Educating Consumers Through Social Media

Brian Hess, Virginia Tech[1]

Communities on the Web are ever expanding, with new users signing up every day on social networking websites. Businesses, government organizations, and charities create these accounts to inexpensively reach their customer bases. However, there is a large amount of information on these social networking websites. This makes it quite difficult and confusing to navigate through all the postings. So how can consumer advocacy groups use the tools provided to educate consumers to make wise and informed decisions about which products to purchase? To begin to answer this we must first understand the changes taking place.

The Social Marketplace: Understanding the Social Economy

Across the globe the marketplace has been evolving. More complex social interactions are occurring; consumers are being influenced in new ways; and increasingly more new ideas are being shared. The world is changing at a faster rate than ever seen before. The question becomes: How can we keep up? To answer this question there are three concepts that must be understood.

Pine and Gilmore (1998), writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, identify the "experience economy." They compare the evolution of the economy to that of a birthday cake. In the basic agrarian economy birthday cakes were inexpensively made from scratch from the ingredients found around the farm. Then as the economy evolved into a goods-based industrial economy, consumers would purchase prepackaged cake mix for a few dollars. Then, while moving into "the service economy" parents would purchase cakes from bakeries, cakes costing 10 times more than cake mix. Finally, as the 1990s progressed, parents joined a trend of paying companies large sums of money to host memorable birthday parties for their children. These findings led Pine and Gilmore to create the concept of "progression of economic value." Previously the idea of selling experiences was grouped together with the idea of selling services; however, Pine and Gilmore identified that services are merely the stage in which the experience is provided (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

We are now living in an economy that is being called by some researchers "the social economy." Understanding what this means and understanding how to navigate this new stage of the economy can be difficult. For the purposes of this paper the definition that will be used is: How social groups and their relationships interact to encourage the production and consumption of goods and services to facilitate exchange, minimize costs, and build trust. This definition explains the ever increasing importance of social interactions between producers and consumers. Originally the marketplace was simply a physical location in which true human interaction occurred—bartering for goods and services. It was not until recently that the market became an abstract idea encompassing all businesses, and the idea of human interaction began to diminish. With the dawn of social networking, interactions between entities have quickly become more and more crucial to consumers as they decide what and from whom to purchase. To piggy-back on the works of Pine and Gilmore (1998), adding a fifth tier of "providing a social network" can be compared to the guests at your birthday party. You can have a fun and memorable time at your party, but if you don't have a large guest list who can you reminisce with about it?

According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2012), more than 1.5 billion people globally use social technologies with 80% of these using the same technologies regularly. Seventy percent of companies are currently active on social networking sites, with 90% of them experiencing benefit. The result is between $900 billion to $1.3 trillion of untapped revenues across all sectors. These findings begin to quantify the monetary value of "social capital"—best defined as the value provided by social networks. Social capital can create both a monetary wealth, but also an interpersonal wealth. Non-profits can increase their social capital by expanding and integrating their online social presence. Having more

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[1] B.S. Student, Apparel, Housing, and Resource Management, Consumer Studies, 295 West Campus Dr, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061 USA. Phone: 703-659-7557. Email: brianleehess@gmail.com

social capital becomes incredibly important as an organization attempts to navigate the new social economy. Even though social networks accounted for just over 5% of communication between individuals in 2010, they are easily the fastest growing form of communication. Social technologies encompass a variety of different uses from simple file sharing, to blogs, social networks, crowdsourcing, e-commerce, and accessing information easily.

The Social Consumer: Identifying the Modern Consumer

With the increasing prevalence of social technologies being easily accessible to consumers, the way consumers make purchasing decisions, participate in society, and interact with others is changing as well. Among modern consumers, quite a few new trends are emerging. However, there are four on which it is important to focus.

