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Social media strategy: The keys to successfully penetrating online communities

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Social media strategy: The keys to successfully penetrating online communities

Abstract

The proliferation of social media usage has made engagement with social networks a marketing imperative. The effectiveness of any marketing effort is largely dependent on the quality and implementation of its strategy. Social media generates an intense amount of interest as a marketing platform because of its low cost and wide reach. However, this study finds that leveraging social media may be far more effective as a public relations asset than as an advertising platform. This study in no way deals with the effects of paid advertising on social media, but focuses instead on utilizing social media for unpaid marketing communication. This study also finds that the perception of social media as a low cost marketing platform is misleading. While free communication is the very foundation of social media, the intense amount of time and effort that is continuously required to execute a successful social media strategy should not be underestimated.

The following research report chronicles the development and implementation of a social media strategy and examines its effects through a participant observation case study. The intensive and immersive nature of this methodology grants unique insight, but its narrow scope also limits its implications. This case study can inform the development of other more general research projects with the aim of testing if its findings are universally applicable. Although this study is by no means conclusive, companies and individuals can use its findings as a guide in the creation of their own social media strategy.

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SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY:
THE KEYS TO SUCCESSFULLY PENETRATING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

By

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SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

THE KEYS TO SUCCESSFULLY PENETRATING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Josh Conroy

2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
<i>Research Problem:</i>	6
<i>Preliminary Research:</i>	7
Methods	8
<i>Participant Observation:</i>	8
<i>Community:</i>	9
<i>Measurement:</i>	10
<i>Influencers:</i>	13
Results	14
<i>Study 1: Introductory Post</i>	14
<i>Study 2: Penetrate Target Community</i>	16
<i>Study 3: Community Interaction Surge</i>	18
Conclusion	20
<i>Social Media Strategy Recommendations:</i>	23
References	24

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media usage has made engagement with social networks a marketing imperative. The effectiveness of any marketing effort is largely dependent on the quality and implementation of its strategy. Social media generates an intense amount of interest as a marketing platform because of its low cost and wide reach. However, this study finds that leveraging social media may be far more effective as a public relations asset than as an advertising platform. This study in no way deals with the effects of paid advertising on social media, but focuses instead on utilizing social media for unpaid marketing communication. This study also finds that the perception of social media as a low cost marketing platform is misleading. While free communication is the very foundation of social media, the intense amount of time and effort that is continuously required to execute a successful social media strategy should not be underestimated.

The following research report chronicles the development and implementation of a social media strategy and examines its effects through a participant observation case study. The intensive and immersive nature of this methodology grants unique insight, but its narrow scope also limits its implications. This case study can inform the development of other more general research projects with the aim of testing if its findings are universally applicable. Although this study is by no means conclusive, companies and individuals can use its findings as a guide in the creation of their own social media strategy.

INTRODUCTION

As modern media increasingly becomes digital media, companies must rethink their marketing strategies and put greater emphasis on digital marketing efforts. Every day the number of social media users is growing and businesses have taken notice, “83% of marketers indicate that social media is important for their business” (Stelzner). To best serve their customers, companies must constantly evolve their marketing strategies and so social media marketing strategies have become increasingly prevalent.

Today we find ourselves in a world where businesses must integrate social media into their overall marketing strategies. Just a few years ago, leveraging social media may have given firms a competitive advantage, but a social media presence has now become a competitive necessity. Companies can no longer afford to ignore social media, without falling short of the market’s expectations.

One of the major advantages of digital marketing, and social media in particular, is that you can target an audience that actually wants to hear your offerings. Social media allows you to easily and affordably locate, communicate with, and appeal to your target market. However, in order to do that effectively you will need more than a social media presence, you will need a social media strategy.

A social media presence is a company asset that exists once it has set up a profile on one or more social media sites. Having a social media presence allows a firm to utilize social media as a communication channel and marketing platform.

