

RETHINKING MARKETING STRATEGIES ON FACEBOOK

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ABSTRACT

While many papers have discussed information diffusion and viral marketing on online social networks in general and Facebook in particular, none, to our knowledge, has looked at the different channels (pages, profiles and groups) offered by the Facebook platform from a strategic marketing perspective.

Nonetheless, the differences between the three channels are fundamental and strongly affect the control over the elements that define viral marketing, amongst which the size of the initial population and the structure of the network, and limit the access to information provided by Facebook.

In this paper, we consider four marketing strategies that could be used on Facebook: mass marketing, niche marketing, relational marketing and viral marketing, and determine the best channel to use for each strategy.

This paper opens new perspectives for strategic marketers who would like to take control over their marketing efforts and optimize their strategies.

We conclude in this research that pages are optimized for mass and niche marketing, while groups are the best support for relational marketing and profiles provide the necessary elements and control for viral marketing.

KEYWORDS:

Marketing, Strategy, Online Social Networks, Facebook, Viral Marketing.

RÉSUMÉ

Plusieurs articles scientifiques étudient la diffusion de l'information et le marketing viral sur les réseaux sociaux en ligne de manière générale et sur Facebook en particulier. Cependant, à notre connaissance, aucun article ne différencie, au niveau du marketing stratégique sur ces réseaux, entre les trois supports offerts par Facebook : les pages, les profils et les groupes.

Pourtant, les différences entre ces trois supports sont fondamentales et influent sur les moyens de contrôle qui la taille de la population initiale de diffusion et la structure du réseau. De plus, Facebook limite de manière différente l'accès à l'information selon le support choisi.

Dans cet article, nous considérons quatre stratégies marketing qui pourraient être utilisées sur Facebook, le marketing de masse, le marketing de niche, le marketing relationnel et le marketing viral, et essayons de déterminer le meilleur support pour chacune de ces stratégies.

Ce papier propose de nouvelles perspectives aux stratégies marketing qui veulent reprendre le contrôle de leurs stratégies marketing dans un souci d'optimisation de ces stratégies.

Nous concluons que les pages sont optimisées pour le marketing de masse et de niche, tandis que les groupes sont le meilleur support pour le marketing relationnel, alors que les profils fournissent les éléments et le contrôle nécessaires pour le marketing viral.

MOTS CLÉS :

Stratégie marketing, réseaux sociaux en ligne, Facebook, marketing viral.

INTRODUCTION

There is an extensive literature about the changes brought to marketing with the explosion of online social networks (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011, etc.) and there are no doubts that online social networks have, at least, introduced a new uncontrollable element to the marketing mix: consumer discussions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Yet, most papers discuss online social networks as if they were all identical which, in reality, is not true as they differ in many aspects. To say the least, Facebook is an undirected network while Twitter is a directed network. Facebook is a network based on «friends» or «fans», while Twitter is a network of «followers». Moreover, on Facebook, a user or a brand can be present in three different ways - timelines, groups or pages - each one having different levels of control over the connections and the communication.

In this paper, we consider marketing strategies on Facebook, and particularly the difference between the three channels offered by this platform, Facebook pages, Facebook groups and Facebook personal timelines.

Marketing and Online Social Networks

Talking about the Internet, Stan Liebowitz declares that “information transmission does not change the Laws of economics” (2002). We also believe that it does not change the laws of marketing either. Marketing on online social networks is merely an enhanced version of what we already know and used since the 1960s like the two step flow theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968), the principles of influence (Cialdini, 2001) and the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983). The attractiveness of viral marketing and its link to social and network sciences made it the #1 subject of discussion in scientific literature in relation with online social networks (Aral & Walker, 2011; Bampo, Ewing, Mather, Stewart, & Wallace, 2008; O Hinz, Skiera, Barrot, & Becker, 2011; Liu-Thompkins, 2012; Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003; D. Walker, 2010; Watts & Dodds, 2007, etc.). The ice bucket challenge is probably one of the most convincing success stories of viral marketing on online social networks (Phing & Yazdanifard, 2014). It helped raise more than 100M\$ and generated more than 2.4 million tagged videos.

Facebook evolution and its impact on marketing strategies

After several attempts to monetization and ads since 2004 (flyers, marketplace, Microsoft ads, etc.), the Facebook strategy for business really started in 2007 with the creation of targeted advertising and “Facebook pages”. Facebook was defining a new “playground for businesses” that is very different from what was offered to users and communities.

Using frustrating limitations on timelines (mainly the number of connections) and goodies on pages (most importantly post boosting and targeted advertising), Facebook has been pushing all brands towards one communication channel, Facebook pages. Yet, one of the criteria of viral marketing is that it should start

with a relatively small seeding population (Oliver Hinz, Skiera, Barrot, & Becker, 2011; Liu-Thompkins, 2012). Some authors even suggest that seeding more than 0.2% of the population is a waste (Aral, Muchnik, & Sundararajan, 2011). So, why not use a personal timeline if the customer population is less than 5,000 customers (clubs, specialized shops, village stores, small communities, politics in a small town, etc.)?

