

the early bookmarking sites, which focused on individual productivity that are enjoying the growth. The growth is occurring on sites that allow users to share their favorite Internet content and to comment on it. That includes sites like Facebook and Pinterest as well as sites known for bookmarking like Reddit and Digg. Loren Baker, writing in Search Engine Journal says, “The positive effects of social bookmarking for publishers of news sites, blogs, and other web sites is outstanding. Social bookmarking can introduce sites to others with relevant tastes, drive traffic to your site, and [generate] valuable backlinks.” He points out that the data produced by social bookmarking is valuable to search engines, and he encourages marketer activity on sites selected for their relevancy.⁴² Also writing about SEO, Deepak Panwar says that bloggers should always submit their posts to well-regarded bookmarking sites. It increases their brand awareness, improves their search engine rankings, and leads to higher Google Page Rank and domain authority, a measure of the name’s power.⁴³

The original Q&A sites seem to have been undergoing traffic decreases in recent years. Whether newer sites like Quora can revive the Q&A sector is still an open question. Social media marketers must not forget, however, that whatever the platform used they must listen to customers’ issues and respond to them. They can also use sites like the ones described in this chapter to develop a reputation for expertise that will lend credibility to the companies they represent. Whatever the type of site, there are a set of basic best practices for approaching online discussions.

One problem that social media marketers are trying to solve is how to track shares of content that fall within dark social. Any website traffic that can’t be attributed to either a search engine or some other referral that includes a referrer tag is considered dark social.⁴⁴ When a person copies and pastes a link into a text, email, instant message, or even another app, the referral site tag is lost and the share isn’t tracked. People have many reasons for doing this that may range from wanting to keep the share to just one person, not wanting that particular story associated with personal social media or just convenience. A study by RadiumOne found that 32% of people only share through dark social.⁴⁵ Focusing on analytics can create a sense that every visit must be tracked; however, social media marketers should sometimes just be grateful that the content is being shared and that traffic to the website is occurring. At this point in time, there are no known methods for stopping dark social and even if one is found, consumers with privacy concerns will always find ways to keep their sharing private.

Best Practices for Online Discussions on All Platforms

While all the types of communications forums discussed in this chapter are generally open and welcoming to newcomers, there are some basic guidelines that all participants are expected to follow. Sometimes known as “netiquette” (a contraction of *Internet* and *etiquette*), these largely unspoken rules define interactions in online communities. In some cases the rules are enforced by a forum moderator or administrator and in others the community is self-policing. For those not observing these guidelines, the response from discussion board veterans is likely to be both swift and harsh. While different forums have variations on these general rules, what follows are some commonly accepted pillars of discussion etiquette, no matter which of the types of forums you are using.

STICK TO THE TOPIC

Discussions, or threads, always have a title and general topic that is obvious from reading just a few posts. This focus is essential for people to quickly gather specific information. Avoid tangents, chit-chat, or diversions from the main topic because they inconvenience other users. For general comments or discussion, seek out forums in the “off topic” section.

SEARCH BEFORE POSTING

Some forums see frequent repeats of common questions or have dealt with an issue in depth before. Prior to asking the community for an answer, search the forum to see if the topic has already been discussed. Most discussion boards have extensive archives that can be mined for information. Asking questions that have been answered before makes the poster seem lazy or inexperienced.

USE GOOD GRAMMAR AND CAPITALIZATION

Many forum users will employ Internet shorthand, loose grammar, or generally poor writing in their posts. For a social media marketer, however, this practice can damage a professional image or reduce credibility of the information presented. While minor grammar errors are easily forgiven, they should not impact readability. Having solid grammar, good spacing, and proper punctuation all makes a post easier and more enjoyable to read. For a similar reason, do not use ALL CAPITALS when posting; it is interpreted as shouting by forum users and will generate negative responses.

NO FEEDING THE TROLLS

In online conversations, a troll is someone who attacks or personally insults another user, driving a thread off topic with negative comments. Similarly, “trolling” may refer to posting unsupported, controversial claims intended to anger others and provoke a response. It should go without saying that a good social media marketer never resorts to trolling in order to get a point across. It is also best to avoid interacting with other users who are acting like trolls. The most effective response is to ignore them and refuse to give them the attention they are seeking. Without a response or someone taking the bait, users who troll usually become bored in time and go away.

DO NOT POST REPETITIVELY (OR DOUBLE-POST)

If a question or comment does not receive a response on one thread, it is unwise to post it elsewhere. If both posts eventually generate comments, it splits the conversation and is inconvenient to view. Users find it annoying when someone litters a forum with comments that disrupt the flow of discussion. If a post has not generated immediate response, just wait. It is possible that no one is interested in responding at the time, and posting again will only aggravate those who were ambivalent to start with.

NO SOCK PUPPETS

According to *The New York Times*, a sock puppet is “the act of creating a fake online identity to praise, defend or create the illusion of support for one’s self, allies or company.”⁴⁶ Several large companies have attempted this tactic and have been caught. For savvy forum users, it is fairly easy to spot sock puppets or other fake accounts. It is better to endure some negative comments than destroy a brand’s credibility online by creating fake accounts. Platforms are also taking more notice, as when Reddit shut down some domains or Quora set up verified profiles.

None of these guidelines is groundbreaking, and many will likely seem obvious to the reader. Most online etiquette issues can be resolved with some common sense

and by reading the rules of the discussion board before posting messages. With focus on relevant sites and content and with due respect for best practices of online conversations, marketers can make this platform a useful part of their digital media strategies.

Notes

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