Earned Media And Social Media: How Brands Can Get Beyond The Hype

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Everyone wants earned media. Marketing agencies know this, and they routinely pitch their ability to generate it.

Earned media is really just the digital-age term for word-of-mouth advertising. It’s an idea that has grown hand-in-hand with content and social media marketing and the notion that a viral success can translate to mega-exposure on the cheap.

If a brand post becomes a runaway hit on Facebook — which has a 1.1 billion-person user base — it can rack up a huge number of impressions before running out of steam.

But even without a “viral home-run,” brands with a smart earned media strategy can see a lot of benefits: They’ll squeeze more out of their paid media dollars, amplify their social media efforts, and attract a core of followers who will advocate for their products, services, and brand image.

The signs of the growing ad world emphasis on earned social media are everywhere.

1. Oreo’s now-iconic “you can dunk in the dark” Super Bowl campaign raked in a reported 525 million earned impressions.
2. Procter & Gamble Chief Financial Officer Jon Moeller recently said that his company, the world’s largest advertiser, is focused on “creating marketing campaigns that include
social-media plans to maximize incremental earned media or free impressions.”

3. At the Cannes advertising awards this year, the jury cited earned media impact as the reason for awarding the Grand Prix award to the “Dumb Ways To Die” campaign created by McCann Melbourne for the city’s Metro Trains.

Most brands and businesses, even small ones, are embracing the earned media paradigm. Eighty-four percent of businesses said “the trend toward earned media via social media marketing” was quite significant or highly significant to their organizations, and 90% believed it would be so by 2015, according to a recent Econsultancy and Adobe survey. A Technorati survey found that 55% of 150 major brands had adopted specific earned media goals.

However, there are many misconceptions floating around the notion of earned media via social media, and we’ll dig into these in this report.

- **Earned media is actually a fuzzy concept in practice**, and difficult to measure in isolation. This isn’t helped by agencies and clients framing earned media as a kind of add-on to paid efforts, rather than carefully considering an earned media strategy at the planning stage of campaigns.

- **Incremental earned social media impressions are a great way to maximize return on investment. But it's important to dispel the myth that earned media is really “free,”** since it is usually built on a foundation of long-term planning and an investment in social media pages, paid media, and brand content.
  - Dove worked patiently for eight years and finally saw a new earned media viral hit with its “Real Beauty” theme that debuted in Sept. 2004: “Real Beauty Sketches,” this year’s earned media blockbuster from Ogilvy &
Mather Brazil (police sketches show that women often have distorted views about their appearance).

- While it’s a highly influential approach, and has been widely adopted into marketing plans, many brands are doing it wrong. **There is a too-heavy focus on Facebook for earned media.**
- We also see a clumsy use of metrics, which can lead to short-sighted earned media campaigns.
- Also, using gimmicky content formats will not serve your brand well in the long-run.
- The only surefire way to create an earned media strategy that succeeds is consistency. Brands also need a tolerance for social media blowback and the ability to move quickly.

*Click here to download the charts and data in Excel—*
Defining Earned Media

An oft-cited Forrester blog post from 2009 laid out a taxonomy for earned, owned, and paid media.

The definitions are still relevant today.

- **Paid media**: Channel that a brand pays to leverage, like a TV network or a popular website.
- **Owned media**: Channel that a brand controls, like a brand’s Facebook page.
- **Earned media**: When the customer becomes your channel.

It’s nice to have these categories neatly delineated. But the fact is that these forms of media overlap.

![Chart showing the significance of earned media via social media marketing](chart.png)

Actually, one of the drawbacks to the entire earned media concept is that too often it seeks to separate out earned media as if it were a
separate, magical, and “free” marketing strategy, when in reality it is typically an amplification effect created by social media for paid and owned channels.

Some marketers have come up with the concept of “converged media” to illustrate this fact. Earned media doesn’t make much sense without owned and paid media to take the lead in crafting a brand’s message and identity.

Also, earned media overlaps with some other marketing categories and buzzwords such as inbound marketing, content marketing, and PR. All these concepts involve earned media to an extent.

In any case it is in the context of social media that earned media really comes to the fore as a tangible and trackable – if difficult to measure – force.

In fact, social media should serve as the heart of any earned media-centered marketing strategy, even for business-to-business brands and TV-centric brands.

Unfortunately, earned media services are often promoted by agencies within a nearly impenetrable wrapping of marketing jargon. For example, Salesforce recently advised agencies to sell earned media advice under the guise of “Distributed Brand Architecting: Learning How To Earn Media.” Before signing up for these services, brands and businesses should have a good understanding of earned media’s limitations, both as a concept and as a strategy.

**Beyond The Hype**

Earned media has any number of advantages.

Many of them are obvious: it’s “free,” in the sense that there’s no direct payment for the exposure provided, it’s transparent in that
brands need not rely on intermediaries to measure earned media’s impact, and it tends to create greater trust than paid or owned messages.