A social media strategy is an organized plan to leverage that social media presence in a coordinated and intentional effort to further the company’s interests. However, what that means exactly, depends largely on the company goals that it seeks to

accomplish as well as the consumer needs that it attempts to meet. Not unlike a mission statement, a social media strategy is a document devised to clarify the purpose of using social media so that ongoing efforts can be cohesive and coordinated.

RESEARCH PROBLEM:

This research project was devised to explore a problem that prevented me from doing an entirely different research project. Originally, I set out to design an experiment that would allow me to test the effect of content length on visitor behavior. The plan was to run A/B tests on visitors to my blog and compare the behavior exhibited by people who read different versions of the same article.

However, this research proposal was found to be untenable because there weren't enough people reading my blog. Any experiment I ran on my blog would lack the amount of participants required to produce results with scientific validity. In order to run an experiment, I faced the same problem that everyone with a website has; I needed to get more people to start visiting my website. The research project was then redesigned to tackle this problem and explore methods for driving traffic to online content.

Having established my goal, I needed to determine how I was going to get people to visit my blog. As is always the case, my options were limited by my resources, which in this case were non-existent. I decided to pursue a social media strategy because it wouldn't require any funding and I was comfortable with the required tools. I also knew that by focusing on social media I could easily target and engage with my audience. Online social networking was the perfect method for my needs because I needed to reach a large audience without spending any money, and what is networking if not marketing without a budget?

Many companies are still struggling to understand social media. They want to know the best ways to engage with their audience, what tactics are most effective, how to measure the results of their efforts, and how to create a social strategy (Stelzner). The purpose of my research was to gain insight about social media strategies by developing one myself and observing its implementation. While my research focus was on creating the strategy, much insight was gained into the other questions in the process.

I decided that I would promote my digital marketing blog, xConroy.com, on several social media platforms. I started by researching social media marketing, and then began investigating online social networks. I used this information to develop my strategy and target industry relevant social media communities. My research efforts focused on penetrating these communities utilizing a variety of techniques while I observed their effectiveness.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH:

There are countless articles out there on how to drive traffic to a website and several of them can be found in the references section at the end of this paper. However, I recommend that anyone interested in this topic read Rand Fishkin's *21 Tactics to Increase Blog Traffic*. That was by far the most comprehensive article on the subject that I was able to find.

While conducting my preliminary research I couldn't help but notice several recurring themes in the traffic generation articles that I read. Every article I read stressed the importance of utilizing the internet's connective nature to proliferate content. They often recommended targeting an audience and producing user friendly content specifically for that audience. They also generally suggested establishing an active

presence wherever that audience gathers and emphasized the need to develop relationships (Fishkin).

Based upon these themes I developed a set of content posting best practices that guided my actions throughout the research. This paper examines my use of those best practices and seeks to determine the role they played in my efforts and the effect they had on my results.

METHODS

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:

Participant observation is a qualitative research method that attempts to understand groups of people. Researchers employing this methodology observe a community, and may even participate in their activities. The most important component to participant observation is the diligent and continuous collection of data. Researchers are expected to record their observations of the community and detail any interactions they have with community members.

Participant observation always takes place in community settings, in locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions. The method is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher.

(Participant Observation Field Guide)

I chose to perform a participant observation study because its goals aligned perfectly with those of my research, but also because its immersive style seemed uniquely

suiting to my situational needs. My research also overcame the major obstacles associated with this field that might have prevented its use.

Participant observation relies upon meticulous and objective recording, but conducting this research online allowed me to track my interactions with community members and record this information without subjective interpretation. Participant observation also requires insider cultural knowledge, and while I was not yet an insider of that particular community, I was already familiar with the broader cultures of both social media and entrepreneurship.

COMMUNITY:

After researching methods for driving visitor traffic to a website, I needed to select communities to focus my efforts on. However, because online communities form around topical issues, I needed to choose a topic before I could begin targeting communities.

