



Katrina Alcorn
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Our quest to understand social media brought us to David Peck. Peck started his journey in social media posing as “Britney Mason,” a sexy 26-year-old woman, and managed to be Britney in his online interactions for about two years. A year ago, NBC requested an interview and Peck decided to out himself. It made for a more interesting story than NBC had originally planned.

The man behind Britney Mason is actually a father of five who lives in Silicon Valley and works as a social media strategist for a marketing and ad agency called LSF Interactive.

Peck has worked on a variety of social media campaigns for Coca Cola, Wells Fargo, and NPR, among others. So we wanted to talk with him about the different ways companies can engage users through social media. He had a lot of interesting examples to share. I’ll admit, some of them make me skeptical. You can do a lot of things online to get attention, but how does that attention benefit your company? And what if the attention is negative?

Despite my doubts, the examples Peck gave us are great food for thought:

Find users where they are and engage them in discussion

If your company has content you want to share, this is a sensible strategy. Peck worked on a project for [NPR’s the DNA Files](#), where his job was to go to social networking sites that target Baby Boomers—sites like [TeeBeeDee](#) (which happens to be a former client of ours) and [Eons](#)—and start discussions about the NPR content.

Pretty straight-forward idea. NPR has content to share, but rather than waiting for users to find it on their site, they employ someone like Peck to go out into the Internet wild, find their target users, and lure them in with compelling conversation about their content.

Co-brand yourself with somebody more popular than you

Although most major newspapers have failed to learn how to make money from the Internet, I continue to be thoroughly impressed by the web-savvyness of the New York Times.

Peck told us about an online “gift” the New York Times created and made available on Facebook. Basically it’s a little image of the paper with the front page headline “Obama Wins.” Users could give this free gift to their friends on Facebook. It’s a great idea in terms of creating an awareness of your brand, and associating it with something that your target users care about. Now, of course, that same idea wouldn’t work so well for Fox News, but for the New York Times it’s spot on.

Piggyback on a timely subject

Peck told us about a project that he worked on for Palm. Palm sponsored a [video](#) (this was pre-election) about Obama vs. McCain that was aimed at getting youth to vote, and then released it on YouTube. The video had nothing to do with the company or its products. But its subject matter was timely. And it was a success in that a lot of people watched the video and commented on it. Heck, maybe some of them decided to vote because of it. Did they notice that the video was “presented by Palm?” Don’t know. Are they more likely to buy Palm products in the future? Don’t know.

Do something unexpected

Another example Peck gave was the Burger King “Angry Whopper.” To promote the burger, Burger King created a Facebook application that said you would get a free flame-broiled Whopper when you sacrificed 10 of your Facebook friends.

“Each friend will be notified,” users were told, “so choose wisely.”

After 233,906 users were “de-friended,” the app was taken down. But Burger King still has a web page where jilted users can send an “[angry-gram](#)” to the Facebook users who dumped them for a free burger.

So what does Burger King get out of this? Is there value to the company in being associated as the catalyst behind a lot of social networking discord?

“Maybe it’s dumb,” Peck said, “but we’re still talking about it.”

Good point. Although, it doesn’t make me find a Whopper any less disgusting than before I heard this story, but I guess I was never their target audience...



Burger King's "Whopper Sacrifice"

Hearing these examples, I can't help but think back to those heady days of the 90s, when the web was fresh and new, and those of us who were designing for it didn't have a clue what we were doing. Over the years rules developed and things that initially seemed really cool, like an airline designing its site to look like a ticket counter, were revealed to be unusable and silly.

Ten years from now, I think we'll look back and laugh at some of the things we tried to do with social media in 2009. The question is, which ideas will we laugh about, and which ones will become a standard part of how companies do business?