

Web 2.0 - What's With all the Hype?

As a marketer, you've no doubt heard of the latest buzzword in online marketing - Web 2.0. Suddenly, it seems every major brand is rolling out an online campaign claiming to exploit the latest features of this new marketing channel.

Is it merely a hyped-up fad or truly the way forward as many tech evangelists claim? It is difficult to judge the phenomenon without a clear understanding of what it is - and the fuzzy outlines of just what Web 2.0 is and what it encompasses can make it difficult to judge.



Web 2.0 does not refer to a new version of the World Wide Web, but rather to a new way of thinking about and using the World Wide Web for both developers and end-users. The world is now beginning to move away from perceiving the web as a mere repository of information, towards using the web to facilitate collaboration and sharing between users.

While you may have only recently heard of the term, Web 2.0 is not new - it was first popularized in 1994 at a leading computer technology conference. Since then, technologies and services such as YouTube, Flickr, social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and any of Google's software services have changed the way we think about and use the web.

These services have several features in common, the most obvious of which is a reliance on shared data and networking of users to be successful. They derive their power from human connections, relying on a social element where users generate and distribute content, often with freedom to share and re-use. Content is now truly king, and the development of rich media sharing technologies (such as video streaming) has made it easier to share the quality content that users demand today.



The explosive growth of Web 2.0 has led many companies and marketers to experiment with using it in their marketing mix, with varying degrees of success. Companies have found it a useful way to build and maintain brand buzz at a time when traditional advertising is losing power with today's consumers, who no longer respond to ads that simply try to push messages down their throats. In an age of user-generated content, marketers have found that it is important to allow consumers to engage with a brand on their terms – which is where Web 2.0 marketing proves useful, as it allows, and indeed encourages consumers to interact with a brand.

The development of Web 2.0 has opened up scores of new online marketing possibilities and ideas – beyond the common methods you already know about such as building a website, planting banner ads, search engine advertising, or sending an email newsletter.

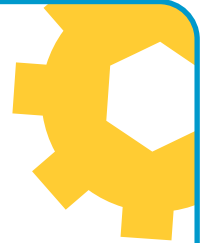
A brief review of the online marketing campaigns that are generating the most buzz today may make it seem as if the possibilities are limited only by your imagination and creativity – a large number of online services can, and have been exploited in a commercial marketing campaign, many of which have broken new ground and introduced new ways of thinking about how we can use the web to work for us as marketers.

Here are just a few of the more common methods.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

While still a fairly new phenomenon, marketers are increasingly beginning to invest in advertising on social networks such as MySpace and Facebook. Already wildly popular and growing fast (MySpace claims over 200 million users while Facebook has over 34 million), such advertising is useful if you want to reach a younger, more impatient and fickle audience wary of traditional advertising.

There are many examples of how this can be done. The UK band Arctic Monkeys, for example, built up a fan base of thousands before even securing a record deal – just by creating a single profile page on MySpace and sharing their songs online – a free and simple way of building buzz about a brand or product. The AXE brand of body spray took social network advertising a step further by creating a group of user profiles around its 'Gamekiller' theme and linking them to the most popular girl on MySpace. Creating a story around these profiles and adding interactive elements such as quizzes and giveaways, the campaign attracted 75,000 'friends' and 1.5 million pageviews – all the while spreading AXE's brand message.



MEDIA SHARING

Media sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr can be valuable tools in the marketer's arsenal. Apart from the obvious benefits such as providing free hosting of media that would otherwise suck up a tremendous amount of your site's bandwidth, they incorporate features that offer tremendous possibilities for viral marketing, such as simple video sharing and embedding functions, as well as comment and discussion possibilities. Will you be able to serve this customer?

If your company has created a particularly clever or entertaining TV commercial for your product, an immediate, nearly free way of leveraging these services is to put it on YouTube, tag it to be easily searchable, and then watch as it makes its way around the world, appearing on blogs, shared in email, and posted on discussion forums.

