

Social media... Brands, you're missing the point!

 By [Felix Kessel](#)

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I find it strange that with all the hype and bluster surrounding the billion or so Facebook users, the half billion twits and the tacked together Pinterest users, the moment brands decide to participate in "new media" they are arrogant enough to believe that they can bring their rules to our common practice of being social.

Brands have missed the point. Social media is simply the gathering of social groups through new technology. Yes that's a simplistic way of putting it but it's the essence of it. Brands look at social media and see the next big opportunity. Untapped potential flows from the keyboards and touch screens of billions of people and all they need to do is hook a few million. It's become a numbers game. And that is in fact exactly the last thing that defines social media. Brands wanting to play in this space need to do a serious amount of reformatting and refitting.

We're social beings

What they've missed is that sociability is a strict tenet of being human. Social groups are, beyond the obvious gathering of people, gatherings of opinions, gatherings of similarities, sharing of ideals, values, and beliefs and even sharing of self. Sometimes disarmingly, sometimes quite alarmingly. Sociability relies on behaving in a way that attracts others or fits in with their beliefs. Here's the tough part for brands. They now have to have those opinions, those beliefs, those values. They have to not only espouse them, they have to actually live them.

People reject fakers and brands that only pay lip service to beliefs will soon find their fan base having to be bought as they continually try to sell an ideology to which they don't actually adhere. But this is new territory for brands. For so long they could simply shout to the hills what they were and people just bought it. Now they have to be more like people. They have to convince you of their convictions. They have to behave like people through always-on digital platforms and real world interactions, in such a way that people want to invite them into their lives. They have to be as much a friend to you as any of your Facebook friends or pinned pals. They're not chasing a target market anymore; they're creating a personality that attracts a market to them. They're trying to win friends and influence people. Perhaps they should read the book to help them understand the principles at play here.

A Penny for your thoughts

So the first rule of social media is to drop the media part and start thinking like a social being. This is Penny. She's a beverage. She's fizzy and sparkly and fun. But would you want to take her home to your folks if all she did was talk about herself and how brilliant she is at what she does all day and never acknowledge you or anyone else, ever? Not much fun to be had there. But that's how brands are behaving in social spaces and it's ridiculous. And beyond shallow and simple 'likes' you're never going to have any meaningful friendships.

Now more than ever brands are taking on the mantle of representing the consciousness of the products and services they offer, complete with a unique personality that will attract some and, fearfully for most brands, repel others. That is the hard truth of being social. Some social circles don't mix. Brands in the past solved the 'reaching a broader audience' problem through line extensions and product variation and innovation. As a social being, what you make or provide is less important than who you are. I'll love Samantha the person long before I love her as the rocket scientist. It also works the other way around. I find Samantha the rocket scientist through what she does. I hang around because of who she is and anything new she does becomes interesting to me because I like her first. That's the power of personality.

Consumers choose to be with you... or not

Finally brands need to also look at social circles and see the fluidity inherent in them. People come and go. Some participate, some watch, some actually engage and connect and some are just passing through. You don't own your consumer any more. They choose to be with you, for now. Say the wrong thing and you're out of the group. Try to be the hero of the group and you'll quickly find yourself on your own on the outside.

So, social media is as complex as a high school's romantic desk graffiti and just as fickle. And that's because it is exactly that: a social experiment manifested in digital connectivity. It's a truly human thing and it's made for people. Brands who want to find success in social media had better start finding their inner human and equipping themselves with beliefs, opinions, values and all the fallibility that make us, us.

There is one proviso though. Brands need to make a fundamental choice right now. Do they actually want to be social creatures? It's not for everyone. Truly it's not. Look at Howard Hughes. You don't have to be the belle of the ball but if you choose to have a friend, make a real connection, your obligation is to return that friendship, and even defend it against intruders or complacency or hold tight through agony. That's the heart of being social.

Wanna be my friend?

ABOUT FELIX KESSEL

Born a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, where writing was the only way to survive the suburban ennui of his homeworld, Felix wrote his way into a strange land called advertising. Currently, he is the creative lead at WPP's agency for Distell, TeamLiquid.

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