

# Bottom line, not buzz words



Between blogs, forums, podcasts, Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, Wikipedia, Del.icio.us, Twitter, Digg, Flickr and all the rest, the array of social media options now at marketers' disposal can be intimidating. The challenge for marketers now, as ever, is to get past the hype and get onto what works.

Perhaps more daunting is the need to move past the traditional campaign mentality that

is focused on relatively short-term goals and activities. Thanks to search engines and links – the true currency of the web – permanence rules social media. This calls for ongoing commitment and willingness to invest more than time and money. This calls for a purposeful investment of human capital in social media.

The intersection of technology and humanity, where consumers have themselves invested heavily in the communities they've built, is one where marketers are not often welcomed with open arms. But individuals bearing genuine value usually are (although, sadly, a link to your latest advert is not guaranteed to be considered valuable to consumers).

Often the most valuable thing a company can extend is also the most difficult for it to offer: the willingness to listen. Of course your brand is wonderful and worth consumers' hard-earned cash. Telling them that in so many words, however, lacks both subtlety and efficacy.

For many online denizens, personalisation and collaboration on their own terms – and turf – are now par for the course. And, as the underlying technology becomes more invisible (and thus accessible) to “non-techie” consumers, the reach and impact of social media grow exponentially. So clinging to increasingly outdated ideas about target audiences becomes something of a folly: there are no audiences in many-to-many conversations, and participants in them don't take kindly to notions of being targeted (or dominated, or captured, or any other hostile marketing-speak we have grown fond of).

To make the most of social media, it is imperative that companies be willing to reduce things to their most basic units: individuals participating in conversations. It may sound soft, but if getting past the hype matters – if results matter – then it's pointless to pretend that a broadcast approach will work in this networked world.

The technology and buzzwords won't be what gets those results. But expertise, enthusiasm, and the persistent delivery of genuine value certainly will. If you've got it, give it away. The value will come back to you, many times over, in the bottom line.

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# In the right social circles

Social networks have been a huge success, but there are signs some users are suffering ‘Face-ache’. Niche sites may prove more fertile ground for ad messages. By Caroline Parry

**T**he year 2007 will be remembered as the year that social networking went mainstream. No longer should the phrase conjure up images of youths spending their days and nights online making friends, as it now applies to one in four adults in the UK. Indeed, the UK has welcomed social networking with open arms. Christmas Day was the busiest day ever for social networks in the UK, according to internet data company Hitwise, and Facebook was the third most visited site over the Christmas period, pushing eBay into fourth place. And it wasn't just the popularity of Facebook that drove the UK's interest. Sites such as Sagazone, which is aimed at the over-50s, have opened up the phenomenon to silver surfers.

But that was last year, and there are already murmurs of Facebook fatigue – or “Face-ache” – as the burst of curiosity and enthusiasm that led many people to sign up to a social network starts to wear off. This can also be applied to MySpace and Bebo, which, though attracting younger users, have fallen behind as Facebook has flourished.

## Social breakdown

Disillusionment with the big social networks is still in its early days – many people are still signing up – but it should act as a warning sign for the owners of the generic networks. While it may only be the early adopters moving on at the moment, new trends are starting to emerge that could be cause for concern.

“Facebook has jumped the shark,” says Jamie Riddell, director of innovation and co-founder of digital agency Cheeze. “For the early adopters it



**Marrinan-Hayes:** MySpace and Facebook are too big to use for developing business relationships

is no longer any good and that will start to apply to everyone. It is getting too messy on there.”

His sentiments are echoed by Anne-Fay Townsend, a researcher at innovation company What If? and blogger at [bigshinything.com](http://bigshinything.com). She describes Facebook as a “cattle market”, adding: “People are just not interested in many of the applications, mainly because they are so uninspired. Much of this stuff actually detracts from what Facebook really excels at – connecting people.”

Townsend and Riddell predict that as users tire of the generic ▶