

India's Most
Watched Ads PG 62

Return of the
Professionals PG 76

Preetha Reddy:
Healthcare Queen PG 90

TOP
CAMPUS
RECRUITERS
PG 113

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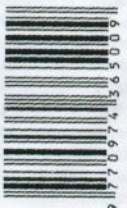
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India Inc.
Discovers

Social Media

Companies and executives are reaching out to consumers, employees and partners through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the other ever-expanding forms of social media. PG 44



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India Inc. Wakes up to Social Media

From Facebook to LinkedIn, Twitter to Orkut, corporates are beginning to use various forms of social media to reach out to consumers, employees and partners. KUSHAN MITRA



KAPIL

Cleartrip.com, an Internet travel agency, thought it had a sound online social media strategy. The company ran a blog authored by company Director Hrush Bhatt, had a Twitter account and also maintained forums where users could air their differences. However, on the evening of June 9, when Bhatt peeked in to see what users were talking about on Twitter, he found a link to an irate forum post by blogger Kiruba Shankar. Shankar felt that he had been given a raw deal by the company after using its services. So Bhatt swung into action, anxious to douse the flames of a disgruntled blogger before it became a conflagration. On June 16, Bhatt posted the entire affair on Cleartrip's blog in an effort to come clean on the entire issue. "There is no point claiming that you are customer-centric, doing something about it but not letting the world know," says Sandeep Murthy, Chairman, Cleartrip. "We live in a world where people have the ability to be heard instantly and brands can be built or destroyed very fast thanks to new media. Business has to learn to adapt."

▶ Reaching out to existing and future consumers

In 1439, Johannes Gutenberg invented the mechanical printing press and shook the foundations of the earth, as news and ideas—contained in books and papers—now began to fly around the world like never before. Gutenberg's press led to the Renaissance, the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation amongst other things. The world was fundamentally and irrevocably changed. Today, a different—but ultimately similar—revolution in the form of the Internet has transformed the way you and I interact, through informal online networks of friends (Facebook, Orkut), artists (MySpace), visual junkies (YouTube) and professionals (LinkedIn).

▶ Finding and hiring talent

However, the ultimate transformation that is taking place today is within the business landscape, worldwide—and increasingly so in India—where companies are beginning to leverage informal social networks to engage people, mollify customers, strengthen their brands and even hire people. For companies in India, the reasoning is simple: While Indian PC and Internet penetration rates are relatively lower than the West,

▶ Managing and monitoring corporate image

India has one of the largest Internet population in the world—some 60 million regular users (not including mobile access). Moreover, these users are the most sought-after customers with high disposable incomes, and companies with clear online media plans are waking up to the fact that they can reap the benefits of engaging with this audience. Those that don't, risk losing the customers that they already have or slipping behind their more savvy competitors.

▶ Contacting peers for career development

An Engaging Plan: Just what is social media? There is no exact definition of the term, but suffice it to say that just because a website is interactive does not mean that it fits the bill. A site built from the ground up as a community is more social than a news site which also is interactive, like, say, the *Guardian* newspaper's various blogs. This is not



to say, however, that the English newspaper will not, a decade down the line, have commoditised its online community into a cash cow bigger than its news operations.

There is, however, a very real distinction between "social" sites and interactive digital marketing ones like the one that Tata Motors built when the Nano was launched. This site had games built into it, where people could customise colours and pick their favourite ones—thereby sneakily helping the car company figure out which ones to use on the Nano. A clever idea, but far removed from a social media forum. However, when Tata Motors did launch the Nano, there was no mistaking its intention to use a full-fledged social media strategy. The company set up groups on Facebook and Orkut hoping to target the numerous official 'Nano'-centric groups that had parked themselves on the site. To its complete surprise, it found that one unofficial group on Orkut dwarfed the official ones—and it would have been a fatal mistake to ignore members not under the official Nano fold. "We engage with people on these sites, too. We react to criticism of our car and try to explain our position. Also, we often find that before we can react to the criticism, there are other members who come up to defend the car." Even today, the official groups on these two sites, at around 17,000 members, are much smaller than the largest unofficial group on Orkut with around 52,000 members.

This stuff might be new to a Nano launch, but an old-school car company Maruti Suzuki India is, strangely enough, a pioneer in online social marketing. Realising that there are several online communities for the highly popular Swift, it has created an online platform to bring together the 2,500 disparate online Swift users clubs in India. Earlier this year, the company actively enlisted bloggers and talked to the community during pre-launch activities for its lat-

est Ritz. No surprise that all of this is old hat to tech-savvy Nokia India. When the Indian arm of this Finnish phone company recently launched its latest—and greatest—device, the N97, it decided to fly down the Chief Designer, Nseries, Axel Mayer for the launch. While Mayer met with some mainstream media organisations, Nokia also organised specific 'Bloggers Meets' for Mayer in Bangalore and Delhi. "We have to have good online social strategy because people are visiting those sites. Plus, we also are promoting online social services from our devices," says Taneja. The result? Tons of buzz generated around the N97 on blogs and on social sites by Indian users.

