



The Millennial View of Social Media:

Why Should I Be Your Friend?

By Carol Phillips

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In the few weeks the buzz about social media has outbuzzed any buzz campaign to date. Much of the noise seems to originate from marketers, so we set out to find what Millennials think of social media.

Two focus groups were conducted online in early March among participants recruited from our Facebook and Twitter networks. We asked a series of simple questions...



What comes to mind when you think of 'social media'? What makes it social?

When it comes to social media, Millennials have a broader definition than marketers. Social media is anything where you can get information about other people, strangers or friends, and interact with them. It includes Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, IM, Skype, text messaging, product reviews and blogs. It even includes video games.

"When I think of social media I think of points of view... social media is media that illicit (sic) me to talk, not just take in info."

"Social media is that media that connects you socially with friends mainly and some family. It makes it social because a large percentage of your friends relative and colleagues use it too."

"... I agree --Amazon reviews are def social media and have big pull on influencing my purchase decisions."

"Social media to me is anything that allows me to access my stuff online from anywhere facebook, instant messaging, xbox live."

"Over facebook I don't feel that connected, but live chat through xbox live and other means makes me feel like they r right there."

How does social media fit into your life?

Millennials tell us they use the Internet for far more than stalking friends and strangers on Facebook. Social media is just one of their uses of the Internet, and not even the most important. They access the Internet continuously first and foremost for information and for entertainment, and secondarily for connection. Most say would miss Google and email as much as they would miss Facebook if they had to give up the Internet. This finding is consistent with Nielsen research that shows just 1 of every 11 minutes spent online globally is spent with social media.

At work, I'm online the entire day. (8 to 12 hours). When I'm at home, I'm online almost the entire time. It's constant. When I sit at home on the couch, my computer is in my lap."

"I am connected as long as I am awake."

"I check it dozens of times daily for information and entertainment."

"(I would miss) the information, and connectedness I have with the world in general."

"It is annoying to sit at a bar and someone can't remember if Steve McNair won his MVP award in 1998 or 1999. It's like, "No one has an iPhone?" I really have come to expect instant access to information."

"There is nothing I can't Google for an answer. I must google 20x a day."

"I'm a Google assisted learner."

Which social media platforms do you use?

Facebook is by far the most popular platform, but not the only one. Facebook is especially good for maintaining relationships with people you *don't see* all that often. Text messaging, email and even (horrors) calling are considered more personal, and therefore are more appropriate for connecting with close friends. Instant messaging is sparsely used any longer; only about half of the Millennials we interviewed had tried Twitter, although they might if they had a good reason to try. Some use LinkedIn for professional networking.

"I also text, but only my close friends....my casual friends I message Facebook."

"Well Facebook keeps me updated on their lives, but it doesn't feel very personal. I'm more of a texting person when it comes to that."

"Yeah, I'm with Kelsey. The internet is a tool I'm likely to use to reach old friends or casual acquaintances. People that I don't see on the day-to-day."

"I'm also much more connected now with old friends than I ever was before e-mail and now with Facebook (which seems to have replaced e-mail as the stay-in-touch-with-friends application."

"If I want to be more connected I call or text."

"I have old girlfriends finding me on facebook...so yes...old friends are coming out of the woodwork."

"(I use) Mostly facebook as it has the broadest user base--makes it the most functional for contact friends/colleagues, twitter works great but only for a much narrower subset of people that use it."

"I have yet to get a twitter, but I'm on the fence with it".

"Twitter for news and deals, facebook for friends, I read digg to laugh at what people think is an important news article. Though I don't tweet enough."

How connected do you want to be?

Millennials are not seeking a high degree of intimacy online. Moderate online social connections are considered ideal. Most Millennials say they are as connected online as they *want* to be -- about a 6 or 7 on a 10 point scale where 10 is 'too connected'. The ability to control the degree of connection appears to underlie some of Facebook's appeal -- and lack of interest in Twitter. Some are afraid Twitter will consume them if they start.

"(On Facebook) I can turn exposure down if I want."

"Yeah, I think online can keep you disconnected sometimes. It lets you keep a "safe distance" that's not there if you have to pick up the phone. "

"(Facebook's) fine because I can set the terms."

How does social media help you connect with brands, products, or causes?

