A woman sits in front of a camera. While you watch, her face goes from ordinary to cover-page extraordinary with the help of professional hairstyling and make-up treatment—and Photoshop. The Dove “Evolution” video, posted on YouTube, illustrated how the accepted concept of “natural” beauty is in reality heavily manufactured. With the video, Dove took the false idea of unachievable beauty, which plays on the fears and insecurities of so many women, and turned it into an honest dialogue.

But more than that, the video was a great example of the crossover between a solid creative concept, traditionally the domain of advertising, and the relational influence of public relations. It became part of Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty,” an effort that helped move Dove, a unit of Unilever, from a traditional marketing approach (high cost, low frequency, low interaction) to the
the social media advantage

publishing approach (high volume, low cost, interactive content).

The campaign had a solid impact on sales: In 44 countries, consumers responded by making Dove a US$3 billion brand. In 2006, Landor Associates computed that the brand had grown by US$1.2 billion in the previous three years. It’s amazing what an honest conversation with consumers can build. And it has been done largely without television ads and mostly with print ads, billboards, public relations efforts and the Web.

To become relevant again, brands need to hustle and adapt, out-teaching instead of outspending the competition.

Company-changing, not just game-changing

We’re witnessing a shift from company-controlled messages to outcome-driven business innovation for those companies that are willing to go all the way to the edge to find new growth opportunities. The real difference, however, occurs in the processes. By focusing on creating instead of allocating, marketing, public relations and advertising can support and fund that journey.

Social media are the latest tools to help you extend and share content further, either by allowing your community to spread it for you, or by inviting the community to co-create it with you. Building a dialogue with the community and building relationships have always been part of the work of public relations professionals. But now they need to take a holistic view, by giving more information, helping people understand the full costs and benefits of their individual decisions, educating and illuminating rather than obscuring, and adding context to content.

Boorish marketers and arrogant advertisers turned off customers by treating them as faceless mass consumers without a personal story worth paying attention to. This resulted in brands becoming commodities in a sea of sameness. To become relevant again, brands need to hustle and adapt, out-teaching instead of outspending the competition.

A new study published in McKinsey Quarterly, based on consumer data from the U.S., Germany and Japan, reports that two-thirds of the touch points in a buyer’s active evaluation process are now consumer-driven: user-generated reviews, word of mouth and in-store interactions. Only one-third of the touch points are still company-driven. This context changes the playing field.

People may want to be entertained, have relationships or just get stuff done online.

Here are a few examples that can help you when creating an online campaign or program:

- **Marketing + social media**: Provide exclusive special offers to the users of a particular site. For example, Dell offers exclusive discounts on computers through a Twitter account. Scale comes when you build the network and community interested in that value proposition, a direct response to the offer. The Twitter offers from Dell weren’t the product of one advertising campaign or one PR stunt. They were the result of Dell’s improved reputation thanks to the efforts of a dedicated team of communicators via blogger outreach and distributed conversations...

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Dove’s “Evolution” video on YouTube helped create an honest dialogue with customers. Watch it at www.dove.us/#/features/videos/videogallery.aspx/

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**Community building blocks**

- **Start with who**. Decide both who will be part of your internal social media team and who you want to connect with online and off. Add what you’re trying to accomplish—your objectives—and then create how you will do that—your strategy. Clear definitions of outcomes will allow you to measure and attribute results.

- **Align everything you do**, no matter what tactics and tools you use. Public relations, marketing and advertising are different communication vehicles that allow you to listen to and engage buyers in different ways.

- **Keep it real.** Be realistic and honest to stay credible and relevant, and to resonate with your audience. Providing them with a consistent experience is one powerful way to do that.

- **Test, measure, adjust, repeat**. Be open to changing what you do, depending on the feedback you receive as you engage in micro-interactions. Learn relationship development from public relations, creativity from advertising, and presence from marketing. Then turn the traditional on its head by including interaction in tactics, enabling customers and buyers to talk with each other and build communities.

—V.M.
through blogs, a company home base at Direct2Dell, and a team’s efforts on Twitter and in other social networks. The result: Dell announced US$3 million in sales since 2007—just from Twitter.

