

Social Media - Madness?

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Over the past year, as I've been writing about how Web 2.0 relates to advertising and marketing, I've described social media concepts, tools, and websites. This month I delve deeper into the realm of social media.

One underlying value of social media is openness. The suspicious side of my brain looks at the culture of online openness and wonders what madness has overcome our self-preservation privacy instincts. Yet, on the other hand, there's tremendous value being created by the vast connections, collaborative efforts, online communities, and the many tagging and recommendation engines that run on openness and participation.

Has the Internet culture gone mad? Or are we beginning to see a new digital fabric that weaves human and machine into one vast environment of knowledge and resources? And where does marketing fit in this new community? Is it welcome?

I can't stand MySpace. There, I've said it. I'll be saying a lot of nice things about social media and its culture of online openness. But MySpace, while the exemplar of social media, is not my favorite. MySpace has popularized the structures, tools, and community ideas that have been emulated by many others. So I'll tip my hat to the site that propelled social media into common culture (Friendster actually preceded MySpace but stumbled in 2004 and MySpace has since been king of the hill). Unfortunately, because of the demographics of MySpace and the generic nature of its purpose, it's not a suitable environment for much other than flirting and swimsuit model try outs.

To some degree all social media sites suffer from this downside to the culture of openness. Among any crowd there will be those inclined toward voyeurism, and the larger, more general and anonymous the crowd, the more such behavior flourishes. But there are many social networking sites that, because of a clear focus and less anonymous profile, are very conducive to networking, business and participating in niche communities.

Both Friendster and MySpace began as simple online communities that allowed young people to post comments, keep up with friends and engage in the politics of popularity that most teenagers enjoy. But the fundamentals of these online social networks began to have effects that were not initially intended. Once observed, these effects motivated thousands of companies to model their sites after social networks. They began including features like members and groups, friends, commenting, recommending, blog rolling, and tagging.

What were these effects that have driven so many websites apparently insane for social media? To appreciate the answer we'll need to understand a particular problem facing the web--the ever-expanding availability of stuff.

Limitations of Search Engines for Discovery

Discovering, deciding, and dealing with so much online stuff can be daunting.

I've written about the problems of global information overload in past newsletters like [Wikis, Swikis and Blogs](#). But let's review. Having access to all the world's information and stuff is a good thing. When choices are constrained we adapt our tastes to what is available--not necessarily what we might actually like best, if we only knew. I like Coke, but I've learned that I like Diet Stewart's Fountain Classics Orange 'N Cream better. But without access to all choices I might not even know that Stewart's exists. I discovered Stewart's when I walked into Soda Pop Stop, a specialty soda store in LA to shoot one of our videos, [The Simple Secret to Search](#). When I first walked the aisles, I was overwhelmed with the variety of soda brands and flavors. It took me awhile to take it all in. Finally, John Nese, the owner of

the store, helped me out by explaining the difference between a truly brewed soda and one that's mass produced using shortcuts. When I told him I was particularly interested in diet orange sodas he helped me identify a few options that I could reasonably sample. Imagine though, if a typical grocery store stocked all of the choices that Soda Pop Stop stocked. And imagine if they stocked the same breadth of brands and varieties for all their products. It would be impossible to shop. It's already a bit overwhelming to walk into today's super stores-- and they carry a very short list of options for each of their product lines.

In this example we're just talking consumer food brands. Multiply that out to all products, all content, all music, all everything and the ability to categorize, rank, filter, sort, and process it all becomes almost impossible.

One way we've learned to manage so much stuff is to use search engines like Google. If I want to find a shoe rack for my closet I can type "shoe rack" into Google. Google returns and ranks all of the 1,270,000 pages containing the phrase "shoe rack." I can count on its results to list the most relevant shoe rack pages at the top. Google and other search engines are one way we contend with billions of web pages. But it's not the only way, and sometimes not the best way.

For example, what if I'm not looking for a shoe rack in particular, but instead I want to organize my closet and I'm not sure exactly how. Now Google's not as much help. The broader, or more open ended my search, the harder it is to get a good answer from Google. Another example: I can type in "diet orange soda" into Google and get 5,200 pages. But it can't tell me which diet orange soda I'm most likely to enjoy. And the more stuff out there, the harder it gets. Google is great at finding the things we know are out there. But suppose you were to ask Google to find an interesting website that you don't already know about. Google would not be a very helpful tool--StumbleUpon.com is-- but I get ahead of myself.