In order to determine what my focus would be, I analyzed my blog content and organized my posts by topic using labels. I then narrowed the topics down to entrepreneurship & digital marketing, because they were the two largest categories: Entrepreneurship with 13 posts & Digital Marketing with 11 posts.

Because I want to target pre-established online communities, I then decided to focus on: Linked-in, Reddit, & Google+ and scoured these sites for entrepreneurship and digital marketing groups. I considered over 50 groups before vigorously narrowing the selection down to the ideal candidates, along with backups in case of rejection when applying for a members-only group.

Originally, I had a total of 10 target groups, 5 for each topic. I selected 1 Google+ community, 1 Sub-Reddit, and 3 Linked-in groups for both topics. However, due to time limitations and the immersive nature of this research project, I then further narrowed that selection down to a single entrepreneurship community on each social media site.

Although digital marketing is my skillset, I chose the topic of entrepreneurship because of my intimate relationship with the subject. I felt that I could most easily penetrate a community of entrepreneurs because of my past experience, ongoing activity, and passion for entrepreneurship.

By mid-October, I had selected 3 online communities to target, developed a content posting plan, a posting strategy best practices guide, and a measurement plan. My 3 final target groups for this experiment were the Sub-Reddit “Startups”, the Linked-in group “On Startups – Community for Entrepreneurs”, and the Google+ community “Entrepreneurs, Self-Employed & Small Business”. I chose these groups based upon their size, topical focus, level of user activity, and overall culture.

MEASUREMENT:

Google Analytics was the primary method of data collection for visitor traffic to my blog. When an interested viewer would click the blog link that I posted, Google Analytics would record which site that visitor came from. Using Google Analytics I was going to collect, analyze, and compare the data accumulated throughout my research. I also planned to track how viewers would interact with my social media posts. Potential user interactions included responding with comments or re-sharing my content to their own personal networks.

TRACKING VISITOR TRAFFIC

Google Analytics was used to track the number of visitors to my blog and Campaign Tagging was used to track which community they came from. Campaign Tagging is a feature of Google Analytics that allows you to design a simple line of code to help you sort and organize how visitors are reaching your website. I devised my campaign tag to include the following supplemental information:

- Source: Googleplus / Reddit / LinkedIn
- Medium: Link
- Name: Intro

This information allows me to see visitor information as I define it. A Medium of “Link” tells me that a visitor arrived at my blog via a hyperlink that I posted. The Name “Intro” tells me that visitor arrived from the introduction I posted and the Source tells me what social media platform they came from.

TRACKING CODE:

[http://www.xconroy.com/search/label/Entrepreneurship?utm_source=Reddit
&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=Intro](http://www.xconroy.com/search/label/Entrepreneurship?utm_source=Reddit&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=Intro)

Visibility of the altered code varies across these different social media platforms, the effect this might have on a perspective visitor is difficult to determine. On Reddit, links are embedded into the content manually using HTML. This is the ideal situation, as it allows you to use URL display text and make the link appear any way you would like. In Google+, links are entered in a special field, separate from the main body of content. Display text cannot be used in this situation because the link must be entered verbatim in

order to function correctly. However, the URL is so long that the tracking code is typically hidden from the visitor. LinkedIn on the other hand, automatically converts URLs within the content into a custom link. The result being that any link will have its complete URL visible within the content text. This is good for the reader because they know exactly what they are clicking on. However, anyone familiar with tracking codes would be able to identify that I am collecting more data than your typical blogger.

