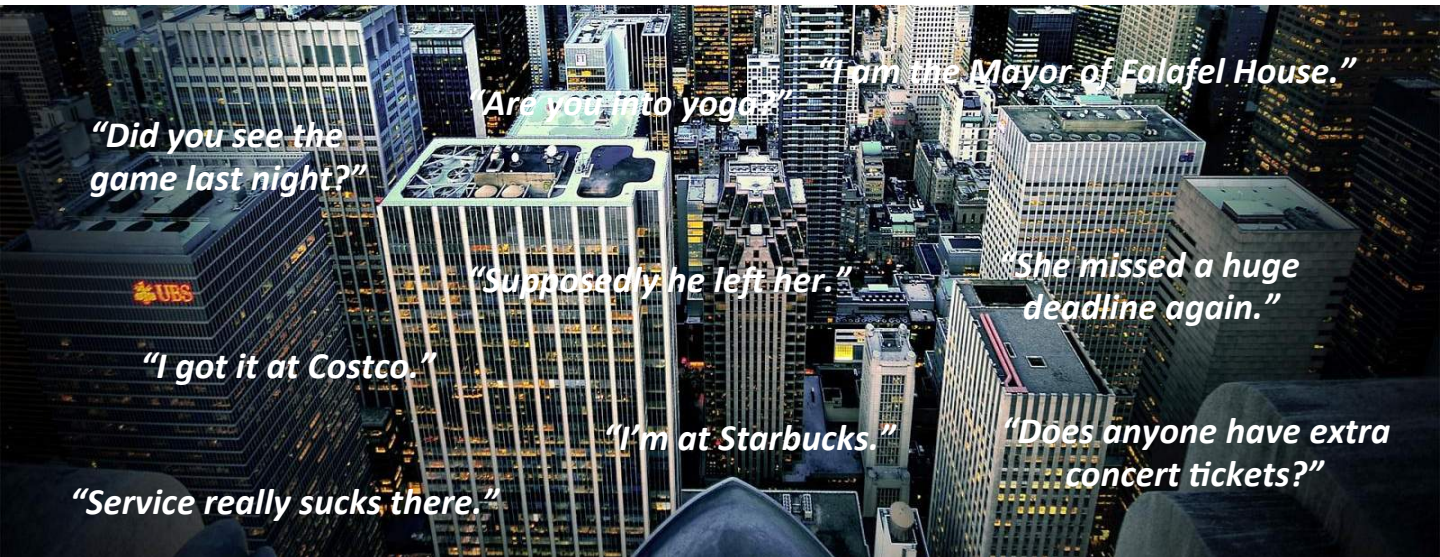


“I’m at Starbucks”: Why We Share & What It Means For Marketing



The most important thing about a point of view is to have one.



We all share. Gossip, news, the weather, brand experiences. The practice of sharing has come under increased scrutiny due to social media. Much of this online activity is questioned for purpose, appropriateness and value. While social media has captured the public and marketers' attention the real human need to share has existed throughout the centuries. People share stories and exchange information. It is called conversation and it happens online and off.

We forward articles, swap tales over lunch and gossip to our neighbors about other neighbors. Social technologies like texting, Facebook and other social media sites have made it more convenient and immediate but the need to share is nothing new. Sharing is not the result of social media. Social media is the result of human behavior. This paper spends some time on our interesting online habits but it deals with the psychology of sharing overall and how critical this is to marketing.

Why We Share

I entered the branding and marketing profession because of human behavior. It started by laughing at my own foibles concerning brands, personal identity and buying behavior. I found that the influences on people around me were both startling similar and astonishingly unique. This proved that branding and marketing are both art and science and can never be entirely mastered. This appealed to my restless yet ordered mind.

Show me a high-performing marketer and I will show you one with a natural curiosity as to why we do the things we do (some just have an innate ability to assess behavior). Marketing is a process of identifying insights drawn from behavior and leveraging them for commercial gain. So every marketer needs to study it.

Sharing is a core human behavior and is at the foundation of human interaction. It is a base unit of socializing. We are social animals and this provides definition to who we are as individuals. Yet why and what we share is downright head scratching.

Author and trainer, Peggy Klaus blogged on *The New York Times* site about the bizarre practices of 20-somethings who over share their personal exploits in the workplace. This is causing consternation in the human resources ranks. Organizations are now puzzling over how to manage these young hires who openly share sexual conquests, drunken escapades, and the fact they are looking for a better job somewhere else.

In trying to figure out why taboo subjects are no longer taboo, the blame in this case, is being placed on online behavior finding its way into face-to-face communications. Others attribute it to “narcissistic baby-boomer parents for raising children with an overblown sense of worth, who believe that everything they say or think should be shared”. More accurately it may be that these particular people seek connection and affirmation and it happens to come at the expense of appropriateness and professionalism.