People will trust the enthusiasms and recommendations of their friends, acquaintances, and professional networks more than ads, including TV ads. (See chart, below.)

The disadvantages are less obvious.

Some brands may be frightened away from earned media simply by the prospect that an earned social media campaign might morph into a user-generated storm of negative publicity.

But that’s shortsighted. Paid media has a similar risk; a paid ad campaign can also go horribly wrong. Social media marketing is fundamentally about letting go, and allowing your customers, clients, and audience assume control of your message.

If a brand is too risk-averse to accept that, then they probably have no business in social media at all.
The real disadvantages have to do with earned media’s hidden costs.

As Fred Wilson, principal of Union Square Ventures has written, earned media is hard work. It takes time and effort.

It requires investment in internal and external social media content generation, i.e. owned media.

For this reason, earned media can quickly become as expensive as paid media, or more so.

Some companies choose to focus their efforts on paid media, and treat earned media as an afterthought, precisely because the paid methods (TV, large websites, etc.) have proven reach, and deliver fairly predictable results, at least in terms of impressions.
Earned Media As A Strategy

In theory, earned media should be a consideration at the planning stages of any owned and paid marketing efforts. Too often, an earned media strategy is an afterthought, tacked on at the end — as if its only purpose was to squeeze out a few hundred-thousand “free” impressions.

Why? There is still a bias in the client-side toward maximizing the proportion of their spend going to actual ad buys, which they sometimes call “working” spend, as opposed to “non-working” spend. “Non-working” spend goes to agency overhead, production, and creative costs. But those so-called “non-working” costs might very well include agency activity designed to maximize earned media from a paid campaign.

In some ways the ad buyers’ concerns are understandable. Advertisers know that viral hits or amplification effects can be unpredictable. Advertisers want to see bang for their buck, and paid media delivers. They want less fluff, more results.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is created. Advertisers put pressure on the system to focus on quick, tangible, and quantifiable results: impressions, real-time brand lift, etc.

Sure, they also want earned media, but often only as a kind of bonus item in their paid media buys.

The result? Agencies, social media platforms, and even digital publishers are promising earned media as if it were a condiment that can be quantified and heaped out in spoonfuls as value-adds to paid campaigns.

Earned media is being used more as a tactic for amplifying the reach of traditional TV or digital campaigns, not as a full-blown strategy with a life of its own.
A final disadvantage to earned media is that it is difficult to collect, track, and measure. However, the tools are there, and if earned media became more of a focus, these tools would likely see more refinement and development.

Earning More Than Likes

Fifty-five percent of brands have earned media goals, according to TechnoratiMedia’s 2013 Digital Influence Report.

The TechnoratiMedia report also detected a strong preference for Facebook as an earned media platform, with 68% of the brands with earned media strategies saying they track Facebook likes and 59% counting Facebook fans, compared to 56% who tracked Twitter followers and only 19% who track Pinterest followers.

Clearly, brands remain heavily reliant on earning Facebook likes and fans. One worry is that these metrics translate to unimaginative
earned media campaigns, which focus on building an audience but often miss on the engagement side of the ledger.

In earned media, brands should begin to understand the gap between audience and engagement.

An example of this is on Instagram, where some of the brands with the most followers rank much lower when it comes to engagement on branded hashtags. From an earned media perspective, a follower could very well be worthless. It might be an inactive user, or a lurker that enjoys brand posts but never shares them with friends. Activity on a brand hashtag however, is a direct measurement of users sharing their own photos and associating them with your brand (via a hashtag like, “#Disney”).

For example, apparel brand Hollister is only ranked number 52 on Instagram in terms of followers, but it has hashtag activity comparable to Starbuck’s, the eighth most-followed brand. (See chart, above.)

Many brands understand that earned media must get beyond the “like” if it is to amount to anything. Of course, a “like” is evidence of earned media, since it amounts to a customer broadcasting their enthusiasm for your brand, product, or service.

And fans are valuable. They have been shown to spend more on the brands they follow than non-fans. So any earned media that leads to more fans should be welcomed.

But such audience metrics should be complemented by measures of deeper engagement, such as a user’s visit to a brand landing page, or that user’s reshares of your own content to their friends, or their ongoing visits to the brand Facebook page.

It might be difficult to wean brands off the “likes” and “fans” metrics, probably because they are simple, transparent, and easily communicated and understood.
In other words, it’s easier to explain a Facebook “like” in an annual budget presentation to the head of a marketing department or to cross-functional managers, than it is to explain a complex social media engagement formula, full of equations and variables. But brands that move beyond the basic metrics will gain an edge on the competition.

Bells And Whistles

For a time, it was fashionable to post trivia questions, quizzes and pick-your-favorite posts on Facebook and other social media.

Brands embraced these because of their supposed ability to generate earned media.

