

Bull Session

Do you ever wonder why answering the return-on-investment question is such a conundrum when it comes to social media? Jason Falls, principal of Social Media Explorer and co-author of “No Bullshit Social Media: The All-Business, No-Hype Guide to Social Media Marketing,” explains why trying to force direct-response marketing metrics onto a brand-marketing vehicle will never yield the results you want. *By Lena Hewitt*

Jason Falls

Jason Falls is a digital strategist, author, speaker, and thinker in the digital and social-media marketing industry. His strategies and ideas have touched well-known brands such as General Motors, AT&T, and Maker’s Mark, among others. Falls is a lead strategist for Elasticity, a multichannel marketing agency. He has co-authored two books: “No Bullshit Social Media: The All-Business, No-Hype Guide to Social Media Marketing” and “The Rebel’s Guide to Email Marketing.” He also founded digital-marketing firm Social Media Explorer.

If you’ve ever had the pleasure of attending a social-media strategy meeting, one question inevitably pops up, regardless of said meeting’s agenda: “How do we monetize it?” The answer is never simple. That’s because there is no easy way to attach monetary value to followers, “likes,” shares, comments, etc. If there was, tweens the world over would be billionaires, and Facebook ads would be nonexistent. In fact, if social-media love translated to cold, hard cash, there would be little if any incentive left for



face-to-face interaction and a whole lot more posts from your Aunt Henrietta asking you to “like” Jesus in exchange for good luck. Thankfully, that isn’t the case.

In reality, measurement and metrics aren’t limited to dollar signs, particularly when it comes to social-media activity. According to Jason Falls, principal of Social Media Explorer and co-author of “No Bullshit Social Media,” the disconnect occurs when event and exhibit managers try to attach direct-response metrics to what is, at its communication core, a brand-marketing medium.

Here, Falls explains the value of social media in terms of building awareness, establishing community, and communicating with the masses.

EXHIBITOR Magazine: Before we get started, let’s clear up this whole idea of the “social-media guru.”

Does such a person really exist?

Jason Falls: I don’t think so. There are people out there with a certain amount of expertise who have generated successful marketing and community-building initiatives using social channels. But we don’t really think of anyone as an advertising guru or a public-relations guru or a telecommunications guru.

Why is there such a label for social media? You have

a certain amount of expertise and maybe a track record. That doesn't necessarily make you an expert or a guru. It just makes you a competent, practicing professional.

Anyone who claims "guru" status is overcompensating, as he or she likely has no actual professional experience or practice to speak of. They can theorize and regurgitate expertise all day, but have little in

is because there's great benefit to being first to market. If you beat your competition to a certain platform and there's something to be had from being on it, well then, I guess you win to a degree. But more often than not, you just waste a lot of time on something that turns out to be not as interesting as everyone anticipated.

The right thing for companies to do is get an account on a platform

ways: direct-response marketing and brand marketing.

Brand marketing is about building awareness, trust, and relationships with your audience, while direct-response marketing is essentially "buy this" or "click here." Most people become frustrated with social-media measurement because they use it for brand marketing, but hold it to direct-response marketing metrics. If your social-media goal is to build awareness, then you don't ask, "How much money did we make?" Certainly you can correlate those two things, but the proper question is "How many more people are aware of us now than before?" Measure to the goal and plan to measure the things that answer the question of whether or not that goal was accomplished.

EM: Aside from measurement, what are most marketers doing wrong when it comes to incorporating social media into their exhibit programs?

JF: In my experience, most exhibit marketers focus their content on the exhibit itself. They're so busy trying to sell the show that they forgot people don't want to be sold anything. Create content that brings the right audience to you. It should be helpful, informative, or entertaining to attendees. Then, incorporate the sell as an aside. With great content that isn't about selling, but helping the audience be smarter about the broader topic or focus, you build a community of people around your social presence. Essentially, you're collecting soft leads that you can then market to in a more direct manner.

EM: The idea of building community isn't a new one, but it is one that seems to pop up whenever social media rears its head. Why is it so critical?

JF: It's important for two reasons. First, you're collecting an audience of "it-getters" and hand raisers who are



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the way of proof to demonstrate that they truly know exactly what they're doing. Those people who are called "guru" by others are the victims of poor word choice in most cases. In fact, I've been called a guru before and I hate it. I know marginally more about social-media marketing than hundreds of thousands of people, but some of the coolest social marketing ideas I've seen come from interns and old ad executives who just "get" communications. There are no gurus in the room when it comes to most successful social-media practices.

EM: Fair enough. There is a perception that everyone needs to be active on social media, and a tendency for companies to jump on board to whatever the newest platform is without regard to target audience and strategy. What do you think drives this mentality?

