

Tackling Some of the Unique Challenges involved in Using Social Media Ministry among Muslims

by Tim Klassen

Tim is currently working on a project to automate social media sentiment analysis and plot a person's spiritual growth for possible automated resource suggestions like 'Recommended for you' in Gmail or Amazon. He is looking for partners in the broader missional community who would be interested in creating social media content in Arabic, social media listening, coding or technical data analysis. You can contact him at ap-fup@maarifja.org.

Introduction

ABC Company wanted to expand to a new demographic. They noticed through polls and hiring experts that their ads were not attracting the percentage of Millennials that they had hoped for to close the sale and buy the product. They had tried various broadcast methods of advertising through newspapers, radio and television. They had even sent out email campaigns and spent money on Google AdWords but had not reached their target. ABC Company needed new advertising tactics. Looking at competitors in their field, they noticed a trend towards narrowcasting their advertising through social media.

Social media is a way of life among Millennials and younger. When I send an email to my college-age children, I follow up with a WhatsApp or Facebook Message to let them know that there is an email for them. They are much more inclined to read and respond to texts.

Social Media for Business

Except for car radio²², broadcast media is in decline. Fewer people are subscribing to newspapers.²³ Many newspapers have launched digital editions but the advertising revenue has remained steady (averaging around 10%) while newsprint advertising has declined by more than 50%.²⁴ Similar drops in viewership have happened in television as increasingly people are cutting the cord on cable subscriptions in exchange for cheaper, ad-free, on demand alternatives like Netflix. Technology has made it easier to skip commercials even for those who stay with cable TV.

Websites show some promise with cookies and technology tracking your movements and serving up ads which are narrowcast to your interests. Narrow casting is targeting a specific group of people or persona rather than a generalized broadcast campaign.

²² 85% of Americans still listen to radio at least once a week (Gabriele, 2015).

²³ The number of daily newspapers has declined from near 1800 in 1945 to 400 in 2014 per capita, a decrease of 78%. (Gabriele, 2015).

However, ad blockers are now big business and 20-25% of all desktop users in Western countries use ad blockers. The highest percentage of these are Millennials.²⁵ And as mentioned before, traditional email use among Millennials is now on the decline.

Another knock-on effect of this trend toward social media is that as the number of newspapers and reporters decreases, the level of 'hard news' is also in decline. This has resulted in the rise of digital and viral news and the increasing consumption of news through Facebook and comedy channels on YouTube like 'The Colbert Report' and 'The Daily Show' by the Millennial demographic.²⁶ This leads to users of social media literally seeing what they want to see based on social media algorithms which tailor an individual's newsfeed to match their interests. Consequently, less dissenting voices are presented. This phenomenon has been documented in the latest US presidential election where claims that 'fake news' stories and a 'filter bubble' played a role in the outcome (El-Bermawy 2016).

Since the Millennial generation bypassed the Baby Boomers in the United States in size this year (Fry 2016), businesses are increasingly looking to market to Millennials. Mobile devices and social media play a significant role in their marketing strategies since they understand that Millennials consume a steady diet of social media on their portable devices.

What are some major factors in effective business marketing to a generation that largely uses mobile devices and social media to interact with their world?

Factors in Social Media Marketing for Business

Keeping in mind that social media interaction mostly takes place on mobile devices like tablets and smart phones, businesses that design social media are creating content that is responsive to its setting/venue/context. Responsive content is aware of the screen size that it is on and displays the information in a format suitable for that device providing a more appealing and convenient info and marketing message to its target audience.

One of the primary goals of social media for business is to come up with something catchy which will 'go viral' and thereby gain even wider exposure as well as customers and advocates for their product. When people resonate with the message, they tend to forward business promotional materials known as organic growth since no extra advertising dollars were spent on the campaign beyond what was spent originally.

²⁵ 2016 Reuters Digital News report (Brackebush, 2016).

²⁶ 61% of Millennials have Facebook as their main source for political and government news (Pew Research) (El-Bermawy, 2016).

Social media sentiment analysis is the study of whether a company's readers are positive or negative towards the message. Most tools analysing social media are designed for the English language (Wang 2014). Since it is the world's de facto trade language and because other languages are more difficult to process, social media for business has tended to focus on tools that extract social media sentiment in English. There is not the same motivation to create media and analysis tools in the audience's heart language.

In addition, businesses often have a large budget for paid social engine marketing (SEM) such as Google AdWords and Search Engine Optimization(SEO). Search Engine Optimization is big business as companies try to get above the fold (the coveted position on the first page of a Google or Bing search).

Ethical issues come into play when fake positive reviews are generated and unfair practices are utilized to 'game' the algorithm. Google (which owns YouTube) and Facebook are regularly updating their algorithms to make it increasingly difficult to make a business look more popular than it really is.

Businesses will also have large departments dedicated to advertising promotions. Google AdWords are often costed as a CPC (cost per click). This averages out to about \$1-2 per click depending on location, geotargeting, timing of ad, and how competitive your advertising space is (Shewan 2016). The average small business spends more than \$100,000 per year on Google AdWords (Shewan 2016). As we will discuss later in the section on social media ministry, these advertising costs can be prohibitive for a non-profit organization intent on providing ministry to a people group who don't provide a revenue stream.

Relatedly, businesses generally provide a *tangible* product or service which makes their profit motive clear. People seeing their ads or coming across their infomercials, free downloads or popups understand that the company is in business to make money.

