Shaping the Future: The New Social Ecosystem

Mark Burgess
Blue Focus Marketing

Abstract

The social ecosystem model provides an effective organizational blueprint for social media adoption. Because social media marketing is inherently advocacy-based, it depends on authentic, two-way interactions, peer recommendations, and earned media to succeed. Employees are empowered under a social ecosystem framework to engage across channels as authentic brand ambassadors. This ecosystem has three pillars: (1) the social governance council (SGC), (2) the employee experience (EX), and (3) the customer experience (CX). Through a focus on guidance, listening, and learning by the SGC, employees become the bridge between brand and customer, resulting in improved business outcomes and greater brand value.

With the era of social business well underway, most organizations understand that marketing isn't what it used to be. Social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn can't be ignored, providing a wealth of new touch points for reaching customers, prospects, and other stakeholders. But the value of social media extends beyond this proliferation of touch points. The prospect of social engagement presents a whole new form of marketing, one rooted in authentic, two-way interactions, peer recommendations, and earned media.

This makes social media an exciting new frontier—but also a frequently misunderstood one. Although maintaining an active presence on social media platforms has already become an essential marketing tool for brands large and small, many organizations are still struggling to maximize the potential of these efforts. It has become clear that "going social" involves much more than a redistribution of marketing resources to online channels. In the social era of business—a time in which customers, employees, and even the organizations themselves are seeking deeper, more durable brand

relationships—practices traditionally relegated to the marketing department are coming to involve the entire organization.

If companies are to rise to this new challenge and embrace an expanded, more holistic view of branding, they must first invest in developing an organization-wide social ecosystem. In such an ecosystem, social processes are established both internally and externally to streamline the business needs of an organization—whether HR, marketing, or product design—and create an environment that values communication, cooperation, and collaboration between management, employee, and customer. Without a social ecosystem in place, social business practices are often treated purely as a function of branding or marketing. This can be detrimental to an organization's long-term health, leading to unclear objectives, inconsistent messaging, and missed opportunities.

"Social" Is About More Than Marketing and Ad Spend

To understand the inherent limitations of thinking of social processes merely as a function of marketing—and not as part of a larger social ecosystem—it's important to understand the role social concepts currently play inside many organizations. Whereas the cultivation of a social ecosystem fosters an organization-wide shift in processes and oversight, a view of social media purely in terms of marketing opportunities and ad spend runs the risk of missing what makes social media such a valuable tool for engagement and advocacy in the first place.

As recent data suggest, while organizations are increasingly putting more resources into digital channels broadly and social channels specifically, many are doing so without a clear objective in mind. The result is an increased investment without a clear return on that investment. Public media consumption habits continue to move from television to online channels, where customers are not only more likely to be reached, but also more likely to be paying attention.[1] In response, digital advertising has grown to take up an estimated 34 percent of ad spend in 2015.[2] But while this now accounts for over one-third of all advertising dollars, it is significant that digital advertising, as opposed to social marketing, is comprised largely of more traditional push models in an online environment: search, banner ads, pop-ups, and the like.[3] Meanwhile, although marketing evangelists continue to speak to the value of social media engagement, proving a business case for social marketing has been surprisingly difficult.[4]

Compounding this, while increasing resources are being allocated to digital advertising and social marketing, diminishing returns in a stagnant industry have hounded these efforts at every turn.[5] In fact, according to a 2016 CMO survey, while social marketing spending is expected to increase

from 5.6 percent in 2009 to 20.9 percent by 2021, this added investment so far hasn't led to improved business outcomes.[6] It's no surprise, then, that only 10.2 percent of CMOs consider an investment in social marketing to yield an "above average" return. And while nearly half reported an "average" return, the remaining 40 percent consider their return on investment (ROI) "below average." [7] For those who would advocate for a greater commitment to social marketing processes, these aren't particularly encouraging numbers. For social media engagement to succeed, far more than 10 percent of businesses need to see above-average results.

