it’s all about creativity’ (Ron, social media marketing manager, advertiser).

Another means of domesticating virality comes under the category of what the same expert calls mechanical virality (*‘le viral de mécanique’*), as opposed to content-based buzz. Mechanical virality is solely based on incentives. The

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best example of mechanical virality is the contest concerning a Facebook application a company has created. First, the contest is advertised through (paid) Facebook ads. Then, internet users are forced to ‘like’ the page to be eligible to participate. Finally, they are encouraged to share the app with friends, since it increases their chances of winning as well as those of their friends. However, the content is very poor: it is limited to a basic quiz with standard questions; only the potential prize varies, depending on the campaign.

Measuring the success of viral campaigns

Viral marketing metrics are fairly similar to their media counterparts, namely the number of videos viewed or the number of quizzes played. These metrics are used to make comparisons between purchased audience and audience acquired through word of mouth. In order to refine the measure of virality, agencies have also developed ~~virality ratios~~ that give an indication of people’s willingness to share the message: ‘Each day we had a table telling us the number of videos viewers, the number of earned viewers [those viewers that were not acquired through paid advertising but through word-of-mouth referrals]... and at the end the viral ~~ratio~~ [the relationship between earned and paid views]’ (George).

Contagion cannot be decreed

Both of the campaigns just mentioned – Orange and Tipp-Ex – are the biggest hits of their respective agencies. They are loss leaders to attract new advertisers. They cannot, however, be reproduced campaign after campaign, precisely because of their exceptional nature: ‘There’s a Tipp-Ex effect, for sure. Advertisers think we can do it again, and they are disappointed that it has not been done with them. Except that there are things that are a bit special anyway, even if we try to do as well every time’ (Mick).

Most campaigns produce little or no word of mouth. The uncertainty of the viral success of the campaigns and the (measurable) extent of this success is very problematic for agencies. Indeed, advertisers allocate their advertising budgets depending on the size and quality of the audience they hope to reach. They want guarantees. Can agencies manage to secure a measured viral audience? This problem is essentially concerned with content-based buzz.⁷ Agencies strive to reduce uncertainty in two ways. First, they develop a ~~detailed~~ knowledge of ~~the properties of a viral video~~, in terms of format and content. For movies, they prefer a short format – less than thirty seconds – and for it to appear to be an amateur production (‘low fi’). These specifications, however, are not sufficient to ensure the viral success of an advertising campaign. As emphasised by this agency employee, content ‘must be brilliant, otherwise it will not work’ (Mick). Genius cannot be reproduced and standardised, campaign after campaign.

The temptation of artificial virality

The most radical solution – but also the most delicate to pursue from an ethical standpoint – is to buy an audience that has been labelled ‘viral’. Several advertising networks sell advertising space that serves as a seeder for viral marketing campaigns. But they can, more discreetly, give a boost to agencies in the second part of a campaign, the part that is supposed to be based on word of mouth. The fact that advertisers ultimately demand a certain volume of total audience means that the ambiguity is maintained between a purchased audience and an audience that is generated by word of mouth:

Goviral and others, like e-Buzzing, or BlogBang, their principle is to say that today, just for a buzz to start, you have to buy a first part of the audience, for the media material to be seen by the first people who will pass it along... But it is not prohibited, if you are struggling, if you feel that it [the content] does not work or that the content is not strong enough, [then] you resort to these players. But it is not so much in the genes of the agency [i.e. the agency Mick worked for].

(Mick)

For another expert, the temptation to use artificial virality – even though it may be justified by advertisers’ risk aversion – is a denial of the principles of viral marketing:

Not to name them, E-buzzing, BlogBang, those people made us believe we were going to use the viral power of bloggers... They clearly say in their sales pitch: yes, do not worry, it’s bloggers. Ah, so this is a new world. But beyond that, what do they say? What promise do they sell? They sell 2 million certified views, irrespective of the video, for €10,000... That is, they rely on a misunderstanding, and they managed the perfect hold up, while, at the same time, selling the dream of social media to their customers, by telling them you’ll see, social media, it means the loss of control. Oh, okay, it’s the loss of control. Yes, but do not worry, I’ll sell you the dream of the loss of control, and you will stay in control. Ah, well, that’s cool, I have the cake and eat it too, that’s even better.