Mobile
By the end of 2013, with global mobile data traffic growing by 81%, 1.5 exabytes of data were used per month. This use of mobile data is 18 times higher in size than the entire Internet was in 2000 (Cisco, 2014). Eighty percent of tablet users have used their mobile devices to research and shop for new products, whereas 60% have used them multiple times for the same purpose. Increasingly consumers are turning to their mobile devices to assist them in the purchasing process. It is easy and convenient for a person to simply turn to their tablet or phone to look up the information they need (EMarketer, 2012).

Photo
Image sharing sites are becoming increasingly more important in the consumer's mind when making a purchase. Thirty-two percent of people have made the decision to buy after viewing an item on a service such as Pinterest; tantamount to that 37% of people have seen things they wish to buy from similar services (Silver, Tran, & Mitchell, 2012).

Video
Increasingly, videos of all kinds are being watched on-the-go. Cellular data, even though becoming more expensive, is being used at higher rates than ever before. Fifty-two percent of all mobile data traffic was accounted for by video, and it is estimated that by 2018, videos will take up almost two-thirds of mobile Internet traffic; this means that by the same time, 11 exabytes of the 15.9 exabytes a month used will be video (Cisco, 2014).

Conversation
With 44% of Facebook users claiming they have never clicked on an ad, paid advertising on services like this are not the best way to go. However, more users will click on sponsored stories in the newsfeed. Users of these websites prefer to keep it social. This is by far the most important trend being seen across social media. Engaging with the members and involving them in dialogues will begin to create a community (Ferrara, 2012).

In a 2011 survey conducted by McCann Worldgroup of youth across the world, youth were asked what motivates today's generation. Worldwide, the top three motivators were commune, justice, and authenticity. For consumer rights organizations, two of these three motivators are easily covered—justice and authenticity. As long as the truth is reported accurately and honestly, and the appropriate actions are taken to correct injustices, then the youth will be interested. However, where the difficulty comes in is fostering the connections that today's younger generation seeks. To help create community there are four actions that organizations should take: broadcast, share, entertain, and maintain.

Broadcasts should be frequent and relevant to the viewers and the organization posting. In a constantly socializing world, it is easy for an organization's voice to be drowned out, so the more that is shared, the greater the chance the message will be heard. That being said, be careful not to overdo it. There are services, such as Tweetdeck, which allow users to queue posts for later times and dates so that it becomes easier to remain frequent. Sharing is quite possibly one of the most important parts of maintaining a community around your organization. If a volunteer or employee does anything interesting

and relevant to your cause, share the actions. It not only feels nice to be recognized, but it also expands your presence to their friends and followers. Creating this dynamic of passing-it-on even extends to other organizations working towards the same goals—encouraging the growth of others and engaging in interactions with other entities. By sharing in the work of other people and organizations, you strengthen the community around your own organization. The saying "all business is show business" coined by Scott McKain in his book by the same name could not be more accurate. Entertainment is what social consumers are seeking from the organizations they follow. Long-form blog posts, while still important, are not the way to grab the attention of readers. Instead well-designed info-graphics summarizing the major talking points of a study, or a brief video describing the information, is a far more effective way to go. Finally, maintaining these connections and nurturing the community is a necessity—best done by talking directly to followers and commenting on anything relevant that they post. Offering live chats online, opening up discussion forums, and creating unique hashtags[1] all can maintain this sense of community felt between the followers of your organization.

The Social Scene: Navigating Social Media

There are many different social media platforms that organizations can use to educate. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube are six of the most commonly used social networking platforms.

Facebook has about 1.11 billion active users each month, approximately 680 million of whom use Facebook on mobile devices. Facebook membership has increased by 26% since 2011 and continues to rise. The average user spends 20 minutes a day on Facebook—for a total of about 700 billion minutes per month. Furthermore, every 20 minutes one million links are shared, two million friend requests are sent, and three million messages are sent (Facebook Statistics, n.d.).

Twitter has over 554 million users with about 135,000 new users every day. Each day there are, on average, 58 million tweets (about 9,100 tweets a second). The search engine on Twitter is used about 2.1 billion times a day (Twitter Statistics, 2014). For the most part, Twitter use is evenly spread between male and female populations with 17% of male Internet users and 15% of female Internet users reporting that they use Twitter. The largest age group active on Twitter is 18-29 year olds; however, about 10% of Internet users active on Twitter are above the age of 50. Education and income level do not seem to be factors in Internet user activity on Twitter.

