

The Future of the Social Web: In Five Eras

Contributed by Webmaster
Wednesday, 29 April 2009

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Expect the Groundswell to continue, in which people connect to each other --rather than institutions. Consumer adoption of social networks is increasing a rapid pace, brands are adopting even during a recession, so expect the space to rapidly innovate to match this trend. Clients can access this report; but to summarize what we found, in the executive summary we state:

Today's social experience is disjointed because consumers have separate identities in each social network they visit. A simple set of technologies that enable a portable identity will soon empower consumers to bring their identities with them — transforming marketing, eCommerce, CRM, and advertising. IDs are just the beginning of this transformation, in which the Web will evolve step by step from separate social sites into a shared social experience. Consumers will rely on their peers as they make online decisions, whether or not brands choose to participate. Socially connected consumers will strengthen communities and shift power away from brands and CRM systems; eventually this will result in empowered communities defining the next generation of products.

We found that technologies trigger changes in consumer adoption, and brands will follow, resulting in five distinct waves, they consist of:

The Five Eras of the Social Web:

- 1) Era of Social Relationships: People connect to others and share
- 2) Era of Social Functionality: Social networks become like operating system
- 3) Era of Social Colonization: Every experience can now be social
- 4) Era of Social Context: Personalized and accurate content
- 5) Era of Social Commerce: Communities define future products and services

Timing of the Five Overlapping Eras:

It's important to note that these eras aren't sequential, but instead are overlapping. We've already entered and have seen maturity for the era of social relationships, have entered social functionality but haven't seen true utility, and are starting to see threads of social colonization with early technologies like Facebook connect. Soon these federated identities will empower people to enter the era of social context with personalized and social content. The following diagram demonstrates how we should expect to see the eras play out in the future --with social commerce the furthest out.

Interviews with 24 of the top Social Companies:

Research isn't done in a vacuum, that's why we conducted qualitative research to find out what we should come to expect. We came to these conclusions based on interviews with executives, product managers, and strategists at the following 24 companies: Appirio, Cisco Eos, Dell, Facebook, Federated Media Publishing, Flock, Gigya, Google (Open Social/stack team), Graphing Social Patterns (Dave McClure), IBM (SOA Team), Intel (social media marketing team), KickApps, LinkedIn, Meebo, Microsoft (Live team), MySpace, OpenID Foundation (Chris Messina), Plaxo, Pluck,

Razorfish, ReadWriteWeb, salesforce.com, Six Apart, and Twitter.

How Brands Should Prepare

What's interesting isn't this vision for the future, but what it holds in store for brands, as a result, companies should prepare by:

- Don't Hesitate: These changes are coming at a rapid pace, and we're in three of these eras by end of year. Brands should prepare by factoring in these eras into their near term plans. Don't be left behind and let competitors connect with your community before you do.
- Prepare For Transparency: People will be able to surf the web with their friends, as a result you must have a plan. Prepare for every webpage and product to be reviewed by your customers and seen by prospects --even if you choose not to participate.
- Connect with Advocates: Focus on customer advocates, they will sway over prospects, and could defend against detractors. Their opinion is trusted more than yours, and when the power shifts to community, and they start to define what products should be, they become more important than ever.
- Evolve your Enterprise Systems: Your enterprise systems will need to connect to the social web. Social networks and their partners are quickly becoming a source of customer information and lead generation beyond your CRM system. CMS systems will need to inherit social features --pressure your vendors to offer this, or find a community platform.
- Shatter your Corporate Website: In the most radical future, content will come to consumers --rather than them chasing it-- prepare to fragment your corporate website and let it distribute to the social web. Let the most important information go and spread to communities where they exist; fish where the fish are.

This project took a team effort, and I'd like to thank Josh Bernoff as a guiding force in my career, Emily Bowen who kept the project going, Cynthia Pflaum for the quantitative data, Megan Chromik in our editing team for the polish, and Jon Symons in our PR team for the media outreach.