It may be that a Wildfire report from last year was influential in driving this trend. Wildfire’s white paper, “5 Best Practices For
Increasing Earned Media,” argued that certain Facebook campaign types could triple sharing and participation.

For example, Wildfire’s analysis of 10,000 social media marketing campaigns over the course of May 2012 showed that pick-your-favorites and quiz campaigns had a share rate of 39% and 32%, respectively. Trivia ranked in third place, with a 29% share rate.

(A quiz is an ad campaign-type popular on Facebook that might ask a reader to select what character in a TV show they resemble in real life, or to click through a set of questions to determine what kind of animal they are most like.)

According to Wildfire, these types of campaigns succeed because they draw users into an experience in which they themselves are the real focus.

That may be true. But the problem with any fixed-format social media campaigns is that they quickly lose their novelty. It only takes a few badly designed quizzes and trivia posts before users sour on the whole
gimmick and ignore the next batch, or unfollow a brand that presents one.

Bells and whistles won’t attract earned media reliably. Today’s fashionable brand content format is tomorrow’s stale spam.

**Earned Media Success**

Earned media requires consistency and patience. It also requires a zen-like ability to relinquish control of your brand to the social community.

These are the ingredients that are key to earned social media.

- **Patience and investment**: Even if you communicate effectively, the community around your brand won’t form overnight. Its devotion to your brand is earned over time, post-by-post. Creative talent must be recruited. Your social media team is an in-house studio, crafting content and messages that will resonate with the social media community. Dove needed to have
tough skin and accept social media blowback that came with each "Real Beauty" campaign, even the successful ones.

- **Letting go**: Brands shouldn’t be squeamish about consumer pushback, or their tendency to “hijack” content, since this behavior is at the heart of earned media. Negative comments, mash-ups of brand content, and user backlashes should be welcomed.

- **Speed**: In fact, negative commentary can be the wellspring for shrewd content that keys into consumer emotions, and piggybacks on conversations they’re already having. Brands need to make quick decisions if they’re to leverage social media conversations and amplify them.

The case of Tropicana orange juice’s failed carton design in 2009 can help illustrate all of these points.
Tropicana Earns Social Cred

Early in 2009, Tropicana customers rebelled when parent company PepsiCo changed the illustration on the Tropicana juice carton. PepsiCo removed the iconic image of an orange being skewered by a straw, and replaced it with a glass of juice. Tropicana drinkers hated it, and were loud and clear about it on social media.

Tropicana returned to the old design only a few weeks later.

The interesting fact is that Tropicana seems to have earned more attention on social media for listening to their fans, than it originally did for its disliked new carton design. Studies found that mentions of Tropicana on social media actually accelerated after the decision was made to pull the new packaging.

This fact illustrates the power of earned media: even negative publicity can be quickly transformed into positive social media commentary when a brand mounts an agile response.

Later that year in 2009, Tropicana launched its Facebook page. (A full year before its competitor, Coca-Cola’s Minute Maid.) The brand’s first post was an image of the beloved carton design that social media fans wouldn’t allow the company to drop: the straw-pierced orange. To this day, it remains Tropicana’s profile picture.

Tropicana stayed active on Facebook. It routinely posted photos and themed posts such as the “Tropimomma” series, about family nutrition. Its first posts only earned a smattering of likes.

But today, Tropicana posts routinely earn hundreds of likes, and a July 4 post earned it 1,002 likes. It has 667,000 fans, 7% more than its main competitor, Minute Maid, which has 626,000.
More importantly, Tropicana is enjoying nearly double the earned media rate (earned media as a percentage of page fans).

On July 10, 2013, Minute Maid's rate was only 0.9%, while Tropicana’s was 1.7%.

(Here, we’re measuring earned media as the number of user actions as tracked by Facebook’s “People Talking About This” metric, which aggregates the number of people who have engaged directly with the brand in the form of user posts, page likes, shares, comments, and other actions.)

Additionally, Tropicana’s page is verified, while Minute Maid’s is not. While Facebook doesn’t reveal how it decides whether to verify business pages, it’s possible that Tropicana’s longer presence on the platform could have helped it earn the coveted check mark, which boosts brand credibility.

These results are impressive because Coca-Cola beverage brands typically outpace PepsiCo’s in Facebook fans and engagement.

In other words, the patient cultivation of a platform and a fan base will pay off over time.

*Click here to download the charts and data in Excel—*

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

- In some ways, the digital marketing world is biased against earned media. Although it’s a popular buzzword, in practice it’s mainly being pursued as an add-on to paid campaigns. For earned media to mature, and for more brands to see success with it, it will require attention as a strategy in its own right.

- Earned media doesn’t come cheap, and it’s definitely not free. However, there’s a benefit to pursuing it because audiences trust
it as a source of information more than traditional ads or other marketing channels.

- Earned media success isn’t going to come from a certain pat formula or content format. It’s going to accrue to brands who stick with their social media platforms of choice, and invest in creative talent that also has the freedom to act on opportunities.
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