

Cyberspace Odyssey

While reading the results of a recent *Reveries.com* survey on the potential of online social-networks as media, I was reminded of the opening scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The movie begins at the dawn of mankind. Enlightened apes band together and take a giant evolutionary step forward by discovering the first tool. They use it together to provide for and defend their territory.

Social networking has always been about groups who trust each other and come together for support, reassurance and insight to provide and defend a common, coveted space. Recently, new tools like LinkedIn, Facebook, and MySpace have moved the speed, reach and enhanced trust of social networks to unparalleled levels.

However, the results of the *Reveries.com* survey (see page 12) suggest that marketers are in the early stages of truly understanding this colossal shift. Surprisingly, only 18 percent found the potential of online social-networks as “huge.” Thirty-nine percent identified the opportunity as “big,” 32 percent “medium”, 9 percent “small” and “zero” at just 1.5 percent.

Right now, your best and worst customers are digitally harnessing every valuable relationship they have. They are empowered to broadcast their opinions and ask for feedback on a large scale at a moment's notice. Their dialog is taken at face value because recipients know them—or know of them.

What does this mean for marketers? It means your best and worst customers now have a greater share of trusted voice than you can amass through conventional media. Your brand is quickly becoming what they deem it to be—hero, villain or otherwise.

The *Reveries.com* survey found “word-of-mouth” was the most mentioned promising aspect of online social-networks. The ability to target specific consumer segments, observe behavior, track trends, test new

products and conduct research of various kinds were also noted as enhanced value-adds from online networking.

This is good, but none of the mentioned categories really embrace the magnitude of what social networking has become. Every marketer should be asking: “How does my brand survive with ever-growing social networks on the prowl?”

Many survey respondents noted the need to become part of the “conversation” without interrupting it. The real big idea is *transparency*.

Tactically, that means *you must honestly define what your brand is and isn't at every point in the customer buy and experience cycles and bring that information to life as content that is accessible for social networks to embrace and repurpose as their own.*

If you break online social-networking down to its most basic form — “a digital construct of real time relationships, past and present” — then you realize that people are not only linked to those they trust, but are also only a few connections away from everybody

else. And because group members crossover, one group opinion will influence a multitude of other groups.

Like the apes in *2001*, if you invade their space and take from them without giving back, they will force you out of their territory.

Not so long ago, the packs were small and slow moving, and you could deal with them one-on-one. Today, they are huge, growing and move at the speed of light. If you would like to receive a free white paper on *Addressing e-Communities*, e-mail me at rmason@hawkeyeww.com. Or better yet, *connect, nudge or friend* me on LinkedIn, Facebook or MySpace. ■

The dawn of social-network marketing.



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Who participates in social-network websites? Is it for business or pleasure? What is the marketing potential, if any?

To get at those questions, and perhaps shed some light on arguably the hottest (and coolest) new-media phenomenon today, *Reveries.com* conducted an online survey of its *Cool News of the Day* newsletter subscribers.

In part, the goal was to get a read on the emerging showdown between LinkedIn and Facebook over membership by the marketing community.

In that respect, the survey's outcome was clear: LinkedIn is overwhelmingly (82%) the network-of-choice among the 500 survey respondents, garnering more members than Facebook (47%) and MySpace (34%) combined. Relative newcomer Doostang (3.5%) rounded out the field.

LinkedIn's dominance is not surprising, since the survey respondents were predominantly senior-level business people, and LinkedIn is more accurately a *professional*-networking than a *social*-networking site. Accordingly, a strong plurality of respondents (45%), said their interest in online social-networking is "mostly business."

However, LinkedIn's popularity took a dive when respondents were asked to pick their "favorite" social-networking site, dropping to just 48%, compared with 28% for Facebook, 15% for MySpace, and .5% for Doostang.

Apparently there can be a difference between joining these sites and actually *liking* them. As one respondent put it: "I don't think 'favorite' describes how I feel about any network site."

When respondents were asked to elaborate as to why they preferred one site to another, the dominant response was: "because it's the only one I have joined." Others cited reasons related to ease of use, aesthetics, or image.