Instagram is a photo sharing community. Currently, 150 million people actively use the service every month. Between 2012 and 2013, Instagram experienced a growth of 900% in membership. On Instagram, 55 million photos are shared daily (Instagram Statistics, n.d.). Instagram has a slightly higher population of female users than male users—by about six percent. Eighteen to twenty-nine year olds make up the majority of the population on this service. Once again, education and income levels are evenly represented, and appear unrelated to Instagram usage.

Tumblr is a growing blogging community that makes it easy to share photos, videos, and opinions. There are approximately 102 million blogs, many of which are operated by a significantly younger portion of the population—45% under the age of 35 (Papageorgiou, 2013). It is increasing in popularity, with many 13-25 year olds listing it as more popular than Facebook. In March 2013, Tumblr's users generated over 6.6 billion views. However, only about 6% of active Internet users are on Tumblr. Education and income levels are irrelevant to the user population (Duggan & Brenner, 2012).

Pinterest, a site that very effectively shows consumer wants and needs, is another community that actively shares images and videos with a large community of followers that boasts a population of 25 million (Abramovich, 2013). This service has been very effective for retailers and businesses as it is an easy, inexpensive, and effective way to earn sales. It caters to a very particular demographic: mothers. Mothers are about 60% more likely than non-mothers to visit Pinterest for shopping and other needs.

[1] See Appendix for a glossary of common social media terminology.
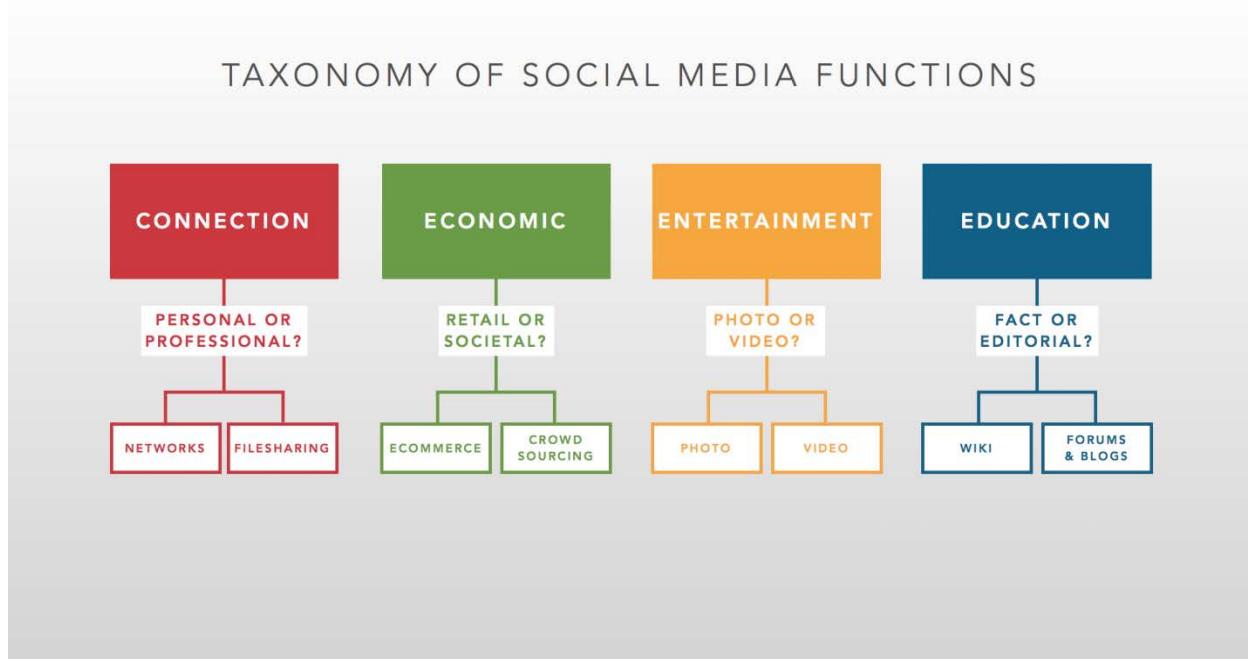
Figure 1. Taxonomy of social media functions. Social media can be divided into four areas driven by its primary use.

