

Social Media: More than Just Connecting With Friends

by Ricardo Lopez

By now everyone should be tired of hearing about social media, social networking, and Web 2.0! Yet, there still seems to be a great deal of confusion on how to benefit from using social media (SM) in marketing research. Here's a very quick overview that sheds light on SM as it relates to the qualitative research industry. There are two broad areas of interest: 1) SM as a tool to gather research information, and 2) SM as a way of conducting business.

Before we look at those two areas let's be clear on what SM is. SM is a very broad term that refers to the activities and behaviors of individuals and/or groups of people that gather online to communicate and interact. Any type of interpersonal communication using the Internet is considered SM. Most SM interactions, sometimes referred to as "social networking," take place in "social networks" or Internet forums.

Never before have we had an opportunity to easily observe social communications and behaviors as we do now through the monitoring of social media. Through SM a qualitative researcher can be a "fly on the wall" and learn through observation, or an active participant in a community of interest. Passive

observation can be as simple as searching for a term on Twitter; and while many in our business criticize Twitter for being full of "irrelevant" tweets, those seemingly tangential statements are an excellent source of product information and consumer behavior.

Doing qualitative research through social media is a logical extension of cultural observational research and social anthropology. One can easily study cultural and consumer behaviors by monitoring the constant flow of conversations in the digital space. It could be something as simple as setting a Google Alert for a brand name (so that you get an email if there is any mention of the brand), or a live Twitter monitor that brings up anything being tweeted on a subject. But you can also get insight on a very specific subject by exploring specialized communities like Yahoo Groups. There are online forums for almost every conceivable subject!

While in some cases it is appropriate for a qualitative researcher to engage "participants" in an established community, many discussion groups frown on the idea of an outsider infiltrating



their forum for business purposes. For this reason, many companies find that it is more effective and productive to build custom communities that are used exclusively for research purposes. There are several companies in our industry that specialize exclusively in building and managing custom communities.

SM should already be an important tool in our research methodologies toolbox, but SM is much more than that. SM is also a venue for conducting business. Marketing yourself through SM really pays off. Use social media to expand your reach and build a reputation, stay in front of clients, establish credibility and professionalism, and keep your business up to date and relevant. To really tap into the benefits of SM you need to dive in and start connecting. The most important networks for business are LinkedIn, Twitter, Plaxo Pulse, and Facebook; but if you are new to SM for business, start with LinkedIn.

LinkedIn is by far the most important SM network for business. To get the full benefit of LinkedIn you need to build your business network by inviting people to connect with you. The larger your network, the larger your visibility. It is also important to have a good profile. A LinkedIn profile has become the standard online resume for business. And if you do not have a website, your LinkedIn profile becomes your most important presence on the Web. Taking the time to build your profile is time well spent. LinkedIn includes a gauge to let you know how “complete” your profile is. The next step is to use the network for social interaction, and the best place to do that is within the groups.

LinkedIn groups are online forums where you can ask questions and interact with others about practically any subject. There are many groups that apply to research; I am a volunteer manager for one of them, the *QRCA Qualitative Discussion Group*. You do not have to be a member of the QRCA to join this group, and it is the largest qualitative research forum on LinkedIn. The AMA also has a members-only national group and many AMA chapter groups.

Before you fully engage in SM at any level it is important to understand the social rules of the online world. Like it is in any society, the Internet has its own tenets of conduct, sometimes referred to as SM Etiquette or Netiquette. But you’ll easily pick up the etiquette as you start to use social media, so don’t let that stop you from connecting now. SM is here to stay and you cannot afford to remain disconnected.

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