

Big Omaha and Social Media Marketing: A Case Study

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## Introduction

It began in early 2009 on the World Wide Web, an explosion of chatter and conversation about a little-known conference called Big Omaha. Its tagline was easy enough to grasp: an event targeted at not just Omaha's social networkers, developers, and designers dubbed "the creative class," but to those who lay their heads and their laptops in cities across the Midwest and around the country, as well. Organizers who spent early morning and late night hours alike in addition to their "8-to-5 gigs" were planning a first-of-its-kind event in Nebraska's largest city that would not only inspire innovators but also lay and reinforce solid foundations of communities both large and small. The conference morphed from a Web-based newsgroup that celebrated the creative class.

That organization, Silicon Prairie News, was born from *Midwest to Manhattan*, a blog written by 30-something Jeff Slobotoski (personal communication, July 16, 2009). Slobotoski, while based in Omaha, often traveled to New York for business trips, documenting his journeys and experiences on the Web. "But no one wants to read about me when I'm traveling, and where I eat," Slobotoski joked. "So I thought, let's turn it around and tell the stories about the cool, innovative ideas here in Omaha." So in July 2008, Slobotoski partnered with Dusty Davidson – founder of BrightMix, a boutique software development company in Omaha – to design a host a new Web site/blog, today known as Silicon Prairie News.

As Silicon Prairie News highlighted innovative players both large and small in Omaha's creative scene and those in nearby locales, Slobotoski and Davidson saw a movement steeped in community and creativity. Interacting with Web designers, software developers, and other entrepreneurs got them thinking. "We love Omaha and we're proud

of Omaha. But we felt we were on our own island. We're not the only ones who love Omaha," Slobotski said.

When author Sarah Lacy made a quick stop in Omaha to promote her new book, she identified a movement in Omaha, writing on her blog: "[W]e were stunned and impressed by the creative vibe of Omaha and creativity is far more of a central ingredient in Web 2.0 than any other Valley-centric tech wave." That feedback was the jumpstart Slobotski and Davidson needed to plan the inaugural Big Omaha conference in May of 2009.

Marketing Big Omaha was sporadic and intermittent in the fall of 2008, when Slobotski and Davidson used their personal Twitter accounts, (@jjsnyc and @dustyd, respectively) to share early details of the event. Twitter is a microblogging Web-based interface that allows users to post updates (also known as "tweets") about absolutely anything in 140 characters or less. Slobotski and Davidson announced when speakers were confirmed via Twitter, starting buzz months before the conference would take place. But in late 2008, the two launched @bigomaha (see Figure 1), a Twitter account designed exclusively for those interested in the conference.



Figure 1: The first tweet from @bigomaha.

They realized Twitter's reach when other users conversed about the conference via their Twitter accounts. By adding either @bigomaha or #bigomaha in the body of an update, a user's text can be read by other users through Twitter's search capability.

Slobotski and Davidson loved the conversation, but hoped that the talk would translate to ticket sales, setting a preliminary goal of 250 attendees. In the weeks leading up to the conference, ticket sales skyrocketed not just from Omaha, but cities such as Los Angeles, Denver, Boulder, Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Des Moines, and Indianapolis. (Ticket prices were around \$200 per person.) "Twitter was it," Slobotski said. "We sold, right or wrong, the majority of our tickets (via Twitter). We are completely blown away, humbled, and excited by what we got from Twitter. We saw the power of that and the use of that." What Slobotski and other Twitter users who use the platform as a basis of conversation and promotion have embraced is the social networks the interface creates. A Twitter user's followers can read what is posted and immediately re-post (or "re-tweet") the information to their followers, creating a Web-based word of mouth scenario that's happening in the public domain. "Anytime you put a message out there, those people see it," Slobotski said. "It's guerrilla marketing in a nice way."