These businesses want to appear to care for the whole person but really are most interested in conversions to the product and then advocacy to create other potential conversions to the product. The depth of the relationship between the company and the customer usually won't go deeper than the next potential sale. Put differently, if the social media marketer has to choose between the personal growth of a customer and sale of a product to a new customer, they will likely choose the latter. However, this is starting to change with the onset of concepts like soft marketing and relationship marketing. There is always the possibility that time will be invested in a potential client that won't lead to a sale but the level of significance for most products means that a sales pitch can happen fairly early in the process. This is especially true since the potential client already understands the profit motive for the establishment of the relationship. One shouldn't propose marriage on the first date but in a business relationship you can propose sooner rather than later.

One of the primary tailwinds for social media marketing for secular businesses in general is that there is no spiritual opposition. Materialism is as good as false religion when it comes to the spiritual deception perpetuated by Satan and his forces.

Now that we have looked at the challenges of social media in business, how does social media for ministry compare?

Challenges of Social Media for Muslim Ministry

Christian ministries wanting to use social media for ministry (SMM) in the Muslim world have noticed the same trends away from broadcast media among their audiences. Many ministries have moved away from shortwave and other bands of radio as their historic primary means of broadcasting the good news of the Gospel from the West into the Muslim world. Satellite TV is still a popular broadcast medium for the gospel but has proved expensive to keep new content broadcasting 24/7 in terms of production costs and satellite airtime rental. Government newspapers in the Muslim world have always been problematic, although ads have been placed in them from time to time for Bible correspondence courses.

In the early days, listeners would send written correspondence through the post with some of the mail being intercepted in both directions resulting in a poor feedback loop with broadcast media. The implementation of email and mobile phone feedback has led to a much better system that is still in use today.

However, in the Arabian Peninsula, as in other parts of the Arab world, email use is on the decline as well as phone voice calls. At my former workplace, I remember having many emails bounce from students whose inbox was full because they didn't maintain or check it at all. For Millennials, texting, WhatsApp and social media have replaced these with more convenient and non-disruptive ways of communicating.

As Christian ministries in the Muslim world have noticed this trend within the past few years, concerted efforts have been made by some to capitalize on this new feedback loop to gain insight into viewer's reactions and responses. These responses can then be followed up for ministry purposes and examined to refine the content being produced for their audience. Unique challenges have been noted regarding social media for ministry among Muslims as opposed to social media for business.

Social Media Ministry among Muslims

As noted above, advertising something widely and getting it forwarded to as many people as possible in the hopes that some will purchase the product is the goal for social media used in a secular business. However, in social media ministry to a closed access area such as the Muslim world, *security* of the message is critical. If the gospel message is viewed by hostile government authorities or religious agencies, they often block the webpage or shut down the social media account. The author

knows of this happening, leading to inaccessibility of the webpage or the loss of thousands of contacts connected to a closed social media account. Months or years of work invested in advertising the location of the web or social media page and building the social media following is then lost. So, a challenge for SMM is finding a select audience that is willing to engage with the content without attracting the attention of the authorities.

As mentioned previously, business budgets available for growing an audience in the social media domain are often extensive. SMM, on the other hand, usually has limited financial, technical and human resources. Thus, much of the growth depends on organic growth to stretch the advertising budget further. In addition, since SMM is not just interested in growing an audience at any cost, *ethical* considerations guide decisions related to SMM strategy.

Another factor is ministering in the heart language of the unreached people group (UPG). Since people are often motivated towards heart change in their heart language, SMM among UPGs often will be specialized in the heart language rather than just a trade language you might see in a business scenario.

SMM practitioners are also interested in an ongoing relationship beyond ‘closing the deal’ and seeing someone take the step of faith from darkness to light into the Kingdom of God. They are also keenly interested in the growth process with the goal of spiritual maturity and spiritual reproduction. This is usually accomplished through a referral of the seeker from an online social media conversation to a face-to-face discipler where the ‘one anothers’ of Scripture and depth of relationship can occur.

One of the biggest differences between social media for ministry and for business is the spiritual opposition. As mentioned in the previous section, Satanic forces are not concerned about individuals buying products that have neutral or negative spiritual effect. However, they are actively intent on thwarting any efforts to spread the Gospel.

There can also be opposition from some Christian ministries against the idea of automating processes involved in SMM. They feel that to automate SMM is to minimize the role of the Holy Spirit working through believers. However, by this token, any use of technology (e.g., internet or television ministry) could be seen as interfering with the Holy Spirit’s work through believers.

The idea of automating the filtering of seekers can also blend well with looking for a person of peace as promoted in discipleship making movements (DMM). Another argument raised against SMM is that since social media has become an addictive and time-wasting pastime for some, Christian ministries should not enable users by interacting on this medium.

However, technology was designed morally neutral. It, like any other human invention, gets tainted and corrupted over time. SMM can redeem technology for

good and, ironically, use the medium to show people that what they are looking for in life *is not found on social media!*

Technically it is very difficult to analyse the data of ministries who seek people of peace by tracking their interaction with a media ministry. A car outfitted with an embedded LoJack RF transmitter is very easy to track after it is stolen. Similarly, the author proposes embedding machine-readable metadata into new media content (a type of LoJack) so that an automated process can connect with these interactions in real time (or at least a timely manner).

Jesus said in Luke 6:45 that ‘out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks’. Seekers are giving us clues about the condition of their heart every time they interact with SMM. Automated processes can help respond to them as we scale ministry in anticipation of the harvest promised in Hab. 2:14: ‘For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’

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