CONTENT POSTING PLAN

1. Research audience prior to posting
2. Introduce self to communities
3. Search for and engage in ongoing discussions
4. Create new blog content inspired by online conversations
 - a. Link to the conversation on my blog
 - b. Link to my new blog post in the conversation

HIERARCHY OF BENEFITS

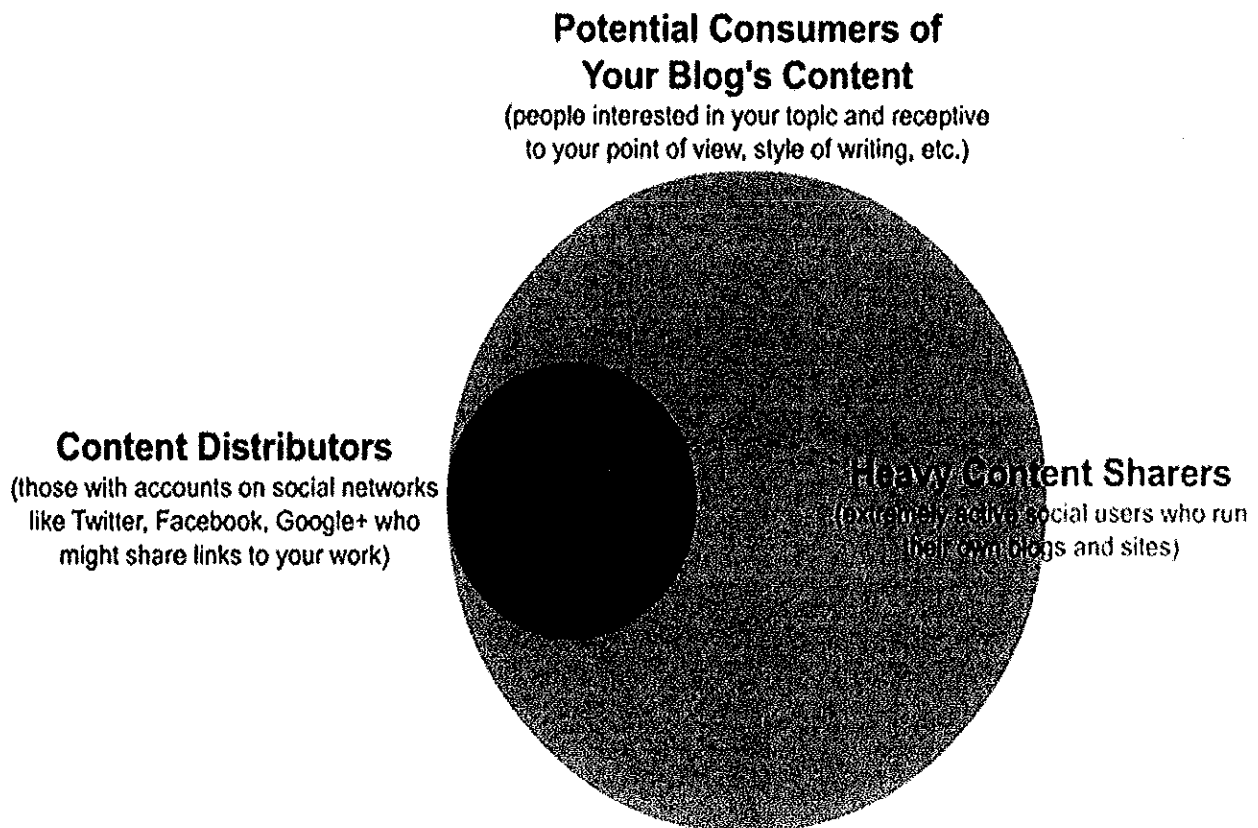
In order to measure the level of interaction achieved on social media, it became necessary to define the various possible interactions and rank them by the quality of engagement that they signified.

1. Promotion: Distributing my content to their own network (re-share, re-tweet, etc.)
2. Subscription: Volunteering to receive my future content (Follow, Add to Circles, etc.)
3. Engagement: Interacting with myself and others through my content (Comments)
4. Endorsement: promoting my content (Likes, +1, etc.)