(Keith, CEO, social media research agency, twenty employees)

Consequently, we observe a very strong tension between the logic of pure virality, which can produce success but is primarily characterised by unpredictability, and the rationality of media advertising, in which predictability prevails. From the point of view of agencies, advertisers’ expectations result in the temptation to reduce the viral audience to a specific medium, to make it measurable and marketable just as with any other media.

Experts in influence

Specialists in influence focus on the identification and targeting of individuals who are supposed to be able to influence those around them. This focus leads these specialists to a marketing practice that is very different from that of experts in contagion. This links them to the field of public relations, whose contours – though not the trade itself – have been redefined by social media.

A figure of social relationships that equips public relations

Wherever there are games of influence, what you called earlier word of mouth, it's about us, it is our business.

(Ringo, 'Digital influence' manager, PR branch of an advertising company)

For this 'digital influence' manager in a PR agency, word of mouth comes down to games of influence. This feature of social relationships is associated with a representation of the social world that is different from the horizontal and egalitarian concept that animates experts in contagion. The world of influence is vertical and hierarchical: individuals can be differentiated according to their ability to exert influence in networks of relationships. A small number of individuals, qualified as influentials or opinion leaders, are supposed to have a high ability to influence those around them.

This view of the social world, based on influence, is shared by public relations specialists. For the latter, the tracking and targeting of influencers are the strategic entry points to shaping public opinion. Founders of this business, like Edward Bernays in the United States in the early 20th century, worked to establish the best practices of 'spin doctors'. Among these, the goal of influencing the influencers appears prominently:

Those interested in fashioning public opinion must be sociologically and anthropologically informed; they must be meticulous students of the social structure and of the cultural routines through which opinions take hold on an interpersonal level. They must consider the imprint of sex, race, economics, and geography on public attitudes. It was also important to understand existing networks of influence – family, community, education and religion for example – as well as the undeclared patterns of leadership that operate within each of them. 'If you can influence the leaders', Bernays instructed, 'you automatically influence the group which they sway'.

(Ewen, 1996: 168)

We will not describe here the different facets of a field whose goals and methods are multiple and sometimes conflicting (Ewen, 1996). Note, however, that the [web](#) and social media are of particular interest to PR professionals to the extent that they expand the boundaries of public space. Indeed, as pointed out by Cardon (2010), the internet weakens the position of the traditional

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‘gatekeepers’ – journalists, publishers, personalities – who are responsible for monitoring and maintaining the boundary between public space and the space of sociability. Over time, gatekeepers have become the almost exclusive focus of attention for media relations, the central tool of public relations. Now, a number of amateurs and quasi-professionals have increased access to public space, for example by blogging. Moreover, ordinary and personal conversations can achieve visibility online. Consequently, as their voice becomes part of a broader public space, new people are likely to achieve the status of being ‘influential’:

We came to the conclusion that it was necessary to offer something different to customers, because there was a great danger, in a way, because not only journalists could express themselves about a brand; the impact could come from elsewhere, with equal force, and sometimes even cause disasters for some brands.

(Janis, CEO, RP 2.0 agency, four employees)

The influence specialist’s toolbox

The influence specialist’s toolbox differs significantly from that of the expert in contagion. The service being sold is not an advertising product, combining a commercial and a short-term campaign. It more closely resembles a support and consulting contract with a company or institution, which extends over the long term. This support is based on two main types of expertise.