Still that does not really get at why we share what we share. Beyond boredom and ease of technology why are we talking and clicking with wild abandon? The reasons appear to be a complex mix of personal and mass psychologies, sociology, peer relations, cultural confusion, along with a healthy distrust of established organizations. Based on my research, here are the commonly ascribed reasons people are sharing more of their lives for better or for worse.

Insecurity

It is a big and fast moving world. There is a perceived lack of stability in so many of the institutions that once provided foundations and touchstones for people as they moved through life. This goes as far as to include the construct of family and certainly applies to organized religion and government. People, especially younger ones, are looking for a meaningful sense of self.

Identity

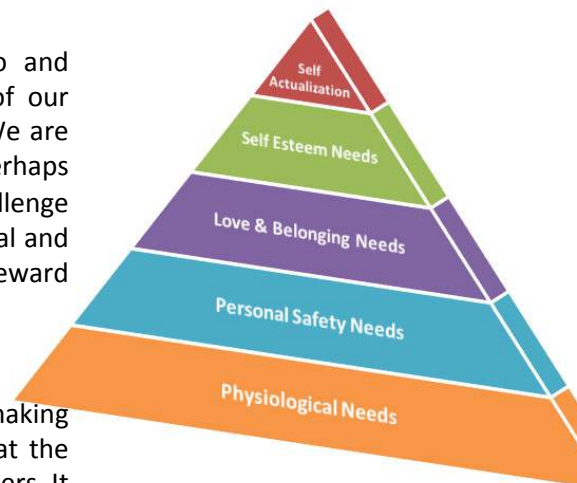
We share to help craft who we are and communicate what we stand for. As we do so we are attracted to those who are seen to hold our interests, beliefs and values. We like and comment on each other’s posts only partly because of the actual substance of the content. We are really attempting to get closer to what we believe is our homogeneous set or desired set. If you have visited a suburban high school lately it is almost comedic how the cliques are segmented by appearance and how teens espouse individuality but look very alike. We are looking for a trusted inner circle.

Connection

The majority of our human efforts go into contributing to and nourishing that inner circle. The shared values and beliefs of our inner circle provide the guardrails and goalposts for our life. We are thrown off kilter if one of our inner circle goes in a different perhaps reckless direction. It does not mean the group does not challenge itself to grow but it requires some permanence to keep personal and group equilibrium. As individual ‘members’ of this group we reward the shared direction with our loyalty.

Enrichment

It comes as no real surprise that sharing represents a way of making ourselves feel good. We are rewarded if there is value in what the exchange. This is both enrichment of self and enrichment of others. It is easily related to the famous hierarchy from Maslow. Belonging, esteem and self-actualization require human interaction and that means sharing. We are especially pleased and often fulfilled if we enrich our inner circle.



It Boils Down to Validation

I find it helpful to think of all of these behaviors and motivations as an attempt to seek validation. When people approve, appreciate or relate to something we do or say we feel good. Sharing is a process of validation in our life choices.

This is easily proven by viewing the last ten status updates of your friends on Facebook. A closer examination will undoubtedly reveal that each of these updates represents a need to be validated, to gain corroboration, and to seek feedback (Like!). I recently caught myself sharing a milestone on Facebook related to the posting of my 700th book review on Amazon. This was a personal double-dose of social media validation seeking.

When people share something they do it for their own reasons. When they share they reveal something about themselves and the recipient: "I found this interesting, I believe you will too." The act and action of sharing is a form of gift giving. Unfortunately, the content is not always positive as some people share negatives and find some bizarre satisfaction in doing so. Inner circles will end up bumping that person out eventually because they prefer members who share 'vaccines' over 'viruses'.

What We Share

The New York Times identified six types of online sharers ranging from helpful and thoughtful 'Altruists' to creative 'Hipsters' who eschew email to Selectives who are more careful and thoughtful.

The value in this study is not the personality types but rather the type of content that is shared. *The New York Times* reports, "we share more content, from more sources, with more people, more often, more quickly." I must challenge this conclusion because it is more sound bite than research. I agree that we are sharing more. But at the very beginning of this process is the creation of content. I contend that the proportion of actual new, innovative, valuable content is shockingly low given the cacophony of activity and sharing going on. Granted, pure originality and innovation may be unattainable. Consider the following compelling passage from Mark Twain.

When people approve, appreciate or relate to something we do or say, we feel good. Sharing, it turns out, is a process of validation in our life choices.

"...the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances — is plagiarism. For substantially all ideas are second-hand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources..."

When a great orator makes a great speech you are listening to ten centuries and ten thousand men — but we call it his speech, and really some exceedingly small portion of it is his.