As Big Omaha details fell into place, marketing began heavily on Twitter and a Facebook group soon developed by conference organizers, alongside the Big Omaha and Silicon Prairie News Web sites. Even Big Omaha's speakers joined the conversation on Twitter (see Figure 2). At no point did Big Omaha consider launching a MySpace account to promote ticket sales. As Slobotski believes, MySpace – considered by many to be a pioneer in social networking – is "done and gone. In fact, this is the first time I've even said 'MySpace' in the past couple weeks. It's clutter."

Marketing for Big Omaha reached beyond home and work computers when Andy Peters (personal communication, July 22, 2009) of Omaha-based Ninth Division developed a free iPhone application for conference attendees. Released just a few days prior to the conference, iPhone users who attended the conference could learn more about the speakers, follow the day’s schedule, and even monitor the Big Omaha conversation happening real-time on Twitter. Prior to the conference, Peters counted 600 installations of his iPhone application. To date, that number has increased to more than 1,000. By developing the iPhone application, Peters not only helped build buzz about Big Omaha, but his business, as well. “The response (to the application) was fantastic,” Peters said. “I had a lot of people come up to me at the pre-party and say – ‘great app.’ I had some good emails, comments on the blog and the Vimeo.com site about it. The best response was just watching people at the event using the app.”

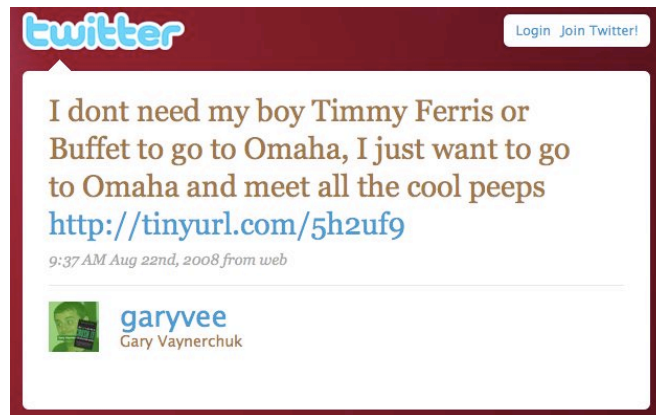


Figure 2: The first Big Omaha tweet by speaker Gary Vaynerchuk.

By many accounts, their social-media marketing approach proved successful. Less than two weeks before Big Omaha, the conference’s 450 seats sold out, with 40 percent of attendees coming from Omaha and the remaining 60 percent from outside Nebraska. Slobotski received passionate ticket requests from would-be attendees just days before the event, only to deliver news that none remained.

What is worthy of closer examination is not solely why Twitter worked for Big Omaha, but the concept of social media marketing and its impact on communication. What is the future of traditional marketing approaches when Twitter, Facebook, and yet-to-be-developed interfaces with similar functionality are added?

### **Traditional Marketing**

Historically individuals and businesses alike have used traditional forms of marketing and public relations to promote an idea and sell a product. By plunking down hundreds, thousands, and even millions of dollars, it was believed that speaking to the masses in mediums such as print, television, and radio would guarantee money in the bank. Yet as social media and Computer-Mediated Communication became easier to use and free of charge, a new pipeline of message delivery had quickly and quite organically been created. So long as interfaces such as Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace are adopted and embraced by the public, messages (often called “talking points” in PR-speak) can readily be heard at a price advertising executives simply cannot beat.

Davidson (personal communication, July 22, 2009) is not shy about his distaste for traditional marketing efforts. Those who sell magazine advertising, Davidson said, often scoff when he questions a return on investment from a \$2,500 advertisement to promote his business. Combine such sentiments to Big Omaha’s target audience – those who live and work in Twitter and elsewhere on the World Wide Web – to better understand why a traditional marketing campaign simply wasn’t a fit for Big Omaha.

From Davidson:

*Traditionally it’s been easy to make a really crappy product and advertise the heck out of it and shove ads, ads, ads, ads down peoples’ throat and probably sell some product. I don’t know. That’s traditional advertising. And I think that in this world of connected social networks and trusted connections you have this scenario where you have to be able to convince people that your product is good or that they should be buying it. They are*

*the advocates for you. They are going to turn around and hopefully tell their friends, but only if it's good, and only if they believe in it, and only if you treat them well.*

Such a response, then, begs the question: What is the future of social media marketing?

