

Social Media:
Fad, Trend, or Much More?

by John P. Mulhall

“Facebook? Isn’t that just a fad?”

Well, um...no, actually. No, it’s not.

As a marketer, I’m actually astounded that this question is still being asked. Haven’t we all agreed on this point yet?

I wonder if this question sounded as strange to the ears of early telephone users as it spilled from the lips of their detractors, still clutching telegraphs in their cold, clammy hands.

According to Dictionary.com, a fad is a “fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period of time; a craze”. Examples of a fad would be the Pet Rock, neon socks and pegged jeans, the use of the term “fo shizzle”, Tickle-Me-Elmo, and The New Kids On The Block. (If you don’t know any of these references, I’m sorry to report that you are utterly disconnected from the pop culture zeitgeist.)

Most of us who use social media on a regular or even a semi-regular basis realize that a genie has been let out of a bottle. Social networking over the internet changes the way that we, as a society, interact and communicate with one another. And that’s a hard bell to un-ring...just ask, uh, Bell.

But wait. Hold on a second. Let me clarify things a bit.

I just said Facebook is not a fad (emphatically so, in fact). But really, it’s the concepts of social media and social networking that we’re talking about here. So, let me revise my statement a bit. Social media is definitely not a fad! And while Facebook is currently the #1 social media site (usurping Blogger in early 2009), the two are by no means synonymous.

I mean, I can’t predict the future. Facebook may not remain on top for very long. Who knows? But what I do know is that if they falter, there’ll be some new social media platform waiting to seize their throne. See, Facebook is to social media as CBS is to television. CBS may disappear one day, but television, in one form or another, is going to be around for the long haul.

Facebook currently reaps a harvest that was sewn in some very fertile internet soil by the likes of MySpace and Friendster in the early 2000s. In fact, one could argue that Facebook is simply the next evolution in social interaction across the internet that

started as far back as usenet, conceived in 1979, or EIES, conceived in 1978. Because computers only became ubiquitous within the last 10-15 years, that's actually a much longer period of evolutionary growth than most people perceive.

So if social media is not a fad, then what is it?

Well, some would say it is a "trend", defined by Dictionary.com as "the general course or prevailing tendency".

Hmmm. Well, I certainly can't argue with this, but I actually don't think it's a strong enough definition. Trends tend to be akin to fads, but they take place over a much longer period. Trends toward body types, language, hair styles, home styles, car styles, etc.

But trends don't represent the type of change I mentioned before. That's why I would call social media more of a "shift" (a paradigm shift, if you'll excuse some late 90's corporate speak.)

A shift, by definition, is much more than the general course or prevailing tendency. A shift is a "fundamental change in approach or assumptions".

Isn't that what this is? A fundamental change in approach?

Think about that briefly. Was the phone a trend? Or was it a shift? How about the automobile? The television? The internet?

Well, I would assert that social media is a shift unto itself.

I'll give you an example. When my father passed away earlier this year, Facebook was an instrumental tool in alerting friends and disseminating information about his passing, the memorial service, donations, and more. It wasn't even a consideration of whether to use Facebook or not, it was a foregone conclusion. I, and many of my peers, have shifted the way we interact.

"Okay, fine," you say, "even if social media is a shift, why does it matter? Who cares?"

Because, quite simply, when the way humans interact with each other is **FUNDAMENTALLY** changed, then the way that businesses need to interact with customers must **FUNDAMENTALLY** change as well.

Period.

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogger...these things are not fads. They are the best players on a global social media playing field. And it's a playing field that needs to be taken seriously.

So, if you're still asking "isn't that a fad?", shift your thinking, and start asking "how can this benefit us?" And if you've been taking a "wait and see" approach, now is the time to jump in the game.

Because frankly, the ones that wait won't be around to see.