These object lessons should teach us that ninety-nine parts of all things that proceed from the intellect are plagiarisms, pure and simple; and the lesson ought to make us modest."

This should provide huge instruction for marketers. Interestingly, Twain's British contemporary touched on this notion too. Charles Dickens summed it up nicely, "all competition is in its nature only a furious plagiarism." If one wants to do something that has never been done before it must come with the sober realization that, at best, it may not be the individual actions that are completely innovative it will be in the brilliance of the combination of actions that resonate and compel that represents something fresh and new.

This 'plagiarism' supports the fact that sharing is largely redistribution. How much value is there in reTweeting an article? The real purpose of sharing is to lend one's opinion to the original idea. It is to garner a reaction. It is to provide deeper insight. This has huge implications for marketing and the content it creates. Content that tends to take off is made up of one or more of the following:

Strives to Entertain: people appreciate being entertained. They want to have an emotional reaction. Make them laugh, tug at their heart strings. The agency Rethink has had great fun on its work with Science World with ads that educate, entertain and inform.

Valuable Information: no one truly hates learning. It is just that people learn in different ways. Insights delivered in clever ways resonate.

Exciting Promise: we all like to look forward to something. Content that sets an interesting expectation is exciting. Just make sure it is followed up and delivered on.

Suggest Exclusivity: at the end of the day branding is the perception of belonging to a club of like-minded members. People want to be on the inside of something special.

Every communication must be assessed on the logic of its information, hold emotional appeal, work in theory and practice, be creative in substance, and come across as real and authentic no matter where it appears. If one can accomplish this, the content will stand a better chance of being shared widely and appropriately.



Giant litter boxes were placed in high-traffic areas during lunch hours.

What This Means to Marketing

Here are four considerations for marketing when we think of human behavior and the practice of sharing.

1. W.O.M. Still Rules

Marketing does not work unless people share. It is not solely a broadcast medium. It never was. All marketing is meant to elicit a reaction. The most desired is to have the content shared. Bill Bernbach of DDB stated fifty years ago that word of mouth was the most effective form of marketing and that remains true. This was supported by Ernest Dichter's research that appeared in the Harvard Business Review in 1966. It still holds amazing lessons on how word of mouth actually works and it maps consistently to the motivations that drive people to share.

What Dichter calls Product involvement is actually a great experience that people are compelled to share and they do so unreservedly. That experience is a combination of surprise, delight, and fulfillment. Self Involvement relates to being an expert in some area and dovetails nicely with the theory of self enrichment as a primary reason for sharing.

The 20% attributed to Message Involvement is why we share humorous advertisements. Advertising agencies focus on this 20% giving them only a 1 in 5 chance for success on each campaign. This is one of the reasons why most advertising is largely forgettable and unsuccessful. Dichter believed that the remaining 20% of the time we share to directly offer help and demonstrate friendship.

Companies need to invite, involve, and enlist people in some aspect of all four ways of involvement. This gives sharing a greater chance of success. Think of the most successful campaigns in the past few years and you will see they had a strategy of addressing two or more of these "reasons to share".

One that deserves such credit is Dove's Real Beauty. It is recognized for its honesty and insights in changing both perception and behavior. The fact that it has received criticism from members of the advertising industry speaks less to its success and more to jaded factions that will never give credit when due.

How Word of Mouth Advertising Works Ernest Dichter, 1966

+/- 33% "Product Involvement"

+/- 24% "Self Involvement"

+/- 20% "Message Involvement"

+/- 20% "Other Involvement"

Advertising agencies focus on only this 20% giving them a 1 in 5 chance for success on each and every campaign. This is part of the reason why most advertising is largely forgettable and unsuccessful.



Weber Shandwick's 2013 report on reputation management showed that word of mouth is still the leading influence when it comes to impacting consumers' opinion of a company online or offline. The power of online reviews stood out on the report. These reviews are increasingly impacting perceptions and public opinion. Online reviews such as those found on recommendation sites (amazon.com, TripAdvisor, Yelp, TaoBao, Ctrip and Dianping in China, and Buscapé and ReclameAQUI in Brazil) have fast-become arbiters of brand trust and company assurance.

2. Persuasive Interactions

By understanding consumer's motivations and emotions we can connect and enlist them to help market our brand. The most effective marketing takes a nuanced, indirect approach. The focus is on educating, entertaining, and delivering value to the consumer, rather than a hard pitch.

What I call Persuasive Interactions are predicated on this value and demand compelling copy and delightful design to pull it off. I covered this in another paper specifically on the topic. In it I provide three examples of brands employing Persuasive Interactions. Apple is all about understanding the human aspect of technology, Canadian Club is meant to facilitate connections, and Utah Tourism promises a new experience that one may not have considered. Each promotes and emphasizes an interaction with the brand that is meant to engage and promote sharing.

