

# Social Influence Marketing: Strategies and Tactics to Win Customers

insight

Shiv Singh | February 2008



Recently, I introduced social influence marketing – or employing social media as part of the entire lifecycle of a marketing campaign, even beyond it. But why does social influence marketing matter to you, and does social influence marketing translate into real digital marketing tactics?

The answers to both those questions essentially point to the future of social media for marketers. So let's examine them carefully.

## Why social influence marketing matters to you

Consumers have always been heavily influenced by each other when they make a purchasing decision. They ask each other for advice, they observe and mimic each other's decision making, and, frankly, they let peer pressure inform their decisions whether they like to admit it.

What's changed is that digital behavior has caught up with the offline behavior – and that's why social influence marketing matters to anyone who has a future in marketing.

Communication technologies like social networks, prediction markets, micro-blogging solutions, location-based, networked mobile phone applications, and even virtual worlds make it possible for consumers to influence each other more directly and dramatically than ever before. This influence occurs in three ways:

- Compliance: an individual agrees with a point of view and acts in a specific way in order to achieve a favorable reaction among his or her peers.
- Identification: a person acts a certain way in front of a group because she believes in what she says, and belonging to a group is important to her.
- Internalization: your views are truly altered beyond the relationship with the group.

Aside from making for good copy in behavioral psychology text books, these concepts do translate into tactics for a digital marketing program or platform. Let's dig deeper.

## How it works

Building compliance, identification, and internalization is, in many ways, the holy grail of marketing. Here are some points to consider as you take advantage of social influence marketing.

**1. Become your consumer.** The rise of social networks and blogs has allowed consumers to stay far more closely connected with each other. As a result, consumers are more intimately watching each other transact online and offline. They want to be in compliance. As they observe, they also comment and directly or indirectly influence purchasing behavior. To influence consumers, you need to become like them and participate honestly in those same conversations in an ongoing basis.

**2. Aggregate information for your consumer.** Social media has empowered consumers to form stronger opinions and express them more broadly. More people are blogging, commenting and rating than ever before. Approximately 120,000 blogs are created every day. These contributors are providing a richer base of knowledge for other consumers to use while going through a purchasing process. Consumers who tap into these blogs know more about your brand than you probably do. Rather than trying to control the message, serve as the aggregator of all information regarding the brand. Let your website become the amphitheatre for the conversation. Even if the conversation is negative, you win over the long term as Chevy did with its Tahoe campaign. The user-generated advertisement contest resulted in 629,000 visits to the micro-site, and Tahoe sales took off.

**3. Articulate product benefits better.** Recent research by *eMarketer* highlights how influential customer reviews are. Approximately, 22% of US online buyers always read customer reviews before making a purchase. 43% of US online buyers read customer reviews at least most of the time before making a purchase. That's social influence at play. So what can you do about it? Recognize that your consumers are more informed and make sure you sell a strong product and articulate its benefits in a more digestible manner. You'll create happier customers who'll then do the marketing for you as others will want to identify with them through similar purchasing behavior.

**4. Align your organization into multiple, authentic voices.** Social influence marketing is about providing the space for consumers to influence each other during the purchase process. As a brand, you want them to positively influence each other. Do this by aligning your entire organization into a network of multiple, authentic voices. Don't leave customer interactions to the sales and marketing teams. Empower other internal constituents across the organization to serve as brand ambassadors maybe via blogs. They'll talk about your brand in their own voices to their own communities. They may not be totally on message, but they'll be authentic, and it'll have a strong, positive influence. Trust them.

**5. Amplify the favorite business stories.** So you can't control the message anymore. Your consumers would rather listen to each other than to you. But you still have messages that you want to disseminate. You can do that by shaping, influencing and amplifying business stories that play to your brand's strengths. Remember; just because your consumers are more interested in talking to each other, it doesn't mean you don't have a voice at all. Edelman research highlights that 28% of US online consumers took an action such as calling, speaking or e-mailing others based on what they read in a blog post. In Belgium, that number is 43%. Publish your favorite business stories as widely as possible and also direct consumers to the individuals or groups already predisposed to your products.