• **Public relations + social media:** Monitor and build dialogue about your organization. If you’re smart and get to know the people in the room—and they get to know you—this will happen when you are not even present. And that can be even more powerful. A few examples: MicroPR on Twitter serves as a communication bridge for media and bloggers when they need help from PR. Writers looking for help with a story send a tweet with their request to @micropr, where PR professionals following the MicroPR feed can see the request and respond directly through the writer’s preferred channel.

  The social media release (SMR) format spearheaded by Todd Defren and the team at SH IFT Communications integrates aspects of marketing communication, and allows people to interact with the parts of your content that have value to them. Usually housed on company web sites, the SMR allows bloggers, journalists and other content producers to easily extract the information they need for their audiences. It can include sections for comments, bookmarks, RSS feeds, videos, photos, quotes and more.

• **Advertising + social media:** Share with peers. Now you have recognition and mindshare among people in a network. User recommendations, referral traffic and community support are the new word of mouth. How many of you have shared a clever ad with someone else? How about sharing in the ad itself, as happened in the T-Mobile flash mob spots? In one, a seemingly spontaneous dance party erupts in London’s Liverpool Street Station. Footage of the event, which includes people recording it on their phones, premiered as a TV spot and was also posted on YouTube. The video is followed by the tagline “Life’s for sharing” and the T-Mobile logo, and at the time of this writing had been viewed more than 2 million times.

• **Branding + social media:** Provide impressions from the experiences of the customer base. This is more about the action people take because they want to be associated with your organization’s purpose. Check out IKEA Hacker (http://ikeahacker.blogspot.com), where people actually ask blog author Jules for advice about customizing IKEA products. The great thing about this for IKEA is that Jules drives people to the company’s newsletter and catalog, not to mention that he is deeply passionate about the brand and its products. Companies can monitor online conversations like this to understand what customers are saying to each other about their products. By observing conversations and other online behaviors, companies can learn how people use their products. Imagine a free focus group.

**Fragm entation and convergence**

All of the components in this mix are about micro-interactions. Public relations is the discipline that gets to the single interactions, the relationships, more closely. Since PR is about the details, the stuff your public cares about, it needs to move more decisively to building and constantly renewing relationships with people (not just the media) to increase goodwill toward your organization. When PR partners or integrates with advertising and marketing, you and your audience can have a much more engaging and interactive experience.

Since the 2008 U.S. presidential election, many
companies have woken up to the fact that engagement and relationships can be ignited through social media, even when scale is a question. The promotional environment has certainly changed. With two-way conversations possible in more places, the amount of noise has escalated.

You can break through that noise with two main ingredients:

- **Content that promotes** the key issues, values and work in support of providing a product or service and empowering the people it serves with real value. For example, the Obama brand broke through many channels with extreme clarity and one message—change—allowing people to co-opt it and create their own stories around it.

- **Willingness to participate** where your customers are, to be helpful where those interactions happen, and to empower the community that forms to do so on your behalf. This is a lot harder for organizations to do than it is for them to tightly control their message, making the customer come to them rather than vice versa.

To build a community or fan base, first you need to have something worth sharing. Your content doesn’t exist in isolation. It needs to make sense within the context your customers live in. As the McKinsey Quarterly study says, you need to give prospects reasons to switch to you instead of excuses to stay with what they have—and you need to make it very easy for them to progress through their buying cycle. Integration and convergence of different communication functions like PR, marketing and advertising can help you do both.

**Measurement basics**

Online, we leave a digital trail. When people ask friends on Twitter, ask peers in communities, or read or contribute to online reviews, you can see it. There are obvious correlations to activities and outcomes, if you focus on measuring what you can measure and what matters.

- **Start** with a baseline: Know where you are before you integrate social media tactics.
- **Establish** financial and nonfinancial outcomes and metrics.
- **Measure** what you can prove—performance as correlated to increased sales, number of transactions and the value of those transactions.
- **Include** qualitative metrics—performance as correlated to customer behavior, plus factors like referrals (number of interactions) and sentiment (quality of interactions).

—V.M.

People are hardwired to be social, and the technologies available today are highlighting and engaging that aspect of our nature. The best ways for business to benefit in the resulting knowledge flows is to contribute to them.

In social media, the differences between marketing, advertising, PR and branding are now blurred. The democratization of information has allowed real people—your stakeholders, your potential customers—to participate in all of them. We’ve gone from one-to-many communication to many-to-many. If you can get beyond the technology, you will find that we’re back to connecting with what people need and want to solve a problem. It’s about them, not you.