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Social Media Marketing

An Interview with Andrew Jenkins, Chief Executive Officer, Volterra

Andrew Jenkins:

Andrew Jenkins is a leading expert on social media marketing and the author of "Social Media Marketing for Business".



We are nearly two decades now into the social media era - time enough to assess its net impact on society at large.

The harms of social media are well known. The social divisiveness. The rampant spread of misinformation – of toxic content – of rage bait. The undermining of traditional media. Blatant privacy violations. The atrophying of attention spans. And worst of all, the insidious effect on the mental well-being of youth whose epidemic levels of depression and anxiety compelled the U.S. Surgeon General to call for a warning label on social media. Social media it turns out is not that social.

While social media has failed to live up to the Pollyanna hopes of its early proponents – who once hailed it as a liberating force for free speech - it has made it easier for people to connect with each other. There are, after all, five billion users around the globe spending a good part of their day on social media. It has become an integral part of everyday life. In some parts of the world, it is the only way for people to message one another. Pick a subject – a hobby – a pet peeve – and you will find a niche group

or community who share the same passion. It has enabled social activists to organize. It has helped expose corporate chicanery. And, as Canadian grocery giant Loblaw recently found out to its chagrin, it can facilitate nationwide consumer boycotts.

From the start businesses have understood the importance of having a presence in social media, viewing it as a natural channel to reach potential customers at a fraction of the cost of a standard media buy. Today more money is being diverted into social media advertising than ever before, eclipsing every other media option. Where companies have struggled, however, is using social media in the way it was intended – to conduct a two-way dialogue with people. Brands still use social media largely as a “buy now” promotional tool. And while most businesses are spending on average up to 20% of their marketing budget on social media, nobody is ever able to prove conclusively that greater social engagement turns into actual sales, no matter how many followers they may have. Social media teams continue to operate as junior partners in marketing, staffed by entry-level employees who are viewed by their bosses as overhead.

Today social media is at a cross-roads. The platforms are under pressure to make their platforms safer. People have become wiser to its addictive properties - its algorithmic manipulations. Others are becoming more protective of their personal data which is the lifeblood of the walled garden platforms. Legislators are tightening their restrictions on data use and clamping down on the freeloading of content sourced from mainstream media. TikToc has upended the playing field with its Svengali-like algorithm. And just beginning to take shape is this alternative concept called the “fediverse” built on an entirely different protocol which allows users to own their own data and share content without having to create multiple identities and accounts.

As social media evolves, maybe to eventually become a private decentralized ad-free network, businesses will have to adapt and respond, recognizing that we are long past the incubation stage of social media. They will be forced to make a far greater commitment to it as the primary means of connecting with people. But to do so successfully, argues the longtime social media expert Andrew Jenkins, they will have to focus on generating better content to rise about the noise and put greater effort into building engaged communities. They will, in fact, have to make social media more social.

In his book “Social Media Marketing for Business” Jenkins lays out a practical step-by-step blueprint for implementing and scaling an effective social media strategy. The Founder and CEO of a social media management outsourcing service, he has been active in social media for most of his career, and is widely recognized as one of the world’s a leading authorities on the subject.

SS **Stephen Shaw (SS):** How did you get your start in social media?

AJ **Andrew Jenkins (AJ):** In 2008 the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts in the UK brought me on as a consultant to conduct research on all of the predominant social platforms at that time. Nesta is very similar to MARS here in Toronto – it facilitates collaboration between academia, the private sector and the public sector. So basically I got paid to become an expert on social media. And then I just incorporated that expertise into my consulting and strategy practice.

Over the years I got increasingly frustrated with strategy engagements where clients struggled to operationalize my social media recommendations. And so after a while I began to ask clients if they’d like to outsource the work to my company. And that is now the bulk of our business. We just focus on social media management - the clients outsource to us.

SS We’ve seen a ton of change over those 15 years. How would you describe the state of social media today relative to those early, more hopeful days?

AJ Well, because that was back in 2008, I have to remind people that the number one social platform then was MySpace – it wasn’t Facebook. Today Facebook is 2.5 billion users. Instagram is only a decade old, roughly - today it has the highest organic engagement. So yeah, a lot has changed, dramatically. You and I are both old enough to remember

the final episode of MASH. That had a viewing audience of 100 million people, and you couldn’t record it, so you watched it when it aired. The final episode of the American version of the Office, when it aired on NBC, was 6 million. But once it moved to Netflix, you could binge watch on any device, far surpassing MASH in viewers. And so the way we consume content has shifted dramatically.

SS How well is social media understood all these years later by senior marketing management?

