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What Customers Want: Tips for Creating and Marketing a Social Catalog

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Introduction

Social commerce represents a powerful opportunity to engage your new and existing customers. Effectively using social commerce—especially a social catalog—can help you understand the drivers behind customers' behavior and recognize what they really want. With this knowledge, you can create new fans and engage more actively with those customers who already are evangelists for your brand.

This white paper begins by explaining how social commerce and social catalogs differ from traditional advertising and online product catalogs. It then provides seven tips for creating and marketing an effective social catalog for your brand.

Social Commerce Is Not Traditional Advertising

Effective social commerce isn't an exercise in repurposing traditional forms of advertising. To illustrate, consider the following:

- A product listing on a Facebook page convinces a customer to visit a brand's Website. They're initially intrigued by a product image, but they're fully sold when they come across positive reviews published by their friends as well as others belonging to this particular fan page community.
- An online coupon attracts a consumer with deep pockets. They click on the coupon link after seeing it on their friend's Facebook timeline.

These aren't hypotheticals. Brands benefit from these kinds of social commerce interactions every day.

For these brands, success derives from their acknowledgement that print, banner, search, and other forms of flat advertising can't be magically transmuted into a powerhouse social commerce campaign. A coupon, product listing, or exclusive promotion must take on a richer meaning in the social commerce sphere. The relationships, the multilayered conversations, the community-based and friend-based validation—in other words, the exact things that constitute and power the social graph—are just as vital as the formal ad unit itself.



Figure 1. The social catalog relies on relationships and friend-based validation.



Figure 2. Flat advertising, such as banner ads and paid search ads, take on richer meaning in the social commerce sphere.

Social Catalogs Are Not Product Listings

The high-performing social catalog operates in a markedly different way than the traditional print catalog or Web store. The latter is built primarily for direct purchasing. Think of Amazon: You visit the home page, you click on a big graphic showcasing the new Kindle Touch, you read a little bit about the product, you buy it—and you're done.

The social catalog, on the other hand, isn't all about purchasing. It also drives social engagement, strengthens brand awareness, delivers targeted promotions, and generates quality traffic. It is a new tool for understanding what customers want.



Figure 3. The value of a social catalog isn't all about purchasing.

Tips for Creating and Marketing a Social Catalog

Here are some pointers for creating and marketing an effective social catalog for your brand. All of these tips serve a larger goal: to gain a deeper understanding of how your customers behave and what your customers really want.

#1. Use Social Engagement to Measure Customer Sentiment

A social catalog is more than a combination of product images, marketing descriptions, and pricing info. These parts are necessary, but it's also good to offer multiple entry points for your customers to share their comments, ideas, and feedback. Remember to accommodate your hyper-enthusiasts as well as a broader base—while one person might be eager to publish a product review on your fan page, another might prefer to just Like an individual product listing. Such activity provides valuable data to your brand. These insights can help your brand answer some important questions about customer sentiment such as, "Which social catalog items are my fans most likely to share with their own personal networks?"

#2. Drive Brand Awareness Outside of Your Website

The vast majority of your customers spend more time on Facebook than on your Website. Instead of depending on one narrow conversion funnel only—where a person clicks on a fan page link that leads to your Website—take some time to map out and test the many engagement tools and pathways that Facebook offers brands. Optimizing additional funnels can help you drive brand awareness outside of your Website. Have you tested, for instance, different tactics for getting a fan to share a social catalog

item with their friends? Have you tested the message, tone, timing, and form of the content (for example, text versus photos in a news feed story) to determine what motivates friends to enlist their network on your brand's behalf?

#3. Deliver Targeted Promotions to the Right Customers

Your social catalog is a targeted retail space. You can reproduce your entire catalog and cross your fingers that your fans won't feel inundated. Or, you can adopt a leaner and more proactive approach and deliver relevant promotions and timely offers to your fans. What if your fans knew that your social catalog was the only place to find a significant discount on a particular product? What if it was the only place to take part in a Facebook-only weekly flash sale? It's important to craft unique and clear incentives to achieve sustained attention, social sharing, and brand loyalty.