The first is to identify and qualify those who may access the status of influencer. This is called ‘profiling’. It is traditionally focused on journalists, of whom PR professionals have a regularly updated database. Profiling extends to influentials that can be identified on social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook or on blogs. To perform this profiling operation, quantitative ‘counters’ indicating the number of friends or ‘followers’ are useful, but cannot replace the interpretative work of the professional spin doctor:

You see if the person has 5,000 followers on Twitter, and half of these 5,000 followers are journalists, to take an example, one can say that [on a scale] from 1 to 10, there is an influence of 9. Because it means something. Same thing on Facebook. In fact we look at people. It is not the volume, that’s the idea. I’m never going to say: ‘5,000 on Twitter, 2,000 on Facebook, so that’s great influence’. Now if those 2,000 Facebook friends are teens, aged 14–15, it could interest me for Nintendo, but it’s not going to be interesting for Perrier-Dita Von Teese. So, every time, the profiling work really involves the individual. But in the same way as it happened before for a journalist. Actually for a journalist, we know what he personally cares for. We know if she has children, we know her interests in life, beyond what is technically visible to everyone, that is to say what she wrote, just to be sure to talk her while being on top of her mind.

(Ringo)

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In a social world reduced to ‘influence games’, the PR professional is looking to fill a position that allows her to influence the influentials whom she has identified. This is the second area of expertise. Thus, most professionals we met publish a blog and have an active Twitter account (‘I have 4,000 followers’). These tools help them maintain a ‘dialogue’ in the sense of ‘being part of the conversation’ about various issues. In addition, experts in influence mobilise classic media relations devices: ~~mailing campaigns~~, events, etc. They organise events such as Apérotweets (cocktail parties with Twitter influencers) or Goldenblog Awards (blogger awards), for which the invite list has an exclusive dimension.⁸

The extension of the domain of influence?

How do customers, advertisers and brand managers measure and assess the work of influence specialists? In the field of media relations, the two most commonly used metrics are press coverage – media coverage resulting from the action of press agents – and the advertising value equivalency rate, which estimates what editorial coverage would cost if it were advertising space. These measures are also mobilised to assess the actions of experts in influence on the web:

Trying to find common metrics that will demonstrate that there is an influence, it’s very complicated. This is a subject that is 100 years old in global PR and it exists today within digital PR. No one has found a good answer. So much so that in traditional PR, the only measurement system I know of that is actually used is the advertising value equivalency. And it’s the worst thing you can do. Making an advertising equivalency, this is the very antithesis of our business. But so far, this is what we find, this is the standard.

(Ringo)

If PR professionals explore the dynamics of how influence affects new media, such as blogs or Twitter, they still use traditional assessment tools. Consequently, the efforts of these specialists are rewarded – and their clients are satisfied – only when their actions produce visible effects in mainstream media. For an operation to be successful, it must loop on traditional media: ‘What’s funny is that by dint of creating this buzz on the web, we hit the jackpot: Jerome Bonaldi [a well known French journalist] on France 2 [a French broadcast TV network]’ (Janis).

Finally, we observe a strong tension between talk that emphasises the need to address the emerging influentials in social media and practices that are deeply rooted in traditional public relations. Thus, experts in influence will look at Twitter not because it highlights the expansion of the public space, but rather because the social network is populated by journalists and politicians: ‘Twitter is an absolutely key influence tool, because it is an elite which

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is an elite group of decision makers. These are exactly the targets that I'm interested in, which can be journalists – there are a lot of journalists on Twitter – or politicians or opinion leaders, whoever they are' (Ringo).

Community specialists

Contagion and influence are not the only social relationship figures on which SMM agencies build their business. Some agencies are experts in managing online communities. This specialty now essentially consists of managing brand pages on Facebook. Community managers are, however, torn between the ideal of strong engagement with community members and the poverty of online interactions... which leads them to elicit more instrumental forms of mobilisation.

The figure of social relationships: commitment to community

Facing the ephemeral bubbles of collective attention based on contagion, which follow each other, the expert in community instead favours stable links and relationships that last. But, unlike the hierarchical representation that is expected to result from influence games, this vision of the social world is egalitarian. If it is possible to differentiate between people according to their level of involvement or participation, the main issue at stake is the separation between community members and non-members. 'On one hand, when we try to talk to influencers, we try to obtain coverage [media coverage] from them. On the other hand, when we speak to fans, we try to get engagement from these fans. These are two different concepts' (John, online agency, subsidiary of an independent advertising company).

