The state of social media today is evolving at an ever-greater pace. Demanding constant attention from its users, social media seem to change as quickly as we are able to adapt and accommodate them. The landscape of applications, tools, sites, and services supports many diverse ecosystems and cultures. How well adapted are your strategies? How fit for survival is your approach?

The social media audit is not just a review of the state of your social media affairs. It offers an insightful look into how you have engaged with your audience, and they with you. Social media are dynamic, living social systems. Once populated, they take on a life of their own: one that can be hard to roll back; but one that can be steered and shaped.

The audit offers a chance to spot new opportunities and to remedy existing tendencies before they cement themselves into unwanted practices. It gives you the chance to consider the impact of new tools and techniques, and new practices. It takes a social experience and interaction design approach, and extends beyond conventional usability studies.

Most importantly, perhaps, the audit is a focusing exercise. You benefit from a second opinion, and from a view of your business, product, or service, that is not strictly your own. The audit gives you options, presents a roadmap, and choices. For what you will do next.

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The site audit is a review of your web site, social media application, service, campaign, or other social media product. I look at how members are using your site with an eye to opportunities for improvement. The audit serves you as a kind of check-up. I look at how your product’s social architecture, taking the perspectives of different users, and standing in for their interests. If you have a social media campaign, I review your execution for engagement and effectiveness. The audit of course offers recommendations and suggestions.

Your goals and objectives

Participation on social media is beyond our direct control. And yet it is critical to success. Individual user and audience engagement has to be fostered and cultivated. And in a way that solicits the types of contributions from active users that creates value for those who choose not to participate.

The audit examines participation against your goals and objectives

- How well are you meeting your objectives?
  - from your perspective (company’s)
  - from the user’s perspective
- Have durable social practices emerged on your site?

- Do they produce the content and usage you want and hoped for?
- What kind of social activity do you wish to support? Is it occurring?
- Does this activity create value?
- Is it valuable to you?
- Is it valuable to your users?
- Is it valuable to third parties (partnering businesses, advertisers, etc.)?
- What are the social barriers to increased participation on your site?
- How well does the individual user experience match your stated goals for user and community participation?

Themes

Social media sites are thematic. They have a social purpose and thematic activity, such as: product reviews, job networking, dating, movie recommendations, restaurant reviews, video sharing, etc. That social purpose has to make sense to users on an individual basis while having a social application also.

The audit examines how well your site or service establishes its theme

- What is your site about, and does this leverage something that members already talk about?
- Can users see the benefit to participating in your site?
- Can members see this from what others are doing?
- What else motivates them to participate?
- How do users relate to your theme? What are their reasons and interests?
- Are users staying “on theme?”
- What kinds of talk and content are required to support and maintain your theme?

Intended social practices

Users will use your site or service according to their interests, in support of you site’s business — or not. In extreme cases, an audience can hijack a social media service; changing or re-orienting audiences can result in

Motives Matter

Users run social media. Users make them work. Users make them interesting.

Users are People

- All users are not the same
- What satisfies a user can be offline
- What captivates users can be accidental

People are interesting

Users have interests and are interesting. When they get interested, when they take an interest, it can be in themselves, or in an experience, or in somebody else.

What compels users can be psychological

The social interface should not get between people

Users have many ways of showing their interest

Shared interests can often be captured

Some users are most interested in themselves

Some users are most interested in other people

Some users have an interest in what’s going on
a mutiny that may cost you your brand and audience.

Seen from the user's perspective, your site's uses depend on what the site does, who's on it, and what they're doing. And all of that is shaped by your site's particular mix of profile pages, public communication, private messaging, media formats, visibility of traffic, activity, distribution, commerce, and more. Users like to succeed, and are sensitive to where they succeed and how. There are no user manuals on social media.

The audit examines your site for the kinds of participation it is cultivating

- What are your site's primary social practices? Do they serve your purposes?
- How do users get recognized?
- Do users interact with personality or with role, reputation, and position?
- What design nuances have you used to steer behaviors?
- Are you aware of how these work and shape behaviors?
- Are you aware of differences in user experiences on your site?
- Do you attract and satisfy those which matter most to your business or site model?
- Have you engendered undesirable or unwanted behaviors?
- What kinds of social activity and relationships are benefitting you?

