Saved by the Bell

12 tips to take advantage of social media in 2012

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December 2011

12 tips to leverage social media

2013 planning is in full swing. We're all focused on what's new, hot, different and how can we make a more memorable impact. ROI is being pounded into our heads more than ever before, and we're being challenged to find smarter ways to measure things that aren't always easy to measure. For social media rookies, we're just getting the hang of the latest round of Facebook changes and exploring the new territory of Google+. For others, we're working on a carefully crafted strategy to leverage audience behavior and social touch points to maximize brand loyalty and conversions through social channels. In either case, we can rely on previous experiences to help us out.

Let's take a moment to flashback... Social media can be a lot like navigating the social sphere of high school. For some of us, it was full of parties and classroom politics; for others it was a difficult time where we were (or weren't) meeting new people and unsure about our future. Let's continue our flashback as we look forward to what 2013 can mean for social media. Use these 12 tips to help plan, navigate, and analyze this fun, and sometimes awkward, space.

1 Tip #1: Be a good friend

Establishing a connection with your audience is just the start. There's no summer vacation when it comes to keeping up to speed with your network. Social media is not just a "one-to-many" relationship but has the potential to truly engage with your audience on a 1:1 basis. These personal connections are what will make these types of marketing channels flourish for you. Social media can be an easy and affordable mechanism for lead generation and nurturing, however, as with any friendship, it takes some effort in order to maintain friendships.

How to get started: Create a social calendar, the same way you did in high school. Except, instead of Friday night parties and football games, you're scheduling opportunities to connect. This may be personal profiles so your audience can connect your company with people rather than just a logo, a quick set of survey questions to let your audience's voice be heard, or a thought leadership series on a hot industry topic. The main thing to take away is to plan ahead and fill your social calendar. Create regular engagement opportunities with your friends, or they might find new friends. There's a lot more competition out there than you ever had in high school.

Keep a log of how many Likes, new followers, and group additions you get. Set some goals at the beginning of the year and keep track of how you are measuring against them on an updateable dashboard that your entire team can see.

2 TIP #2: Know who you are

Remember the kid in high school that was always *trying* to be cool? Or maybe there was someone you always envied? The good news is not only are we all (thankfully) past that, but we know who we are now. For your company, the brand is defined, clear and established. Use this to your advantage. Companies that succeed in customer loyalty know who they are and are consistent with their message, brand, and experience they provide. You don't have to copy what someone else is doing because it's working for them. Find that winning gem that fits who you are. Your friends will love you if you stay true to yourself. And remember, while being excited and positive about your products, there is a line between daily sales pitch posts and providing valuable content that will keep them engaged.

How to get started: Take a few minutes and brainstorm what themes, ideas, and takeaways do you want your audience to experience. You may choose to leverage a company mission statement or key brand

messages. Use this to create a set of guidelines or a framework that you can measure your ideas against. It can be easy to jump on the latest bandwagon, adding cats or honey badgers to your marketing, but make sure that above all, you're staying true to yourself. One good way to self audit is to record your interactions through the Twitter or Facebook API and look back at them over time- many companies have set up interactive dashboards solely for this purpose.

3 TIP #3: Leverage your social circles (and befriend the new kid)

Sometimes the secret to climbing the social ladder is helping others look good. One of the best strategies to improve your influence is to share other people's opinions, content, wall posts and more. If you monitor your key topics and retweet and repost relevant, newsworthy, or otherwise cool content it creates a mutual win-win. And, while it is important to assure a good relationship with big name influencers...don't hesitate reaching out to the ones that may not have a ton of friends. Everyone starts somewhere and finding a spark of genius in a lesser known friend may put you at an advantage later on as being one of their first fan/ followers and poster of their content. They might just end up returning the favor.

How to get started: Monitor content for free by using search.twitter.com or set up a dedicated tab within Tweetdeck or HootSuite. Make sure you are connected to experts and thought leaders in your market so you are getting the best content to choose from. Create a visual representation of your network and track how it grows and changes over the year. Be on the lookout for new blogs popping up, active forum posters – especially those with a cult like following (badges, stars, etc.) and start engaging with them. Also see what kind of content others are retweeting/reposting and look for trends and common contributors. By keeping your head in all the newest content and chatter will also keep you up to speed on all the latest happenings and lend itself to great content.