The concept of 'community' as it is mobilised and equipped by SMM agencies does not have the same meaning as is given to it by sociologists since the works of Tönnies and Durkheim. Brand communities (Cova and Cova, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) are described as stable and structured groups, based on a shared interest in a brand or a product. The forms of commitment associated with these communities are compatible with contemporary individualism and consumerism, whose values they share. Web-pages and forums that are fed and managed by internet users support many brand communities (Amine and Sitz, 2007).

The conversation established between brands and consumers organised in communities can be linked to the field of customer relationship management. Indeed, ~~the recorded interactions and associations~~ between internet users can fuel the remote monitoring by an organisation of the quality of their products and services. Social media can also be used to support the development of loyalty programmes:

However for a brand, it's still interesting enough to have all this feedback, because for once, even if it's sometimes scary, there are hard facts, there

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are real consumer insights that come to the surface... At the risk of caricature, a guy who says 'it's a crappy product', how can we reply? And a guy who says 'the product is great', it would be nice to answer. Brands do not know what to answer, but today we are entering a logic of community that requires management.

(Paul, CEO, online niche marketing agency, forty employees)

The community manager's toolkit

~~For the influence specialist, the intervention of the community manager is to~~ be maintained over time ('Today, we are more in a year-long contract logic'). This positioning is consistent with a critique that is made against the expert in virality, unable to maintain a lasting relationship with the internet user beyond the initial campaign:

When looking for example at Tipp-Ex, which is today's buzz, there is no connection to Facebook. It's weird not having a Tipp-Ex fan page... I do not want to rewrite history, but now, in the end, what I find unfortunate is that this is a campaign that was very successful, which is great and all, [but] it will stop and will struggle to bounce back because it did not create its legend. They could have, perhaps, tried to group some fans [i.e. page likes] together, or at least people who found this video funny, before eventually reactivating them later.

(John)

The management of brand ~~or product~~ pages on Facebook is the typical product marketed by those who are experts in community. These pages gather Facebook members who have declared themselves 'fans' of the brand by clicking the 'like' button. This membership gives them the opportunity to like, comment and share content (news, photos, videos, contests) published by the page manager – content that appears directly in their newsfeed, alongside the news of their friends. Thus, the functioning of the 'community' is based on engagement. Customers agree to become members of the community. They agree to receive the information, but they can also unsubscribe. They eventually agree to become the voice of the brand among their friends. They thus differ from influentials, who are usually solicited against their will, and often repeatedly, once they have been recorded in the files of the influence specialists:

Today it will be mostly the management of Facebook pages. At the start, we were working with blogs. We did a lot of things, sending small gifts, organizing parties, things like that, for bloggers. It had a certain limit. There have been so many that it made for big budgets. I recognize that they are true influentials, but as they were over-solicited, it did not really work... I recognize that with the rise of social networks... platforms like Facebook, we're really in this logic of community management. And for

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once, the social networking part has a real meaning, because we have reached what was originally our dream: to ~~connect with influentials in order to gather~~ together those in love with a brand. Now, we manage them directly. Well, they are not necessarily ‘in love’ with a brand, but in any case these people have a great deal of sympathy for the brand.

(Paul)

Of course, community management presupposes the existence of a community. The most common way this process is configured involves a company that engages the agency’s services because it does not know how to handle an existing fan page:

So people come to us saying ‘well, what can we do?’ Often they have existing communities, but they never made them lively... This was the case when we got the management of Petit Bateau [an old French clothes brand that has become fashionable in the past 20 years], for example. We have run Petit Bateau’s page for about six months. They had done nothing with it. We took it over and we really made it lively. And this is the most common case.

