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What really counts in metrics

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You know those advertising figures you were given? The ones that tell you how many people read a certain magazine, watch a certain TV show, open a direct mail piece or even drive past a specific billboard? Lies. All of them. Dirty, dirty lies that are told by marketers so they can take as much of your marketing budget as they can get.

That's because the numbers you've been told are based on estimates, best guesses and industry legends that have been handed down from generation to generation without anyone going back to see if they're accurate anymore. In fact, many times, the marketers and ad salespeople don't even know the origins of those numbers; they were given them during their first day on the job, and they've repeated them ever since. Or they're numbers that count something completely different from what is claimed and are fired at you in the hopes that you don't stop to ask what they really count. Here's what I mean.

How would you like to reach 120 million homes?

On its website, the Golf Channel (owned by NBC Sports) tells potential advertisers that their channel is ‘available in more than 120 million homes worldwide’.

Oooh, 120 meellion homes! marketers swoon, with their pinkies to their mouths like a well-dressed Dr Evil. Sure, who wouldn’t want to have their ad beamed into 120 million homes, where it will be seen by 120 million people. Who can say no to that? Except it’s not really 120 million people. It’s not even 12 million people. On a good night, it’s 1.2 million people.

According to a June 2012 article on the TVbytheNumbers.com website, Round Two of *The Players* tournament in 2011 saw 1.8 million viewers, making it the most-watched programme of the year. Second place was Round One of the *Wells Fargo Championship* with 907,000 average viewers (ie half as much as Number 1).

Other tournaments clocked in around 700,000+, while the Golf Channel’s original entertainment programme, *Big Break Atlantis*, reached 349,000 people one time in May 2011. That’s not a bad reach, considering the National Golf Federation says there are around 26.1 million golfers in the United States. But that’s still not 120 million.

Yet when advertising sales reps sit down with marketing directors to sell ad space on the Golf Channel, which number do you think gets trotted out: 120 million or 349,000? What opportunity are they being sold: the chance to reach a population the size of one-third of the United States, or a population that’s slightly larger than Tampa, Florida?

While I’m sure the ad sale reps at the Golf Channel are fine, upstanding people who pay their taxes and love their mothers, I am also willing to bet they don’t tell people ‘our average viewership for a night is almost 350,000 people’. I would bet their commissions that they say, with a straight face: ‘Our channel is beamed into 120 million homes worldwide.’

These are the lies that we marketers are being told – and are telling our bosses and our clients. It’s creating some unreasonable expectations, which may end up hurting future marketing efforts, especially as social media marketing becomes an even more important channel.

How thousands are worth more than millions

The problem these lies create for social media marketers is that our clients and bosses are still programmed to expect millions of readers, millions of views and millions of clicks.

‘120 million homes?!’ they shout. ‘We’ll take it!’

So you can imagine their disappointment when they see a Google Analytics report that says there were thousands of readers, thousands of views, and hundreds of clicks.

‘It’s a failure!’ they now declare. ‘We should have stuck with TV!’

You can see the problem. Social media is used by millions of people. Hundreds of millions. In fact, as of this writing, Facebook has over 1.1 billion users. Twitter is clocking in at over 500 million users.

‘So why did only 30,000 people show up at our website last month? How is that not a failure? That’s less than 120 million.’ The problem with expecting millions of visitors is that it’s based on the lies we were told over the last few decades about open rates, read rates, circulation, viewership and every other metric we’ve been given.

I’ve heard from many business owners and executives who think that social media should match the same viewership they get from their TV ads, newspaper and magazine circulation, or highway billboard views. They want to measure views by the thousands, just like the other metrics they’ve measured all this time. And when it doesn’t happen, they blame social media for a failure. But they’re missing the bigger picture. And that is, on social media they’re engaging the customers who are probably the only ones to interact with them anyway.

There are a few problems with the whole ‘we need millions of clicks’ line of reasoning, some of which you can fix, and some of which will take a bigger educational effort within the marketing industry.

It’s not possible to accurately measure most traditional marketing channels

There are a few exceptions, but most people don’t take advantage of them. Sure, we’re told that 1,000,000 people were watching a particular programme at a particular time. But how many of them saw your commercial, taking account of the number of people who went to the kitchen or

bathroom during the break? How many of them flipped channels or forwarded through your commercial? The same problem holds true for radio, newspapers, billboards, direct mail, etc. The numbers only estimate the number of people watching, but can't tell you accurately.