These mothers, who make many of the purchasing decisions of the household, are a great market segment for businesses to reach. Since 81% of consumers trust what is posted on Pinterest, active posting can help establish a level of credibility for a company's product (Silver et al., 2012).

YouTube is a very popular video sharing website that has approximately 800 million unique visitors every month. These visitors contribute to a total of 3 billion hours of viewing time each month. Every minute, 60 hours' worth of footage is uploaded to the website (YouTube Statistics, 2013).

There are many functions that the individual social media tools serve, beyond the six services discussed in this paper. Figure 1 breaks the different functions into four classes: connection, economic, entertainment, and educational. These four classes are further divided into more specific uses. Each service can then provide a myriad of functions. For example, Facebook serves as not only a network, but also for photo and video sharing, and as a blog. Most of the platforms listed above fall into those same categories.

Because so many organizations and people are currently on Facebook, there is information overload where things easily get lost on people's newsfeeds. However, due to its high number of users, Facebook is a great way to store and organize information and open it to the general public. Using the timeline feature of Facebook, the user can organize the information in a neat chronological order so that a reader can simply scroll down and read all of the information.

Twitter, because of its restrictions on characters, is an incredibly effective way to get brief bits of information across and redirect readers to more in depth articles. Tweets can be used to provide information on a variety of topics and are easily organized by the use of hashtags.

Instagram uses similar concepts; however, it is used mainly for pictures. The interface associated with Instagram makes it incredibly easy to edit photos by adding filters and numerous other effects. These effects can increase the aesthetic value of the photos and appeal to a larger range of users.

Even though it is great for sharing photos and videos, Tumblr is very effective with long-form posts. Sharing personal opinions on current affairs is very easy because of the use of hashtags.

Readers on Tumblr will search by topic of interest and will reblog any post that is found to be interesting. These reblogs are instantly shared with the followers of the blog and the chain continues.

Pinterest is a great way to divide up the causes that an organization is advocating. An organization can create different boards to help the follower filter through the different messages and ideas to find those that he or she decides are relevant.

YouTube, an incredibly popular video sharing website, makes getting exposure very easy. Users who post videos create channels and can recruit subscribers. When viewers subscribe to a particular channel they can opt to receive email notifications when new videos are posted. YouTube videos can be anything from an animated infographic to speeches to advertisements to college students doing stupid things instead of studying. YouTube makes it very easy to share videos, therefore allowing for the message provided to circulate quickly and efficiently and possibly go viral.

Applying the tools provided by the different kinds of platforms can be difficult. There are many tricks to keep in mind when trying to optimize the effectiveness of each social network. Understanding the nuances offered by each service will provide a much more pleasant experience for readers and reach the largest number of people.

Integration among all of the platforms is a very important thing to consider when managing a successful social media campaign. All of these platforms serve a purpose, including support and enhancement of the viewership for each account. Using the settings on each platform, the user can allow posts to be posted to multiple accounts increasing the number of people that will see a particular post. One popular service that helps with integration is bitly.com. Bitly works as a URL shortener (to save characters) and also allows click-through-rates to be easily tracked.

Frequency of posts is another important concept to keep under consideration. There is a balance that must be achieved between active and annoying. Maintaining a regular presence on the feeds of followers is crucial; however, it is important not to dominate the pages. Keeping active and relevant posts about whatever ideas are currently at work within the organization will maintain the attention of readers.

Finally, it is important to be true to the first word of "social network." It is imperative that an organization socializes with its followers. All it takes is a few retweets, reblogs, repins, or even mentioning the user in comments, to build up exposure. Providing a personality to an organization will generate a far more loyal following and create more regular visitors.