(Paul)

Facebook page management has two main dimensions. First, it is necessary to moderate fans’ discussions. This form of control, ~~which is generally carried out a priori~~, implies removing insulting or outlandish comments and responding to questions or criticisms. Second, it is necessary to maintain the relationship and to encourage likes and comments by regularly publishing content. This work is based on a clever arbitrage between soliciting attention and maintaining a certain distance between the publications, in order to prevent the defection of fans whose newsfeed could be overloaded. Maintaining a high level of attention and participation depends not only on the quality and consistency of published content, but also on the publishing strategy:

So that’s basically how to reach out better in the newsfeeds. For example, we know that the inclusion of photographs is a plus, that kind of thing. It is true that we have to write open questions in order to maximize the number of likes or comments. The more comments or likes I receive, the more relevant my post will be. The more relevant it is, the more it will go up in Facebook’s visibility algorithms. That’s an emerging field.

(Paul)

Facebook’s engagement metrics

The value of the community to the client depends of course on the number of its members, but also on their level of engagement. The community manager’s objective is to ‘maximize the interaction rate’ (John) on his or her page. To assess the activity of members and adjust their work accordingly, managers

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have a dashboard featuring numerous quantitative insights on the community's activities: number of new fans; number of active members – those who have, at least once during the previous week, visited the page, commented or 'liked' a post; number of comments and likes, etc.

Basically, to continue on my Danone [*Dannon*] example, I have a fan base on my page, my Danone yogurt fan page. I connect with them several times a month with messages that I publish on the Facebook page. And I observe all this very, very closely. I check the number of likes, I check the number of comments, I check the percentage of interactions [with a post] with respect to their reach. These are the first KPIs [Key Performance Indicators]. Then I check the churn rate [the proportion of Facebook users who stop liking the page over a given period of time], I refine the editorial line in terms of themes, photos, videos, links, content, etc. I actually look to refine my editorial strategy and my Facebook presence in order to maximize interaction rates while minimizing my churn.

(John)

“Engagement, that’s fine; but then what do they do, all these fans?”

With Facebook, experts in community have a very powerful toolbox for measuring the activity of members and adjusting their management work. The representation of the activity of users produced by quantitative indicators is very valuable. It allows them to reduce uncertainty in planning their activity and to provide precise accounts to customers who wish to obtain a measurable return for each dollar spent. Finally, these indicators have a performative effect to the extent that they form a ‘community’ made up of more or less ‘engaged’ fans. Since it is measurable and comparable, it is not necessary to consider the nature of the ‘engagement’ of people, or to question what ‘being a fan’ or clicking ‘Like’ on Facebook means. However, as forms of attachment, these are extremely thin and inexpensive, and they drain the concept of community – even when used in the modern sense of brand community – of any real substance.

The community managers I interviewed say their job often consists of trying to maintain ‘fans’ who have been manufactured artificially and in large quantities through quizzes based on practices of mechanical virality (see above). Thus, they find themselves caught in the tension between the ideal of participation and dialogue associated with the ‘community’, and the need to generate revenue at the risk of betraying this ideal in favour of a utilitarian logic.

This tension is also reflected in the relationship between SMM agencies and their clients. As underlined by one advertiser, ‘engagement, that’s fine, but then, what do they do, all these fans?’ ‘Engagement’ and conversation are not conventional marketing objectives. They must, at some point, convert or transform; in other words, they must lead to sales. This tension between the conversational ideal and economic necessity can lead to more open conflicts

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concerning page management. In the case of Petit Bateau's page management, this opposition led to a jurisdictional dispute, which ultimately resulted in the client recovering the Facebook page management function:

Then, there is a skills problem, about who will be in charge. For example, I know that at Petit Bateau they have taken over the page, saying 'hey, it's no use'. Everything is finally nice and after all we had done to engage users, basically they said 'we do not care. What we will do from now on is send coupons every week, and also publish pictures of the catalog with the leading products of the moment that are top sellers.' It's an approach. Honestly, it works, but hey, if after all that the Facebook pages become newsletters for coupons and sales promotions, this is not what I call conversation.

