

Trust is what matters most when it comes to building reputations online (and off)

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8 Apr 2011

One of the biggest problems when it comes to social media is the explosion of data. There's so much user generated data that the real challenge in navigating the social web for users is discriminating and distinguishing the signal from the noise.

Facebook's statistics alone are staggering. The latest stats from the social media giant tell us that there are over 900 million groups, pages, events and community pages on the site and that the average user is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events. There are 500 million active users on Facebook who have returned to the site in the past 30 days, and on average each user creates about 90 pieces of content each month. Facebook says that about 30 billion pieces of content which include web links, news stories, blogs, photos and notes are shared monthly by its users.

So how do people navigate around all of that information? Well in normal life when you need something you go to people you know and trust. The same thing happens online and on mobile networks. People look for trusted friends, family and public figures they know that they can rely on for authenticity and for the say so when it comes to information.

But what makes people trust one another online and what influences online trust and reputation? Market research firm Invoke Solutions did research on this and they discovered that people trust people who they know, or who are similar to them.

The survey showed that Facebook users "like" multiple brands, and on average people liked more than ten brands and the big reasons for "liking" brands were because the people were offered special offers or product news and updates.

When liking a brand people often saw this as giving the brand an endorsement or the Facebook user's personal stamp of approval. And it appears there's no such thing as a free lunch online, people expected some kind of return for giving a brand this "like" or stamp of approval.

70% of the participants in the survey said they'd visit their favourite Facebook pages once a week to look and see if there are promotions or product news. The people surveyed very much saw "liking" a brand as a way of staying in touch with that brand.

The research also discovered that blogs written by friends or posts by friends on Facebook were trusted far more than Twitter streams, corporate blogs and brand pages on Facebook. 26% of respondents said they trusted blog posts written by people they knew, while 23% of respondents trusted posts by friends on Facebook. This in comparison with 12% of respondents who said that they trusted their friends' Twitter streams.

By comparison 11% of respondents trusted corporate blogs, 9% of respondents trusted Facebook updates from companies and 6% of respondents trusted Twitter streams that represented brands.

What this shows us is that familiarity and friendship is a huge influencer in terms of brand trust and reputation. But this shouldn't come as a surprise because it is only mirroring real world behaviour. Offline when people buy a car or a fridge they ask their friends which brands are the most reliable, or offer the most value for money. That's good old fashioned "word of mouth" endorsement.

The big question then is how you grow or build trust. The same research showed that when dialogue was open, declarative and brands allowed both positive and negative comments, they were trusted more. Trust is also increased when there's a strong presence on social networking sites and the people who put the content out there are responsive, and offer a

meaningful responses. It goes without saying that integrity and authenticity are amongst a brand's most important 'assets' when it comes to social media.

The bottom line for building reputation online is that if you want to be seen as being good, then just be good. If you want to be seen as caring and involved, then be caring and involved. Huge businesses have created constructions that have largely kept their customers at an arms length, but social networks have placed customers and brands face-to-face on an equal footing where the classical advertising broadcast model has been upturned.

If you want to build reputation and be seen as trustworthy, it is all about being trustworthy, open, honest and accessible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oresti Patricios is CEO of Ornico.

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