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The Era of Social Media in the Middle East

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Abstract: This paper discusses how people started generating profits through social media, showing some examples worldwide and in the Middle East and its effect on marketing. This paper aims to study the impact of social media on marketing from traditional marketing techniques to marketing on social media and its effect through people's daily information sharing and knowledge spread, moreover how individuals started gaining profits by being influencers and being followed by large number of followers without border limitations such as geographical location, language and age differences. This paper also conducts some studies about the cultural/political changes that are taking place through social media and how individuals started gaining money through these tools.

Research hypothesis is that the world news , information and marketing spread to people is shifting towards social media and the influencers are effecting people's perceptions ,all of this is causing a tremendous change in people's minds , information sharing and communication flow moreover how people started generating money through social media tools..

Keywords: social media, influencer, follower, marketing.

Introduction

When talking about the great effect of social media marketing from the old traditional techniques like radio/ TV advertisements, billboards newspapers and magazines to frequently updated and influencers sending you imbedded messages .certain questions needs answers for this study as a backbone for this research is social media vanishing old marketing techniques?

1. Is the Middle East culture getting affected from the worldwide influencers on social media?
2. Is social media affecting our community to increase awareness and improve the communication flow or working in a negative way?
3. How are people reacting to this worldwide change? Is it an added value or a drawback to the Middle East society as a whole?

The purpose of this study can be easily grasped through the research questions that we started with, and weather social media is causing this huge impact on businesses and people's lives, how people started thinking out of the box and gaining profits through creating a high number of audience and helping in information spread regardless of the age, language geographic differences. The purpose of this study is explain how social media changed all the measurements and is having a huge impact in the region in addition to its effect on other traditional businesses and increased the competition.

This research will address how social media has affected the middle east from different perceptions and findings from the questions that have been raised in addition to few interviews with social media entrepreneurs and find out more about the cultural changes that took place through social media and how social media helped in creating success stories of influencers to spread their messages to the largest number of people.

Social media and business

This section will discuss what social media is and how it did affect the world whether on business wise or individual level.

Harris and Rea (2009) define social media as “a perceived second generation of Web development and design that facilitates communications and secures information sharing, interoperability, Bell and Loane (2010) define social media as “a set of economic, social, and technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by participation, openness and network effects”. Social media technologies share common characteristics that distinguish them from previous generations of Web development. First, brings about an emphasis on collaborative learning as well as on user engagement through participation. Second, is regarded user friendly, as it enables immediate publication and wide distribution of user generating content, the driving force behind the new wave of social media stands in their content and data management systems, In the absence of an exact definition, it is difficult to realize a comprehensive list of tools that fall into this category.

To sum up ; Social media includes sharing content such as images, videos , audio and multimedia shared online by a click from the user .All of this has helped in communication and sharing of information . In general the social media started at the beginning of the use of internet through emails and blogs The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media,” they named the following:

- collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)
- blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter)
- content communities (e.g., YouTube, Flickr)
- social-networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace)
- virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)
- virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)

How did social media affect businesses?

Social media are gaining popularity and are increasingly used in regular operations of many companies, including start-ups, small, medium-sized, and large organizations.

Statistics from the Facebook blue print state that Facebook's broad reach (1.32 billion people worldwide as of 2014) across desktop and mobile enables you to drive scalable results across devices.

- Awareness: Build your brand
- Consideration: Drive intent with high-value prospects
- Conversion: Acquire new customers by finding people who are most like your best customers
- Loyalty: Cross-sell and upsell to recent purchasers

All of these tools played a huge role in changing people's life and businesses, most business opened their accounts on social media to communicate with their customers and spread their news in addition to online selling that made the products reachable worldwide 24/7 helping to have smaller stores since the products can be produced by Just in time and be in warehouses that decreases the running cost of rent and having less employees and branches.

Real-world social relationships have been shifting to the virtual world, resulting in online communities that bring people together from across the globe. This movement into the digital dimension allows individuals to share knowledge, entertain one another, and promote dialogues among different cultures.

If most customers engage with social media, firms should engage with social media as well. In the past, marketers employed direct marketing, telemarketing, informational websites, television, radio, and other mechanisms to spread information related to the firm or its products. The World Wide Web was used to present marketing messages through page views and advertising to reach large numbers of people in a short amount of time. It served as an advertising tool that shaped surfer behavior rather than as a medium that facilitated interaction between buyers and sellers. Despite its advantages, this type of marketing strategy is too broad to effectively target customers, salespeople and harder to measure and promote.

One of the major advantages of interacting on social media is that it is easily measured through the likes, views and shares on social media accounts that lead you to a competitive advantage, Comprehensive statistics for brands on Instagram. Benchmark your brand against your competitors. Compare the number of followers of brands and interactivity on social media sites such as Instagram accounts or the number of posts by other Instagram users on their hashtag.