(Paul)

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an exploration of the business of social media marketing agencies. We have seen how these players have emerged, positioning themselves at the junction between a new, 'conversational' form of media – social media – and a market – the market for advertising and marketing services. In this conclusion we come back to the issue of 'domestication' of sociability by marketing, as raised in the introduction.

The domestication of word of mouth on social media sites by marketing is not self-evident. It involves multiple investments not only to design and equip marketable means of action, but also to incorporate these innovative products in a market with stabilised formats and measurement indicators. We identified three modes of intervention. Each is derived from a basic figure of social relationship, each results in a 'marketing promise', and each is materialised in a product and measuring instruments. The emerging market for social media marketing services is thus organised into three specialties: contagion, influence and community. However, efforts to build products that meet advertisers' expectations are not always sufficient. There is an irreducible tension between the metrics that are specific to these innovative products – the 'virality ratio', the measure of 'online influence', 'engagement' rates – and traditional marketing metrics. Agencies sell potential contagion, but advertisers demand a guaranteed audience level. Agencies sell online influence, but advertisers ultimately look at the benefits of traditional media (TV, print media). Agencies sell a dialogue with fans, but advertisers demand promotions that convert into sales. Agencies are therefore constantly tempted to give up their promise of 'alternative marketing' based on virality, online games of influence or dialogue. It is here that we finally realise that the adventure of social media marketing is – or at least it is when one adopts the perspective of professionals – the history of the domestication of marketing by marketing, rather than the history of domestication of word of mouth by marketing.

Notes

- 1 Word-of-mouth marketing originated with the research carried out at the Department of Sociology of the University of Columbia by Paul Lazarsfeld's team in the 1940s and 1950s. Their surveys revealed the limited impact of short-term media-based initiatives on people's attitudes, and the influence of networks of personal relationships on purchase or voting decisions. While everybody is exposed to media, we have varying relationships with these information flows. 'Opinion leaders' are characterised by an active attitude combining a systematic quest for information with attention paid to understanding it. The conversation between opinion leaders and those they influence then begins, leading to decisions being made by some. Word-of-mouth marketing, which developed in the late 1950s in the wake of the work by Lazarsfeld's team, is in fact the application of this model to marketing: the implementation of targeted communication designed for individuals who are identified as influencers and are therefore likely to play a key role in the purchase decisions made by the other people around them (Brooks, 1957). As the reader shall see below, social media marketing redefines and greatly widens this restrictive approach.
- 2 In June 2014, Facebook was the second-most visited website in France with almost 28 million monthly internet users (Médiamétrie-Netratings). Video sharing site YouTube occupied the third rank with more than 25 million users. Blog-publishing service Blogger was ranked 16th (10 million users).
- 3 The term 'domestication' must be understood both literally – marketers seek to exercise tight control over *a priori* uncontrolled ordinary conversations – but also figuratively, in the formulation proposed by Callon (1986). Callon places particular emphasis on definition and intersement mechanisms, and on devices that support them.
- 4 Experts in contagion implicitly refer to Gabriel Tarde's ontology. Indeed, as pointed out by Latour and Lépinay, Tarde's conception of social science focuses on the dynamics of contamination which spread from individual to individual. They are even more directly – but certainly unknowingly – Tardians when they implement the 'conversations among idlers' [*les conversations des badauds*] in their activity as their main 'factor of production' (Latour and Lépinay, 2009: 2).
- 5 As we will see in the next section, this representation is mobilised by the influence specialists.
- 6 www.youtube.com/profile?annotation_id=annotation_820885&feature=iv&src_vid=4ba1BqJ4S2M&user=tippexperience
- 7 Indeed, the recommendation is more predictable when obtained through economic incentives, which is the case of gaming applications on Facebook – hence the term 'mechanical' virality.
- 8 "Without some form of censorship, propaganda in the strict sense of the word is impossible. In order to conduct a propaganda, there must be some barrier between the public and the event." (Lippman, 1922, p. 42).

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