TEN DIGITAL TRENDS FOR 2020

A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

Consumers and marketers have predominantly used and viewed social platforms as a one-to-many channel, a public forum, a place to drive added-value public social interactions like comments and shares. Through technical platform updates, increasing time spent with specific content formats, and a generation rooted in one-to-one connections on social, the way we currently interact on social platforms is evolving to favor private before public interaction.

Mark Zuckerberg kicked off this year's F8, Facebook's annual developer conference, stating "the future is private." While this might sound like social as we know it is being dismantled, consumers should view this more as an evolution that increases their control: control of content, control of data, control of overall interactions taken by one's social self. While formats like the news feed are here to stay, we are beginning to see small changes that inherently make the way we interact on these platforms different.

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Data privacy and end-to-end encryption are often top topics discussed in relation to the idea of privacy within social, but it is this shift in content creation and communication that plays a key piece in this larger transformation in the social space. To stay relevant, marketers will have to change the way they think about social: First, in how they measure its value and, more importantly, in how they can build and retain interaction on their social channels through this shift.

The solution to social in an age of consumer empowerment and privacy appears too simple to be true. But in this time where brands rich in authenticity trump brands rich in followers, our measurement of success truly becomes the value exchange between consumer and content. Brands thriving in this new environment are confident in their brand and communications strategies, creating intimate social experiences, and are working to connect their social activations to the in-store experience.

Once marketers are able to retrain their mindset to this standard, we will be able to drive deeper and stronger connections with consumers, ultimately increasing their lifetime value to the brand. To understand and evolve with this shift, it is first important to understand where it came from and who will champion the behavior to be expected on social platforms moving forward.

KEEPING INTERACTIONS CLOSE

The increased consumption of the story format greatly accelerated this shift toward one-to-one connections. From its launch via Snapchat in 2013, platforms were quick to adopt the format with Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube all launching story products by the end of 2017, allowing consumers to share ephemeral highlights in their day across their social communities. Instagram saw both the quickest adoption and the most sustained use of this format, with 500 million daily active users as of January 2019.

Some would probably equate stories' quick success to puppy-face filters and dancing hot-dog augmented reality characters, but the change in consumption is much more rooted in the psychological benefit consumers received from this new format. Facebook news feed consumption saw a decline in 2016 because of increased negative sentiment driven by news and political content being shared at the time. This drove users out of the feed and into other more intimate social spaces like Facebook Groups and Messenger, and to other environments on social like Instagram and Snapchat.

While these environments allowed consumers to escape the political frenzy of the feed, like counts and comments on traceable posts continue to drive high anxiety and promote idealized or inauthentic content. Researchers even found reading comments on others' posts caused increases in depression. Instagram by far was categorized as one of the worst offenders for mental health. The solution to all of these problems became stories. With the stories format, users could share moments today that would be gone tomorrow. There were no like counts to measure, and all comments were private or could be disabled. This was the perfect balance of connection and control.

This spike in usage coupled with a new initiative to make social a more "be who you are"-friendly environment drove the interest in taking some learnings from its form. Instagram's chief Adam Mosseri announced a couple of updates currently being tested, including hidden like counts and less prominent follower counts, in an effort to lessen the power of these vanity metrics and to allow users to feel safe to share openly with their followers. More recent updates include the mute feature rolled out in early 2018 and the close friends option introduced in late 2018. Mute allows users to hide posts from a certain person they follow without having to unfollow or block them, while close friends allows users to limit the people who see their story post. While all these features promote safe and happy sharing, they also promote keeping interactions by and between users out of the public view.

NEW NORMS

Gen Z is estimated to have $143 billion in spending power, in comparison to the $65 billion driven by Millennials. As this generation can range from 4 to 24 years old, they not only have their own spending power but influence on their parents' spending. They also inhabit the life stage when consumers are starting to form preferences, opinions, and ultimately loyalties. The gist is that brands need to get in front of Gen Z and how they interact on social. This generation is leading the charge toward more private interaction for a few reasons:

They are digitally dialed in to their community. Snap allows Gen Z to quickly communicate with their close friends and communities.

Authenticity over quantity. Growing up with social media, Gen Z is well aware that more followers doesn't necessarily mean quality followers. Only 19 percent say they admire someone for a high follower count, while 67 percent of those surveyed agree that "being true to their values and beliefs makes a person cool."

Trust is key. Growing up with the Internet has made Gen Z smarter about the negative impacts it can have. They want the control to share the right content with the right people and to ensure certain messages don't get into the wrong hands.

These things are the standard for Gen Z. Consumption from this generation will continue to skew toward the platforms like Snapchat and Instagram that adapt to provide these consumers the experience to safely communicate and curate with their friends.