There are other times when even a super-accurate search engine is not much help finding what we need. For example, if you move into a new state and want to find a good doctor, what do you do? You can search for doctors on Google, or you can open the Yellow Pages. But on what basis do you choose from among the scores of doctors? Do you choose the doctor with the biggest ad on the page? Do you call a few and ask them some tough medical questions to test their expertise? No. Usually, you ask people you meet who they go to. You ask for specific recommendations like "who's the best doctor for allergies?" Friends are better at recommending certain things than directories and search engines ever will be.

Search vs Social Perspective of the Web

The ever expanding web needs openness and transparency to work

These limitations to traditional search engines pose a problem which is growing as more and more stuff becomes available. This problem is what many of the social networking sites are helping to solve. We've already learned how to search through billions of web pages using strategic phrases to find almost any website (hmmm, except for many advertising agency websites because they build them entirely in Flash... but that's a different newsletter). But this doesn't help us discover sites *we're not looking for*, but are better than the ones we are looking for. It also doesn't help us choose from among all the options we do find.

So, is there anything else on the web, besides web pages, that could possibly help us with this problem? There is. It's the *billions of people who look at web pages*. Every day people click, read, evaluate and pursue information online. Back to our doctor example, imagine if you could tap into the collective judgment of every person in your town with regard to who you should go to for medical care. If you could know from each person's experience who they like and dislike, who's done a good job and who to avoid, you'd likely identify a good doctor. That would be nice, wouldn't it? But of course that's impossible.

Now imagine if you could tap into the collective judgment of every person who ever looked at a particular website and, having considered it's merits and compared it to others, offered their opinion of it. This is not impossible.

Example of Social Media - Collaborative Bookmarking

Example of collaborative bookmarking

For example, when you find a website you like, you bookmark it so you can find it later. You can even organize bookmarks into folders based on subject. Suppose you could get access to everyone else's bookmarks? If you had all this information you could derive things, like

which pages are bookmarked by the most people. You could also determine the various folder names people use to organize their bookmarks. By examining all the other sites in these bookmark folders you could build up a list of categorically related sites. With enough data you would have a brand new way of looking at the web, not from a mathematical search perspective, like Google's, but from a human perspective.

Let's go back to the Soda Pop Stop. In the same way that the owner was able to use his knowledge to recommend a soda suited to my tastes, so too the aggregation of people's use of the web leads to content we might like. If I'm at Soda Pop Stop, John's help and recommendations are invaluable. They make the overwhelming number of choices more manageable. If I go to his website rather than his store, I don't have him as a resource to guide me. But if I could somehow get access to his internet bookmarks (assuming he used them) I might be able to get some clues about which sodas are his favorites. If I could get all the bookmarks of all the people who ever bookmarked the pages in his site I would have even more to go on.

Of course our bookmarks are listed on our personal computers and associated with our *individual* browsers so this information is not publicly available to the whole world. They belong to us and are part of our *private* information. It's nobody's business what sites you and I bookmark. Is it?

Check out this video by Lee LeFever at [The Common Craft Show](#) that quickly and clearly explains social bookmarking.

But what if everyone was willing to share their bookmarks, and even add their thoughts, opinions, and evaluations of the sites they bookmark? Imagine how robust a resource could be created. For example, suppose a few of us were into the history of the Civil War. Maybe each of us has a folder in our browser's bookmarks called "Civil War." I might have a few sites bookmarked that you might find very interesting and you may have a few I might like to go to. I might not ever find these sites using Google, but if I could see your bookmarks, I could check them out. And maybe there is one site that all of us have added to our Civil War bookmarks folders. If someone else who was just getting into studying the Civil War could see all of our folders and noticed that we all had this one site in common, they would probably guess that this might be a good place to start reading.

Here's the rub: in order for people to share a maximum amount of information with each other they would need to be very open with their web viewing activity, their bookmarks, and their reviews. But generally the idea of being open on the web is considered a very bad idea. For example, as a web development company Newfangled has had to find technical ways of keeping people's email addresses off of websites. This is usually done to keep spammers from scraping them from the site and dumping them into spam databases. Most people are afraid of having too much of their identity online.

