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The Role of the Brand in Social Media Marketing

By [Mike Jones](#) , February 28, 2008

People online are seeking new ways to connect and be social. To meet that growing need, a new wave of social media sites have germinated explicitly to provide tools and platforms that facilitate sharing in all its facets and forms. The recent popularity of online social networks gives testimony to our most primitive desire to belong, as we congregate around the things we are most passionate about.

Savvy marketers are beginning to see this evolution of Internet users, from passive consumers into brand influencers and ambassadors who are not to be underestimated.

Many brands are wary of exposing themselves on social media sites, but as anyone who's been involved in social media for more than five minutes knows, they're too late. Their brands are already exposed, and the community is talking about them, whether they choose to get involved or not. Rather than trying to avoid the conversation, brand marketers need to create a strategy to engage online influencers and social media users who have the power to make or break their brand.

Here are seven social marketing tactics to help your brand "get social" and join the conversation:

- 1. Boost the Fun Factor** – Find out what social sites your customers and influencers frequent, and help them accomplish something new there. This does not mean inserting your brand as a social media billboard. It may mean offering an application that entertains or informs, or starting and growing a community based around your customers' areas of interest. Caveat: Start it, facilitate it, but don't try to control it.
- 2. See the Forest and the Trees** – Pay attention to the smaller, niche social network sites, where people are gathering around their areas of interest and hobbies. Brand opportunities around these newer micro-social sites will increase as they begin competing and winning attention from the large, noisy social sites.
- 3. Widgets are Welcome** – Incorporate a widget into your next online marketing program. Widgets are portable applets that appear on blogs, Web sites, and social networking sites. These self-contained applications allow page owners to personalize their sites quickly and easily. At the same time, widgets allow you to engage your audience with compelling content while also strategically and subtly branding your company or product.
- 4. Conversation is King** – If you develop an application for use in social networks, or if you build a custom network, enable seamless conversations using the tools that users are familiar with. Promoting text conversation among participants is one thing, but also facilitating conversations using video and audio can help boost interactivity and brand resonance. Also give them a way to connect back to you by subscribing to a custom feed and giving them direct access to someone internally.
- 5. Engage** – Find something that appeals to customers at an experiential level. Once upon a time, you built it and they came. Nowadays, they won't show up unless you effectively engage them. Show your customers that you thought about them at a human level and not as simply "users." This will impact every approach you take and will force the personalization for target demographics regardless of the tools you use to reach them.
- 6. Research and Listen** – What is appealing to the people you want to reach? The only way to learn about their preferences and what they will or won't embrace is to monitor their activity, as well as the culture of the community you wish to reach and create. By observing, you'll uncover not only the ideas to build or deploy relevant tools, services or campaigns, but also the methods and strategies for creating genuine excitement and participation.

7. Don't Go It Alone – Making the wrong move in the social media space can do more damage than not participating at all. Look to technology, marketing, and strategic business partners to create an effective and appropriate presence on the social web.

Remember that your brand influencers are online to connect with people who care about the things they care about. They are there to make meaning, not to be broadcast to. They are there to participate and create, not to be advertised to. The more your brand can assist people in connecting with others online to create or share something new, the more favorably you will be received in these new and influential social circles.

Mike Jones, founder and CEO of [Userplane](#) and VP of AOL, oversees Userplane's business strategy, sales and operations. Jones' business leadership brought Userplane from startup to acquisition by AOL in August 2006. He now focuses on the growth of the Userplane/AIM division, as well as AOL's strategic positioning as a platform provider to the online community marketplace.

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