#4. Generate Quality Traffic and Optimize Your External Purchase Funnels

Social-network-to-Website traffic should be treated differently from other forms of referral traffic. More often than not, this traffic reflects visitors with an existing brand affinity or interest—those who have specifically clicked through based on a friend's trusted recommendation. Accordingly, you'll want to optimize your purchase funnels—design unique landing pages and improve shopping cart flows, among other things—to secure successful conversions for your brand.

#5. Take Advantage of Sponsored Stories, Custom Verbs, and Ticker Stories

Use the tools available to target your desired audience while building interest and credibility.

- **Sponsored stories.** Sponsored stories are Facebook ads that appear in the right-hand column of Facebook pages. They allow you to use your fans' personal endorsements—for example, "Mike bought the Eames chair from the Furniture Store social catalog"—to target relevant audiences and increase the visibility of public support for your brand.
- **Custom verbs.** Custom verbs allow you to insert special keywords into your Facebook stories. They help ensure that you are using marketing language tailored to your brand, industry, and customers. And they can help your messages stand out among the other more-generic contributions. A customer verb such as, "Mike listened to Prelude and Fugue in C major on the Bach Facebook page," for example, might make for a more interesting Facebook story than someone else's "X Likes Y."
- **Ticker stories.** Finally, ticker stories allow you to disseminate rich messages—note that you can add custom verbs to ticker stories—to your fans and fans' friends. You can use this tool to offer branded messages that are more specific and more meaningful—for example, "Mike purchased the 50-percent-off black oxfords on the Shoe Wholesale social catalog"—than a mere display of your company name.

#6. Track Customers Using Your Entire Analytics Toolbox

Between Facebook Insights (which provides statistics, such as the number of unique people who have seen your fan page posts) and Oracle Social Engagement and Monitoring Cloud Service (which allows you to measure ad conversions on Oracle Social Sites Cloud Service pages), brands already have a number of ways to verify their marketing success and uncover weak spots. The key task, then, is to make sure that your brand is building these regular analytics checks into your social commerce processes.

#7. Meet Customers' Demands for Helpful Product Recommendations

Give customers a voice and they'll reward you with brand loyalty. Oracle Social Sites Cloud Service integrates with third-party ratings and reviews services, which allows brands to publish and consolidate reliable feedback from fan page commenters and the larger Facebook community right at the point of purchase. According to Bazaarvoice.com, a popular online source of ratings and reviews, 30 percent of consumers use three or more retail channels for any shopping transaction. If your brand uses positive recommendations on your Website to win over customers, then it's equally imperative to provide the same kind of useful information on your Facebook page. You simply don't need to risk your customers not being able to find the social proof they need to make a purchase.

"The big winners in social commerce know that the customer must be at the very core of the social experience. Give consumers an easy-to-use and transparent platform for sharing their recommendations, and you'll see immediate dividends. On Facebook and other social networks in particular, your fans aren't just looking for basic product and purchase info—they also want to see real feedback and real validation from their friends and trusted reviewers."

—Michael Hylton, Director of eCommerce Product Marketing, Oracle

A Final Note

This paper did not discuss the prospect of in-stream commerce (purchasing directly from the Facebook wall), which for many represents the Holy Grail of social retail. However, because Facebook doesn't truly support in-stream commerce—which at this point is limited to the use of Flash—it's too early to invest many resources here. Dumping resources into legacy technologies and ad hoc workarounds would amount to a waste of precious time and money, especially in light of the robust social commerce solutions that brands can access today.

Conclusion

If you heed the seven tips described in this white paper, you'll be well on your way to creating and marketing a powerful social commerce presence and social catalog for your brand, and fully understanding what your customers really want. You'll drive social engagement, strengthen brand awareness, deliver targeted promotions, generate quality traffic, and attract purchases—without having to reproduce your entire inventory listing or traditional catalog.



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