

# THE AGE OF BRAND TRANSPARENCY

**Y**our customers are on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and many more online social networks. Here they freely share their opinions on everything under the sun, even your products and services. It is an amazing, non-stop flow of information.

Think about it. What we are witnessing is the most exciting opportunity for both private and government organisations that has come along in decades. The number of people who use these sites is the first indication that something big is happening. Facebook has more than 750 million users, 70 percent of them outside the United States (US). Twitter has more than 200 million users sending hundreds of millions of 'tweets' (short messages) a day. Even Google+ reported 10 million users just two weeks after its launch, which was by invitation only.

Social media adoption in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries started out slow, but the number of regional users is growing quickly. *The Arab Social Media Report*, a recent in-depth study by the Dubai School of Government, calculated that there are now 1.1 million Twitter users in the Arab region. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the nearly 28 million Facebook users in Arab countries (with more than 28 percent penetration in Qatar).

What if you could know what your customers are thinking? What if you knew their likes, dislikes, hopes, fears and frustrations? Imagine the insights you could gain from having this information, and how you might use it to improve your current offerings or create new value-added innovations says **Kamal Hassan**. But there is a way – and it is called social media.

According to the study, the number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased 30 percent in the first quarter of 2011. The report attributes much of this to the demonstrations in Egypt, Libya and Syria, as more people joined these social networks to stay informed on the events. This may cause some to wonder if Arabs will continue to join and use social networking sites after the excitement of the 'Arab Spring' ebbs? But you only have to observe the conversations on Facebook and Twitter for a few minutes to see that politics is merely one of the many

topics being discussed. What people have realised is that social media networks provide a convenient, immediate and satisfying platform for sharing their thoughts.

#### FAR FROM A FAD

Two years ago an organisation could write social media off as a passing fad. Today, the numbers speak for themselves. In addition to MENA, user numbers are growing tremendously in the Asia-Pacific region. China also has home-grown versions of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other Western social networks, some with 100 million users or more.

The exploding popularity of social media is partly due to increased awareness, thanks in part to the regional demonstrations that made Facebook a household name around the world. There is also a technology component,

as more people around the globe gain access to faster internet connections and the use of smartphones with internet connectivity continues to increase exponentially.

User numbers are not the only data we have. A recent McKinsey survey showed that nearly nine out of 10 companies using social media technology receive measurable business benefits from it. More than 50 percent reported increased marketing effectiveness and increased speed of access to knowledge (both internally and externally for suppliers/partners), as well as reduced communication costs. Other benefits included increased customer satisfaction, increased revenue and even an increased number of successful new product/service innovations.

As a business owner, I have been involved in social media for several years and give it credit for a portion of my business, both directly and indirectly. Social media has been instrumental in increasing brand recognition for my company, connecting us with partners and like-minded organisations, and helping us understand what people expect and need from a business like ours.

On LinkedIn, for example, a virtual group my company facilitates (Middle East Innovation) has gathered 1250 people with a common interest in the topic. The group members post discussions on regional innovation efforts, entrepreneurship, idea generation, etcetera. Recently, we organised an in-person networking event for members of the group. This gave people a chance to exchange ideas, and we also got their

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opinions. The event was such a success we have already had requests for the next one.

Whether or not you use social media as a launching point for events, you can still learn much from your customers and your target market by joining the social media conversation.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA TRANSPARENCY

The data demonstrates that businesses can benefit from social media. Then why do we not see a bigger adoption among both private and public organisations? One issue is perception – many business people see social media networks like Facebook as places where kids go to play games and chat online with their friends. Unless this is your target market, it's easy to think that you have no reason to go there.

However, the data shows a surprising range of age demographics for social media users. (Just ask any teenager if his parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents are on Facebook and the look on his face will tell you they are.) Social networks appeal to young people because it provides them a forum to share their thoughts with their friends. But adults also need a place to express their opinions, both personal and professional, and social networks provide that outlet.

This leads to the second reason why many organisations (especially governments) shy away from social media – fear of transparency.

It is most evident in the internet shutdowns enacted by several Arab dictators to keep protestors from communicating on Facebook and Twitter. This fear is also apparent in countries that censor the internet, such as China, where Western social networks are blocked and homegrown ones are closely monitored to assure adherence to the party line. Even the US, despite President Obama's Facebook and Twitter campaigns, struggles with the level of transparency that social media produces.

It's no wonder that companies are afraid to dive into social media. What if our customers learn we're not perfect? What if social media reveals our trade secrets? What if we look like we don't know what we're doing?

Firstly, your customers already know you are not perfect, and they are already talking about you so you might as well join the conversation. Second, social media doesn't require you to be completely transparent, just authentic and responsive (a good social media policy can help ensure that anyone who represents you on social media knows not to share confidential information).

Finally, if you are new to social media, my advice is to jump in. Find a social network where your customers or constituents go and join in the conversation. Figure out the tools as you go. Accept that you will make mistakes, but owning up to them is part of being transparent. Humanise your brand, and let your customers get to know you as you get to know them. As you do this, you will see that the benefits of social media far outweigh the risks. ■

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