At present, there exists a clear disconnect: many see vast potential in digital/social marketing, spurring an increased allocation of resources in this area, yet business leaders remain underwhelmed by the payoff. Part of the reason for this disconnect could certainly stem from improper or inconsistent deployment and integration of resources. Because social engagement still isn't fully understood, it's often treated separately from other marketing efforts. In fact, on a scale of one to seven, CMOs ranked their social integration at an average of 4.2.[8] And without the full backing of an organization's marketing department, any successes in the social arena will be limited—while the failures could be compounded. Another challenge is data management. In integrating customer information gathered from both social media and other sources, CMOs ranked their efforts a 3.4 out of seven—a number that has actually decreased over the previous year.[9] This indicates that while organizations have little difficulty collecting data, they are still unsure of how to apply this information in their marketing efforts—social or otherwise. But even assuming improved integration and data management, few organizations are likely to have a positive perception of their social marketing efforts if they are unable to measure their own success. According to one study, only 11.5 percent of CMOs were able to measure their organization's social effectiveness through quantitative data. And while 40.6 percent say they have a qualitative idea, 47.9 percent have been unable to determine any impact whatsoever.[10]

Taken together, the data indicate some troubling conclusions. While organizational spending on digital and social marketing suggest a clear perceived value, these efforts are often unfocused and difficult to measure. Further, a failure to integrate social efforts even within the marketing department unfairly and unnecessarily limits the scope and function of these efforts. For social programs—meaning any initiative that involves the targeted use of social tools to improve business outcomes, whether for marketing, customer service, or product design—to succeed, executive leadership must be able to understand, demonstrate, and champion these programs' value.[11] This means gaining a better understanding not only of how

social programs work, but also how they can be designed and deployed within an organization to become not just relevant marketing strategy, but a sound model for doing business in the 21st century. Such is the goal of the social ecosystem.

Finding the Value in Social Marketing

In order to establish the essential pillars of a social ecosystem, it is important first to understand how social marketing can help generate brand value—and how concepts such as brand ambassadorship and social advocacy tie into this process. Branding in social media is not as simple as buying ads, getting clicks, and generating sales. While prospects have shown to be more receptive to digital advertising than they are to television or print, fewer than half (47 percent) say they trust these forms of advertising. According to research, the most trusted form of advertising, with 92-percent support, is earned media—chiefly word-of-mouth recommendations from peers, friends, and family.[12] Social reviews on sites like Yelp or Amazon, which also constitute a form of earned media, have also become invaluable to the purchasing process, with 90 percent consulting reviews at least occasionally before buying a product—and 82 percent specifically seeking out negative reviews to make sure they are making informed choices.[13, 14]

Implicit in this data is the notion that, as its name implies, social media is an inherently advocacy-based platform. Social marketing is not about immediately generating a sale by telling consumers what to buy. Rather, it's about building communities through useful, relevant information, eventually forming a core fan base who will amplify a brand's message through authentic, organic exchanges. The social marketer's job is to create space for these exchanges, to encourage brand conversations, and to recognize and celebrate their brand's most vocal proponents.[15] In this way, what has commonly been referred to as the customer experience (CX) has evolved into a crucial component of online engagement—and therefore the social ecosystem. Whereas push models depend on a brand declaring its value to a captive audience, social advocacy models depend on two-way conversations involving detailed exchanges of information (e.g., content marketing), questions (e.g., Twitter AMAs), and even content co-creation (e.g., re-sharing fan-made content that ties into the brand).[16]

But despite the persistent difficulties arising from misallocated spending, unclear goals, and difficulty measuring outcomes, change may be coming. According to an IBM CMO report, 66 percent of CMOs surveyed plan to invest in developing and delivering deeper, more relevant customer experiences in 2016.[17] Such an initiative extends beyond social marketing and into the fundamental relationship a brand has with its customers.