Figure 2 is a flow chart that gives a step-by-step process on how to use social media platforms to advertise a product or event, share various forms of media, publish opinions, make announcements, and interact with others on the various networks.

Social media marketing has been an incredibly effective tool for businesses and nonprofits and it can be equally as effective for education. It is an incredibly quick and inexpensive way to share a large amount of information with many people across the world. By using the tools provided, organizations will be able to spread their message and ultimately further educate consumers.

FLOW CHART OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE
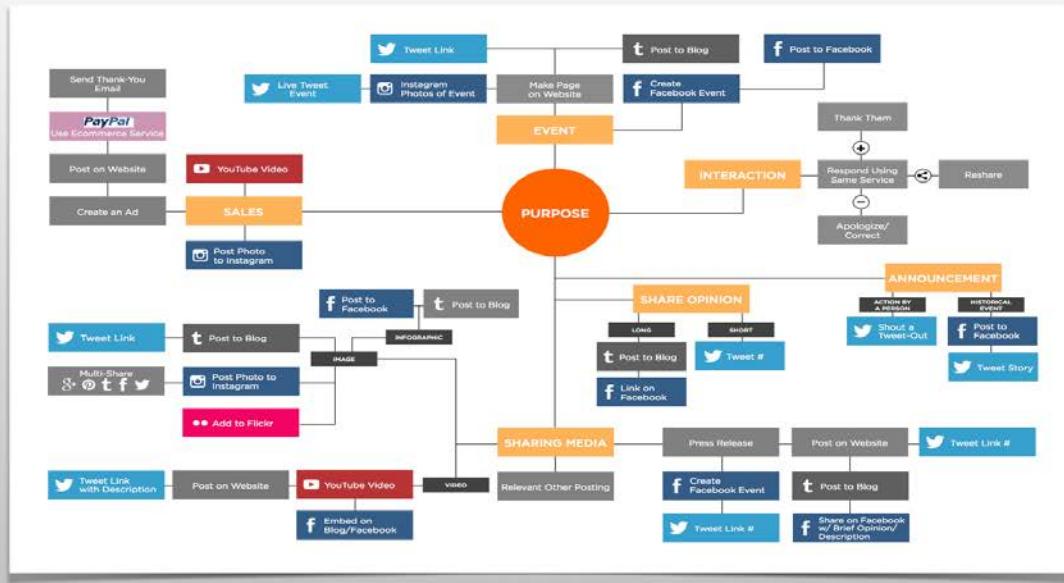
Figure 2. Flow chart of social media use. This flow chart provides a guideline on how a post should be put on the Internet.

Appendix

Board .... A feature of Pinterest that groups together pins
Channel........ An account on YouTube
Comment ..... A thought that is shared beneath a post
DM .... Short for Direct Message; a feature on Twitter that allows for private conversation
Favorite .... A feature on Twitter that shows a particular preference to a post
Feed .... A listing of all the current postings by the accounts followed
Hashtag .... A way that posts are organized by categories, which is, therefore, searchable, using the
                      symbol #; for example, . #VirginiaTech
Like.............. A feature on Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram that shows a particular preference to a post
Mention........ Attaching another account to a post using the symbol @; for example, @blhess
Newsfeed .... A feature of Facebook where all the postings of a user's friends and other connections are
                      published
Pin .... A video or photo that is posted to a board
Post .... Text, image, or video uploaded to a social network
Reblog .... A feature for Tumblr that posts another account's blog to the user's own account
Repin........... Sharing the pin of another user
Reply .... A feature on Twitter that allows for public communication between users
RT................. Acronym for Retweet; used to easily share Twitter posts
Share .... A feature on Facebook that posts another account's post to the user's own account
Tag .... Attaching a person's account to a photo, video, or posting
Timeline .... A feature unique to Facebook where all the postings are arranged in chronological order
Trending ...... When a topic is being discussed by many people, usually based on hashtags
Viral .... When a large portion of Internet users in a short amount of time sees a post, usually a
                      video

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