### **New Marketing Methods on the Web**

While the Internet and the World Wide Web are still in their shared infancies, researchers and scholars have studied and noted the impact such connectedness has had on human interaction and communication. And this interaction doesn't stop at simply email messages. Self-produced media – from blogs to videos to Second Life builds and online photo galleries – can be shared with individuals and groups literally anywhere in the world where an Internet connection exists (Croteau, 2006). In doing so, users not only share the information they collect, but repackage and redistribute it via the Web. Big Omaha saw this happening after the conference. Attendees grabbed up source code from photographs and videos posted online and repurposed them to develop their own recaps and reviews of the event. It is important to note that users who create and recreate content can do so today because of these three key ingredients, as according to Croteau (2006):

- An increase in affordable digital equipment, such as video recorders, still cameras, Webcams, audio recording equipment, and even laptop computers;
- An increase in broadband access to the World Wide Web, allowing data-heavy files to be uploaded to the Web relatively quickly; and
- An increase in specialty Web sites and services that make the distribution and promotion of such content easy and often free (WordPress, Flickr, Vimeo, and YouTube, to name a few).

Again, this technological movement is changing the way marketing takes place. In years past, it was not often that consumers would repurpose television commercials or magazine advertisements to promote a good or service. But now, given the right tools and the right access, consumers cannot only market a product they support, but themselves, as well. Today's interaction happens in collaboration, pooling knowledge, and constructing content shared with each other (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). And according to Croteau (2006), this trend will only continue: "The confluence of these developments has enabled the dramatic proliferation of self-produced media, which are likely to grow exponentially in the years to come" (p. 341). With such development and distribution, the line between corporations and users may blur even greater in the future.

What has made this movement of social media marketing possible is what's referred to as Web 2.0. The initial "launch" of the World Wide Web was only the first phase of an evolving media that would bring more users to heavily networked platforms. Web 2.0 is a term created to identify recent, fundamental changes in the way the Web is used and the new technologies it offers (Cronin, 2009). Web 2.0 services and applications make possible more dynamic interactions among users, with more user-to-user conversation than ever before on the Web (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). These new technologies include photo-sharing sites, blogging platforms, video-sharing sites, and wikis. Wikipedia, arguably the best-known wiki, allows users to create and edit content that's available for free on the Web. The word *wiki* is Hawaiian for "quick" (Cronin, 2009). Wikis have definitely been labeled a "game changer" in content generation and distribution. No more must users page through volumes of texts to digest information or find a question's answer. The Google search engine remains a popular option, but the Wikipedia Web site

is certainly gaining momentum among users on the Web. And microblogging sites, such as Twitter, allow brief nuggets of information to be shared among users. Miller (2008) suggests that Twitter offers a peek into a future media and communications world of “connection over content. Even among users, there is a certain amount of trepidation as the general ‘pointlessness’ of the messages circulated, at the same time as an appreciation of an overall feeling of intimacy of being connected in real time to many others outside one’s geographical location” (p. 397).

For Big Omaha 2010, Slobotski and Davidson agree that Twitter will be a key vehicle to promote the conference. They recognize, as Fernando (2009) pointed out that: “Microblogging is definitely going to evolve – not, as some have surmised, at the expense of blogging, but in a way that will fill the gaps in how we can stay tuned to a rapidly changing media and communication world” (p. 12).

### **The Word of Mouth Movement**

Without Web users who actively populate the various social media sites, the movement of social media marketing ceases to exist. Content on social media site such as Facebook and Twitter are often in response to what someone has already shared. By using “old” content and redistributing it as new content, a new form of word of mouth marketing is born. Blogs, along with today’s popular social media interfaces, are easy to update and encourage interaction among users. Because of this, authors and readers alike can participate in the exchange of information who may not otherwise have the opportunity (Schmallegger & Carson, 2007). When users have a good experience, they generally enjoy spreading “the good news” on the Web.