Championing the CX in the social age means that social marketing efforts must be coordinated across sales and customer support channels with the goal of presenting a consistent, unified, and authentic voice. For brands to generate effective advocacy programs, the image or persona they present as part of the CX must be consistent not only across social channels, but also across departments—a goal that many brands have so far struggled to achieve.[18] Despite this challenge, however, other organizations that have championed this approach have seen encouraging results:

> Several other firms are also building customer-centricity into the essence of their brands, as Indian online clothing retailer Jabong shows. The company has earned a reputation for providing outstanding customer service. Here's one example of how it has done so. When a customer tweeted a complaint about the state of the courier bags Jabong used to deliver goods to customers, the company quickly responded with a design hackathon, attended by product designers, engineers, and logistics experts who collaborated to design a better courier bag and improve the last mile of the customer experience.[19]

More than a simple ad buy or even a viral-ready tweet, this is customer experience through product design, marketing through customer advocacy, and customer support through direct action. By demonstrating to stakeholders that they have not only heard customer complaints, but also acted upon them quickly and decisively, Jabong has earned considerable goodwill within their customers' communities. Further, it demonstrates that social media isn't merely a marketing channel, but a PR channel as well—and a pathway to real-world action. This is how earned media works, with satisfied customers sharing their brand experience throughout the purchase cycle with friends and family. And when those stories of satisfied customers get back to a brand's social channels, that brand can then amplify these moments of goodwill to further the customer bond and generate more goodwill. Seeing the clear benefits of this process, two-thirds of CMOs have indicated that building "deeper, richer customer experiences [is] their top marketing priority." [20]
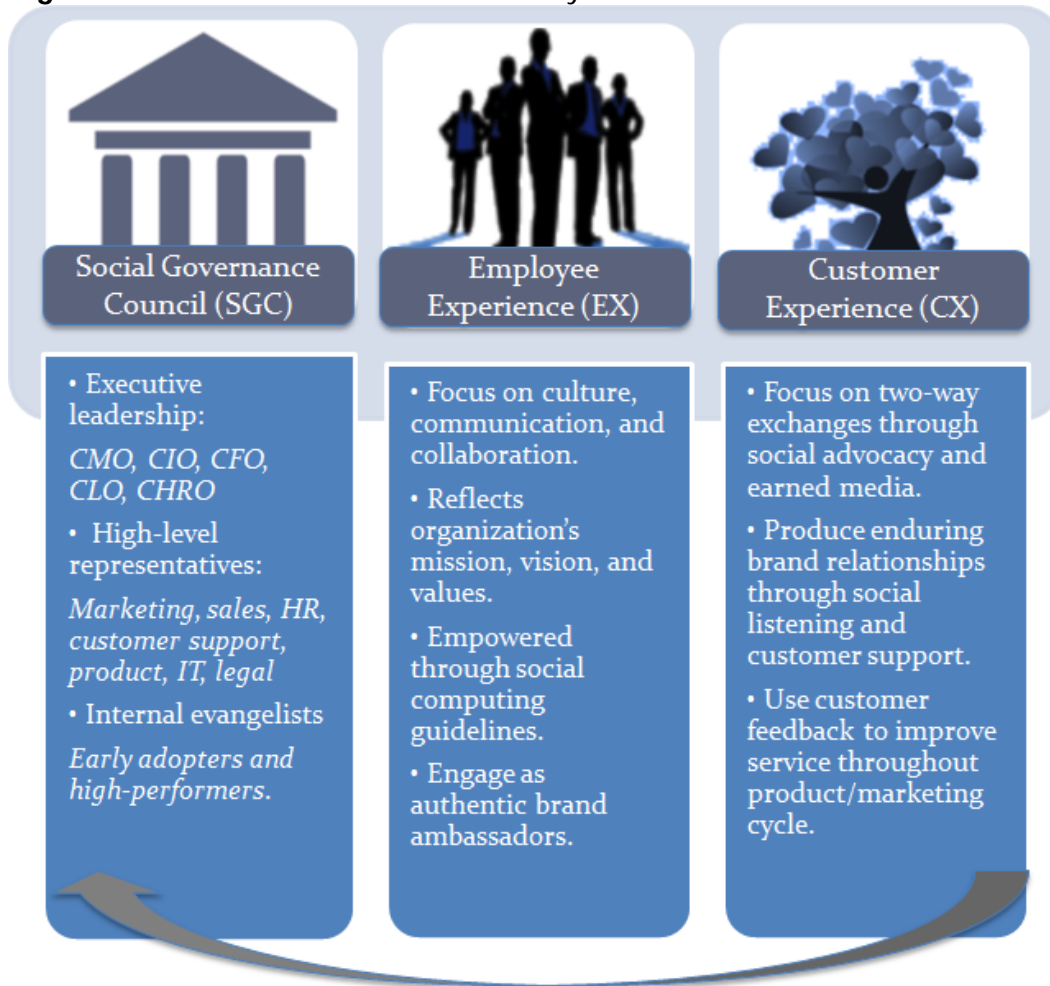
Such deep commitment to the CX, one that extends across departments and could be said to affect an organization's entire workforce, forms an essential pillar of the social ecosystem. In fact, it could be seen to represent a shift to an economy of the experience-as-product. In this environment, experience is "co-created between the product and the user," which in turn leads to a deeper, more lasting brand relationship.[21] But while fundamentally tied to social marketing, these examples also show how the importance and value of the CX extends into all areas of a business—including product