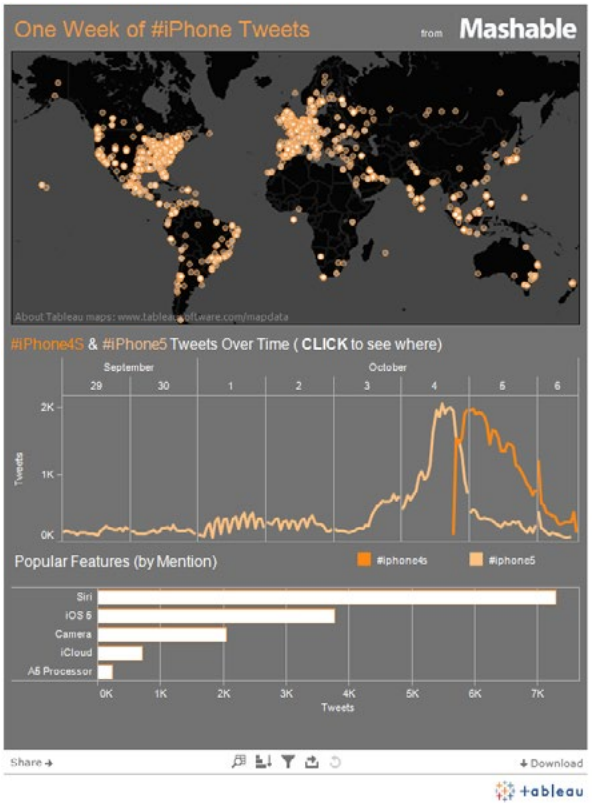

Figure 1: *Visualizing iPhone Tweets (click to interact)*

With the hype and launch of the iPhone 4S, a view of released hash tags provides quick and valuable insights into popular product features, popularity locations, and the change over from #iPhone5 to #iPhone4S.

4 TIP #4: Be engaging and interactive

Thinking back to high school, some of the people who you remember weren't necessarily your best friends. They were the people who stood out, did something different or engaging. Maybe they were a little controversial and got people talking. Your content should be engaging, preferably interactive, and what everyone is talking about.

Once you find an engaging connection - don't let it slip away.

Social media is not just a one-to-many relationship but has the potential to truly engage with your customers on a one-on-one basis.

– Thomas Bosilevac, CEO and Founder of Mashable Metrics

How to get started: Don't be afraid to be different or put controversial content out there. People like having a say and having an opinion. That's a huge reason why social media is so incredibly popular. Post an interactive chart on a hot topic, show interactive data to make what your content is about more personal and meaningful to your audience. Use video, pictures, etc to get people to relate.

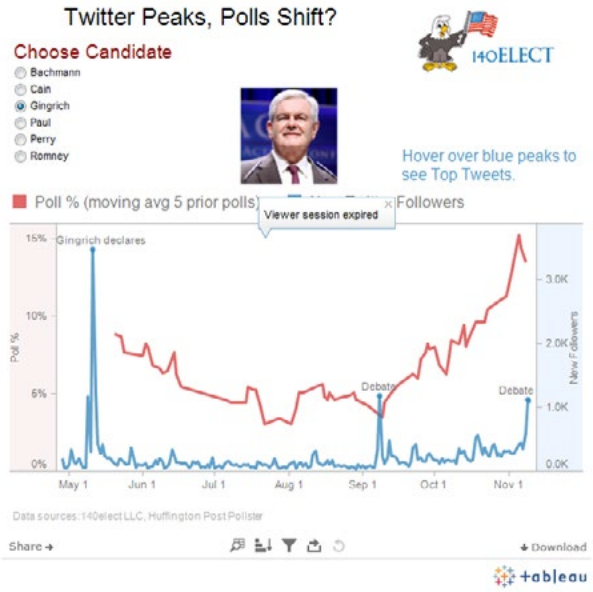

Figure 2: *Twitter Predicts Polls (click to interact)*

A change in Twitter following is a leading indicator of polling. Candidates will receive a burst of followers days or weeks before their poll numbers shift. The chart above illiustrates the past 7 months of data for Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Romney, Paul and Perry. The charts interactivity allows readers to select a candidate to how their relative tweets change to candidate selection. Source; 140elect.com

5 TIP #5: Your number of friends/followers does not make your net worth

Your mother was right. While your overall goals may be to increase your number of likes on Facebook or your number of followers on Twitter, the net value of your friends is more important. Things like how often they are engaging with your content or retweeting your posts. With Twitter, for example, a good way to gauge the effectiveness of your network is to categorize your network into the following three segments:

1. Friends not following you (but whom you have added as friends

2. Followers you are ignoring (they have added you, but you have not added them)

3. Networked members (friends whom are both following you and you are following)

From there you can better target what your goals are (maybe more networked members), as well as evaluate your efforts against changes in them.

