TURN FOLLOWERS INTO CUSTOMERS



JULIAN DELPHIKI

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Social Media Business

Define your social strategy, start selling on social media and expand your business in China

#strategy #socialselling #china

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PART I

Social Media Strategy

Chapter 1 The Social Media Landscape

Chapter 2 New Developments and Social Platforms

Chapter 3 Creating Your Social Media Strategy

Chapter 4 Social Media in the Age of AI

CHAPTER 1

The Social Media Landscape

IT IS ALMOST GUARANTEED that you are already familiar with social media, and are using it to chat with friends, share pictures, and perhaps even in your work. But in these pages, we are going to guide you through everything you need to know about social media: the latest trends and developments and how to get the most out of it for your brand, campaigns, and activity. In these first chapters, we are going to explore what exactly social media is and how many of the brands you are familiar with are already using it, and introduce the trends and issues which you, as a brand and as an individual, need to be aware of.

The state of social media in 2024

Currently, social media is becoming less social than ever. One of the primary reasons for this shift is the increasing focus of social media platforms on content from influencers rather than connections with friends.

Initially, social media platforms were designed to foster connections between individuals, allowing people to share updates, photos, and thoughts with their friends and family. The core idea was to create a virtual space where social interactions could thrive, transcending geographical boundaries. However, over time, the landscape of social media has evolved significantly.

Today, the algorithms driving these platforms prioritize content that generates the most engagement, which often comes from influencers and popular content creators rather than personal

connections. Influencers, with their large followings and professionally curated content, are seen as more likely to keep users engaged and on the platform longer. This shift in focus means that users are increasingly exposed to a steady stream of sponsored posts, product placements, and lifestyle content from influencers.

While this type of content can be entertaining and sometimes informative, it often comes at the expense of genuine social interaction. Instead of seeing updates from friends about their daily lives, users are more likely to encounter polished and commercially-driven posts from influencers. This can create a sense of disconnection, as the original purpose of staying in touch with personal contacts is overshadowed by a constant barrage of influencer content.

Another reason for the decreasing social nature of social media is the increasing prevalence of product-related content. Social media platforms are evolving into powerful sales channels, incorporating features such as live streaming shopping. While these developments enhance the platforms' commercial capabilities, they further diminish the focus on social connections.

Social media's transformation into a marketplace is evident in the growing number of advertisements, sponsored posts, and direct shopping options integrated into the user experience. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have introduced features that allow users to shop directly from posts, stories, and live streams. Live streaming shopping events, where influencers or brands showcase products in real-time and interact with potential buyers, are becoming increasingly popular. These features leverage social media's interactive nature to drive sales, creating a seamless shopping experience within the app.

However, the emphasis on commercial content often comes at the expense of personal interactions. As users scroll through their feeds, they encounter a higher volume of product promotions and sales pitches rather than updates from friends and family. This shift can make the social media experience feel more like browsing a digital catalog than engaging in a community of personal connections.

The commercialization of social media also affects how users engage with content. Instead of participating in conversations or sharing personal experiences, users are more likely to interact with branded content through likes, shares, or purchases. This transactional form of engagement can lead to a more superficial interaction with the platform, reducing the depth and quality of social interactions.

Moreover, the constant exposure to product-related content can contribute to consumer fatigue and overwhelm. Users may find themselves inundated with targeted ads and promotional posts, which can detract from the enjoyment and relaxation that social media once provided. This environment can make it harder for users to find and connect with the personal content they initially came to the platform for.

Finally, the emergence of virtual influencers could significantly disrupt the nature of the content and profiles that users are consuming on social media. Virtual influencers, or computer-generated characters that act as influencers, are becoming increasingly prevalent. These digital personas are crafted with advanced technologies, allowing them to interact with followers, endorse products, and engage in promotional activities just like human influencers. However, their rise brings a new set of challenges to the social media landscape.

KEY CONCEPT

Virtual influencer

A computer-generated character or avatar that acts as an influencer: it interacts with followers, endorses products and takes part in promotional activities, just like a human influencer, but is entirely fictional and fully controlled by its creators.

Virtual influencers are created with precision, often embodying idealized features and lifestyles that are meticulously curated by their creators. They are immune to many of the issues that human influencers face, such as scandals, fatigue, or inconsistencies, which makes them appealing to brands seeking reliable and controllable marketing tools. As a result, these virtual figures can dominate social media feeds with content that is consistently polished and on-brand.

However, the prevalence of virtual influencers (more on that below) can further erode the authenticity and relatability of social media. Unlike human influencers who share their personal experiences, struggles, and successes, virtual influencers are entirely fictional.

This lack of genuine human connection can make interactions with their content feel superficial and contrived. Users may find it harder to connect on an emotional level with a digital persona, which can diminish the sense of community and real-life connection that social media once provided.

> *"Social media channels will be redefined not by what users want, but by what the platforms need."*

The rise of virtual influencers

Traditionally, companies have often utilized animated or illustrated mascots—such as Tony the Tiger, the Jolly Green Giant, and the Geico Gecko—as the face of their brand. These characters have proven successful, and with the rise of artificial intelligence and the growing influence of real-life digital influencers, it's no surprise that businesses are now exploring virtual AI influencers to represent their brands.

