

# A CONVERSATION ABOUT FORMALIZED AUTHENTICITY (OR, HOW TO BE A MORE ENGAGING BRAND IN THE SOCIAL AGE).

## MEET JOHN.

John Ounpuu is a strategy director with Blast Radius, and thinks about this stuff for a living. We sat down to talk to him about the contradiction in terms of formalized social media, structured spontaneity, and the 'act casual!' directive for brands in social's maturing age.



**The practice of social media, for brands, has become much more formalized.**

**The days of saying “Hey! Social! Let’s give the mailroom guy a twitter account!” are over.**

## **Given the rise of social media, which has injected all kinds of new energy and conditions and expectations into traditional marketing, how would you define today's brand strategist?**

What we do as brand strategists at Blast Radius is help brands create a more meaningful relationship with their customers. We take positive things that already exist in the brand's DNA, in the customer's mind and in the existing relationship between the two parties, and we **magnify** those things. We take what's working and build on it, add depth.

## What does magnification look like?

It means looking at the existing thinking around brand – the brand attributes that shape the presentation of the brand in traditional channels – and using that as a springboard for something more engaging. Research is key here, with the brand listening to what customers really think as opposed to making assumptions based on how they *wished* people felt about them. With good listening, brands already have the raw ingredients to inform their voice in social places, and to craft voice, tone, frequency, creative. People used to think it was enough to set up shop in these channels, run a few promotions off-the-cuff. Now there's discipline around it. Efforts in social channels need to be informed by the brand just like all marketing channels. That doesn't mean a corporate presence in social media is doomed to be inauthentic or contrived in that horribly transparent way that we've all witnessed. But these days, social media efforts – for those on the right track – are certainly more thoughtful and more strategic than they might have once been.

## Will this new rigor compromise social media's status as a nursery of open brands? Is structure a contradiction to all the unstructuredness that social media represents?

Structure just eases fear. Twitter, for instance, is a blank slate. People go on there and forget their business goals. They try to do too much – customer support, formal announcements, promotions, fan stuff. That's why some are so quick to get overwhelmed, and unable to pinpoint effect. There can and should be a thoughtful approach to what seems like casual conversations. Structure just helps us, as marketers, to stage those conversations while staying focused on goals. That said, the highly controlled approach of traditional marketing can sometimes miss the subtleties and complicated dynamics of the relationships and social interactions that create engagement. You need some art along with your science. Brand strategy calls for as much art as this new dimension does. It needs careful analysis and creativity, insight, intuition. It's hard to do. It's not formulaic.

# A MORE ENGAGING BRAND IS:

**REAL BUT STRUCTURED.  
REACTIVE BUT STRATEGIC.**

**A MEASURED PRESENCE  
DOES NOT EQUAL A FAKE  
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## **Do companies worry about losing authenticity by applying that structure to social media? Does that make them uncomfortable?**

Not enough. The opposite problem is prevalent – brands are most comfortable when they're controlled and in control. It's our job to make sure they don't start being perceived as canned or corporate – and that has a lot to do with the formalized brand work I've been talking about. But it's also a matter of hiring the right person to apply that structure and execute on it. The guy who manages Starbucks' twitter account is an ex-barista. Nike Jordan's community manager is really into basketball and rap and he's done youth coaching. It's not about putting on a mask. You want someone who's got the right skills and who can write, but who's also close to the target market and who understands the existing dynamic between the audience and the brand.

Even with carefully defined goals and carefully chosen tools and skilled people behind it, social efforts won't work without the substance and value that keeps customers interested. Without this at the core, you can create some superficial interactions, do some contests or promos, buy some fans, but it's all hollow. And if that's all you're doing, you're missing the real strength of these tools and channels – the opportunity to strengthen connections and relationships.

Ultimately it's about coming up with an authentic brand. It's hard to talk about this without it sounding prescriptive, which seems like a contradiction in terms. Real but structured. Reactive but strategic. A measured presence does not equal a fake presence. Not with the right people behind it.

# THE PATH TO 'MORE ENGAGING' IN THE SOCIAL AGE

- 1.** Write a list of goals then cut it in half. Keep the rejected half as reminders of where not to go.
- 2.** Base your social voice on the existing role your brand embodies for customers.
- 3.** Validate that role with a bit of research (resist the pull of wishful thinking).
- 4.** Hire people who can play that role *authentically*.
- 5.** Don't think of them as tweets or status updates. Think of them as brand programming.

## How do brands mess up with social media?

By sounding more like spokespeople than fans. By being obviously corporate, dull, faux-enthusiastic. By sounding like a guy in a suit trying to sell you something. By broadcasting, and being all about themselves. I follow a couple brands like this because I find them fascinating in a kind of morbid way. They're tactical, self-indulgent, verbose. It's like friends on Facebook who pepper you with constant Farmville invitations or status updates like "oh boy I'm looking forward to the weekend". They make you want to click HIDE. And when a brand makes people feel like that? It's a car crash.

## Does strategy and structure narrow the gap between social media and traditional marketing?

Social media used to be perceived as an extra, a toy, a diversion that was at times both fun and maddeningly unpredictable. Now, we're approaching social marketing with the same rigor we'd apply to, say, crafting a strategy for any other channel, digital or not. Content that lives on social channels can be just as impactful as anything else a brand releases to the world. It allows for more spontaneity, but smart brands take an editorial approach. Don't think of it as a wall post. Think of it as brand programming with a social bent.

In traditional marketing, branding was about defining how you're going to present yourself. Hair, makeup, clothes. The first thing out of your mouth as you're shaking hands. That was brand strategy. Now, brand strategy is "what's the next thing I'll say, after the handshake? How will I respond to what the customer says next?"

**FOR MORE ON WHAT TO SAY NEXT, COME TALK TO US.  
HELLO@BLASTRADIUS.COM**