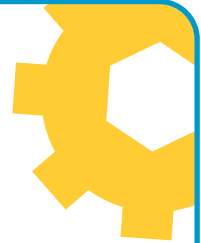
BLOGS

Blogs can be a useful tool for you to engage in dialogue with your customers, and in the process test new product ideas or obtain feedback about your products and services. There are scores of such examples; General Motors for example runs a blog discussing automotive-related topics, in the process keeping readers in the know about the latest product lines and new ideas at GM.

Other ideas for blog marketing are more straightforward – placing ads on popular blogs or arranging tie-ups with popular bloggers for example. Food/lifestyle blogger Chubby Hubby, for example, has run such advertising on his blog for major brands and organizations with good results.

PODCASTS

Podcasts are audio programs that can be downloaded and played on an mp3 player at any time, without the need for an internet connection. While relatively new terrain, marketing through podcasts, similar to corporate blogging, can be useful in connecting with your customers and raising awareness and public perception of your brand. Natural candidates for podcasts are media companies and content providers – the New York Times, for example, runs a very successful series of podcasts aimed at extending the reach of its content beyond its print and online versions.



VIRAL MARKETING

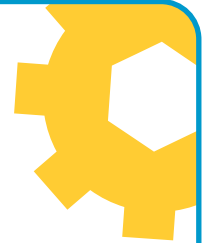
Examples abound of these methods – create an entertaining or useful little widget such as an online game, and encourage users to pass it on – along with your brand message and perhaps a message sending users to your website. This approach has been used to good effect by many consumer brands such as Absolut Vodka, Heineken, M&Ms, and Burger King (remember the Subservient Chicken?).

SEARCH ENGINE ADVERTISING

Search engine advertising is not new – companies have been paying to have their ads displayed on search results pages for years. But now, new technologies are available that will allow you to target your ads within the context of pages being viewed. Google has been doing this in Gmail, albeit with some controversy – if you have a Gmail account, you have probably noticed how the ads you are served are always relevant to the contents of your email.

OTHER EMERGING IDEAS

Some intrepid marketers have begun to explore other avenues for Web 2.0 marketing. Examples include advertising in online ‘virtual worlds’ – many major companies have established virtual ‘offices’ and ‘stores’ in the huge virtual landscape of Second Life. Marketers are also turning to aggregators, feeds, social bookmarking and other such services such as delicious, Technorati and digg.com to conduct informal market research and stay in touch with current market trends and fads. These services are particularly useful for keeping abreast of what consumers are talking about as they highlight interesting sites based on their popularity as well as the most talked-about topics on blogs.



The examples cited so far have mostly been from the US or European markets. Locally, examples of major brands successfully incorporating Web 2.0 marketing into their campaigns include Levi's "Stay True" campaign, Volvo C30's "Express Yourself" online launch, and Johnson&Johnson's campaign for the Clean and Clear brand.

For every successful Web 2.0 campaign however, there has been a campaign that has failed. The key to minimizing the possibility of failure is to truly understand the reasons behind a Web 2.0 campaign before embarking on one. Too many marketers today are caught up in the hype and glamour that surround these buzz-generating campaigns and fail to answer some fundamental questions before beginning their Web 2.0 plan: Why are we investing in this channel? Who do we hope to reach and how?

A successful Web 2.0 campaign begins first with plenty of research – about your customers, their habits, and the way they use the web – which should then drive your choice of which technologies to use. Also be aware that, unlike most traditional advertising campaigns, your work is far from done once your site is launched. Because Web 2.0 is content-driven, it's important to continuously keep your site updated with fresh content to drive the viral effect and repeat visits. Simply creating a single profile page on a social networking site and then expecting it to create its own links and spread automatically is not sufficient – interactions with your users have to be two-way.

Finally, always remember that you shouldn't be in too much of a hurry to jump on the Web 2.0 bandwagon – or abandon traditional marketing methods in favour of it. Web 2.0 is not a magic bullet – just one more tool in your marketing toolbox.

In the next few issues, we'll explore some of these Web 2.0 marketing methods in further depth. In the meantime, if you've got a Web 2.0 marketing idea you'd like to discuss or implement, get in touch with us – this might just be the latest new buzz-generating interactive campaign the marketing community will talk about for months to come!

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