Brands are working hard to find a place on social networks, but they may be trying too hard. Millennials use social media to connect with other *people*. It's not that brands are unwelcome; they just don't seem to belong. That makes them easy to ignore, like a guest who has stumbled into the wrong wedding reception.

"Brands that show up on facebook often look like your parents when they (unsuccessfully) try to act cool."

"Seeing a brand on facebook makes me just think is spam mail or a scam."

"Yeah I don't really pay attention to the ads on the side of facebook."

"I mean, I think people use it as a user-to-user network. I mean, you call your connections "friends."

"I don't think I've ever joined a brand's FB group -- unless you count maybe a sports teams, though those are usually fan generated ... There's something really offputting about a big brand sending you a facebook group invite. I'd never accept it."

"I think there is a sniff test people give brands when they use such tactics. And I'm not sure what the formula is for passing it"

"I really enjoy being able to "friend" indie rock bands for their music, but I don't really friend any product company, or brand. I always feel like most brands are scamming you in some way when they want to be your friend."

What do you think of brands that communicate in social media?

Consistent with their overall skepticism about marketing, Millennials are suspicious of brands that want to be their 'friend'. They are aware the motivation behind brand communication is to 'sell shit', which is an automatic turnoff. They are skeptical brands have the ability to return value in a social media setting. They make exception for causes, especially ones that they hear about through friends.

"I don't need incentives ... I see that as a front ... I want to see that they are run by humans and I can relate to them."

"I don't think I'd friend (a brand) unless there was some explicit benefit to being its friend."

"I would want added value from a brand if they are going to connect with me. It has to be worth it. If they added value that they normally didn't because they were on social media then it would make sense."

What advice do you have for businesses or causes for connecting with you through social media?

Millennials say they would communicating with brands in social media if they act 'human' and provide news of special events, cool things happening or special offers.

"Most of the time I don't want to hear from them. If I do, it would usually be in reference to saving money on some product I really like. I don't think I'd friend one unless there was some explicit benefit to being its friend."

"I would want added value from a brand if they are going to connect with me. It has to be worth it."

"If they could tell me a place I would get it cheaper that would rock."

"Events, give aways, member exclusive content."

"Yeah Comcast has their customer service reps on twitter actually helping people."

"One cool use of Twitter is with starbucks where they have a person at corporate who will communicate back to you."

How could news organizations connect with you through social media?

Millennials like the idea that Twitter and Facebook can help to personalize news by filtering it through their friends. In the same vein of personalization, many say they would follow a particular reporter, rather than a channel or publication, because they would trust a 'friend' over a news organization. Creating news around specific reporters, entertainment personalities or 'personas', would have greater value and appeal.

"(With Twitter) I get the news filtered from my friends."

"Top stories is good for facebook... but not necessarily what everyone is reading... cause that's that pop stuff... I want editing... like a credible news organization does."

"It would be nice to be able to customize what news you want to see on facebook."

"Maybe I'd follow a favorite columnist or something."

"I think a possibility for twitter posts and facebook pages for companies would be to have actual people doing them – to have entertaining personalities or something."

"If you get the stars of the shows doing it would work."

What it Takes to Bring Millennials and Marketers Together in Social Media

Marketers and Millennials have fundamentally different views of social media. Making social media work for brands, causes and news organizations will require acting more like a 'friend' and less like a salesman -- but isn't that fundamental to brand building anyway? Here are some first steps to making 'friends' with Millennials in social media:

- Be real and genuine.

"I don't need incentives ... I see that as a front ... I want to see that they are run by humans and I can relate to them."

- Be unique; don't regurgitate information available elsewhere

"I would expect behind the scenes inside scoop, I suppose."

- Be transparent.

"I would want to know what they're about through their social media interaction".

- Be candid.

"They need to surprise me with their content or genuine nature or candor."

- Maintain your credibility

"Something reliable and trustworthy ... that wouldn't clog up everything either.

- Make the effort opt-in.

"Definitely don't try to stalk me, let me come to you."

- Encourage participation

"Make me feel special, get me more engaged."

- Provide useful information

"Good deals catch my attention too, especially for stories I like!"

- Have an emotional component --Make them laugh

"What catches my eye too is seeing really funny or really bad pictures of celebrities or political leaders."

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This research was conducted by Brand Amplitude, LLC, (www.brandamplitude.com) in conjunction with Crawford Johnson & Northcott Inc., (www.cjni.com) a market research and consultation firm, specializing in local television and media strategy.