The ingenious Facebook trap: Is it time for ensnared brands to cut their losses?

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22 Nov 2017

When Facebook was started back in 2004, it was hailed as one of the first truly 'free' advertising mediums for corporate and personal brands alike. Brands could create new homes for themselves and their products by the click of a button and use Facebook's ecosystem to access new audience segments and expand the appeal of their service offering. It was an exciting time, and the marketing world embraced it like wildfire: it didn't take long for Facebook to become the go-to social media platform for brands across the world.

Unbeknownst to most brands though, Facebook was silently plotting increasingly creative ways to monetise brands' presence on the platform and implemented an ingenious strategy to ensnare unknowing brand custodians.

Back when organic reach was actually still a thing, Facebook representatives would hail the importance of increasing page numbers via paid media, citing the direct correlation between the amount of page likes and the organic reach of a brand's content. This still, however, left brands with an option: "As long as we can increase our page numbers (by means of competitions and campaigns), we don't have to rely that heavily on Facebook's paid infrastructure."

But in the background, Facebook already quietly implemented the second phase of its plan, namely the gradual changing of its content serving algorithms to prioritise the content of non-brand accounts, whilst de-prioritising the content of branded entities. As organic brand reach started dwindling, the marketing world realised that page likes were becoming little more than a vanity metric, its only real purpose today being a boasting tactic used by the CEOs of big corporations during golf days.

This left brands in a difficult spot: after investing thousands (and perhaps millions) into building massive communities on Facebook, was it time to abandon ship? As with most long-term relationships, the suffering party (i.e. brands), however, decided to try to salvage things, and Facebook was geared and ready to make amends with their estranged brand partners. So, with page likes losing its value, Facebook (and its legion of marketing evangelists) needed a new metric to solidify their grip on brands. The solution was simple: 'paid reach', a metric similar to organic reach, but one where brands are actually guaranteed eyeballs on their services and products. Best yet, Facebook has wrapped this metric in beautiful bows by introducing new and exciting paid ad units, such as the Facebook Carousel adverts and the Facebook Canvas. It shouldn't be a surprise that brands and the marketing world alike have embraced this new, shiny metric and the hefty price tag that comes with it with open arms.

The ingenious Facebook brand trap seems, however, to be reaching a beautiful crescendo, if one considers the impact that a new potential change currently in testing can have. If implemented, this change will see the traditional news feed split into two sections: one new non-default (and slightly hidden) feed that will be dedicated to brand content and the other, the new default feed, which will be dedicated to content from a person's Facebook friends. However, brands will still be able to get their content in this key default feed by means of paid reach, ensuring the continuous relevance of Facebook's strategy to entice brands with paid advertising (Rukshan, 2017). This, however, effectively means that organic reach will be even harder to come by for any brands that do not invest in Facebook's paid infrastructure as they are unlikely to attain any or much noticeable value from an organic-only Facebook presence.

The plans to discontinue darks posts is yet another example of how Facebook can and will change the workings of the platform, often in ways that can be to the disadvantage of brands. My hope is that the upcoming changes to Facebook hopefully shatter all remaining disillusions that the marketing world might still have that Facebook is a free and owned brand platform. The truth of the matter is that Facebook was and never really will be free, and brands have always been restricted by the rules and regulations of the platform itself. It's important for brands to accept that Facebook has always been first and foremost a place for friends and families to connect, and this priority is unfortunately one that has never truly aligned with the agenda of brands that are trying to increase their market share via Facebook.

But will upcoming changes to the Facebook platform such as those discussed here seal the deal for massive corporations and small businesses alike that have fallen hook, line and sinker for the Facebook brand trap? Is it too late for brands to change their relationship status to 'open for new marketing opportunities', considering the investment they've made into the platform over so many years? Before brands decide to evict themselves from their Facebook homes, it's important to note that there are still ways for brands to work around the limitations built into the Facebook platform. Opportunistic brands already have strategies in place that allow them to circumvent the platform's restrictions, with one such tactic focusing on utilising third-party personal Facebook accounts to disseminate brand messaging on their behalf.

But even if you manage to work around the restrictions built into the channel, brands should seriously be reconsidering the value of long-term investment into the Facebook platform. If history tells us anything, Facebook's de-prioritisation of the brand agenda is not slowing down any time soon, and brands are quickly running out of clever ways to 'cheat' Facebook out of their precious advertising revenue.

The brands that will truly lead the future of marketing are the ones that are busy developing social online communities for their brands outside of the restraints of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. One of my personal favourite brands that is making noticeable strides in this regard is Sony PlayStation; the brand's rich internal ecosystem is constantly expanding the platform's appeal as a social media community in itself, and it's one that they can own and nurture without any restrictions from another corporate entity.

Don't get me wrong: there is still an immense amount of value that brands can gain from a solid presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, and this is not going to change any time soon. The key lesson here is that brands need to constantly remind themselves that they don't have to play by the rules of massive existing social media networks in order to effectively socialise their business and brands in the online space. Yes, the realisation that the marketing world most probably overestimated the brand-related value of non-owned social media platforms is a bitter pill to swallow (for all of us), but my hope is that our accountability towards our clients will lead to exciting and creative new frontiers for brands in the years to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ewoudt Cloete (PhD) recently joined Wunderman SA as 'Head of Social Media'. Ewoudt's expertise in social media spans across eight years of professional brand experience. Dr Cloete has been actively involved in the shaping of various brands' strategic social media marketing offering, which includes contributions in relation to social media business operational planning, campaign planning and execution, overall social media brand strategy, content creation, community management optimisation, online reputation management and more. Clients include Nando's, Coca-Cola, Wimpy, MTN, Samsung, PPS, Neotel and Jaguar. Dr Cloete's PhD in communication studies is a complement to his career in social media, with his thesis exploring the organisational positioning of professional social media within a modern marketing communication context. **Social profiles:** [[https://www.linkedin.com/in/ewoudtcloete/]] [[http://www.meerkatburrow.com/]]

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