Alternatively, however, a negative experience is also ceremoniously discussed in public on social media interfaces. And with a few keystrokes and a few mouse clicks, that unfavorable restaurant review or customer service experience is sprinkled to hundreds, possibly thousands of users living and working online.

According to Klaassen (2009), reviews and public discussions about products and services are growing in importance to marketers who want the conversations to yield dollars for the bottom line. When business owners discover such negative information on third-party sites, Schmallegger and Carson (2007) encourage a timely and honest response. A direct email to the disgruntled customer can sooth the problem, but a public apology online can also impact the opinions of potential customers, as well. Self-disclosure from either an individual or organization standpoint has become increasingly important as a means to gain trust and achieve “authentic” relationships with others (Miller, 2008, p. 389). Additionally, marketers can “search clouds of the twittersphere” to learn more about consumer behaviors, activities, and trends, along with the impact of their products and services on the marketplace (Miller, 2008, p. 398). Such online chatter has much to tell.

### **A Peek at Nonprofits**

Nonprofit groups are embracing the concept of social media marketing out of a lack of revenue. Many around the country whose advertising, marketing, and public relation budgets are severely limited or nonexistent have found a free home in social media interfaces. Panepento (2009) noted that nonprofit organizations cannot just spread the word about their efforts, but also reach potential donors and volunteers alike via Facebook and Twitter. Panepento (2009) pointed to a recent study by the University of

Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing, which reported that 89 percent of nonprofit organizations use some form of social media, and that 57 percent reported that they use blogs.

Because social networking for nonprofit groups is relatively new, few handbooks exist that offer usage guidelines. Instead, organizations are learning through active participation on Facebook, for example, which can pose challenges to those users lacking a solid understanding of social media and Computer-Mediated Communication. Yet nonprofits are “encouraged to understand the uses and benefits of social media marketing” if they hope for increased membership and interest (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009, p. 105).

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Marketing is a means to spread the word and create buzz about a product or service. Historically – and even today – businesses and nonprofits alike seek the advice of advertising and public relations agencies to drum up interest from groups and potential consumers, spending dollars on media campaigns. But with the popularity of social media interfaces such as Facebook and Twitter, groups are finding free marketing opportunities. Messages can be directly delivered to interested parties who opt in for such information. Additionally, users who follow such social media Web sites are repurposing and redistributing such content. While users attempt to attract attention centered on their opinions and decisions, they are also, often unexpectedly, serving as an indirect marketer. Little to no money is necessary for this very public conversation, which many experts agree is a must as the future of Computer-Mediated Communications continues to remain very active and evolving.

The inaugural Big Omaha conference held in May 2008 primarily used Twitter to market the event, build buzz, and sell tickets. Their approach to social media marketing worked, selling out all 400-plus seats. Conference organizers understand that Twitter worked not simply because Twitter is easy to use, but also because a number of their primary audience lives and works on Twitter. Rather than spend dollars on print advertisements, radio, or even television ads, the Big Omaha team went online and spoke directly to attendees. “Tweets” have already trickled in for Big Omaha 2010, and organizers anticipate another successful conference that’s marketed by nontraditional means.

Social media marketing, much like the Internet and the World Wide Web, remains in its infancy. More often than not, businesses and organizations will likely embrace social media marketing not by textbook examples or case studies, but by trial and error. Future researchers who examine social media marketing should be encouraged to investigate the organizations who utilize this medium and dig deep into their rationale. Big Omaha organizers were quick to explain why launching a MySpace profile to promote the conference simply wasn’t a smart option. Other events and groups most likely have similar rationales, which could benefit future organizations and efforts who wish to build buzz on the Web.

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**Appendix A**

Big Omaha tweet (Figure 1). Retrieved July 23, 2009, from

<http://twitter.com/BIGOmaha/status/1036533603>

Gary Vaynerchuk tweet (Figure 2). Retrieved July 24, 2009, from

<http://twitter.com/garyvee/statuses/895679575>