

# Is Friending Ending CRM'ing?

“Friending”  
is great for  
your brand.  
Here’s why.

The other night, I was having dinner with James Andrews, a cultural anthropologist ([thekeyinfluencer.com](http://thekeyinfluencer.com)), and he was explaining to me his level of friendship with another colleague of ours at the table.

“Yeah, we’ve known each other, I’d say three years. She’s a phase-one friend, but I am very competitive with her when it comes to music. If I find something

that is over-the-top, she goes right to the top of my list of who I make that available to because I want her to know that I trumped her.”

Then someone else joined us at the table and James says: “Now, he’s a phase-two friend, and I have never met him before. We do a lot of charitable work together, but it has always been online.”

Of course I had to ask: How many phases of friendship are there and what does each phase mean? Here’s what James told me:

**First Phase:** You share a common association or general interest (*e.g.*, the parents at your kid’s school, members of the same gym, people who take the same yoga class), and you share what you know.

**Second Phase:** You are bonded by shared values, interests, hobbies (*e.g.*, teammates you may play with on a regular basis). There is an exchange of information about those things you have in common, and you share what you think.

**Third Phase:** You are bonded by a love and deeper passion for common interests and shared values (*e.g.*, members of the same church, of a small group of mutual friends), and you share how you feel.

**Fourth Phase:** Full transparency — a level shared only with family. All guards are down and all emotions are shared; you share who you are.

The fact that people can be good friends and never physically meet is not necessarily a new concept. I had a pen pal when I was a kid — back when people actually used cursive writing and wrote

long letters about themselves and anxiously waited to get a letter of equal weight and value back.

From my point of view, we have a physical life and a digital life — and understanding this bifurcation is a key to gaining insight into what “friendship” is all about. Some refer to that concept as the emergence of the *twinsumer*.

## SEPARATED AT BIRTH

The twinsumer, as defined at [trendwatching.com](http://trendwatching.com), is a very different and incredibly important concept. Twinsumers are actually out there in the digital world looking for “fellow consumers... who think, react, enjoy and consume the way they do.”

This is made possible by the collaborative filtering software that has not only spawned “millions of personal profiles” on social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, but is also “turning millions of reviews, ratings and recommendations” into a motherlode of marketing insights.

In the not-too-distant future, brands will be looking for experts in collaborative filtering who can marry what is happening in the world of “friending” with a brand’s content and its stories. It’s the modern version of a “customer database.”

Truly makes your hair hurt, doesn’t it?

There has been some early, seminal work done on this concept of “friending.” MySpace has collaborated with Carat/Isobar and Rex Briggs, managing partner at Marketing Evolution, on the topic.

Mr. Briggs’ concept of the “momentum effect” does a very good job of trying to capture measurement criteria for the new Consumer-to-Consumer (C-to-C) framework. The joint study compares ROI of the new C-to-C paradigm to current online advertising and makes a compelling case for why “friending,” if done authentically, is great for brands.

I would like to take the dialogue in another direction and ask how it will not only affect how brands approach online marketing, but also how,

philosophically, “friending” changes the notion of CRM and loyalty from an organizational, infrastructural and tactical perspective.

#### CONSUMERS AS BUSINESSES

Sure, there is a lot to be said about how the digital world has created so many more choices for people in terms of how they gather, sift and use information. And we do an awful lot of talking about fragmentation of media and where and how to connect with audiences — recent bad weekend box offices have been attributed to the release of *Halo 3*, for example.

But the most important reason for CRM’s demise is that given the tools and applications at their beck and call, consumers are acting more and more like businesses. They are setting up branded storefronts (Facebook, MySpace); publishing empires (blogs and podcasts, YouTube); tradeshow; info swaps and share groups (*moli.com, turnhere.com, ning.com, snapvine.com*).

In the halcyon era of the late 1990s, we talked about how it was no longer important to be big. It was important to be fast. But we were talking about companies. We were talking about the disruption created by startups and e-commerce sites — not consumers.

And as it relates to CRM? We have built these monoliths of web and email infrastructures. We have names in our databases. Certainly, some of us even have sales histories to go along with those names and that help us tee-up that never-ending, all-you-can-eat email machine with a constant flow of relevant and timely offers. But that doesn’t mean you have “friends.”

We have email and e-CRM summits, e-sales planners and sales enablement tools. We have call centers that interact on the web with a caller. We sometimes even have face-to-face meetings.

Yet, if 92 percent of Americans surveyed by Roper Reports (2004) rate word-of-mouth of friends and family as being among best source of ideas and information, then decisions about brands in people’s lives are conversations we are generally not a part of.

Some marketers like to think that social-networking is just a fad, that we should all look forward to a more logical day when brands will own their own destinies again. Granted, there is much we do not know and a lot that is yet to be played out as far as brand loyalty and relationships to brands in a Web 2.0 world — but there is no going back.

## Best Friends Forever

**What’s a stressed out CMO to do? Here are five things to start thinking about that will help shape strategy, brand character and infrastructure to become best friends forever (bff):**

- It’s all about getting together: me, you, us, my friends, and your friends. Think about the new CRM as various get-togethers. Your job is to facilitate these. Think of three types of get-togethers — formal, informal and friend-generated. Segment these as virtual, phone, face-to-face and hybrid.
- Facebook and MySpace are the new email — they allow people to get to know one another at a depth that friendships require — in the world of the twinsumer. Brands should try to map “phases of friendship” to “best customer” scenarios.
- I say this in almost every article I write: It’s all about your content and storytelling abilities. If you cannot build an authentic voice for a variety of people and be relevant to all of them and allow them to collaborate and diffuse your content, you will have few friends. Storytelling is a core part of any and all brands.
- Start to address the twinsumer in your communications planning. Integrate live and digital encounters. More than ever, the re-assembling of marketing tactics into a relevant whole where live encounters are connected to mobile, web, retail and loyalty programs will offer a refreshing alternative to advertising on the front-end.
- Begin to bring contextual and behavioral measures to non-digital activities. You are paying through the nose to get at the digital part of the twinsumer — what about the flesh-and-blood person? I’ve never seen anyone drink wine through a cable modem!

What loyalty and CRM look like are yet to be developed. It certainly is not what we have today. To dismiss the advent of more natural, less linear forms of information exchange and relationship enablers is to basically say that friendship itself is a fad, and susceptible to be replaced by something, well, more logical. ■



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