The differences between the three channels (Facebook timelines, Facebook groups and Facebook pages) are fundamental. They are shown in the table below where we compiled what we considered the most substantial differences when planning a marketing strategy:

	Timelines (Personal)	Groups	Pages
Number of connections	Up to 5,000	Unlimited	Unlimited
Know connections (names)	All	All (tested with a group of 2,500 users)	Very Few
Engaged users (names)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control connections (Accept, Ban, etc.)	Accept/Reject except for followers	Open, Closed, Private	Ban only
Reach	Unknown	Known for small groups (names and count)	Percentage only
Paid Reach	Not Available	Not Available	Available
Reach Methods	Lists, reach unknown	Tags, reach unknown	Custom audience, Boost, Ads
Privacy	Good (who sees my stuff)	Best (Private groups)	None
Insights (statistics)	None	Limited (seen by)	Good
Direct Messages	Yes (select one by one)	Yes (option to send to all for small groups)	Reply only
Administrators	One (Real or «Gray»)	Many	Many
Post Scheduling	No	No	Yes
Post Location	Yes	Yes	Yes
People Tagging in posts	Yes	Yes	No
Free targeting	Limited (lists created by the user)	No	Yes
Target outside one's network	Friends of friends virally	No	Friends of fans, fans of other networks, broad target (by country, sex, age, language, etc.)
Find and target existing customers	No	No	Yes (custom audiences)
Call to Action	No	No	Yes

Table 1: Differences between timelines, pages and groups on Facebook

I. MARKETING STRATEGIES AND FACEBOOK CHANNEL

I.1 Mass Marketing on Facebook

Mass marketing or undifferentiated marketing is defined in the Business Dictionary (2012) as «an attempt to appeal to an entire market with one basic marketing strategy utilizing mass distribution and mass media». The low cost and ease of mass advertising on Facebook and the complexity of controlling all the elements of viral marketing (Oliver Hinz et al., 2011) may push some companies or political groups to use mass marketing instead of viral marketing. Based on our tests, an advertiser can deliver a message to more than a million users with less than 3,000 US Dollars.

Because maintaining a web page with large group of fans and creating viral content may be a hassle, using mass marketing on Facebook can be a cost-efficient and resources efficient solution.

Mass targeting is all about reaching the largest number of people without distinction. Amongst the three Facebook channels available, this is only possible on pages:

Mass Marketing	Timelines (Personal)	Groups	Pages
Reaching a very large audience without discrimination	No. Only distributes to friends and to friends of friends in case of engagement	No. Only distributes to some group members and the rest of the members in case of engagement	Yes. Very wide targeting is possible (by list of countries)

Table 2: Mass Marketing on Facebook

I.2 Target Marketing, Niche Marketing or Differentiated Marketing

With niche marketing, the target audience is much more specific. In terms of marketing mix and the 4 P's (product, price, place and promotion), the niche is the «place». It can be a country, an age group, a gender, people interested in some kind of sport or other activity, people speaking one or more languages, etc.

Facebook ads are limited to Facebook pages and offer a relatively precise targeting:

- Geographically: up to the area level in some countries.
- By gender
- By age
- By interest (sports, food types, parenthood, hobbies, fashion, etc.)

More interestingly, with a small tweak, a brand can target the people who like another brand. This can be compared to the «free rider problem» (Kim & Walker, 1984): a brand can take advantage of the fans a competitor or an ally strives to acquire on its own page and target them effortlessly.

These options are not available for timelines and groups where targeting is limited to direct connections (friends or members). This makes pages the best channel for niche marketing.

Niche Marketing	Timelines (Personal)	Groups	Pages
Reaching a very large audience without discrimination	No. Only distributes to friends and to friends of friends in case of engagement	No. Only distributes to some group members and the rest of the members in case of engagement	Yes. Niche targeting is possible.

Table 3: Niche Marketing on Facebook

I.3 Viral Marketing

Viral Marketing as defined by Bampo & al. (2008) is a mode of communication among peers who are encouraged to spread. Hinz & al. (Oliver Hinz et al., 2011), consider four elements for viral marketing success:

- The content (Berger & Milkman, 2009)
- The structure of the network (Bampo et al., 2008)
- The behavioral characteristics of the recipients and their incentives of engaging with the content (Arndt, 1967)
- The seeding strategy (Bampo et al., 2008; Liu-Thompkins, 2012)
- To these four elements, we add a 5th one suggested by Tom Valente (2010):
- The messenger

Because viral marketing requires a complex setup and a certain level of control over the five elements described above, we try, in the pivot table below, to match the elements of viral marketing (rows) with the three different channels available on Facebook (columns). Explanations follow the table.