Content

Content on social media should be easy to use by active participants and passive consumers alike. Social architecture can lead to social distortions, or it can help to offload the to activities or areas away from valued content.

Social navigation schemes and shortcuts like lists, tagging, bookmarking and favoriting all help users save and find what they are looking for, while facilitating discovery and surfacing serendipitous relations and connections, too. Content can be structured to bring attention to members or to topics. All content produced by users will have reflect user interests, and expectations. How you handle these will shape the degree to which your content contains personal, subjective, and social tone and style.

The audit examines your site for the kinds of content it is organized for

- Does your site help users find what they need?
- What kind of content organization schemes are you using?
- What motivates user contributions?

“Talk” analysis

Any social software service must engage users in talk: in talking about something, and to somebody. This talk must reveal something interesting about the member doing the talking,

We like how we look

We see ourselves

Social media are a mini-me-dia: they allow us to present ourselves, and give us a representation of ourselves.

We see others looking at us

Users have an idea of what others think of them, and an idea of what makes them interesting and appealing.
PERSONALITIES

User personalities vary, as do styles of communication, interaction, and behavior.

while also contributing the content of that talk to the site for consumption by others. Mode and motive of contribution should be aligned with desired output (content, content organization, discovery, exploration, networking, etc). Architecture, navigation, and site features cannot alone repair the distortions that appear in content when site contributions serve as a way of getting attention and visibility.

Talk is the “social engine” that drives participation on your site. Users must be motivated to talk, and must find that talk interesting. That talk should be interesting to those who consume it. And both should appear interesting to others.

Talk varies in what it says and what is says about its author. And talk varies in how others can pick it up and respond to it. Online forms of talk include telling, sharing, opinion-ating, reporting, inviting, recommending, commenting, quoting, announcing, messaging, and more. And these forms of talk occur in more, or less, public spaces — slowly, and over time.

The audit examines your site for the kinds of talk it structures and steers

- What kinds of talk does your site facilitate?
- How does it help users to differentiate themselves?
- Who are users talking to? Not talking to?
- Why are they (not) talking?

Communication

Social software generally involve two kinds of communication: direct communication between members, and indirect communication in front of others. User contributions tend to be addressed either to other users or to statements. A comparison of social content creation on, say Wikipedia vs Facebook, or on Yelp vs Twitter, reveals a broad spectrum of variations in communication. How communication is addressed, to whom, and whether privately, semi-publicly, or publicly will shape and inform what users submit and why. It’s by communicating directly to other members, and by contributing indirectly to the site’s audience, that users get noticed, distinguish themselves, attract attention, and so on. A communication model is thus more than just a matter of user features and utility. It shapes the very social character of a site.

Communication is increasingly at the core of newer social media. Services such as twitter, and related “microblogging” and “lifestreaming” applications, bring conversation and talk to the foreground, while supplying a new kind of audiences as well as unique ways of gaining visibility in front of them.

Different strokes...

What compels and interests users on social media is psychological as well as social.

Psychology is Personality

- Users are Self-oriented
- Users are Other-oriented
- Users are Relationship-oriented

Psychology shapes behavior

 Orientations translate through different communication and interaction styles, as well as behaviors and activities.

- Self-oriented users will tend to themselves more
- Other-oriented users will tend to be more responsive
- Relationship-oriented users will tend towards activities and social experiences
- These dynamics, as common online as they are offline, shape how social systems grow
- Each kind of online system will tend to benefit some users and kinds of behavior over others
The audit examines your site for the kinds of communication it channels and preserves
• Does your site emphasize the activity of communicating or the content of communication?
• How does communication “left behind” by participating users serve those who come later?
• Is communication, rather than interaction, a primary means of personally involving users?
• What are the communication and interaction demands placed on users?
• How important is it that communication is searchable, organizeable, and re-usable?
• How are you using direct interaction tools (IM, winks, messaging)?
• How are you using indirect communication tools (posts, comments, compliments)?
• What are the benefits, rewards, and incentives to and from communication on your site?
• Does your site or service structure communication? In how users contribute? In how they describe it, value it, or make connections around it?