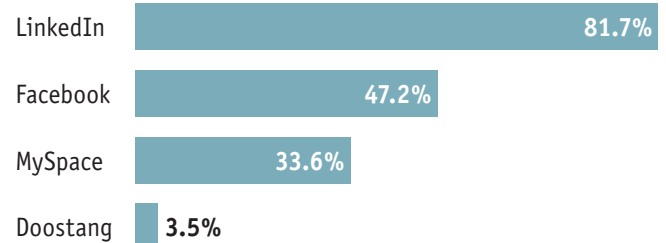
Despite Facebook's reported inroads into the "grownups" market, especially among marketers, a number of respondents said they viewed Facebook as a site "for kids" and that LinkedIn was more "serious" or "professional." Issues of "privacy" also surfaced, with several respondents saying that they liked LinkedIn because it didn't reveal so much about one's personal life or related details.

Socialized

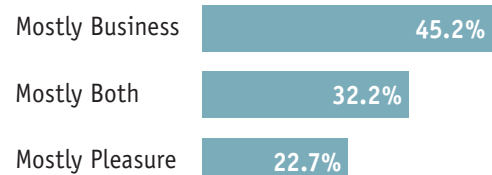
Do you *personally* participate in a social-network site?



In which social-network sites do you participate?

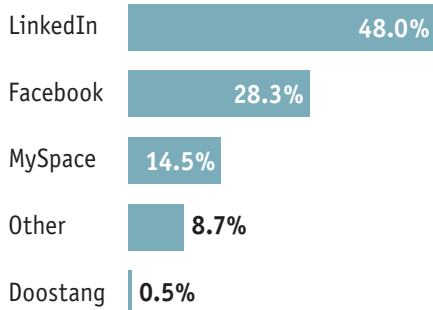


Why do you participate?

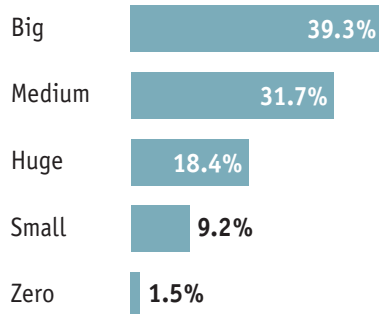


Media

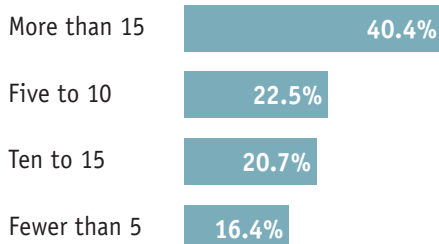
Which social-network site is your favorite?



How would you rate the potential of social networks for marketing purposes?



Number of years in marketing:



Turning to the question of online social-networks as a medium for marketing, the result was perhaps more tepid than might have been expected, given all the hoopla. Just 18% termed the potential of online social networks as “huge.” However, 39% pegged the opportunity as “big,” followed by “medium” at 32%, “small” at 9% and “zero” at 15%.

Predictably, “word-of-mouth” received the most mentions as the most promising aspect of online social-networks from a marketing standpoint. The ability to target specific consumer segments also popped up, as did the opportunity to observe behavior, track trends, test new products and conduct research of various kinds.

Several respondents warned against too much intrusion by marketers, especially with advertising and other traditional marketing techniques. Others suggested the networks could prove to be a field day for marketers who find ways to become part of the “conversation” without interrupting it. A few verbatim comments:

“If you sell (unless you are a very cool web app), you lose. Don’t sell. As a marketer: network. Help people. Advise. Create value and add to the conversation.”

“No more poking and prodding the person for answers. Be a fly on the wall and see how they relate to your product or services through the mask of a lifestyle oriented group that you have set up.”

“Social networks are a great way to connect communities of people with similar interests and desires. However, you still have the challenge of activating their intent to do anything with regard to commerce.”

Overall, the survey results suggest great interest and excitement over online social-networks, and equally strong concerns, doubts and questions about how the phenomenon can or will develop as a platform for brand success.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

A total of 500 survey respondents included agencies (24%), brands (24%), marketing services (17%) and consultants (14%). A majority were senior-level executives, with 63% reporting more than ten years of experience in marketing. ■