design, PR, HR, and even IT. But in the social ecosystem model, in which the CX is not a starting point, but rather a single pillar in a larger process that begins with upper management and members of the C-Suite and is driven by social employees, organizations can begin to arrive at the answers they've been seeking.

Designing the Social Ecosystem

Three essential pillars comprise the social ecosystem (see Figure 1): (a) executive and upper management leadership in the form of the social governance council (SGC), (b) the employee experience (EX), and (c) the customer experience (CX). Suffusing this ecosystem is the commitment to learning, flexibility, and adaptation necessary for sustained viability in the social ecosystem.

Figure 1. Three Pillars of the Social Ecosystem

Social Governance Council (SGC)

- Executive leadership:

CMO, CIO, CFO, CLO, CHRO

- High-level representatives:

Marketing, sales, HR, customer support, product, IT, legal

- Internal evangelists

Early adopters and high-performers.

Employee Experience (EX)

- Focus on culture, communication, and collaboration.
- Reflects organization's mission, vision, and values.
- Empowered through social computing guidelines.
- Engage as authentic brand ambassadors.

Customer Experience (CX)

- Focus on two-way exchanges through social advocacy and earned media.
- Produce enduring brand relationships through social listening and customer support.
- Use customer feedback to improve service throughout product/marketing cycle.

With the foundational understanding of the CX already established in the previous section, the following sections will discuss the SGC and EX pillars in detail, followed by discussions of the value of social learning and emerging data on the benefits of a social ecosystem as it pertains to organization, employee, and customer alike.

The Social Governance Council (SGC)

In many organizations, the concept of social governance emerges as needed during early adoption processes, although research has found that such a piecemeal approach is likely to produce inconsistencies, silos, and difficulties in scaling social programs down the road.[22] Further, while social programs are found to be more successful when driven by executive leadership, a majority of respondents in an Altimeter study (60 percent) did not feel that such leadership was in place. And while a slight majority (53 percent) agreed that their organization's social business strategy formed the foundation of its social media governance, fewer than half were confident in their policies' efficacy, while only 16 percent agreed that "social business governance is well understood and deployed throughout all parts of the organization." [23]

Considering the need for organization-wide involvement in social initiatives in order to ensure their success, a greater emphasis must be placed on executive-level oversight. This makes the social governance council (SGC), one with representation across departments, an essential pillar in building a social ecosystem. This governance council could include representation from:

- *Executive leadership.* Top-level members of the SGC help to make sure that any efforts align with the brand's mission, vision, and values. Involvement from the CEO, even if only as a public advocate, can add legitimacy to any social program. More active C-level participants include the chief marketing officer (CMO), chief information officer (CIO), chief financial officer (CFO), chief human resources officer (CHRO), and chief learning officer (CLO).
- *Upper-level management.* Participants at this level take a more hands-on role and help translate SGC guidelines and mandates into actionable processes. It is recommended that participants be drawn from across departments to ensure organizational needs are met. Participants can include managers in marketing/PR, sales, HR, customer support, product development, IT, and legal.
- *Internal evangelists.* Individual adoption of social tools and processes often outpaces organizational adoption. Any SGC that can identify internal evangelists, early adopters, and other high-performing

representatives will benefit from these individuals' practical knowledge and hands-on experience.

With these councilmembers in place, the SGC is then tasked with not only defining what "social" means to their organization, but also designing the essential processes and conditions for a social ecosystem to take root. These include:

- *Establishing objectives.* To what degree should social tools be incorporated within an organization? How does the social component fit into elements such as product design, recruitment, marketing, and customer service? How can social tools help departments communicate better internally and consistently represent their brand externally? Finally, who's in charge of the execution of these objectives, and how will they communicate organizational social goals to their employees?

- *Design pilot and scalability.* Researchers at Altimeter found that one key challenge of social business was scaling up from a pilot to an organization-wide program, a core reason for this being the lack of a clear plan.[24] With an SGC in place, many of these challenges can be mitigated, offering employees a clear blueprint for both how to get started and how to move forward.

- *Determine key metrics.* Thought leader Gary Vaynerchuk once famously asked "What's the ROI of your mother?" as a rhetorical flourish to demonstrate that social processes have intrinsic organizational value.[25] While social marketing should be able to justify its ROI to an extent, a social ecosystem extends far beyond marketing efforts, and therefore cannot be measured purely in financial terms. Metrics such as social "chatter" about a brand, views and shares of branded content, and customer advocacy can help, as can internal measures such as employee adoption of tools, brand advocacy, and even frequency of communication and collaboration between departments. The clearer the organizational goals, the more robust and focused the metrics become.

- *Monitor progress.* As previously discussed, many organizations have a wealth of data collection tools and strategies, although their ability to access and analyze that data is often underdeveloped. Organizations serious about capitalizing on their efforts must take their social monitoring processes as seriously as the practices themselves.

- *Establish meeting frequency.* Building and sustaining a social ecosystem is an ongoing process. The SGC should meet regularly (monthly, quarterly, biannually) to reevaluate goals and adapt to changing needs.

With the SGC in place and policies established, the organization can then move on to the next pillar of the social ecosystem: designing the employee experience.

The Employee Experience (EX)

As organizations move away from inefficient social marketing silos and more into social ecosystems that impact processes across the enterprise, the question arises: how can employees be accommodated and empowered in this new landscape? Implicit in the social ecosystem model is the knowledge that tool adoption alone is not enough to generate authentic brand ambassadorship and earned media. Employees must be encouraged to buy in to the process, necessitating a commitment from the SGC toward developing a social guidance that champions the employee experience (EX).

Many organizations have either already restructured or begun to do so around the idea of the EX. For instance, when Adobe decided to formalize its social efforts in 2009, it first conducted an internal audit to determine the degree to which employees were already engaging, what tools they were using, and how these factors affected workflow and productivity. While leaders found a high degree of independent adoption, they also found considerable duplication of effort, redundancies, and unintentional silos as a result. To encourage and reward employees' innovation and desire to advance social efforts, Adobe reorganized around the hub-and-spoke model, establishing an EX that removed unnecessary barriers to communication and collaboration. Through this model, employees engaged through a uniform set of tools, with each department directly connected through a central hub dubbed the "Center of Excellence."