This theoretical willingness to being open with information is not actually theoretical. Believe it or not, there is a growing population of web users who are extremely open to sharing their bookmarks, preferences, opinions, and just about anything else. There is a huge contrast in web culture between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. Young people, in the Web 2.0 generation, are radically transparent with their online identities, their personal blog entries, the music they're listening to, the blogs they read, the friends they have. And all this human collaboration, human collections of knowledge, human recommendations, and human popularity is the fuel that makes social media work.

Social Media Culture

The Web 1.0 generation versus the Web 2.0 generation

The Web 1.0 generation tends to think this kind of openness is madness. If we're Web 1.0, we're seriously afraid of giving out our email address, we fear identity theft, we're uncomfortable with websites planting "cookies" on our computers, and we're reluctant to fill out web forms that ask for personal information such as name and email address. In contrast, the Web 2.0 culture maintains personal MySpace pages and public Flickr photo accounts. They use online bookmarking services, and have MyBlogLog identifiers. They publicize the music they're listening to and the blogs they subscribe to. They post their vacation photos and videos and anything else that can be shared. They are the *polar opposite* of older folks who don't even want their names to show up on a web page out of fear of the information falling into the wrong hands.

Not only are Web 2.0 people open with their identities they also talk with each other and make friends with each other. What do they talk about? Everything, including where they are going to eat before a show, and what they think about the latest track on iTunes. The vast

collections of Web 2.0 activity made up of individual's preferences is what makes up much of Web 2.0 and what is driving the changes in the marketplace. Community, conversation, and openness is happening. It is driving Web 2.0.

del.icio.us revisited

I've used bookmarks a lot in my examples. Earlier I asked you to imagine what would be possible if everyone shared their bookmark data. But you don't have to imagine it. It already exists. Many people no longer use their browser's built in bookmarks. Instead they use online bookmarking services like [del.icio.us](#), [Diggo](#), and [Furl](#). I've written about del.icio.us in [Wikis, Swiks and Blogs, part 2](#). Basically, sites like del.icio.us are, at their most basic level, simply online alternatives to a browser's built in bookmarking feature. Instead of bookmarking sites in a browser you add them to your online del.icio.us account. But there are two big differences. First, de.icio.us bookmarks are typically public (though you can make them private, that would defeat the primary purpose). It's also different in that rather organizing bookmarks in folders, you use "tags" instead. A tag is a single word that you use to identify and describe a web page. Any bookmark can have multiple tags. So if I were going to bookmark a site like [Search Engine Land](#) in my del.icio.us account I might use the words, searchengines, SEO, and blog. As I'm adding my tags, del.icio.us also tells me what words other people have used to tag Search Engine Land, which gives me insight into how others categorize that site. Because bookmarks are open, I can actually see what other sites have been tagged with these words, and which users have tagged this site, and every other page each user has tagged. That's a lot of openness. And it has created a rich and growing perspective of the web.

Not Just Bookmarks

But it's not just about bookmarks. In the same way that del.icio.us is creating a huge community of aggregated bookmarks, [Flickr](#) is doing the same exact thing with photos. [Last.fm](#) is doing it with music. [Technorati](#) is doing it with blogs. [Yelp](#) is doing it with local reviews and recommendations. And [Spout](#) is doing it with movies and DVDs. There are hundreds, even thousands of other such communities growing up in and around specific areas of interest.

The Benefits of Social Media

The benefits of social media

One thing that any social media web community needs is members. Members are the commodity of social media websites. The more members, the more value--not just to the site owners, but to the community itself. In fact there is a critical mass to a social media site. Without enough members the site has virtually no value. But as the community grows, its value increases exponentially. If a community only has a few dozen members there is not enough content to make the site compelling. Also, without enough people a community will not be self-correcting. James Surowieki does a fantastic job in his book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, in describing how crowds (as long as they maintain decentralization, diversity, and independence) come up with better answers and more accurate analysis than even the most qualified experts would provide on their own. One reason is that a large, diverse group will tend to corroborate correct information while canceling out errors. It's why [Wikipedia](#) works.


Well populated social networks are have all the characteristics of a wise crowd. Del.icio.us pulls together the collaborative judgment of millions of people thus categorizing and ranking the sites among billions.

The benefits of a social media website is found in the connections that get drawn between those that participate. Connecting people, recommending resources, identifying expertise, and distributing content are all benefits to those who participate in and use these sites.

Getting Started in Social Media

Getting started in social media

So if you're a Web 1.0 person who is feeling a little brave or irresistibly curious, here are a few places you might try out.