Trawling the Net can be useful for other reasons than just monitoring brand activity or engaging in customer outreach. A company can often find a goldmine of information about its existing as well as older products which can be incredibly helpful for both the company and existing customers—say, for example, a user manual for your ancient Nokia phone from four years ago which will show you how to transfer your directory onto your laptop. "On the social web there is a lot of 'meta-knowledge', that is knowledge in the form of blog posts, comments, pictures and videos that is tremendously useful to many companies but these companies are often outside the loop. Now, they want to leverage that knowledge and try and form a community around it," says Narendra Nag, Founder, Gray Matter, a technology consultancy.

Sometimes these kinds of 'meta-knowledge' can date back to the origins of the Internet itself and still remain hives of activity, again providing companies with valuable outreach possibilities. "We did a project for Lenovo India earlier this year which involved reaching out to these communities and not just the high-profile networks," says Karthik



A. PRABHAKAR RAO

S., Account Director, Text100, a public relations consultancy.

Social media, however, has already run into a problem of plenty. Today, there is a surfeit of information from blogs, communities and tweets and blog aggregators such as Technorati, Alltop and BlogAdda—while not social media sites themselves—provide neatly organised silos by topic which make it easy for people to find information on social sites.

Can Advertising Work? Reaching out to customers is one thing but Apollo Hospitals has gone one enter-



Hired Over Social Media

prising step further, by using the Internet to advertise its services in an engaging and novel manner. The company has caught the eye of medical "tourists" worldwide by uploading videos about its procedures, on video sharing site YouTube—the company posted its first clip in October, 2008 where a foreign patient spoke about his experiences at the hospital. This has several advantages: It is completely free, with a mass reach; it is devoid of company-controlled jargon, presenting a far more effective, "honest" and "true" account of a patient's experience (caveat: we're not sure whether he

Kaushik Ray

Senior Director,
HRD, Dr Reddy's
Labs



Ray, an alumnus of Jamshedpur's XLRI, got an invite to join the LinkedIn network of fellow XLRI alum Prabir Jha who happened to be the Senior VP and Global Chief of HR, Dr Reddy's Labs. The two started exchanging messages over the site and five months after the two connected over LinkedIn, Ray found himself working with Jha. "My link with Dr Reddy's started with LinkedIn," says Ray. "On the verge of completing one year in the company, I look back at how it all happened, and all I can say is that it is pure serendipity." Today, he spends at least an hour on the weekends on LinkedIn and is in the process of joining Facebook. He feels that apart from networking and building contacts, it is a good medium that allows professionals to share knowledge.

"We have got some profiles from LinkedIn and maybe we will formalise this as a channel (for hiring) now," says Ray.

Social Media Junkie



DHEEPAK G. PAWAR

Paul joined the LinkedIn service quite a few years ago, and as a marketing professional in Bangalore, a city with few marketing forums, she also set up a “CMO Roundtable” on the service. The “by invitation” group is a bona fide hit, and members have begun making deals with each other. In fact, Paul says that she has not just learnt a lot but also managed to find her US marketing chief using this group.

Paul runs her own blog and also actively maintains her Twitter and Facebook accounts. She also ensured that Wipro has a Twitter account to reach out to the world at large and to monitor what is being said about the company.

“I don't think social media is the best business to business medium, and I hate being sold stuff on LinkedIn, but it is an amazing business to consumer or business to employee medium,” says Paul.

received a discount on his procedure for plugging Apollo); it is also far more targeted than an advertisement on TV. Still, it is risky. One whiff of a staged “confessional” can cause potential customers to avoid the hospital like the plague. Since its maiden video voyage, the number of such Apollo clips has mushroomed to nearly 30, and the hospital has also set up a Facebook group, joined Twitter, added a del.icio.us account and several blogs. Timesofmoney—an online payment solution provider—is also using a combination of blogposts, Facebook and LinkedIn to attract new customers.

Of course, if Apollo's unique promotional concept doesn't quite work for you, traditional advertising on social networks such as Orkut, Facebook and LinkedIn (there is no advertising on Twitter, as yet) just might. “Google AdWords customers can actually enable Orkut automatically for their campaigns via Google AdWords itself, through a click of a mouse,” says Shailesh Rao, Managing Director, Google India. However, “in this option, there is no guarantee to advertisers that their ad will show. The other option is for advertisers to actually ‘reserve’ ad slots on Orkut and they can specify day slots when ads have to appear—much like TV. This carries a pricing premium,” he adds. Krista Canfield, spokeswoman, LinkedIn, a professional networking service, says that her company is now also serving up adverts to Indian users which can be directly targeted based on their professions.

Social media sites are not just about a company-customer relationship. It can also be a vital tool

Jessie Paul
CMO/ Wipro