This requires brands to non-intrusively insert themselves into the consumer's lives or present themselves in such a way that consumers invite the brands in. Brands that converse, listen, and let us talk about how we and our friends interact with the brand give us greater reason to share. Still, how something catches on and is shared is elusive. We can't force content to be a hit.

3. Earned Media

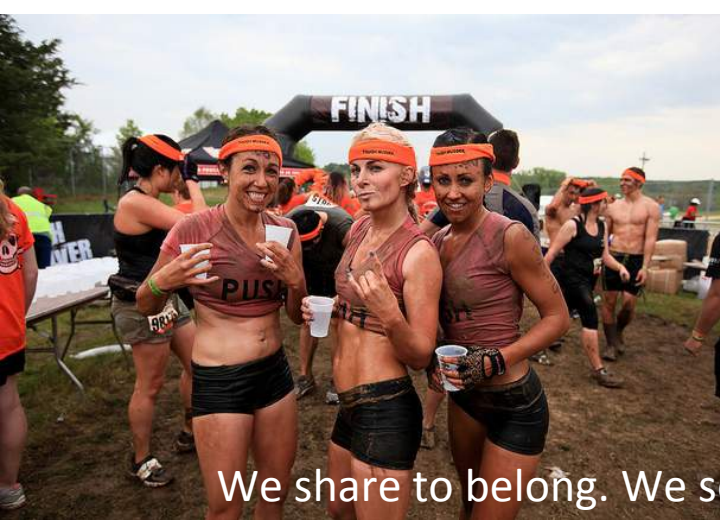
One advantage of sharing for marketers is "Earned Media". This refers to the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th person who becomes your follower as a result of the 1st follower sharing your content or it is measured buzz as a result of much talked about and shared campaign. It means you have not paid to have your brand promoted. Theoretically, social media can lower traditional marketing costs but I caution getting caught up measuring how much media you earned and focus instead on the direct sales that resulted. Earned media is analogous to the "eyeball metric" at the height of the dotcom bubble. It is interesting but ultimately not material.

4. Brands Built Around People

Marketing has historically been built around the product. Then the web was first organized around content forcing us to search for it. We are now in the process of organizing content around people so brands find their audience with more accuracy. 'Brands built around people' does not sound like rocket science but marketing has had a hard time getting it.

Marketers have tons of data to inform their decisions but in many cases they end up targeting an algorithm and forget that they are trying to connect with very real people. That is why creativity remains an integral and critical variable in all marketing. Paul Adams, Global Head of Brand Design at Facebook, says that every creative idea must come from a real insight about social interaction. A focus on 'creative social interaction insights' will help you connect with your desired consumer.





We share to belong. We seek validation of our choices.

How to Get Shared

It is often bizarre what takes off and frustrating when you believe you have something of value and it goes nowhere. So do not assume what follows is a prescription for success. The value is in thinking differently about how you communicate your brand. All that follows is predicated on a deep respect for your audience demonstrated by your thorough understanding of their goals and what influences their behavior.

Keep Asking Yourself These Three Questions

Brands are not static they change with each and every interaction. A strong marketer knows when to intervene and change the conversation or to let the brand evolve on its own. By asking on an ongoing basis what do we have that is truly unique you consistently build your case of relevance and differentiation. Who wants or needs it identifies the most appropriate customer base and how do they like to engage tells you where to put your efforts and investment in terms of communications channels.

Remember What Drives Sharing

In this fast moving, insecure world people are seeking connection as they continually form their identity. They are looking to belong to groups of like-minded people. They do all of this to seek validation of their choices. By understanding what this means to your brand you will be five steps ahead of your nearest competitor.

'What' is as Important as 'Why'

What people choose to share is a very personal statement. A long held goal is to have customers be an extension of the marketing department but they will only be advocates if the material is beneficial, authentic, and honest. All of which should be communicated in an entertaining way that clearly provides value, makes a promise, and I contend, suggests exclusivity like belonging to a club.

Challenge Your Brand and Yourself

Take a day away from your normal routine. Walk around a mall, visit an art gallery or museum (especially the gift shop) or go to the airport when you do not have a flight (but don't look like a security risk). Really observe the people around you the next time you are downing a Venti Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccino. Insights into human behavior are right there for the picking. Choose one that excites you for its potential and write up a strategic and creative brief to capitalize on it. Then be gutsy and present it to your boss, colleagues, and peers. There are far too many mediocre businesses and brands in the world today. Make sure yours is not one. Do not be a passive caretaker of your brand. All it takes is a passion for studying human behavior.

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