INFLUENCERS:

Online communities adhere to the same rules as all groups of people. They are formed by a collection of individual members and are subject to group dynamics. Power, influence, and participation will inevitably vary from member to member. Out of everyone in the community, the cooperation and support of these people would be the greatest asset to penetration efforts (Creative Market). Therefore, I designated 4 individuals from each social media community, top influencers. The following graphic gives an excellent overview of these influencer targeting principles.

INFLUENCER INFOGRAPHIC



(Fishkin, 2012)

These 12 top influencers would be ideal candidates to win over because of the influence they exert within their community. This influence was often derived from a formal position such as community moderator or founder. However, many other influencers were chosen because of their level of involvement with the community. These influencers didn't require any formal power because they created their own influence through persistent involvement with the community. Targeting these select individuals, allowed me narrow the scope of my efforts and better define my audience.

RESULTS

STUDY 1: INTRODUCTORY POST

On October 27th, I posted a personal introduction on each of the 3 communities. I started with an introductory post because the Google+ community specifically asked for one. I decided that if I had to write an introductory post for Google+, I should also post that to Linked-in and Reddit. It seemed logical that introducing myself was a good place to start in any community, virtual or otherwise.

GOALS

This post was also a good way to identify major differences in interaction with posts or blogs that existed between groups and discover how these communities would react to a basic post with neutral subject matter. This attempt to conduct a traffic generation experiment across multiple social media sites would also provide baseline data to compare against other efforts.

CONCERNS

I knew that this initial interaction would have an effect on how I was perceived within these communities. Being that written communication is less expressive than verbal communication, and introductions are not typically the most exciting content, I attempted to express warmth and playfulness through my writing style. When revealing my interests and professional details, I attempted to relate them to the community topic as much as possible. I then explained why I joined the community, all the while expressing my interest and passion for the topic. I made it clear that I enjoy talking about this topic and encouraged people to interact with me. At the end, I posted a link to my blog and promoted its content as topical.

RESULTS

Source / Medium	Acquisition			Behavior		
	Visits	% New Visits	New Visits	Bounce Rate	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Duration
	29 % of Total: 49.15% (59)	79.31% Site Avg: 45.76% (73.31%)	23 % of Total: 85.19% (27)	82.76% Site Avg: 74.58% (10.97%)	1.21 Site Avg: 2.53 (-52.21%)	00:00:06 Site Avg: 00:02:18 (-95.30%)
1. Reddit / Link	20	90.00%	18	80.00%	1.20	00:00:05
2. Googleplus / Link	7	71.43%	5	85.71%	1.29	00:00:12
3. LinkedIn / Link	2	0.00%	0	100.00%	1.00	00:00:00

From this table we can see that my introduction on Linked-in only generated 2 visits, both of which failed to explore my blog. Even the posted content itself, received no community interaction on Linked-in.

The introduction posted on Reddit received the majority of visits, but the low visit duration indicates that little interaction was achieved. The post itself received 3 Up-votes & 8 Down-votes as well as a particularly negative comment. All this data indicates that while my introduction successfully generated traffic to my blog, it ultimately performed poorly and failed generate interaction with the community.

On Google+, my introduction received 9 +1's & 3 Comments. 2 of these comments seemed like pitches to join or use a service, but the other was a warm greeting and possible soft-pitch from a business coach. 5 community members also added me to their circles after reading my introduction. While Google+ failed to generate the greatest quantity of traffic, it generated the greatest level of community interaction and the data indicates that it managed to generate the highest quality traffic.

I was also able to follow up with the people that interacted with my post by reading and interacting with their content. This began a cycle of organically compounding interactions with members of this community, including one of the top influencers I had targeted. This was the type of community penetration that I needed to achieve. Although it started slowly at first, this small scale success led the research project to evolve once again.

STUDY 2: PENETRATE TARGET COMMUNITY

The disappointing level of interaction that had occurred on Reddit and Linked-in forced me to reevaluate my research methodology. I found the results of my efforts on these sites unsatisfactory and ultimately decided to limit the scope of this research project.