AJ The biggest misunderstanding is they tend to conflate the way they use social with the way their target audience uses it. I have to remind them, you are not your customer. And I use myself as an example. I personally don’t spend a lot of time on Instagram. I don’t find it a particularly interesting platform. That being said, every one of our clients should be on it, and I can give them all the data to support why. You have to look at each of the platforms individually and at what content and what approach best serves the use of those channels. And the last thing I’ll say is, many of them still fall back on vanity metrics. They judge a lot of things by the number of likes and followers. They need to be looking deeper into the stats and validate that their content is resonating with the target audience.

SS That’s the challenge, isn’t it? Part of the stigma around social media has been its obsession with vanity metrics, as you’re pointing out, and the inability to ladder up to the measures that senior management actually cares about. Are you drawn into building the financial justification for investment in social media?

AJ Well, I can show them why social media should be part of their marketing mix. But I’m also very transparent with them. I will tell them, social media is not your salvation. It should not be your sole marketing effort. And so the way we approach it is to say, let’s talk about your corporate objectives. What’s your focus for the next six months? How will you be measured? Oh, we’re focused on brand awareness. Oh, we’re focused on thought leadership. Oh, we’re focused on lead generation. And then I look at where and how social media can complement those objectives. Social media should be an overlay to what the company’s doing versus trying to bend the company’s will to social media.

I like to talk about the three Cs of social media ROI. The first C is community, and that includes fans and followers.

We want to leverage that community to extend the reach of our content. You want them to be engaged, you want to build rapport and potentially a dialogue, and there will be a subset of your community who are highly engaged and more likely to amplify your content. The second C is content. We want to show over time that the content we produced is performing well in terms of engagement. And then the third C is conversion. We want to show the referral traffic to the website driven by social. We're sending people to the website to read a blog, to listen to a podcast, to register for a webinar, to sign up for your newsletter, or to fill out a contact form because they want sales to contact them.

SS

Part of the challenge is that for too long social media was treated as this standalone department. And what you're saying is that social media really permeates every aspect of marketing today.

AJ

It should! Social needs a seat at the table. When we're talking to clients and they've got staff going to an event, it's foreign for them to start thinking about, oh, this could be social media content. And we've shown them, when you have a picture of one of your senior leaders on stage, it gets a lot of engagement. It doesn't have to be an Annie Leibovitz-quality picture either. It can be from your phone. Don't get hung up on production value. People are more intrigued with the immediacy of your content than the production value.

SS

Let's talk about the integration of social media into businesses. And one of the points in your book is it can be a big drain on time and resources. Content generation alone is relentless. Is that why a lot of companies just choose to outsource the work? Is that the preferred model today?

AJ

It's a spectrum. So we have some clients who just hand over the keys and are quite comfortable saying, run with it, just keep me in the loop, because they're busy doing their thing. And then we have the other end of the spectrum – for example, financial services where nothing goes out that they haven't touched or seen. Now, we might still do the scheduling, but everything is usually done days and weeks ahead, usually weeks. The content is planned, the calendar is planned, the posts are designed. And for other clients, we provide advisory support and analytics. So it can be anywhere along that spectrum.

Many of our clients have digital marketing resources in place, but they're doing a million different things. Social

is always on. Unless you're a big retailer, you're probably not sending out an email every day to a newsletter list. You're not building a new website every day, you're not rejigging your SEO every day. And those are all of critical importance. But social is the only one of the digital marketing realms that is on every single day and that demands a constant stream of content.

SS

One of the sobering truths in your book is just the complexity of it all. If a company chooses not to outsource, who should own social media? Where does it properly belong?

AJ

It depends on the size of the organization. When I was at Royal Bank social media sat in the enterprise brand and communication group. But every business unit was autonomous. So you ended up with a dog's breakfast of social accounts - no coordination of efforts between business units - and that can detract from the brand. And so the organization has to decide, do you want to be a mile wide and a foot deep? I tend to recommend forming, whether literally or loosely, a steering committee.

I had a consulting engagement with a direct to consumer organization and I asked when it was over: Who owns this after I'm gone? And it was one of the longest, most awkward silences, because there are some people who see it as their chance to soar, and others go, no, I'm not sticking my neck out. It highlights one of the things that's the most overlooked aspects of an organization when it comes to social media success, and that's culture.

And so if everyone's rowing in the same direction, wanting the company to succeed, that's probably going to cascade into a more collaborative approach to social. But you can also have organizations where you've got disparate silos working at cross purposes in social, where they're almost at war with each other. And what ends up happening is their audience gets mixed messages. You have duplication of effort, you have the wrong content going out at the wrong time, or just an absolute ton of missed opportunities as well.