Viral Strategy Criteria	Timelines (Personal)	Groups	Pages
Content ¹	Yes	Yes	Yes
Network Structure ²	Yes	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Limited</i>
Behavior of the recipients ³	Can be anticipated	Can be anticipated	Can be anticipated
Seeding Strategy ⁴	Yes	<i>Limited to No</i>	<i>Limited to Broad</i>
Messenger ⁵	Yes	Yes	<i>Untrusted</i>
Score	5/5	3/5	2/5

Table 4: Viral Strategies on Facebook Channels

1. Content is a channel independent element that is fully controlled by the brand or the social media manager in charge of creating content for Facebook.

2. Network Structure is about the connections (or edges) between the vertices (or nodes) of the network. In personal timelines, the user has access to all the connections in his own network (who is a friend with whom) and even access to some of the connections outside his network (who are the friends of my friends?). In a personal timeline, there is a confusion between strong and weak ties (Friedkin, 1980; Granovetter, 1983) because Facebook friends can be acquaintances (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008), business colleagues or people we met at a party. For this reason, Facebook offers a “lists” feature that can be handy to separate strong ties from weak ties in one’s network. In addition, Open Graph capabilities allow the marketing strategist to draw a larger network of connections reaching friends of friends that are not in the user’s network. Finally, it is also possible to draw the connections between friends who engage with the same post in order to draw a graph of interactions or activity.

With groups, it is only possible to draw a graph of interactions, compare it to the entire population (all members are identifiable) and to the members who have actually seen each post.

With pages, only an extremely small portion of fans are known by name. Facebook obfuscates most of the data that could be used to classify the fans or draw social graph of connections. However, it is still possible to link those who engage with posts by their interactions (discussion network) but this option requires manual, scraping or programming knowledge and can be complex, imprecise and time consuming.

On pages, the fact that the network structure is «invisible» to the end user does not necessarily mean that it is not optimal for viral marketing. It means that it is completely out of the control of the marketer and that it cannot be improved. Filling structural holes and optimizing the network via network engineering or network interventions (Aral et al., 2011; Valente, 2012) is only possible on Facebook’s personal timelines. In fact, some authors suggest that people are filling their own structural holes with people they not necessarily know to maximize their social capital (Chen, Geyer, Dugan, Muller, & Guy, 2009).

3. Behavior of the recipients can be anticipated based on previous reactions to similar messages (Phelps & Lewis, 2004). In fact, companies are using anticipation to prevent blunders (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). This puts all three channels at an equal level of control over the anticipation of the behavior of the recipients.

4. Seeding Strategy is defined by Yuping Liu-Thompkins (2012) as the “first-generation consumers to spread a viral message to”. She suggests that these consumers should have strong influence on others and strong ties with the marketer. For Watts and Dodds (2007), the seeding population should be consumers that are easily influenced by others, not influencers. Whatever the case, with Facebook pages, the complete population of fans is made of “unsubs” (a term used in the TV series “Criminal Minds” to describe “unknown subjects”) and the marketer can have access to a very small portion of the global population. In this situation, from a viral marketing perspective, most viral marketers are just shooting in the dark. Ferguson (2008) asks if “without customer identification and access to customer data, are viral marketers just blowing smoke?”.

With groups, the global population is known and the marketer can “tag” an initial seeding population making it the recipient of the post. This makes it an ideal candidate for a seeding strategy. Yet, messages distributed within a group cannot be seen by people outside the group itself. Therefore, if the objective is a viral marketing strategy within the limits of a group, a seeding strategy is possible. However, if the aim is to create a viral marketing strategy that will extend beyond this limit, the seeding strategy within a group is not an optimal solution.

Personal timelines offer the best solution to initiate a seeding strategy because the whole population is known and an initial seeding population can be targeted by using the “lists” feature available only on timelines.

5. The Messenger has a special importance in the diffusion of the message. Valente & Myers showed how, in social networks, “the messenger is as important as the message” itself (2010). On online social networks, the name of the creator of the message, the first messenger, is linked to the message itself. Therefore, when the message is “liked”, “shared”, “tweeted”, “mentioned” or “commented”, the name of the first messenger is always visible. When a post is published on a Facebook page, it is received by the users of the network with suspicion, simply because brands are not welcomed on online social networks (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

On groups and personal timelines the message originates from a real user who can be a person of influence (Cialdini, 2001).

In Table 4, we listed the number of criteria that can be controlled by the marketer on each channel. The result is surprising: marketers have almost no control over the elements of viral marketing on Facebook pages, the channel associated with brands, while they have complete control over these elements on personal Facebook timelines.

1.4 Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing has the vocation to «establish, maintain and enhance [...] relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises. Such relationships are usually but not necessarily always long term» (Grönroos, 1994).