LinkedIn  - LinkedIn is a great place to start. LinkedIn is the most professional and business oriented of the social media sites. It's not like MySpace and its ilk because members are real people using their actual identities. It's primarily used as a contact management system and relationship development site. You'd be surprised how many of your business associates, classmates, and colleagues are already using LinkedIn. As you develop your LinkedIn network you ask other LinkedIn users to join your network. LinkedIn tracks who you're networked with and who they are networked with. So if you wanted, for example, to make a new business introduction,

you could find out who you know that knows the person you want to get introduced to, or perhaps who they know that knows you.

One facet of LinkedIn that I've been using a lot lately is LinkedIn Answers. LinkedIn members post questions in various categories which members answer. I subscribe to a couple Answers categories via RSS feed and whenever I see a question where I can give a good answer, I take five minutes to post it. This has led to a bunch of visits to my website (since I usually point them to one of my newsletters for details), and creates good will among the LinkedIn community. It never hurts to help.

By the way--since you're reading this, if you're a LinkedIn member (or become one), would you please consider recommending me? LinkedIn has a built in recommendation system that makes it really easy to recommend experts in your network. Recommendations are very valuable and I would sure appreciate them from clients, agency partners and folks that have been following our newsletter for awhile (thanks!).



Diigo (in conjunction with del.icio.us) - Since I've talked a lot about del.icio.us already, and in past newsletters, I'll just say that for me, it's become a critical tool for managing [RSS feeds](#), blogs and sites I discover daily. I also have seen significant traffic to our site through others having added me to their del.icio.us network and following my tags. (I'm [ericholter](#) on del.icio.us.)

Diigo is a competitor to del.icio.us and does basically the same thing. The main difference is that when you save a web page to Diigo, you can also highlight specific text on the page and add your own notes to the selection. These notes are viewable (if you leave them public) to other Diigo users. Didn't know that there is an invisible layer of Diigo notes over the web, did you? If you create an account you'll see Diigo notes here and there, and be able to post them yourself.

LinkedIn, RSS, Diigo case study: Just this week I got a LinkedIn Questions post in my RSS reader. Ian Lurie wrote an article called [An Internet Marketing Manifesto](#). In LinkedIn he asked the crowd to comment on the article. I saw it in my feed and rather than just leaving a blog comment, I created a Diigo group called [Internet Marketing Manifesto](#). Now anyone who has a Diigo account can see my notes I added to the page about specific statements and some of Ian's response--and you can chime in too. I love it when a feedpostdiigogroup comes together.

StumbleUpon - To me StumbleUpon is just plain fun. When you open an account, you tell StumbleUpon what categories you're interested in. You can then start "stumbling" the web. Click the Stumble icon and StumbleUpon directs you to a site they think you'll like. You can thumbs up and thumbs down the sites to refine your profile. You can also join groups, make friends and build a fan base. All of these things continue to refine your profile in order to match you up with sites you'd like. I've discovered lots of cool and helpful sites this way.



MyBlogLog - Have you ever noticed blogs that have a list of profiles of people who have recently read the blog? These are all people who have MyBlogLog accounts. This lets the blog owner and readers know who is active on their blogs. On the MyBlogLog site members can join blog groups, add contacts and friends, and comment on member and group pages. MyBlogLog takes what was an invisible facet of activity (who's reading who) and makes it visible to everyone--connections made, groups established, popularity quantified, and the social web rolls on.

flickr GAMING **Flickr** - I'm not a photographer so I don't use Flickr. But if you are into photography, Flickr is the social media site bar none for images--same structures, shared content, collaborative tagging, groups, fans, RSS feeds, popularity engines, and the rest. I subscribe to the RSS feed Flickr photo of the day and I'm always impressed with the quality of photos that come through. By the way, if you read our newsletter on [Creative Commons](#), many Flickr participants make their images available under CC licenses. This could be a great resource for clients that would benefit from unique photography but don't have large photography budgets.

These sites are great places to get started in social media. I almost always use my real name as my member identity when I participate, but you don't have to. If you're more comfortable using a code name, go ahead, but try it out. You might be amazed at what you discover. And if you do bookmark your discoveries, add the tag "websmartcrowd." I'm going to subscribe to the tag and you can too. That way we'll all be able to share with each other the sites we find. Isn't social media great?!