

Virtual and Reality: How Social Media Changed the World

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Continued...

Let's start out by taking a look at some of the key ways social media altered the world in which we do business, because you'll need to understand the shifts so you can take full advantage of the strategies you'll learn as we move forward.

Immediacy

Forget postcards, letters and email. Forget the six o'clock news or the morning newspaper or this month's magazine. Social media enables us to live in the 'now'. We are 'in the moment' more than ever, in ways never before possible. We see what a friend across the country or across the world is having for dinner a moment after the plate arrives on the table. We watch streaming video from a cell phone user in another country and we see what that person sees, in real time.

Not too terribly long ago, phone calls were the only immediate form of communication. Live video feeds required expensive, complex equipment and the resources of a major TV news channel, along with crews of trained personnel.

Now, whether it's the Arab Spring or the tsunami in Sri Lanka or an altercation at traffic stop anywhere in the country, someone will post video, maybe even livestream. We see history and tragedy as they unfold, in real time, without the buffer of news anchors or TV networks editing or censoring. We go online to find breaking news instead of turning on the TV. Even in our personal lives, we check out someone's Facebook page to see how they are doing, where they're going on their vacation, what they did today.

We have grown accustomed to living our lives played out for the world to see on a scale beyond what even the celebrities of yesteryear could have imagined. Not only are we used to the immediacy of sharing our lives moment-by-moment and getting instantaneous feedback, but it's easy to become addicted to the rush of validation that comments, shares, liked and retweets provide. We are all stars of our very own reality show.

Use the immediacy of the internet and social media to your advantage by inviting your audience at live events to post video, live-tweet or upload photos to Facebook. Recognize that via social media, you can engage with people who could not attend your event in person but who can participate virtually by responding to the in-the-moment content you and other attendees post as the event unfolds. Take advantage of the immediacy inherent in video by making use of the ever-expanding range of apps that make web video easy. You're limited only by your imagination.

Disintermediation and Decentralized Information Flow

All hail the rise of the citizen journalist. Gone are the days when the network news teams of the broadcast TV channels curated the information, images and opinions that reached the public. Social media, the internet and cell phones have made everyone a reporter, commentator and broadcaster.

On one hand, this new decentralized information flow and its lack of institutional filters, censors and controls frees us to digest information raw. We can find a nearly endless amount of information on every topic, posted by all kinds of sources. To the extent that this makes it much more difficult to suppress information or carry out disinformation campaigns, disintermediation is a good effect of social media.

No wealthy individual, no powerful government, no feared criminal is powerful enough to gag the internet. WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and many other whistleblowers and informants have proven time and again that secrets will out. And when a media hoax is perpetrated or an urban legend goes viral, it falls as quickly as it rose to prominence, exposed by bloggers, fact-checkers and sites like Snopes.com.

On the other hand, not all news sources are created equal. While some may strive to be unbiased or to at least honestly admit their bias, many others take a 'caveat emptor' approach. 'Astroturf' organizations—groups with earnestly populist sounding names that are actually funded by political or business organization with a definite agenda—can be difficult for the average reader to quickly identify. We can now report and retrieve our own news, but we must also authenticate the information provided to us by others.

Social media has also changed the concept of 'expert'. Subject matter experts can reach niche audiences easier than ever before, without the need for travel or speaking engagements. Blogs, videos, webinars and social media share a subject matter expert's insights and connect directly with the intended recipients.

At the same time, it's now up to the individual to determine whose expertise is authentic. Although experts have proliferated on social media, validating expertise has become a thorny proposition. Before social media, the experts who gained fame held some kind of hierarchical power. They worked for a large corporation, for the government, or for a non-profit or religious organization, which functioned as a level of vetting. Expertise was also determined by earned degrees, such as MD, Ph.D., etc. or professional membership, which served as an endorsement from the organizations granting the degrees or accepting qualifications for membership.

Social media makes it possible for people with subject matter knowledge, computer skills and an engaging personality to reach millions without needing to obtain the approval of gatekeepers. This opens tremendous possibilities for knowledgeable people with an entrepreneurial spirit, and has built the fame and fortune of many internet gurus. Yet it can also be difficult to vet

internet experts, since their information and platform is often entirely self-reported and their validation relies on anecdotal evidence and testimonials.

What does this mean for you? Social media presents you with a golden opportunity to establish yourself as an expert in your field of expertise and to reach the world with your information. Establish your credibility and build your brand through the valuable insights you share on social media, and use the connections you make to expand your influence.