

A Marketplace of Social Engagement

People will do business where they are socially engaged and interacting.

By J. Walker Smith



THE INTERNET has matured, and yet even so is still evolving, with the latest killer application being social engagement—a development paralleled by the rising interest in community and connection throughout society at large. These days, the best way to sell something is not to engage consumers with a brand, but to host or

facilitate the ability of people to engage with one another. While they're doing so, they'll do business as well.

The dynamic of social engagement belies some of the earliest concerns about the Internet. Instead of isolating people into private experiences shared with no one else or clustering people into closed communities of narrow interests, the Internet is bringing people together in new, unprecedented ways. The dot-com hype about Internet community was overblown, of course, but mostly because it was premature—not because it was wrong. It turns out that the social glue of the Internet is even stronger than originally anticipated.

For example, the social networking site myspace.com is so powerful a place for social engagement that Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation paid a premium for it in order to drive traffic to its Fox Interactive Media sites. The killer app isn't online content from Fox; it's social engagement at myspace.com. Social engagement is the platform on which business can be done.

The online mall yub.com says, "Meet. Hang. Shop." Note the order in which these activities are listed—social engagement comes first, after which commerce follows. At lastfm.com, visitors are given an invitation: "Join the social music revolution"—not just the music revolution, but the "social" music revolution. Engagement is the driving force. At both of these sites and at many others like them, people interact with one another via postings, raves, chats, blogs, profiles, forums, networks, discussion groups, and more. And where people are engaged and interacting, they'll do business too.

Participation is the fundamental essence of digital technology. It is inherently interactive and engaging. Technological advances always increase control, but in the past this has been, for the most part, an increase in collective control not in individual personal control. However, with blogs, fan fiction

sites, social networking sites, digital cameras, instant messaging, digital video recorders, and all of the other new digital technologies, people now find themselves inescapably immersed in a new world of participation, engagement, and control.

The smartest use of technology is to leverage this dynamic of participation and engagement. This is what people want to do in general and this is what all of the new technologies do so well. Although e-commerce is booming, the biggest trend online is social engagement.

The best e-businesses like amazon.com and ebay.com have always understood this. Certainly, people want good deals, but a good deal is sweeter when it's available someplace where people can engage. That's why even small efforts to

**It turns out that the social glue
of the Internet is even stronger than
originally anticipated.**

facilitate shared moments of self-expression make sense for Pop Secret at whatsyourpopsecret.com, for Saab at maintain-youridentity.net, for msn.com at whatsyourstory.msn.com (sponsored by Volvo), or for Tazo Tea at tazo.com (where the company issues a request: "enlighten us"). It's not about engaging consumers with the brand. It's about the brand enabling people to engage with one another in new, often quirky, but always meaningful ways.

It's not only the Internet, though. Social engagement is the next big thing for the entire marketplace. In this age of consumer resistance, people are avoiding brands while seeking one another. So, brands must shift away from simply trying to engage consumers and instead become adept at enabling people to engage with each other. This will give brands the edge they need in tomorrow's marketplace of social engagement. ■

© Copyright, Yankelovich Partners Inc. 2006

About the Author

J. Walker Smith is president of Yankelovich Partners Inc. He may be reached at jwsmith@yankelovich.com.

Copyright of *Marketing Management* is the property of *American Marketing Association* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.