

# Marketers, brace yourselves for the speed of share

Consumers are now a huge, almost instant media channel, and content can spread rapidly if it's relevant and engaging, says **Judy Franks**, The Marketing Democracy

**T**HE SPEED OF SHARE is a code-name for the speed at which great ideas travel across consumer networks. It's the idea that compelling content in any media channel can travel as fast as consumers are willing to share it with others. Consumers are the most powerful accelerant in the distribution of great ideas; they help move content along with a simple behaviour, the click. And their clicks travel at the high speed of broadband or 3G.

The speed of share has profound implications for advertising and media planning. Previously, advertising content could travel only as fast as the media channels could accumulate their audiences. We placed messages in specific channels and we waited, for a week, four weeks or for entire purchase cycles, to accumulate effects.

The process was slow, cumbersome and expensive. We had to pay for every 'opportunity to see' the communication. To make matters worse, media audiences would reach a plateau and our efforts would begin to pile up frequency and lead to message wear-out.

## Consumers do the work

But now, if we can engage a consumer with great content, they will do a lot of the work for us. The media plan will take on a whole new shape and meaning. Our ideas will travel across more channels with greater speed, efficiency and impact.

There's a catch, content will only travel at the speed of share if it's worth sharing. Our industry must remain focused on nurturing, producing and celebrating great content.

Content holds more weight in the speed of share than the channel because you can launch great content in practically any medium and, if it's truly worth sharing, it will travel at an incredible speed among well established networks of hearts and minds. Unfortunately, we tend to focus more on construct (building new channels) than we do on content (filling existing channels). We don't need another feed or another chatroom. Our ideas do not have to take the form of a widget or a viral video to touch hearts and minds.

## The Mona Lisa

If someone asked you to name the media channel that delivers the Mona Lisa to the world, you would most likely answer, 'The Louvre'. But that answer is only partially true. If you went to the Louvre, you would see hundreds of patrons standing before the Mona Lisa with their camera phones held high. With a simple click, and within only minutes, the Mona Lisa will travel at the speed of share and will land on sites such as Flickr, Facebook and MySpace.



FIGURE 1

## The old rules don't fit

- **Time:** the traditional measures of media planning time – purchase cycle, average four-week, or even weekly intervals – seems like an eternity when compelling content can travel across networks in nearly real-time.
- **Place:** Media channel optimisation seems a bit narrow-minded when content leaks off its originating channel and travels 'anywhere' and 'everywhere' at the speed of share.
- **Performance:** Measuring the 'opportunity to see' via traditional reach and frequency on the front-end misrepresents the actual engagement that transpires through the speed of share.

Many marketers are missing the point. They view social networking as a channel strategy instead of a line item on the marketing plan. This idea is far more profound. All aspects of a brand's experience should be considered worthy of sharing among networks of hearts and minds.

Are we prepared to harness the speed of share? We have to re-examine foundational advertising and media planning practices that were based on 'once upon a time', when the majority of brand experiences were pushed out to consumers via controlled, mass-distribution channels. The adjustments are significant. The dimensions of 'time', 'place' and 'performance' take on a whole new meaning in the speed of share (Figure 1).

They say, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Go to Digg Labs and check out the 'Swarm' (<http://labs.digg.com/swarm>). Swarm is captivating to watch. Diggers 'swarm' around compelling content and you can watch the swell happen in real-time. A virtual 'swarm' isn't just a Digg phenomenon; it's simply easier to see on Digg. The notion of 'swarming' around provocative content in real-time happens in and across multiple media every day.

Why? Because every single medium is only one 'click' removed from the conduit (the network infrastructure) that enables consumers to take the content and share it. The speed of idea travel is now based upon the speed of a consumer's connection. Thanks to broadband and 3G, in most cases, it's a matter of seconds.

If exposure can accumulate so quickly, does a media planning timeframe of an average purchase cycle, average four-week, or even one week, make sense? Our marketing clocks are not in sync with the speed of engagement. Media plans live in a timewarp. But speed comes with a catch. How can marketers sustain top-of-mind awareness when messages travel so quickly? A suggestion, create something memorable. In the spirit of the late Simon Broadbent, think of a great idea in this model as 'AdStock' on steroids. While messages can travel at the speed of share, they need to remain in the hearts and minds of consumers for some time to come.