These computer-generated characters or avatars, designed to resemble humans and powered by algorithms, can interact with users on social media, create content, and endorse products or services. This trend has gained traction among brands looking for innovative ways to engage audiences and leverage influencer marketing. Seventeen members of the Forbes Agency Council provide insights into how AI influencers might revolutionize brand representation.

The following insights, while sometimes contradictory, suggest that the impact of virtual influencers is still unfolding, but they are undeniably already part of the marketing landscape.

- Success with AI influencer marketing will mirror the success found in real influencer marketing. Brands that align their AI influencer

campaigns with audience interests and maintain their core identity will thrive. Those chasing novelty may not fare as well.

- AI influencers, particularly in fashion, have shown promise. However, success requires more than creating unique characters. Storylines, character development, and creativity are essential to sustain engagement and impact.
- Integrating AI influencers as the "face" of a brand requires careful consideration. While AI promises significant business impacts, akin to the internet's evolution, its timing in marketing conflicts with the demand for authenticity. Employing AI influencers can be effective, but it must be done thoughtfully and not merely for convenience.
- AI's greatest advantage is its ability to be customized. AI influencers can be tailored to appeal to any demographic and can be quickly adjusted to target different audiences. This level of personalization surpasses that of traditional influencers, offering more precise and consistent customer engagement.
- AI mascots could serve as advanced animated spokespeople, capable of real-time interaction with consumers through voice activation, complete with realistic body and facial expressions. The potential for interactivity with AI brand mascots is exciting. Expect AI mascots that can interact with audiences via chat or augmented reality, merging brand spokesperson and customer service roles into one.
- While AI influencers can rapidly create, test, and scale strategies, this speed can also lead to challenges in maintaining authenticity and alignment with the brand, making it hard to build a consistent presence.
- There will inevitably be AI-influencer failures, which might even become a source of amusement, like Wendy's social media team poking fun at these missteps. Some brands will experiment with AI influencers, but many may abandon the approach, realizing that real people prefer trusting other real people over digital mascots. Some fashion and lifestyle brands might find success, but they will be exceptions.

- Time will tell if AI influencers will prevail or if people will prefer connecting with real humans. AI influencers offer dynamic experiences but lack the long-standing emotional and nostalgic connections that traditional mascots have with audiences. Building similar connections will take time and require innovative storytelling and consistent messaging.
- AI influencers should ideally not mimic humans too closely. While integrating AI into brand stories is appealing, crossing into the realm of pretending they are real can undermine authenticity.
- We might soon see disclaimers like "AI reenactment" on testimonials or reviews presented by AI visuals, similar to the "paid actors" disclaimers in advertisements.
- AI influencers might accelerate the decline of consumer trust, exacerbating skepticism towards online endorsements. Genuine content demonstrating a product's effectiveness will become increasingly critical. Expect to see AI influencers modeled after classic mascots but with a digital twist. Imagine Tony the Tiger with real-time social media interaction, blending nostalgia with modern engagement.
- While current AI influencer campaigns have seen success, they often appear as novelties rather than sustainable marketing strategies. AI spokespeople can seem artificial and lack transparency, which may not resonate well with consumers long-term. As AI becomes harder to distinguish from humans, people will seek connections. AI avatars that look, sound, and feel like friends can foster a sense of belonging, leading to more AI-driven blogs and content. Despite the rise of AI influencers on social media, most established brands will likely continue to rely on human-based marketing for its authenticity and emotional connection.

These varied perspectives highlight the potential and pitfalls of AI influencers, suggesting a future where they may play a significant role, but with careful and thoughtful implementation.

On the verge of regulation

Recently, social media platforms have come under increasing scrutiny and are on the verge of more stringent regulation. One major area of concern is the impact of social media usage on the mental health of teenagers. As conversations about this issue intensify, lawmakers and regulatory bodies are responding with new regulations aimed at mitigating potential harm.

There has been a growing body of evidence suggesting that excessive use of social media can negatively affect the mental well-being of young people. Issues such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and exposure to inappropriate content are among the primary concerns. In response, some governments have started to introduce laws that specifically address these problems. For example, new regulations may include age verification measures to ensure that younger users cannot access potentially harmful content, limits on data collection from minors, and requirements for platforms to implement stronger parental controls.

Additionally, there are calls for greater transparency from social media companies about their algorithms and the ways in which they influence user behavior. Policymakers are also advocating for educational programs to teach teens and their parents about safe social media practices and the potential risks associated with excessive use.

These regulatory efforts reflect a broader recognition of the significant role that social media plays in the lives of young people and the need to protect their mental health in an increasingly digital world. As these laws come into effect, they are likely to shape the future landscape of social media, promoting a safer and more mindful approach to its use.

The TikTok question

At the center of the new social media war is TikTok, a wildly popular platform owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company. This has sparked an ongoing conflict between the United States government and TikTok, fueled by increasing concerns over cybersecurity and the potential undermining of Western values.