**6. Let consumers shape and share the experience.** Your consumers don't necessarily want to participate in the conversations on your website. Rather than just focusing on creating strong brand experiences that can then be shared among consumers, think in terms of creating

assets that allow consumers to shape and extend the brand. Furthermore, let them shape and share those experiences wherever they want. For example, make it easy for consumers to pluck information off your website and carry it with them elsewhere to the places where conversations are happening. Apple gets this. According to patent filings, Apple will be launching a service that lets users of iTunes assemble and modify podcasts prior to downloading them.

**7. Participate where your consumers are.** Your consumers are spending time on social sites interacting with their peer groups. Don't try to disrupt those social dynamics by dragging them to your website every opportunity you get. Instead, provide them with the messages directly on those social sites themselves. Go to your consumers rather than continuously trying to pull them to you. In fact, even de-emphasize the website if you have to. Wondering where the conversations are happening? Not just on the social networks but on the magazine websites too. According to the Magazine Publishers of America, the top 320 magazine websites received 67.5 million unique visitors per month representing 8.1% growth over the same period in 2006. Overall Internet traffic grew only 2.1%.

**8. Don't do it all at once.** Your consumers are probably smarter than you think. Don't try too hard to come across as clever, participatory and cool. Rather than trying every social strategy at once, focus on strong ideas and only use the channels that are most appropriate for them. In other words, don't feel obliged to have a Facebook page, a CEO Blog, a wiki, a MySpace page and a YouTube channel simply because everyone else has one. Focus on an engaging way to interact with your consumers as a participant, and then choose the channels to use. After all your consumers maybe suffering from social networking fatigue as its happening in the UK. Bebo, MySpace and Facebook all took double digit percentage hits in December 2007. Users spent less time on those sites.

It is early days for social influence marketing. We're only just beginning to understand how consumers are influencing each others' purchasing decisions online and what role brands should play in this. Behavioral psychology helps us understand influence to a certain extent. But no one brand has really figured this out yet. If you're smart, sensible, pragmatic and mindful of your consumers' sensitivities, you may be one of the first to do so.

*Strategist David Charles and Account Planner Grant Owens contributed to this article.*

## About the Author



Shiv Singh has been with Avenue A | Razorfish since 1999 and has worked in its Boston, New York, San Francisco and London offices. He helps clients leverage digital technologies to develop meaningful and value driven customer and employee relationships. As Director, Global Strategic Initiatives Shiv is tasked with building Avenue A | Razorfish's Social Media capabilities. He recently returned to Avenue A | Razorfish full time after having completed graduate work at the London School of Economics & Political Science where he researched social networks. Prior to that, he founded and led the Global Enterprise Solutions practice at Avenue A | Razorfish. Visit <http://www.goingsocialnow.com> for trends, commentary and news affecting the social media landscape. Please share your insights or thoughts to [shiv.singh@avenuea-razorfish.com](mailto:shiv.singh@avenuea-razorfish.com).



## About Avenue A | Razorfish™

Avenue A | Razorfish™ is one of the largest interactive marketing and technology services agencies in the world. The company helps industry leaders such as Starwood Hotels, Kraft, Ford Motor Company and Carnival Cruise Lines use digital channels to acquire and service customers. Avenue A | Razorfish's full suite of digital offerings includes online advertising, Web site design and development, email and search engine marketing, emerging media strategies, and enterprise portal development. Its award-winning client teams have a great understanding of customer needs and provide solutions through distinct business disciplines, which include: analytics, strategy, technology, media, creative design and user experience. Avenue A | Razorfish has offices in markets across the United States, and global operations in Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Visit [www.avenuea-razorfish.com](http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com) for more information.

Avenue A | Razorfish  
821 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Suite 1800  
Seattle, WA 98104  
Phone: 206.816.8800  
Fax: 206.816.8808