Using this as its social foundation, the organization's next goal was to empower employees to begin engaging externally on Adobe's behalf—and in so doing become autonomous brand ambassadors and customer advocates. To facilitate this, leaders developed social guardrails, a simple five-point set of guidelines designed to help employees represent their brand professionally and avoid any slip-ups.[26] This commitment to the EX has been ongoing, with organizational leaders reevaluating a broad set of long-established policies in order to make the company more nimble, transparent, and employee-centric. For example, beginning in 2011, Adobe decided to replace what it considered an ineffective and time-consuming annual review process with a check-in system oriented around continuous, ongoing employee feedback. The company quickly found that this shift led to a host of organizational benefits, including higher employee engagement, lower turnover, and greater leadership accountability.[27]

Through this restructuring around the EX, employees were essentially given the opportunity to keep doing what they had been doing all along—chiefly, developing social solutions to pressing business needs, albeit now with the organization's blessing and significant barriers to progress removed. This restructuring around the EX was essential for Adobe to move forward with its social ecosystem. But as the example of Dell will demonstrate, building a stable bridge between the employee experience and customer experience depends not only on a social-friendly organizational structure, but also on a fundamental commitment to organizational learning and listening.

Bridging the EX and CX with Training and Education

The ultimate goal of the EX in the social ecosystem is twofold: (a) to create an environment that encourages employee use of social processes, and (b) to help employees understand the fundamental purpose and function of social engagement. Without this understanding of purpose, and the attendant culture it produces, attempts at social media advocacy risk coming off as inconsistent, disjointed, or tone-deaf—the very issues the cultivation of a social ecosystem seeks to eradicate. Therefore, an investment in education, training, and empowerment is an investment in the kind of deep knowledge, skill sets, and processes that will foster authentic social employee advocacy and ultimately bolster the organization's CX.

One organization to recognize learning as an essential component of the social ecosystem was Dell, who as early as 2005 had become aware that they were not properly set up to monitor and incorporate consumer feedback into their business model. So, beginning with a pilot group of about two hundred employees, Dell created the Social Media and Communities University (SMaC-U). The program began with clear communication surrounding Dell's goals for SMaC-U, what they expected from employees, and how they intended to increase brand presence in the social web. As of 2014, over 12,000 employees had taken at least one course, with 7,000 achieving SMaC certification.

To keep employee learning ongoing, Dell hosts a series of open-format "unconferences," where employees from all branches of the organization are invited to learn about social media trends from outside experts. Breakout sessions also provide a fertile creative environment for employees to bring their own ideas to the table—many of which are eventually incorporated into SMaC training. Bridging the CX and EX is the Customer Advisory Panel (CAP) program. These CAP Days bring customers and employees together over the span of a weekend, where customers are encouraged to share their

thoughts openly on a variety of subjects, and even offer suggestions on how to improve current offerings—or even new products altogether.[28]