The speed of share is fuelled by equal opportunity. The content can come from any medium and it can land on just about any medium. No single medium operates

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### Susan Boyle

How did the world fall in love with Susan Boyle? She delivered an incredible performance on the British television stage that quickly landed on YouTube. Within a matter of hours, days, at most a week, this video travelled extensively across many different consumer networks. The YouTube frenzy got the attention of the American mass media. Once again, Susan Boyle became a broadcast phenomenon. And, the cycle continues.



what is otherwise dull, boring, and/or irrelevant. In the speed of share, performance is no longer based on an 'opportunity'. Rather, performance is an actual measure of real action taken: a consumer's willingness to share content with others. The cycle of performance is endless. The first action taken by the consumer triggers a chain of events. The consumer then becomes a media channel. The true reach of our efforts is multiplied by the number of connections in the consumer's network.

### T-Mobile 'Dance'

T-Mobile's marketers understand the power of the speed of share. They knew that if they staged a surprising and delightful 'dance' in Liverpool Street station in London, by-standers would capture the

experience and share it among their networks. Again, practically in real-time, this content experience travelled around the world and served to fuel a powerful marketing campaign.

in isolation; rather, content flows from one channel to another in an array of patterns and pathways. Consider the examples of the Mona Lisa, Susan Boyle and the T-Mobile 'Dance' event (see panels, above and above left).

If content can land 'anywhere' and 'everywhere', have we returned to the 'wild West' of media planning? How can a marketer possibly develop a channel strategy in the midst of such fluid behaviour? We shouldn't throw informed strategy out of the window, but we should change the way we approach channel optimisation. Do our models capture how content leaps effortlessly off one channel and onto another? Which channel gets the credit for consumer engagement: the originating channel, or the 'jump' channel? The answer should be all of the above. Rigid allocation models that align marketing investments to media consumption do not account for such channel leaping. Instead, we should hope that our efforts leap anywhere and everywhere consumers wish to take them. The net result should far exceed the boundaries of the original media plan.

A note of caution. Content won't land anywhere, let alone everywhere, if it is not worth sharing in the first place. It

doesn't matter where content comes from – Hollywood, Madison Avenue or a consumer's webcam – as long as it's great. How do we know when we have great content that is capable of flight? Unfortunately, we can't copy test our way into this phenomenon. We have a wealth of learning on how to optimise messages for specific media channels that consumers love to skip. Until we start measuring 'importance', 'contextual relevance' and 'worth sharing' we won't have the proper benchmarks to determine whether content has what it takes to travel at the speed of share.

One thing is certain, 'average' is the kiss of death in this model. You stand a better chance with something really awful. At least it will travel (marketers, please don't try this at home).

The traditional media plan measures of reach and frequency only matter when you plan to hit consumers over the head with a dull message. The term 'reach' is only an opportunity to see (OTS). The message that I will truly see is one that is important, one that is contextually relevant, one that I will remember and one that I care to share across my network. Frequency only matters when you have to beg me to pay some form of attention to

### Consumers as media channel

The world has clearly changed. Advertising and media planning need to catch up to the realities of how ideas travel in the speed of share. Consumers will take care of moving great content along at the high speed of their network connection. They, in essence, have become the most powerful media channel in any media plan. We need to rethink our role in the process. We need to refocus our efforts on creativity. Let's develop and nurture brand ideas that can grow into content in any and all media forms that consumers will deem worthy of sharing.

This is easier said than done. We need to make foundational changes to both our approach to content development and to media planning to harness the speed of share. The first order of business should be to reframe what we mean by a brand's social experience.

Social networking is not a marketing tactic. It is not a line item on a marketing plan, a specific channel or form of content. Rather, it is an outcome, and no single channel has a lock on the social nature of content. Most media can serve as the originating medium in a journey that can take a great piece of content across channels and into vast networks of hearts and minds.

Creative output must now be bigger than a 'good ad'. Because, spoken from a true media professional, great content is the critical fuel in the speed of share.

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