1. Nike ... 13,875,426 followers ... 41,048,160 posts on hashtags
2. Starbucks ... 3,979,064 followers ... 19,756,430 posts on hashtags
3. Adidas Originals ... 4,835,994 followers ... 11,735,962 posts on hashtags

Firms should seek to develop digital relationships using promotional strategies that emphasize the creation of content and meaning. To this end, word-of-mouth communication can be particularly helpful. Of course, firms always talked to their customers; the critical difference between past and present communication is that online communication tools and social media allow customers to respond to firms and give their feedback and questions about certain issues.

Social media and E-business

“The social media space has become a common place for communication, networking, and content sharing. Many companies seek marketing and business opportunities via these platforms. However, the link between resources generated from these sites and business performance remains largely unexploited.” Paniagua and Sapena (2014).

Social media now days is the online and global trend, new learning curve toward the social media are being implemented into the schools and universities, in addition, social media created new concepts such Branding, influencing, Hashtag, and online brand risk management

“A study by the University of Maryland’s Business School, found that the company had created as many as 235,644 U.S. jobs, injecting some \$15.71 billion into the U.S. economy. The study found that 53,000 new jobs have been created in software companies that build applications for Facebook’s platform fairly straightforward. The study’s next finding is a little more nebulous: as many as 182,000 people are employed in jobs supported by the app economy, which includes “businesses that supply app developers, and in sectors that reap the benefits of increased household spending by app developers and suppliers.”

Social media closing down other businesses

According to statista.com studies shows that the number of social networks users worldwide is estimated by 2016 with approx. 2.13 billion social network users around the globe. A survey was held by Pew research center in 2014 about social media updates stated that Facebook is still the most popular social network website, while its growth has slowed; the level of user engagement with the platform has increased. Other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn saw significant increases over the past year in the proportion of online adults who now use their sites. This had a huge impact on the marketing and information sharing such as the effect of social media on newspapers.

The Newspaper Association of America published the advertising revenue of American newspapers for 2013. Unsurprisingly, the numbers are still dropping. Daily and Sunday newspapers generated 17.3 billion U.S. dollars with printed ads. That’s an 8.6 percent decrease compared with the year before. Digital advertising saw a 1.5 percent upturn, reaching 3.42 billion U.S. dollars.

According to Morejon (2012) over 50% of people have learned about breaking news via social networks rather than official news sources, 46% of people get their news online at least 3 times a week and in 2012, online news revenue has surpassed print newspaper revenue.

Social media changed the equation from searching for news on the traditional newspaper by making news reach to your screen at the same time the things are happening this made a huge political and business effect such as the Arab spring through twitter and other social media tools.

Twitter, launched in 2006, is a “real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting.” Users communicate via Tweets which are short posts limited to 140 characters, also allowing for embedded media links. Twitter users can follow or essentially subscribe to the updates of other users, some of which include conventional media sources, such as Newsweek or Al-Jazeera, celebrities, and friends. Additionally, tweets can be categorized using “hashtags” which “group posts together by topic or type. For example, the most popular hashtags in the Arab region between January and March 2011 were #Egypt (1.4 million mentions), #jan25 (1.2 million mentions), and #Libya (990,000 mentions).²⁸ There are an estimated 131,204 Twitter users in Egypt between 1 January and 30 March 2011, generating an average of 24,000 tweets a day during that time period. ²⁹ One user in Cairo generated 60,000 words alone during the 18-day revolution, a total of 1,500 tweets.³⁰ The Arab Social Media Report tracked the volume of daily tweets in Egypt throughout the time period of 1 January through 28 February, with the peaks in Twitter use revolving around major events in the uprising, including the protests in Tunisia on 14 January and Hosni Mubarak stepping down on 11 February.

Negative impact of social media in business

On the other hand there is a negative side of social media as a marketing tool such as low security standards, empowering customers talking about bad customer service and disappointing products passing quickly through social media networks. It has become more difficult for companies to contain its negative publicity and it’s difficult for businesses to track statements about their brand that are negative. Companies face difficulties managing their social media so they higher content creators and social media managers to handle their account that might post confidential information, misleading customers and the responsibility of posting about a company's perceived objectives and direction that can damage the company's reputation or differs from the business owner wants.

As mentioned before social media has empowered customers and followers , beside the posts and comments that they can post they can also write reviews about the business , which will be visible to all the people that enter the accounts on social media this is a huge drawback since it has a huge impact to spread the bad review – studies showed that this has the highest impact on small businesses more than any other business such as a new restaurant bad service , usually the content creator of the social media page is the one

responsible to handle this issue and make sure to contact the complaining customer and get him satisfied other than that this will cause a drop in the number of customers .