These programs also demonstrate how a social ecosystem can grow from training programs to organizational initiatives—and how companies can sustain a level of engagement in these programs after the initial training is completed. Indeed, many have argued that—in a highly innovative era where in-demand skill sets one year can become obsolete the next—organizations must target employees that are adaptable and committed to continuous learning rather than acquiring static skills. Says Josh Bersin in his *Predictions for 2015* report, "Companies should take a 'supply chain' view of skills, realizing that it often takes many years for employees to build deep skills within their roles or organizations; career development programs, job rotations, competency-based assessments, and simulations are increasingly important."[29] In this way, building a social ecosystem is no different than training skilled, dynamic employees. A strong EX requires sustained organizational support if employees are to become the flexible, resourceful, and adaptable thinkers necessary for creating a complete, comprehensive CX.
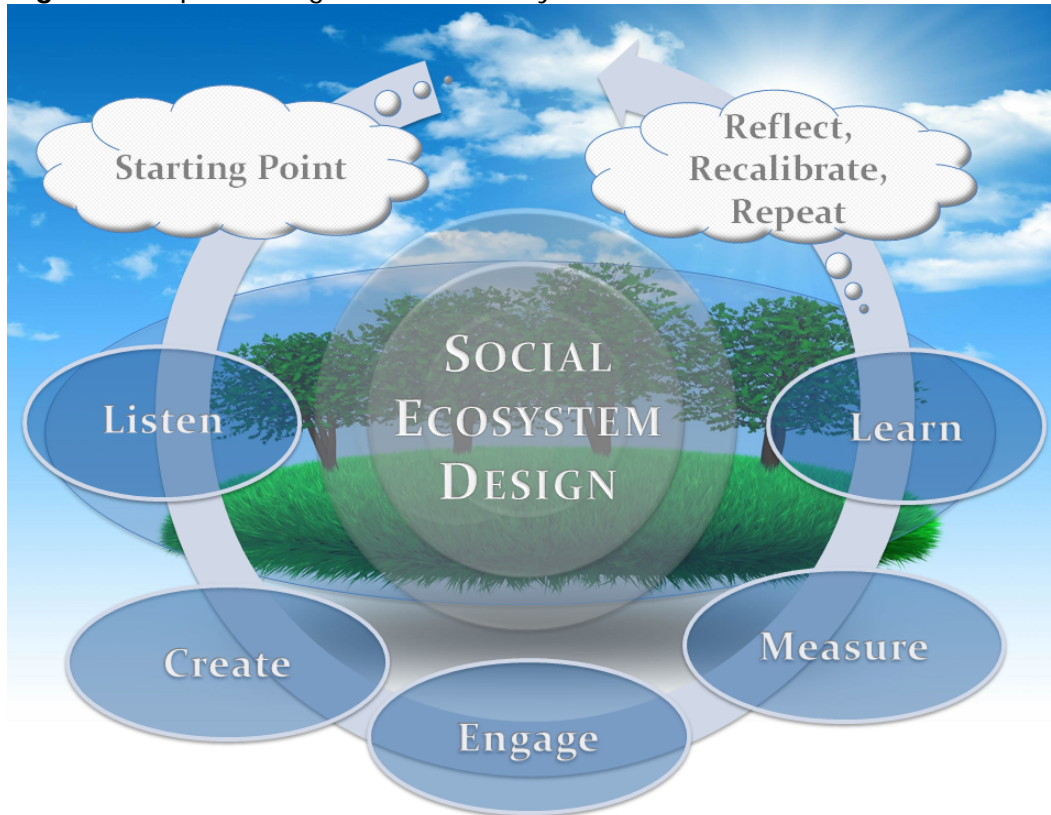
Finding the Value in Social Learning

One way to achieve an ecosystem that values lifelong learners is to understand how employees prefer to acquire new skills and to provide resources that support this process. Because of this, many organizations have turned to the 70:20:10 learning model. Credited to Morgan McCall of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), the model breaks down employee learning into three categories: self-directed (70 percent), mentoring and coaching (20 percent), and formal training (10 percent).[30] While formal training and mentorship should never be discounted, if nearly three-quarters of employee learning is self-directed, then organizations have a responsibility to support these informal processes however they can. For many organizations, the proliferation of analytics-based social learning platforms could be the answer:

> SAP, Saba, Skillsoft, Cornerstone OnDemand, Wiley CrossKnowledge, ADP, and IBM have all invested in new LMS interfaces that make learning easier and provide Netflix-like "recommendations" for learning. In 2015, you should reevaluate your learning platform; make sure you have a plan to deliver a "digital learning experience" that lets people rapidly find the content they need, helps them to find experts, and advises them on the formal training appropriate to their roles.[31]

Through such platforms, employees have the opportunity not only to learn the necessary skills for the task at hand, but also to receive guidance on acquiring related skills and directing their learning. Further, they are

afforded a social component by gaining access to other employees who have already acquired a certain skill and can provide additional direction. Many enterprise computing platforms also allow for the creation of user-generated content, allowing employees another avenue for learning and sharing.