From relationship marketing literature (Grönroos, 1994, 2004; Herbig & Milewicz, 1993; Williams & Chinn, 2010), we can compile the following goals for successful relationship marketing: Identify customers, build connections, develop relationship, strengthen awareness, understand needs, create engagement, enhance loyalty, provide additional value, retain existing customers, terminate relationships when necessary, create mutual benefits, generate profit and earn trust.

The table below combines the goals of relationship marketing with the capabilities available on each of the three Facebook channels.

	Timelines	Groups	Pages
Identify customers Build connections	Yes (mailbox)	Yes (email)	Yes (custom audience)
Develop relationship	Yes	Yes	Reply only, Ads
Strengthen awareness	Yes	Yes	Yes
Understand needs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Create engagement	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enhance loyalty	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provide additional value	No	No	Yes
Retain customers	Yes	Yes	Not controllable
Terminate relationships	Yes	Best	Not entirely
Create mutual benefits	No	No	Yes
Generate profit	No	No	Yes
Earn trust	Yes	Yes	Yes
Score	9/12	9/12	9/12

Table 5: Relationship Marketing Goals and Facebook Channels

Identifying existing customers on Facebook is possible using any of the three channels. On timelines and groups, the user can invite people to his network using an email database. On Facebook pages, the user needs to use the custom audience feature combined with a paid advertisement to invite existing customers.

Developing relationship, understand needs and earning trust is based on interaction via messages, comments and replies. On Facebook timelines and groups, the marketer can initiate the conversation, not on pages. Nevertheless, once the customer initiates a discussion, the marketer can engage with him and open a discussion.

Online social networks help increase customer awareness, insights and engagement (Woodcock et al., 2011). This applies to all three channels without exception.

Engagement, emotional loyalty and financial value (benefits, profits) are linked together (Woodcock et al., 2011). Engagement in terms of liking, sharing, commenting, opening videos and photos, is at the core of Facebook's platform and, thus, available on the three channels. Nevertheless, Facebook pages offer the highest flexibility and capabilities, like a "call to action button", "Facebook apps", and other features not available for groups and timelines.

Communication and interactions help retain customers. Yet, while it is possible to track the changes in the global population on timelines and groups, it is impossible to know which fans have left the population on Facebook pages.

Fan attacks are not uncommon on online social networks (Champoux, Durgee, & McGlynn, 2012; Steel, 2010) and Facebook is no exception. Brands have the choice to ignore negative comments, respond to them (Shaw & Coker, 2010), or delete the messages and ban the users. Timelines and group allow a fair level of privacy and blocking capabilities while pages have an option to prevent the user from writing on the page (ban) but he will always be able to visit the page and read its contents.

In conclusion, while all three channels have their strong and weak points, groups and pages seem to be more appropriate as they allow an unlimited number of customers while personal timelines are limited to 5,000 (see Table 1). If security and privacy issues are important, Facebook groups will provide the

best environment to keep conversations private; while the control over reach using post boosting, ads and custom audiences targeting is only available on Facebook pages (see Table 1).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Even after several years of presence and use on the web, we still have a lot to learn about marketing on Facebook. One of the reasons for this delay may be the barrier to access one’s own data on Facebook in order to analyse results in an efficient way and adjust accordingly. However, research and practice allow us today have matured enough to suggest new marketing strategies on Facebook. This paper tries to open a new line of reflection for strategic marketing researchers and practitioners.

While studies have mainly focused on viral marketing on online social networks, this paper suggests several marketing techniques (mass marketing, niche marketing, viral marketing and relationship marketing) to consider as marketing strategies on Facebook. Furthermore, while the natural environment for brands on Facebook is Facebook pages, this paper suggests using Facebook timelines and Facebook groups as alternative marketing channels mainly because of the level of control they offer over Facebook pages and the core differences between the three channels offered by Facebook.

From a managerial perspective, this paper broadens the horizons of marketing practitioners on Facebook and recommends an appropriate channel for different marketing strategies. Eventually, marketers could use different strategies and different channels simultaneously in order to optimize their presence, engagement and actions on Facebook.

The table below summarizes the results and suggests the best channel for each marketing technique:

	Facebook Timelines	Facebook Groups	Facebook Pages
Mass Marketing			X
Niche Marketing			X
Viral Marketing	X		
Relationship Marketing		X	X

Table 6: Marketing techniques and Facebook channels

From a research perspective we highlight the need to look and do research on Facebook by looking at the three different channels (pages, profiles and groups) independently and simultaneously. Facebook channels have a different structure and a different population. Thus, a same marketing approach can be optimized for one channel and not the others and results could be completely different.

This paper discusses marketing strategies and Facebook channels from a theoretical and qualitative perspective. Additional research, experimentation and analysis is necessary for a better understanding of the marketing strategies that could be used on Facebook.

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