Based on the results of this study, I determined to focus solely on penetrating the Google+ community for the duration of my research. This seemed prudent because the immersive nature of a sociological participant observation study requires an intense and concerted effort (Participant Observation Field Guide). Using Google+ allowed me to track all interactions with my Google+ profile on a single page. Also, “Google+ give(s) some added value with their SEO features, along with sharing capabilities” (Jacob).

GOALS

In order to penetrate this community, I decided to immerse myself in the conversations that were taking place within it. My plan was to gain interest in my content from others by first showing interest in their content. I began reading the recent posts and commenting whenever I could think of a response that I felt added value to their content. “It's important to make sure you leave meaningful comments that are likely to invite people to click on your link to read more” (Gunelius).

RESULTS

Of the 13 comments that I posted, 8 were +1'd and 3 of those received a comment in response. My designated influencers only interacted with 1 of my comments.

However, that influencer was one of the few who went beyond the brief acknowledgement of a +1 and took the time to formulate a comment in response to mine.

Previously I had identified influencers in each community based solely upon my observations of their status. However, it became clear that I needed to discover which influencers would actually engage with me. In an attempt to uncover which influencers these were, I wrote a post that I believed might appeal to them specifically.

My goal was for influencers to notice me, and the only way I could confirm that was if they interacted with me. I tried to lure influencers into interaction with my post by asking a question that only those with industry knowledge would be able to answer. The post received a comment and 2 +1's, but none of those interactions involved influencers.

Not long after writing this post, I was able to achieve varying degrees of interaction with all of the influencers. These interactions resulted from commenting on their content and were entirely unrelated to the post that I had designed to accomplish this goal. These interactions included +1's, comments, adding me to their circles, inviting me to join their other communities, emailing, and even suggesting a video chat.

STUDY 3: COMMUNITY INTERACTION SURGE

My only real progress penetrating this community had been the result of interacting with the content of other members. All of my previous attempts at soliciting interaction with my content had been largely ineffective. Despite the fact that my latest attempt to solicit interaction failed, I still believed that a directly appeal to the community was a promising strategy.

Upon analyzing my last attempt for potential flaws, I realized that the question I posed to the community might have been too specific. I had intended to ask a question that required industry knowledge, but I didn't realize that answering my question actually required knowledge of a specific company. Therefore, I decided to try this strategy again, this time asking the community to take a survey I had drafted. In order to minimize the possibility of preventing viewer responses, I asked community members to perform a task that required no specific knowledge.

GOALS

The objective of this post was to intensify my level of interaction with members of this community. To achieve that goal I decided that I would follow up every comment on my post with heavy interaction on the commenter's personal content. I focused on leveraging comments because my preliminary research emphasized them as power tools for gaining and maintaining the interest of others. Comments engage others by starting a dialogue and demonstrate that you value their opinion (Gunelius).

RESULTS

My post received 23 comments, 5 +1's, and a re-share. I posted 5 of those 23 comments, meaning that community members posted 18 of them. In total, 14 people commented that they had completed my survey. I added all of them to my circles, then explored and interacted with each of their profiles.

After the first seven comments, I realized that this post was working, so I began interacting with the respondents and expressing my gratitude for their involvement. My expression of gratitude was seemingly effective, because not long after people began to interact with my post on a deeper level and became more involved. Their comments began to evolve beyond notifications that they had completed the survey. People began to ask me personal questions and speak to me directly by +mentioning me.

The conversations that began on this post were still going on even weeks later. Some of these conversations moved off the comment section and began unfolding organically as personal relationships. Thus far, following up with the survey respondents by re-sharing and commenting on their content has yielded 29 +1's, 10 responding comments, and 2 private messages.

The brief appeal that I posted asking for survey respondents finally attracted the level of community interaction that I had been aiming for. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this strategy itself contributed to this success, but I am certain that my cumulative efforts are what allowed me to penetrate this community.