SS

In the final few pages of your book, I'll quote you here, "Hopefully by the time you read this we have moved beyond the polarization we have witnessed and experienced and returned to business as usual". But it seems to me, going back to my question about the state of social media, that polarization in social media is business as usual. How do businesses insulate themselves from it?

AJ

Well, you raise an interesting point, because we could not have predicted recent events, like October 7th in Israel and Gaza. I use that as an example, because now individuals and organizations are being drawn into the discussion, whether they want to or not.

SS

They're being asked to take sides.

AJ

Yes and there's no easy answer. Anytime someone has an issue, and they bring it to a brand, the first step is to acknowledge it and say, we hear you, we understand that you have an issue.

We did some work with a financial services company where the CEO of the company happened to be Jewish. A member of the staff was posting pro-Palestinian content on their personal Facebook page, which was their right to do. But their personal Facebook account was not locked down - it was open and visible to the public, and therefore potentially visible to clients. So, this brings up the importance of having social media policies and rules of engagement. We often advise companies to put down what you will allow on your social media accounts. You can say what you will allow and what you won't allow and where and how you're willing to engage in a dialogue. Unfortunately, in this heightened era of polarization, you can no longer sit on the sidelines. Inevitably you will be drawn in. And so you have to be prepared to state your corporate position. But increasingly the younger generation are looking at how transparent organizations are with their values. And so if you are not aligned with their values, they have no interest in working for you.

SS

Or potentially buying your products. Speaking of Gen Z, I'm going to move on to TikTok. It's obviously been a massive game changer. We know the U.S. is now trying to force it's sale or even banishment. How has it permanently altered the landscape of social media? And if it does disappear - it's got this whole generation of Gen Z'ers hooked on it - what takes its place?

AJ

The pandemic was instrumental in its growth. There was a hashtag called "Moms of TikTok". Women at home with children, whether they were stay at home moms or they were working moms, but now at home, because of the pandemic, having to do a multitude of things all at the same time. That hashtag exploded to a community of billions - the usage was astronomical. It was one of the largest

single communities on TikTok because women during the pandemic wanted to find a supportive community. And now there's, "Book TikTok" - there's "Film TikTok". All these distinct communities.

When I grew up, my father had horses, so I know what a blacksmith is, and I know what shoeing a horse is all about. The proper word for blacksmith is "farrier". And so there is a "Farrier TikTok". Tons of videos of blacksmiths or farriers shoeing horses, or there's vets working on the infected hoof of a cow. And some of these videos are getting hundreds of thousands of views. You couldn't have said to me five years ago, you're going to watch a video of a blacksmith shoeing a horse and find it fascinating. But that just speaks to how well this unique platform is giving you more and more of what you want.

Now, because of that outsized influence, and because it's not controlled or regulated by the U.S. government like the others are, politics is infusing itself into the situation. And because the government can't control the message, it concerns them. Both the prospective Republican nominee and the Democratic nominee - I'm just using U.S. examples - are on the platform because they recognize if you're trying to reach Gen Z, you have to be on TikTok, hands down, because that's where they get their news. There is a TikTok account called "Under the Desk News" that has 5 million followers. They're getting their news, they're consuming their content, on TikTok. Cable news shows are getting half a million viewers, live. But their six minute summary clip on TikTok is getting viewed a million times.

SS

Yeah, it's crazy. Facebook has been looking enviously over at TikTok's meteoric rise and wondering what it can steal. It created Reels out of the gate as a response. But interestingly, they've also done something else recently. Apparently they've altered their algorithm to deemphasize friends and family content in favour of content more broadly based on user preference and interests. In other words, they're taking their cue from TikTok. What's your perspective on where Facebook is headed?

AJ

It's the TikTok effect. My 24-year old daughter and I have similar interests and similar senses of humour. We're constantly finding that we're sending the same TikToks back to each other because we respond to many of the same things. But it just never ceases to amaze us how two

different people, two different genders, two different age demographics, etcetera, can have the same platform serving up similar content to us. It just speaks to the amazing algorithm that they have. And this has forced Facebook, or Meta more broadly, to not just respond on Facebook, but to respond in the same way on Instagram too.

If you're starting a Facebook page today, you're going to need to have funds set aside for paid to get your page off the ground. Starting a page organically now on Facebook is nearly impossible for visibility. Having said that, if you are doing paid, it is one of the most cost effective platforms with high potential reach. If you're trying to reach someone over 40, that's going to be Facebook. But if you're trying to reach a Gen Z, who's university age, it's Instagram and TikTok. Someone who is in their mid-thirties, who's into fashion and beauty and travel, probably Instagram with a bit of TikTok. And then one of the surprising things, LinkedIn, is under 30, because GenZ is recognizing that they have to have visibility, they have to network.