How to get started: With a product launch or an event, track your hash tag. You don't necessarily need a lot of people to get a lot of traffic or popularity around your hash tag. Having that great set of dedicated and active followers who want to participate in the conversation is where the win is.

Decide early on what set of goals you want to focus on in 2012. Is it sheer volume, or high level of engagement? Maybe it's a little bit of both. Whatever goals you set, make sure your efforts are designed to support them. Perhaps most importantly, devise a way to keep track of your progress and keep the team informed.

6 TIP #6: Don't be a follower… of everyone at least

Choose your friends (and who you follow) wisely. Do not ever auto-follow users on Twitter. There is no need to instantly follow everyone unless you honestly feel you can engage with all of them or their content is helping you reach your goals. It is best to make this a practice every other day and look through the users that may be in your target audience or have mentioned your brand in the past. The person with a lot of friends rarely treats them all well.

How to get started: Hit up your Twitter account and give it an early spring cleaning. Really evaluate who you are following and unfollow those who don't make sense. At the same time, try to find gaps in content or thought

leadership and search out some new people to follow.

7 TIP #7: Don't be a loner

Social media rarely works when only one person at the company is able to Tweet or post to your wall. Use this as an opportunity to give many people some stake in your brand and engagement with your customers. Your sales team, HR, developers, and even interns, all should have a chance to post to your wall or send out messages on your brand page. Keep a close eye on things, but only rare cases will your trusted employees ruin your reputation. In most cases the diversity will make you look like a rockstar and be a brand booster. That being said, it is unwise to allow that new employee or temporary worker access until they have proven to really understand what it is you want to achieve.

How to get started: Obviously you don't want to open the floodgates of posting to the company on a whim. Start by gathering A small group (or maybe just you) of people who currently provide social content. Create a set of social and brand guidelines that others must use in order to post. Then, open up the invite to the company. Not everyone will feel comfortable or naturally inclined to want to participate – and that's OK. But you'll absolutely get some eager fresh faces that may have a cool new outlook or fresh ideas. Create a broader Social Team within your organization of these interested folks. Review and make sure they understand the participation guidelines you established before giving them access. There will be a few bum posts in the process, but try to meet semi-regularly with this team to take a look at what was good (and wasn't so good) and what types of posts garnered the most attention. It will be a good learning process for all of you. Again, effectively evaluating your work will require a detailed history of your interactions (and your followers interactions).

8 TIP #8: Don't sign up for all the clubs at once

You're likely to get overwhelmed and not give your full efforts to each. Start with easy wins like twitter, graduate with Facebook, and then start trying the others. There is nothing worse than going to a brand page where the last message was sent a month ago. Do one thing very well instead of a mediocre and spread out experience. This offers the ability to test your messages and ROI before diving in head first.

How to get started: Take a quick inventory of the accounts you already have, followed by the ones you keep meaning to get around to setting up. Do a quick evaluation and assessment of each of the channels you are currently active (or maybe not so active) in. Put them in order from best to worst. What about the best ones make them the best? Is it the type of content, frequency, audience engagement? Establish a plan, starting with the existing accounts, on how to build these into stronger channels. Take what really worked from those and start applying it to the new ones.

9 TIP #9: Make a date – in fact make many

Scheduling content ahead of time is an effective way to ensure your content doesn't go stale, or make you look like you fell off the social planet, during busy times. One strategy is to think of a topic and find four to five news/related articles to create a mini posting series, then move to another topic and repeat. Before you know it you will have a month full of posts ready to pre-schedule. Think of it as your social media editorial calendar. While this saves time, it is wise to keep posting relevant and breaking news on a daily basis. Another great tactic is to record Tweets around industry keywords, and then analyze them to find uncommon posting times. If you can slip in a well placed tweet while everyone else is doing other work, you may reach a new and different audience.

How to get started: Familiarize yourself with the scheduling feature in HootSuite or TweetDeck. Pre-schedule a couple test posts to get the hang of it and then start pre-scheduling your content calendar. Remember to keep an eye on things daily to make sure the content is still relevant, it's performing the way you expect, and drop in new and repost related articles to validate existing or upcoming scheduled posts.