Figure 2. Replenishing the Social Ecosystem

Recognizing and Replenishing a Thriving Social Ecosystem

In the social ecosystem, a social governance council establishes the scope and conditions necessary for implementing a comprehensive sustainable social program. This in turn provides the foundation for an employee experience that privileges collaboration, engagement, and authentic brand advocacy, paving the way for a dynamic, active customer experience in which the customer is not merely a passive listener, but an active participant in the brand. Finally, through the cultivation of a learning culture and the application of social monitoring, this activity feeds back into the SGC, which can then pivot its strategy to better recognize and reward this social advocacy (see Figure 2). In so doing, brands will become more responsive, attentive, and helpful—regardless of company size or geographical distribution.

And while the SGC provides the catalyst for the social ecosystem to develop, it is the social employee the helps that ecosystem thrive. Already, the data supporting this employee-first charge are mounting:

- Employee-run social media profiles are far more trusted than branded or executive accounts.[32]
- Consumers respond to employee-generated posts at a higher rate than they do to digital ads, with 21 percent reporting that they have "liked" such content.[33]
- Employee-generated or shared content is eight to ten times more effective than traditionally branded content.[34]
- Employee advocacy can increase visibility, inbound web traffic, brand recognition, and brand loyalty.[35]

While these figures paint a positive picture from a branding and outreach perspective, and while the ability to generate such results is essential to sustaining a social ecosystem, the question remains: does this methodology yield a greater financial windfall? According to LinkedIn, salespeople who share engaging content are 45 percent more likely to exceed their sales quota, and socially engaged companies are 57 percent more likely to generate increased sales leads.[36]

These numbers are certainly encouraging, but admittedly, it may still be too early to tell. LinkedIn also found that only about 3 percent of employees share content relevant to their industry or employer.[37] However, with an expected increase in organizational emphasis and social employee empowerment and participation, the number of social employee advocates should rise in the coming years. Many CMOs (62.6 percent) have cited content creation as their top priority, followed by campaign optimization and social media listening (41.5 percent), community engagement (40.5 percent), and customer care (30.8 percent).[38]

This spending emphasis, particularly on content creation, listening, and community engagement, shows a growing understanding of social media not only as a marketing channel, but as a multidimensional organizational touch point that offers brands benefits extending well beyond lead and sales generation. Further, the growing move to produce content and engage communities shows an understanding that, while some social marketing tasks can be automated, the need for authentic, thoughtful advocacy on behalf of social employees is essential to seeing real returns in the form of engaged social employee advocates, impassioned customer-driven earned media, improved brand awareness, and ultimately increased revenues. Through the three pillars of the social ecosystem, the position of the brand, the employee, and the customer are improved—a win-win proposition for all involved.

Author

Mark Burgess (@mnburgess) is cofounder and President of Blue Focus Marketing®, a social branding firm that helps businesses realize the power of the social employee. Mark is a TED speaker, and author of best-seller The Social Employee (McGraw-Hill) "How Great Companies Make Social Media Work." His book features success stories from IBM, AT&T, Dell, Cisco, Southwest, Adobe, and Domo. Mark is a digital marketer, content marketing strategist, speaker and marketing executive. He is also an online course author for Lynda.com/LinkedIn, and HBR Italia contributor. Mark is Part-Time Lecturer at Rutgers Business School teaching MBA Marketing and executive education courses. Mark is adjunct marketing professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Mark has held senior level B2B and B2C positions at PwC, McCann, and AT&T. Mark delivered a TEDx Talk in May, 2014 on The Rise of the Social Employee. Mark is listed on Forbes Top 100 Must-Follow Marketing Minds on Twitter. He is ranked #19 in the Top 200 Content Marketing Influencers, and is a contributor to the Wharton Future of Advertising 2020 project. Mark holds an Executive MBA from Fairleigh Dickinson University. email: mburgess@bluefocusmarketing.com

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