

Online chat as a marketing tool

Word of mouth will always outweigh formal marketing, but this can be used to your advantage online.

PERSONAL communications have always been recognised as a trusted authority. For this reason, they have also been coveted as a powerful marketing tool.

All the advertising in the world will be hard-pressed to stack up against a single earnest recommendation or a cynical condemnation.

In fact, marketers have long attempted to harness this power, through the personal touch of the face-to-face salesperson, network marketing, the infomercial, and "everyman" TVCs.

The challenge for marketers has always been the ways we socialise. Our social networks are highly pre-qualified and vetted.

Before relating to someone with intimacy we establish a level of trust. This is a primary reason that personal communication is so powerful an influence.

If a marketing manager walks up to someone in the street and starts advocating his or her brand, rejection—disbelief and confusion—result.

But online, social groups tend to be a lot more haphazard. It is socially acceptable to approach and converse with strangers given limited vetting—usually only whatever restrictions are imposed by the venue.

Partly to address this, more focus is given to the context and encoding of messages. Anyone can join the conversation but if you don't know the lingo, you will become an outsider.

Yet here is an environment in which marketing messages can be validly integrated into personal communication, with all the positive and negative connotations of that medium.

This grass roots strategy of generating and manipulating discourse for marketing effect is called "online buzz marketing".

Like so many of the emerging tools at the disposal of the online marketer, this is not a panacea for all brands or objectives. When deployed correctly, online buzz marketing achieves very specific objectives, within a specific scope, efficiently and cost effectively.

There are three main ways in which the technique can be used.

Official Representative

In many situations, a product may already be discussed in online chat forums. Hardware and software products, for example, may have entire chat rooms dedicated to user issues.

As part of a customer relationship management effort, and to cross-promote products where

appropriate, marketers may wish to enter such environments identified as an official representative of the company.

When executing this approach it is important to ensure that all activities embody the brand.

Covert Operative

It may seem desirable to enter chat environments popular with the target audience, and for marketers to promote the product without identifying themselves.

This is a powerful way to drive initial discussion about products but must be executed with caution. The complex diction and behavioural patterns online, particularly within small groups, may alert the group to this type of imposition.

If the decision is made to take this approach, it is essential to research the mode of discourse within the group, and if possible, secure the services of someone with experience conversing with this type of audience.

Diligent Evangelist

Often the most cost-effective way to promote high involvement brands that have a dedicated following (such as bands, sporting teams and movies) is to enlist the services of this fan base to promote the product.

To promote a pop group, for example, members of the group's fan club could be encouraged to actively advocate the group in chat environments.

These tactics will only work if the business objective is suitable for this approach.

Who chats?

In Australia, 27% of regular Internet users chat, but they are heavily weighted toward under-20-year-olds. In the early and mid-teens there is a considerable female gender skew, which disappears in the late teens. In the 20s and 30s there is a male skew, before it swings back to women for over-40 chatters.

Chatters tend to access the net outside business hours, particularly very late at night and on weekends, making this the ideal time to target them.

This is a perfect vehicle for reaching young users (especially female kids and teens), particularly if your offer is technologically cutting edge.

(All statistics have been sourced from the 9th Australian Internet User Report [July-December 2000, www.consult])

Brett Rolfe is a strategist at Beyond Interactive.



Visual chat engines allow users to move as they chat.

A chat glossary

Chatting: Conversing electronically with other Netizens. The dialogue is usually text-based, with some exceptions.

Chat Room: A virtual location where a group gathers to chat (may be general or topic specific).

Visual chat engines (or virtual worlds): A number of products allow participants to exist in a physical (2D or 3D) space. You can move around as you chat, and often interact with objects in the virtual space, or with other participants. Examples of this technology are The Palace, and Habbo Hotel.

Nickname (or nick): The name adopted for chatting. This may be your real name

but it's usually a name that conveys something about you like Study.Dude, SurferChic or Lord Ravenhurst.

Avatars: In visual environments, you are represented by a character called an "avatar". This may take on various forms, depending on the environment and your personal preference.

Acronyms: Due to the need to type all communications, many common terms have been shortened for ease of communication. ROFL = Roll on the Floor, Laughing; BRB = Be Right Back.

Emoticons: And of course, what conversation would be complete without using emoticons to highlight relevant emotions like :) and :p.



Brett Rolfe.