SS

Let's move on to X, formerly known as Twitter. It's been in freefall through self-inflicted wounds. How do you see its fate playing out over the next few years?

AJ

Twitter was my favorite platform. It was where I got my news, where I got my information. This is before TikTok. I saw some of the most thought provoking, interesting stuff come there, and some of the funniest stuff, too. But then Elon bought it. And in some ways, Elon's a genius, and in some ways, he's an absolute idiot who should not be running a media company. I mean, some of the things he did to people, staff, just absolutely inhumane and disrespectful. Just shooting from the hip with no thought to the repercussions. But, as much as we say, oh, he's running it into the ground, the day that the guilty verdicts about Donald Trump were announced, where was the largest engagement? Where does news still break to this day? Twitter.

SS

Because there's no real alternative at this point, is there?

AJ

We do a lot of social media listening. And Twitter, or X, continues to be the proxy for all the other platforms. But engagement is down, usage is down. We were asked by a client in the healthcare space to grow their following on Twitter. The healthcare industry in Canada is bigger on Twitter than it is on Instagram. We were following doctors and physicians who had been active in the last 90 days, and

they weren't following back at all. We were left scratching our heads going, what is happening on Twitter?

So, I remain hopeful that someone will take the keys away from Elon. But he continues to operate erratically. He re-shared content about transgender transition surgery. And it turned out that the source was a hate group posing as a pediatric organization. Nobody looked close enough. So, if the CEO's sharing misinformation, what hope do we have?

SS

Content moderation has been the bane of existence for many social media platforms. I'm thinking of Nextdoor as an example. But Reddit, after being home to the very worst of humanity for a long time, straightened it out through proper governance. What lessons do they have to offer to some of the other platforms?

AJ

In order to go public, they had to get it under control. But this speaks to a broader issue, and some will remember Tumblr. Tumblr had tons of pornography on it, which fed into its engagement and user base, which fed its valuation. Then Yahoo buys it, and a publicly traded company can't be peddling porn, so it had to purge a lot of the objectionable material. Once it did, Tumblr got bought later for just a few million dollars. So Reddit had to purge a lot of the objectionable communities.

SS

They actually went after those groups and banned them, purged them from the system. They didn't just purge the posts, they banned the producers of the post.

AJ

To your point, they have tried to put in some community standards that you as a moderator have to adhere to or your community isn't going to exist anymore.

To tie this into AI, there's a solution called Perplexity that competes now with Google. Perplexity calls itself an answer engine. And so you can use it to conduct research. But one of the interesting things about Perplexity is you can actually point it solely at Reddit. Instead of sifting through all the disparate communities on Reddit, I can use Perplexity to extract more value. The reason I want to tie it back to your mentioning of Reddit, I'm wondering if something like Perplexity, working in conjunction with Reddit, will increase its usefulness to people.

SS

I want to ask you about the "fediverse", which a lot of people scratch their heads over. Do you believe it's genuine alternative to the centralized platforms? And I ask that

because even Zuckerberg has said, quote, “a privacy focused communications platform will become even more important than today’s open platforms”.

AJ

Say you wanted to use Midjourney2. You have to have a Discord account. So you have to figure out how to navigate into Midjourney via Discord. Well, if you want adoption, you have to remove as much friction as possible. And I have to educate people just to the advantages and strengths of being federated. It also means my community is going to be capped at whatever a server can manage. Well, most of my money and time will be spent on infrastructure. So, why? So users feel better because they’re federated? Organizations are struggling to just manage the volume of activity related to social media. Now I’ve got to be monitoring a number of Discord servers, Mastodon, whatever? Good lord. To what end?

SS

Certainly the complexity issue is a big barrier, at least at this point.

AJ

Mastodon has been around for a while, like five, eight years, maybe even a decade, but not to any degree of popularity. One of the things that held it back from mass adoption was this whole federated mechanism. I think back to Second Life. The amount of things you had to go through was a

ridiculously high barrier to joining. But once you were on and found your like-minded people there, it was magic. I could fly from one community to another. I could be whatever I wanted. But then I was anonymous too, and so I wasn’t that trustworthy. So again, it goes back to every platform has its nuances and its strengths and its weaknesses.

1. Nesta (formerly NESTA, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) is an independent charity that works to increase the innovation capacity of the UK.
2. Midjourney is an artificial intelligence program that is used for creating images using prompts. At present, this AI program is only accessible using a Discord bot.



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