Though they are driving the change, Gen Z isn't the only generation to make this shift. From Gen Z to Baby Boomers, social apps that support private interaction like Instagram and WhatsApp have seen growth in usage. Social apps like Twitter that are still heavily focused on public interaction have the lowest usage numbers across all generations. We also see that across all generations, priorities have changed when it comes to how we interact on social. Instead of being the first place to share our opinion, people are shifting their behavior to increasingly include search and discovery actions within social. While Google might be the first place to go to find the quickest direct answer, social is adding additional context, especially from a product search perspective.

Source: visualcapitalist.com

SHIFTING MINDSETS

Changes to the way people are consuming and interacting with social channels mean marketers need to evolve our perspective on the ways social platforms can be used in broader brand-building and sales-driving strategies. The competition for attention remains high, even as consumers shift toward more intimate channels. Brands still compete with top content curators and personalities, but in this new landscape users will place a higher priority on following their friends and family. One-to-one curation can look similar but can be very different than one-to-many curation. In a crowd of 2,000, a tone-deaf loudmouth is one thing. But that same tone-deaf loudmouth at a small 20-person party is an entirely different thing.

So how can brands change the way they are thinking about social to remain relevant and to avoid the extra dissonance that comes from invading an intimate space? A few tips to keep in mind when thinking about strategy on social:

Be who you are and own who you're not. You must have a distinct and authentic brand voice, period. As competition increases in the channel, brands who don't have a distinct social voice get lost in the noise and are likely to be associated with a competitor with a stronger presence. Create your brand's social personality. How would they talk, what would they post, what types of communities would they be involved in? Not only does this help brands stick true to who they are and what's important to them, but it also provides a consistent and authentic perception for the user that they can relate to. This morphs your brand into more than just a channel to target from and makes it a channel to be followed.

Blurred lines. Many brands draw lines in the sand of what organic content looks like vs. what paid or, more specifically, branded content looks like. While content that looks more ad-like (with traditional elements such as logo, headline, heavy stylization) definitely still has a place, especially with certain ad units, push to find ways to break out of that box. This is where I think large brands can take a tip from the local guys. Find ways to naturally showcase your product or service, and ask yourself: "Could I get the consumer to consider learning more without a call to action?"

Keep it simple. Many times as marketers we try to remove ourselves from the equation when talking strategy (no one likes a focus group of one). Sometimes it is worth looking inward and taking a second to think about your own interactions with content on social. Are you typically liking or commenting on brands' posts? Likely not. It is more likely we are pausing, swiping, and zooming in. Part of being relevant on social is posting in a way that fits the conversations or content in which your target is engaging and how they are

engaging. Take a step back, think of the most fundamental interactions on social that a user must take just to engage with content, and lean in to those.

Take it offline. If brands are losing opportunities for interaction on social, what can they invest in to retain connections and drive interest? The answer: In-store experiences that create shareable moments. If content is trending toward ephemeral moments and users are trending toward authenticity, positive in-store experiences create both content brands can use and content users want to share with their community. This also allows the brand to take their social persona one step further, associating real people with their perception through behind-the-scenes or insider looks. This allows the consumer to feel closer and more relatable to the brand because it's a deeper look that goes past the idealized form a brand takes in traditional advertising.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The shift in behavior seems abrupt, but we have naturally been making this shift for some time. While some might think it is making our job as advertisers harder, I find it pushes brands to be better than just being present. This new shift toward privacy, whether it be from a data or interaction perspective, forces brands to think of what value we are providing the consumer not just in our products and services but also in our communications. What has historically been a very one-sided relationship can and should now be mutually beneficial.

The solutions to keep brands relevant are simple. A focus on authenticity and respecting our invitation into these intimate channels on social can bring brands great success in fostering relationships with current and new customers. The walls and constraints we have previously put on the way ads should look, feel, and do aren't as sturdy as they once were. Ultimately, as an advertiser, if you think you are not in the business of creating personal relationships, you will get left behind.

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Aubri came to The Richards Group in 2015 as a media planner working on Chick-fil-A. Witness firsthand (firsthoof?) to the online connection the cows had with their fans, she made the move to our social team and has been happily posting and pinning ever since. Aubri's love of social stems from her love of making connections—she wants great brands to create relationships and reward loyalists with smiles. When consumers feel engaged and heard, Aubri feels happy.

A graduate of the University of North Texas and a recent Interactive Marketing Awards winner, Aubri spends most of her office time on brands including Firehouse Subs, Charles Schwab, and Sub-Zero. Her non-office time is spent moving, as either a dancer or a very social—and inspiring—spin instructor.

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