

Social Media:

A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH

By Tekla Szymanski

We tweet, blog and friend on Facebook. But are we truly connected, or do social media divide us more than they unite us? Using social media efficiently is a key component in branding yourself as a media professional, in publicizing and showcasing your work, in promoting your company and marketing your services. Not all social media platforms and messages are created equal, however. Unless you fine-tune your outreach by taking into consideration racial, ethnic, cross-national or even gender differences, you might ultimately fail to accomplish your goal.

Gender, race, ethnicity and nationality are as important as the message itself.



Sheryl Sandberg

Not connecting with the right consumers via social media can be especially detrimental for business and brand promotion. According to Toby Bloomberg, author of *Social Media Marketing GPS*, “social media pull away the Wizard of Oz curtain to reveal true brand values, benefits and honest customer expectations. Relationships rule.” And Dan Greenberg of *Forbes* magazine stresses the challenge of producing content—not ads—that can create connections: “Forward-thinking advertisers are shifting budgets towards social strategies that center on creating content that’s likely to be shared.”

GENDER DIFFERENCES

If your goal is to reach women with your social media campaign, you’re using the right channel. Women use Twitter more than men and log onto social networking sites 30 percent more often; 55 percent use their mobile phones to access those sites. “Female users are the unsung heroines behind the most engaging, fastest-growing and most valuable consumer e-commerce companies,” observes guest blogger Aileen Lee at TechCrunch. “Women rule the Internet. [They are] the routers and amplifiers of the social Web. And they are the rocket fuel of e-commerce. If you figure out how to harness the power of female customers, you can rock the world.”

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and a 2011 Matrix Award winner, says that women drive 62 percent of activity on Facebook in terms of messages, updates and comments, and 71 percent of the daily fan activity. So, be prepared to polish your Facebook business page and tweet frequently to get female attention—unless the women you want to reach live abroad. There, they lag behind men in using social networking sites.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Are you aware that more African-Americans use Twitter than whites? That Latinos and blacks prefer accessing the Internet via their cell phones? That 70 percent of all African-Americans and English-speaking Latinos use text messaging, compared to just over half of whites? To reach the former groups, you should plan your social media strategy by moving your Web-based presence to mobile platforms. And you’d better start texting and tweeting.

But there is more to such data than meets the eye. According to Pew Internet, a nonpartisan research group, there is a real digital divide emerging along ethnic lines: 77 percent of Asian-Americans and 68 percent of whites have broadband access at home, compared to 49 percent of blacks and 48 percent of Latinos.

To make up for that gap, 51 percent of Hispanics and 46 percent of blacks use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33 percent of whites. They use their phones for email, and they prefer accessing social media platforms like

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Facebook via their phones as well. According to Aaron Smith, a senior research specialist at Pew Internet, these groups are leading the change in Internet access “from something that occurs at home or on a big screen with a dedicated high-speed connection to something that’s much more mobile and transient and stays with you wherever you are.”

Did you know that Asian-Americans rank the highest in Internet use on a daily basis? They also lead in cell phone connectivity. But they text much less often than African-Americans and Hispanics. Asian-Americans are very attached to email, and consequently email campaigns are more effective when geared to that demographic than to Hispanics and African-Americans.

Nowhere in the United States, however, is the digital divide as pronounced as among Native Americans: More than 90 percent of tribal populations lack high-speed Internet access, and usage rates are as low as 5 percent in some areas, according to the Federal Communications Commission. Some Native Americans can't even participate through mobile platforms. Less than 10 percent have universal cellular coverage in their communities. In fact, 32 percent don't even have basic telephone service.

CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Confused yet? Add to the mix international differences in social media usage. Users abroad tweet less, don't “friend” or “like” on Facebook as much as Americans, and flock to social networks that we have never heard of. Cindy King, a Paris-based cross-national social media outreach specialist, vows that “our communication is more personal. It is closer.”

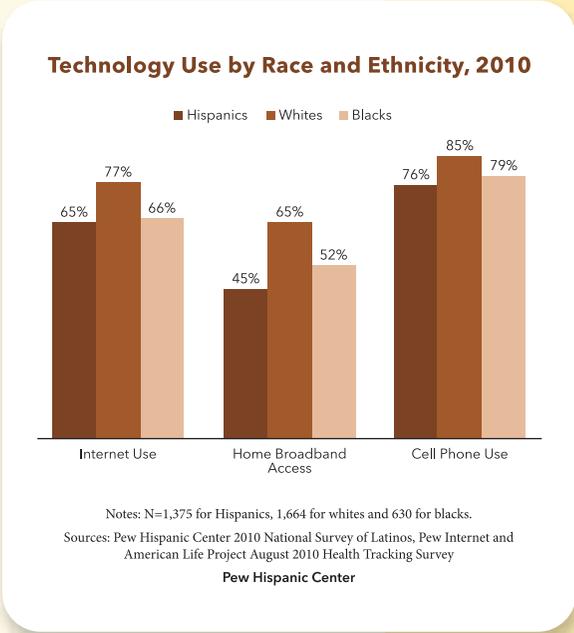
Europeans in particular are slow to warm to social media. Blogger Paul Hassel Mönning stresses the key cultural difference: In Europe, data privacy is regarded as a universal and individual right. American social media networks, on the other hand, have no qualms about sharing user data and information with third parties.

European Union copyright and libel laws are also stricter than ours. France is working on a law that would require companies like Facebook to delete data after a certain time at a user’s request. Germany is currently leading an ongoing war with Google over privacy.

Thus your shiny new Facebook business page might not reach customers abroad—unless they live in Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa or India, countries where the Facebook population has recently expanded most rapidly. Facebook adoption in Brazil, Argentina and Peru has also been growing dramatically.

And then there is Twitter. According to the German market research company Rheingold, Twitter’s promise provides a perfect fit for American culture: “A nation of immigrants, [Americans] are constantly on the go, always setting the stage for themselves in front of new people.” But only about 2.5 percent of Twitter users are German. Brands that tweet run the risk of being perceived as insubstantial, unfocused and unsustainable in Germany.

In short, getting the most out of social media requires more than merely creating good content that can be shared: Gender, race, ethnicity and nationality are as important as the message. There’s no global village yet in social media land.



Internet access is changing from something that occurs at home on a big screen to something much more mobile.