10 TIP #10: Make your opinions heard

Social media does not work if you agree with everything. Just as you would not say "yes" to every demand ... feel free to disagree - with good reason. More often than not this leads to a powerful dialogue with your followers. Your followers and fans will respect you and listen to you much more closely if you provide your honest opinion. In fact, there are several cases of back-lash when negative comments are simply ignored or deleted from a brand's wall. Social media works in real-time and this kind of behavior is quickly noticed. That being said, it may be wise to stay away from political or religious commentary.

How to get started: Feel free to post your opinions on more than just your pages. Just be sure that you provide thoughtful opinions that you can back-up. Your opinions and how you phrase them should also reflect your brand. Post only where you can be relevant or start a meaningful dialogue. Also, keep a close eye on comments to your pages that warrant a response or alternative opinion.

11 TIP #11: Keep it relevant

Being timely is critical to driving interesting and re-post worthy conversations. Content and conversations today have a shorter shelf-live than the latest issue of *Us Weekly.* Making sure your content matters amongst conversations are already happening is key. Get your head out of the past on this one. The faster you can get something new and relevant out, the better.

How to get started: Keep your ears to the network and constantly be thinking about innovation. Perhaps you don't have an innovative idea necessarily, but then come up with an innovative or more meaningful way to present that information. Make the content even more relevant than ever before.

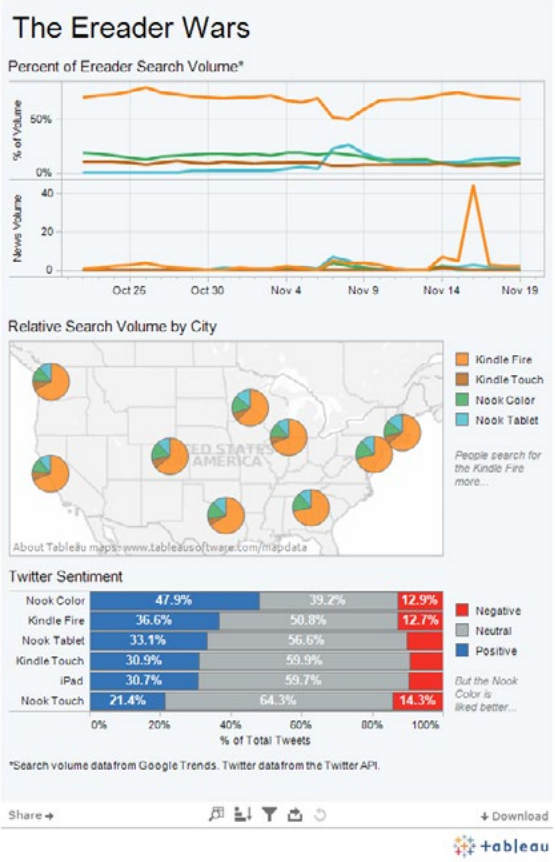

Figure 4: *The Ereader Wars (click to interact)*

Tableau compiled and measured how the new Ereaders are being received versus the exisitng market dominators, Kindle and iPad. The Kindle Fire seems to have won the race by volume of searches and shares. However, note stronger margin of positivity around the new Nook Color than its competitors — perhaps a sign of what the sales curves may look like after the holiday rush has subsided. Source; Mashable Tech

12 TIP #12: There's no PhDs in high school

While some have more experience than others with social media, the rules (and platforms) are always changing. Active communication, experimentation, and quality engagements with your audience will make this a great year. Spending too much time worrying about what to say, when, at what times, your follower count, etc. will only hold you back. It's OK to try something and fail – it's all part of figuring out what works in the land of social media. It's not the same as traditional marketing and advertising efforts and should be treated as such. Using data tools can help you measure and providing meaningful results that will take you to the head of the class.

How to get started: Jump in, get started. Make a plan. Don't forget to track and measure everything. Social media is fluid, fast, changing, and moving on faster than you can make your next post. Using tools to analyze your results will help you understand what is working and what needs improvements. Use this data to help adjust and hone your plan throughout the year.

Join the conversation now and use these 12 tips to help you grow and define your social media strategy for 2012.

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About the Author

Thomas is a 15 year veteran developing and managing data-driven Interactive Projects for Fortune 100 companies and Top-Tier brands. Most recently he has leveraged this experience founding MashableMetrics which focuses on bringing disparate cloud-based datasets into a cohesive ActionCard and MashBoards. Thomas specializes in mapping business processes with actionable data insights from online, offline and public datasets to assure data becomes an active part of the rhythm of business.

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