There are a few ways to measure traditional marketing, like using a special phone number that only appears in that ad, or creating a special purchase code that is tied into the ad, or even just asking people 'where did you hear about us?' But those usually take extra effort and are not always properly tracked. It also doesn't tell you which ad was responsible for the sale or store visit, or how many times the customer saw the ad.

You can't target with traditional marketing the way you can with social media

The best traditional marketing channel that lets you target your audience is direct mail. Right now, you can buy a specific breakdown of demographic and psychographic criteria of your potential customers:

'Divorced women between the ages of 30 and 50 with three kids, and a median income of \$65,000.'

You can't do that with television, radio, or billboards, because you're reaching a large portion of the audience that doesn't fit what you need. Viewers of sports channels may be mostly men, but they may not have the median income you want, or be the age of viewer you want. Or even be men.

You can do this kind of targeting with social media marketing. For example, Facebook lets you target ads to only show up for those people who meet your target. Google lets you buy ads that only appear when people look for a specific search term. And you can even create an online community that is geared towards your exact audience and let them communicate with each other.

You can also create an e-mail newsletter from your past customers and send it out on a monthly basis as a way to generate repeat business. Thanks to the e-mail metrics tools available, you can even measure open rates, click-through rates and purchase rates. From there you can segment audiences into groups of people who make purchases, click your articles – or who don't even read the newsletter at all.

You can measure social media marketing, and link it directly to sales

Thanks to Google Analytics and your CRM, you can see exactly how and when people arrived at your website, which pages they clicked, when they placed an order and how much they bought. Then you can total up the sales and arrive at a figure: ‘This tweet we sent at 2:34 pm resulted in \$20,000 in sales.’ How many TV ads or billboards can you say that about?

This will even let you determine the pieces of content, the channels and even the times of day that are most effective in reaching your widest – and most profitable – target audience. In contrast, with traditional marketing, you’re not reaching the millions of viewers/readers/listeners you thought you were. You also have no idea how many you actually did reach.

You’re reaching thousands of viewers/readers/listeners with social media marketing, but you’re reaching the right people at the right time; which means you were probably only reaching that many people with traditional marketing to begin with.

Social media marketing is just another tool in the toolbox

This does not mean that you should replace your traditional mainstream marketing efforts with social media marketing. That’s not the point of this chapter at all. Rather, you should understand that social media marketing is no longer about teenagers downloading videos from their mobile phones or goofing around on MySpace.

It’s about engaging a much wider audience and targeting only the ones you want to receive your message. Rather than using your marketing tools like hammers, and treating your marketing tools like so many nails, use social media as a specific tool that lets you interact with rabid fans, and help them to become ambassadors for your brand.

The final secret about social media marketing

So here’s the biggest secret of all about social media marketing: *Your customers do not trust, listen to, or care about you at all.* They get their

information about our products from each other. This is actually a staggering piece of news to many marketers, because we've all been told we're special. That our work is important. That the hours we spent as a committee designing that latest brochure mattered. We don't want to be told that the tens of thousands of dollars we spent shooting that commercial were useless. Or that the carefully chosen marketing copy we wrote – and the know-nothing legal department 'helped' with, which we promptly ignored – was ignored in favour of someone's comment on our website.

It's painful to hear, but it needs to be said.

Our customers are talking to each other instead of listening to us. We're the paid professionals. We went to college for this sort of thing. We were told the latest buying theories that told us the right words to say for the right personas, and that everyone would flock to our product if we just found that magic bullet.

Our customers want to hear from people they have relationships with. They trust those people. They're friends, family, co-workers and neighbours. They have a vested interest in seeing our customers get a good value, succeed in their efforts, or at the very least have an enjoyable experience.

That means they ignore the traditional 'Buy This! Buy This! Buy This!' marketing messages. That means that if we want our customers to listen to us, we have to stop advertising and start talking with them on a regular basis. We need to become their friends and trusted resources. We have to stop talking to them like marketers.

It means we have to ignore the millions and reach the thousands, by talking to hundreds. It means finding the influencers in our markets, forming solid, real relationships with them, and then letting them serve as evangelists on our behalf. It means redefining marketing and how we do our jobs, since social media has made it both possible and necessary to do so.

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