CONCLUSION

Many marketing strategies focus on the extent of their reach and the quantity of impressions that they can generate. A good social media strategy is the antithesis of that approach. The true value of social networks is that they allow us to connect with people. The best way to leverage that asset is to focus on forming and maintaining satisfying personal relationships with the quality of your interactions.

Technology enhances human capability and allows us to be more independent. The consequence of greater self-reliance is that we become increasingly isolated. This makes it easy to forget that social networks are about human interaction. The people who join these communities are looking to find people they can connect with. They want to engage in authentic interactions and develop personal relationships based not only on mutual interest, but trust and respect as well. An online community is still fundamentally a community and it must be treated like one. If you disrespect a community, its members will resent you, so find out the rules and respect them.

The underlying theme of many discussions that I had was authenticity, meaningful relationships, and real human interaction. Whether the discussion was about technology or etiquette this theme kept recurring. Another undertone was respect, not only did people want to be treated with respect, but they also perceived honest and

sincere opinions and interactions as a sign of respect. Authenticity validates respect, because anyone can smile and nod, but when someone expresses their honest opinion it stands out. Expressing our own beliefs takes time and effort, these statements become loaded with passion and personal experience. However subtle these elements may be in an online interaction, their absence is noticeably missed from a quick or inauthentic response.

The topics of these discussions were consistently based around a problem. The content identified an issue that the poster viewed as a problem. They would go on to explain their criticism in detail, sometimes suggesting solutions to the problem. Those who replied to this content almost always agreed with the poster and identified this issue as a problem as well. Then a dialogue would begin to unfold where all parties gave their personal perspective, which often included past experiences.

I believe the reason that these posts had such high levels of interaction is a result of the feelings that each party shared for this issue. Those who commented identified a connection with the poster. When they read that content, they became compelled to express those feelings.

Although a social media strategy is a low cost approach to marketing, one must consider the intensive continual nature of such a strategy and be prepared to invest the time it requires. This strategy will require commitment to a determined effort in order to be successful. The audience must be targeted and researched. Your content must offer an exchange of value customized for that audience. You must constantly monitor the environment and the conversations taking place within it. Be mindful that this strategy is about nurturing long-term relationships, it is something much closer to public relations

than direct sales. Attempts to promote yourself without first establishing a relationship will be ineffective and damaging to your reputation.

After about a month of continuous interaction, I was able to penetrate the community I had targeted. The main factor that contributed to my success, was simply demonstrating that I was interested in this community and its members. I demonstrated my interest by reading what they were writing and engaging them in discussions about it. I also demonstrated that I deserved their time by being open and honest. I showed respect and gratitude, not only for the people, but for their time as well. I demonstrated that appreciation by reciprocating anyone who invested time in me.

In total, I added 40 people from this community that I interacted with to my circles. 32 of them added me to their circles as well. Most added me 1st, but some simply added me back. However, I was only able to penetrate this community because I demonstrated that I was worthy of their acceptance. My actions convinced them that my presence contributed to the strength of their community. In order to create an effective social media strategy, consider the recommendations outlined on the next page.

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Investigate the community
 - a. Attempt to understand how it works
 - b. Read their mission statement
 - c. Read their guidelines
 - d. Identify members you want to interact with
2. Gain the community's trust
 - a. Don't selfishly promote your content without engaging the community
 - b. Consider what value you might add to the community
 - c. Observe their rules
 - d. Be authentic, don't pander or fake sincerity
3. Act with intention
 - a. Understand the purpose of your actions
 - b. Consider how your actions will impact the community and their perception of you
 - c. Be mindful of what your actions might imply
4. Reciprocation
 - a. If you want people to engage with your content, you should first engage with theirs
 - b. If someone takes the time to interact with your content, return the favor
5. Commitment
 - a. Building relationships takes time
 - b. Think of your social media efforts as an investment

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