The increasing digital empowerment of consumers

One of the major changes in human interaction is the recent increase of online social media. Swift growth of social media platforms that facilitate online social behavior has significantly limited the nature of human activities, habitats, and interactions. Real-world social relationships have been moved to the virtual world, resulting in online communities that connect people all around the world. This movement into the digital world allows individuals to exchange knowledge, entertain one another, and promote dialogues among different cultures

From a consumer's perspective, the use of social media offers a lot of benefits, including efficiency, convenience, richer information, a broader selection of products, market pricing, cost reduction, and product diversity (Bayo-Moriones and Lera-López, 2007). Online social networking tends to improve these benefits, as social media users are able to communicate more proactively and frequently; the customers can share their opinions and points of view.

As revealed by a Harvard Business Review Analytical Services study of 2,100 companies, while two-thirds of respondents were actively using social media, many felt it was still an experiment with a vague future. Only 7% successfully integrated it into their marketing activities; most companies were still trying to understand the likely impact of social media on branding and searching for best practices regarding its use.”

Analyzing previous social media users, consumers used the internet passively to read or watch content that was of interest to them. However, the rapid growth of social media created a shift in consumer's behavior and their interaction with the Internet. The focus was from consuming to creating and sharing content via social networking sites, Facebook , twitter , instagram and many other social media sites . Easier access through new platforms such as mobile phones, ipads, tablet PCs and mobile phones completed this transformation from an isolated Web interaction to a truly social experience with the aid of notifications from the social media sites to keep you updated you with the latest news /data that you are interested in.

“In 2012, the share of smart phones increased to more than 50% of mobile subscribers; and Facebook, became the most dominant of social media sites. It took just 8 years from its start to sign up half the users on the Internet, exceeding the 1 billion mark. Social media can be defined as users generated media that covers a wide variety of new sources of online information, created and used by consumers intention on sharing information with others regarding any topic of interest “

Case study

Telling a big story of organizations and influencers in social media by a small lens, looking in the deep impact of social media in culture and businesses moreover how do people work and generate profits through these tools. I studied the case www.arabGT.com , number one Middle East website of automotive news and reviews both as a website and the largest automotive pages on social media according to social bakers. The website is basically targeting the gulf region but their offices are based in Jordan. Arab GT has been established since 2012, Alexa site for ranking is used to calculate the traffic ranking. It is based on the amount of traffic recorded from users that have the Alexa toolbar installed over a period of three months. This traffic is based on such parameters as reach and page views. Arab GT ranks as number 651 in kingdom Saudi Arabia sites and globally ranked as 26,716. Not forgetting to mention their Facebook page 3,954,367 likes , twitter 118 K followers and YouTube channel views exceeding 65M views.

Choosing Arab GT in as our case study for this research mainly because it is from the successful social media stories in the Middle East, How effective was social media for them and most importantly gaining profits from their social media.

Arab GT is a specialized entertainment online network for Automotive and Motor sport news and reviews. Arab GT vision is spread informative Automotive and motor sport culture in the Arabic region moreover to achieve this goal ArabGT team focused on their primary area so the website content wither the videos or the articles is all in Arabic, the focus split into 50% into written articles and another 50% for more visual video content since the topics of cars and Motor sport is more appealing to the audience in motion.

ArabGT used the social platforms heavily to catch the maximum audience from the targeted countries such GCC , the strategy reflect back positively during this study ArabGT became the largest Facebook fan page for Automotive worldwide with over 3.9M fans.

On the other side with the video content they have caught a very positive numbers too for example total views reached over 65M although all their content is only in Arabic, which reflected perfectly on their vision in spreading and creating a content that it was not available for the Arabic audience and online users.

Conclusion

Social media includes sharing content such as images, videos , audio and multimedia shared online by a click from the user .All of this has helped in communication and sharing of information. Social media is used now a days as a marketing tool , helping raising awareness , show the brand identity , closer to people and reaching the target audience all the time with the least costs ; cheaper than TV/ radio advertisements and newspapers in addition to the simple measuring tools and reaching target audience.

Social media has helped in opening new job opportunities such as Search engine optimization, vloggers, blogger's and social media content creators. All of these had a huge role in integrating cultures together and know what is happening all around the world.

Social media influencers have a huge role in social media as they have a large fan base and are credible to their followers so they can direct them to what they want in an indirect way and this is how new businesses and marketing people work with them to reach their target audience with credible content moreover cheaper than the traditional marketing tools. In addition to turning regular individuals into influencers and gaining profits through these modern tools as shown in the research such as Taim Al Fulasi and many others.

Social media is a trendy tool that you must keep up to date in order to understand what is happening, moreover the real long term profit generation is through social media tools that are linked to a website in order to get traffic and spend all the banners limits, However social media influencers gain profits but the question is for how long will this stay? And how they will be different from other people and stay active with all their followers?

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