Member trust and confidence
Social media sites structure the trust users place in each other and in your site or service. For your users to get involved in your site, you must secure their confidence in the site, and facilitate trust among members.

Trust in your service will transfer to trust in your membership. And trust between members will transfer to your brand. (As will distrust.) Trust is created between people, and invested in systems, through experience, interaction, and communication. Trust need not mean integrity, sincerity, or honesty, but can mean reliability, consistency, and dependability.

The audit examines your site for the kinds of trust it engenders and sustains
• How much trust does your site require?
• What kind of trust do you establish among members?
• Do you use social networking (relationships) to create trust?
• How does your site surface trusted content?
• How does it distinguish degrees of trust among users and their contributions?
• What commenting, rating, voting or other social participation schemes have you employed to make trust a visible and reliable feature of your service?
• How have you protected yourself from loss of trust?

Transactions
Social software sites promote transactions among members. In many cases these transactions are structured around some kind of economy: sharing knowledge, exchanging files, circulating media, voting, inviting, collaborating, and so on. But in social media, many transactions serve social and relationship purposes also. These may form economies and cultural practices: gifting, forwarding, pass-along, following, favoriting, and so on.

Social structures organize social interactions, and transactional systems can be designed around a number of common social practices. Each kind of transactional system will include expectations of reciprocity, mutual recognition, fairness, and will produce social hierarchies that range from flat to ordered.

Conversational media
Social media become increasingly conversational, and brands want into the conversation.

When People are Brands
All people are equal but some are more equal than others on social media.

• Influencers have appeared on social media
• Influence provides reach and exposure
• It is a form of social capital at work as currency
• Influence can be deep or broad

When Brands are People
Brands on social media can put a human face on their brand image: a face that talks and engages

• Branding on social media increases trust and access
• Social media permits a kind of participatory branding: in which brands and users create facets of the brand
• The more direct communication the engagement strategy, the more time-consuming it is
The audit examines your site for the kinds of transactions it depends on and supports

- What do your members exchange with one another?
- What kind of economy organizes these exchanges?
- How do members stand out?
- How do members give and take, and what do they give and take?
- What kinds of transactions occur directly between members?
- What kinds of transactions are conducted “in front” of all members? Groups? Friend networks?
- What kinds of actions does your site permit on transactions?
- How do you use community policing or normative reinforcement to enable self-sustaining and self-organizing user behaviors?
- What token gestures (such as winks, favoriting, hot-listing, compliments) are available to you for the purpose of cementing transactions and their cultural economies and social practices?

Social networking

Most social media sites use some kind of social networking to organize relationships among members. Relationships are a means by which members can meet one another. They are also means by which members filter the site’s content. Social networks do not have to be built on the basis of friendship, but can organize professional, affinal, and peer relations also. Networks may even be built around family networks (which are not social networks).

Increasing numbers of products permit transitive social networking amongst members of large and open audiences — as on twitter. These indicate a trend to networks of purpose, such as for peer knowledge sharing, and not requiring strong commitments of friendship and private information sharing.

The audit examines your site for the kinds of social networking it organizes

- What kinds of social or other networks does your site provide?
- Are these relationships used to create trust?
- Are they used in navigation or content organization?
- Do they filter access to site members or content?
- Do they increase or decrease site content contributions?
- Can you leverage networks to enhance the user experience?
- Can you use social networks to facilitate transactions?

Distribution

Increasing numbers of social media companies are modularizing their services and making available through widgets and badges. These make it simpler and faster to engage in social practices with friends and audiences, and are a lighter mode of producing social media and user-generated content than the full-on walled-city approach.

The audit examines your site for distribution opportunities

- Do you export your content to badges?
- Do you use widgets to parcel out small and familiar kinds of social interactions?
- Could your content or users be of value to third party sites or services?
- If so, how might widgets be used to accomplish this?

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