

Secrets of Social Media Revealed 50 years ago

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Almost 50 years ago Ernest Dichter, the father of motivation research, did a large study of word of mouth persuasion that revealed secrets of how to use social media to build brands and businesses.

The study was reported in a 1966 article in HBR (Harvard Business Review).

A major Dichter finding, very relevant today, was the identification of four motivations for a person to communicate about brands. The first (about 33% of the cases) is because of product-involvement. The experience is so novel and pleasurable that it must be shared. The second (about 24%) is self-involvement. Sharing knowledge or opinions is a way to gain attention, show connoisseurship, feel like a pioneer, have inside information, seek confirmation of a person's own judgment, or assert superiority. The third (around 20%) is

other-involvement. The speaker wants to reach out and help to express neighborliness, caring, and friendship. The fourth (around 20%) is message-involvement. The message is so humorous or informative that it deserves sharing.

Looking at the social media role in brand building, I suspect that these same four motivations explain why some brands have been successful in using social media. It suggests that, in the absence of exceptionally entertaining communication, in order to employ social media effectively a brand needs to deliver extraordinary functional, self-expressive, or social benefits. That is more likely to be the case when the brand is associated with an offering that is innovative in a way that truly resonates with customers. It is unlikely to happen when the brand represents a me-too offering in an established category or subcategory. So it comes back to creating and leveraging innovation and differentiation.

A second finding was that listeners are primarily concerned with two conditions. One is that the speaker be credible with experience and background that is convincing. A person does not need to be an expert although that can help, people that have an intense interest in a subject resulting in relevant experience and access to relevant people and information will qualify as well. Another is that listeners also are skeptical of the speaker's motivation. They want the speaker to be interested in the listener and his or her well-being without a bias. Is the speaker's intention to sell a product or help me? What is the speaker's relationship to me? An implication is that a firm promoting its own brand needs to be aware of its status and emphasize facts instead of opinion, represent the right culture and values, and have a balanced perspective.

Another implication is that a firm should promote a dialogue because a listener will be more likely to accept judgments from someone with whom there is an interaction going on. With a dialogue, it is much easier to communicate expertise, interest in the subject matter, and the right motivation because there is a chance to build up a relationship and use reassuring cues. In contrast, a one time, one way communication will have a harder time demonstrating credibility and motivation.

A third finding was that recommenders had on average a huge impact on purchase running to 80% for some products. The classic and even earlier work of the sociologists Katz and Lazerfeld reported in their book *Personal Influence* had already documented the impact of social influence has a two-step flow but this study brought the ideas to the level of purchase decisions.

It is amazing that the nearly forgotten theory and practice of word-of-mouth communication and influence from five decades and more ago can be so relevant today.

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Four motivations for communicating about brands:

1. 33% product-involvement
2. 24% self-involvement
3. 20% other-involvement
4. 20% message-involvement

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