JF: The shiny new object syndrome is hard to overcome. If you're anywhere near the pulse of what's next and something pops onto the scene, you rush to it like it's the next big thing. I think the reason most people do this

of their choice, then experiment and play around. See who is there and observe the activity. Do people tend to ask for different things on that network versus other sites? Is the audience similar to other channels you have? Is there some feature you can exploit that other networks don't have? Only after a few weeks or months of learning what kind of audience is there, how it interacts with the tool, and what its expectations are for brands in that environment can you develop a smart way to leverage that channel. So you can be first. I'd rather be smartest.

EM: Aside from clamoring to figure out which platform is appropriate for a company, many exhibit and event marketers struggle with social-media metrics. Why is measurement such an intangible thing to so many users?

JF: That's because often people don't start with a goal, and they don't set out with a plan to measure results. Keep in mind that a goal might be to sell more tickets, subscriptions, products, etc., but you need to market a product or service in two primary

more likely to buy from you. You don't have to spray and pray advertising dollars to find them if you do a good job of collecting and attracting them.

Second, the people who are closest to your brand can be turned into word-of-mouth ambassadors for your company. Having people turn to their friends, colleagues, and co-workers and say, "You've got to buy this!" is far more powerful and sustainable than any ad campaign.

EM: Right, but one could argue that a company has way more control over its message through an ad campaign than through social media, which tends to take on a life of its own. Is it worth the substantial risk?

JF: Despite popular belief in the boardroom, companies have never controlled their messages. They have controlled how the media regurgitated them, but they never touched the water-cooler conversations. They're also coming to realize that they don't have control. However, the way to get over the fear is to simply participate. Be a voice at that water cooler. That's what social media facilitates. Be genuine, truthful, and fair, and try like hell to be human rather than some sales robot or corporate shill — you'll quickly find that you are a

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welcome participant. Sure, you might have to take some finger wagging or even deal with some upset customers along the way, but running away from the conversation only creates more problems for your company, not less.

EM: What's the cost to companies for joining this water-cooler conversation?

JF: There's a misconception that social media is free. It's not free; it's just easily accessible. Sure, it costs considerably less than most traditional marketing tactics, but with Facebook and other social channels forcing brands to pony up ad buys to get their content seen, the financial investment in good social is starting to become more normalized. However, it is true that you can blog, build an audience, participate in social networks, etc. for minimal cost. If your content and engagement are compelling to people, you can feasibly build an audience for a fraction of the cost of a traditional advertising campaign. But those that produce effective content and successful engagements are few and far between.

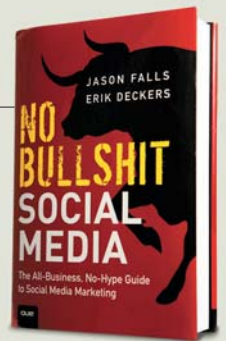
EM: Let's say a company does produce quality content and engages its audience. How does it know its social-media efforts are paying off if return on investment isn't a viable metric?

JF: Marketers try to attach ROI to social media because they don't understand the investment — which is often more time and human resources than dollars — and because they don't measure the right things. If your goal is exceptional customer service, then you don't measure how much money you made on that medium. You measure customer-service ratings, Q-scores, and online sentiment regarding your brand. Those are soft returns, but they are still returns.

Instead of asking, "How much money will we make?" ask, "What will we get

Class is in Session

You can learn more about Jason Falls' approach to marketing by reading "No Bullshit Social Media:



The All-Business, No-Hype Guide to Social Media Marketing," co-authored by Erik Deckers. Broken down into four sections titled "Social Media is for Hip-pies," "Social Media Marketing is for Business," "How Social Media Marketing Really Works," and "Get Off Your Ass, Would Ya," the unconventional business book presents an honest explanation of how to execute a social-media marketing program that generates results. Falls is also part of the Authors Executive Series at EXHIBITORLIVE, an educational conference and exhibition for exhibit and event marketers, and is teaching two sessions: "Holy Smokes! How Great Content Marketing Drives Results" and "Social Media Measurement Made Simple." For more information on EXHIBITORLIVE, visit www.ExhibitorLive.com.

in return for our efforts?" You can get soft metrics like customer-service performance ratings, insights gleaned from engaging with your customers, a better reputation, higher awareness, and brand recognition. Again, these can all be correlated to revenue, but they aren't meant to directly affect revenue. So stop measuring with dollars and cents. Measure beyond that, and you start to see the true benefits of social media. **E**

Lena Hewitt, managing editor;
lhewitt@exhibitor magazine.com