

Customer first thinking.



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. TikTok has upended the playing field through 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.

I started by asking Andrew how he got his start in social media.

AJ

Andrew Jenkins (AJ): So I had left Bell Canada in 07, late 07, and in 08 I had started doing consulting. I had made a connection on LinkedIn in 07 and continued to nurture that relationship for no other purpose than I just liked corresponding and communicating with this person. They were in the UK. Some months after our initial connection I was in the UK, met with them in person and then as all part of that sort of networking. And fast forward a few more months into 2008. And I had reached out to them for some advice, and they said oh by the way, we have a project here and we had you in mind for it and that was to conduct research on all of the predominant social platforms at that time. And so I wrote a report, a research report on all the predominant social platforms at that time. And I looked at them from user demographics, from economics, culture, you know, ethics, a whole variety of fronts because they were an innovation - the organization was the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts in the UK. And for those in Canada who are, or more specifically Toronto, that are familiar with MARS - Nesta is very similar to MARS, that facilitates collaboration between academia, the private sector and the public sector. And so Nesta was funded by government grants, and they wanted to explore this idea of whether or not social media was the new city. And so I looked at all the social platforms from this lens of how are they similar to a city and how are they different? And so it’s a long winded answer to your question, but basically I got

paid to become an expert on all the predominant platforms of social media at that time. And then I just started parlaying that expertise into - I was already doing consulting and strategy consulting and started incorporating social media strategy into those engagements.

And then over the years I got frustrated with strategy engagements where, came in, situational analysis, strategic recommendations, strategic plan, here you go. And then watching them not do it, not do it well, or you know, struggle. And so after a while started saying to clients if it was affordable, would you like to outsource it to my company and have it managed for you? Oh yes, we would be interested in doing that. And that is now the bulk of our business. We just focus on social media management, the clients outsource to us.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): I’m going to come back to that subject because I was interested to read that. And you’ve been at this for a while. You’ve seen a ton of change in that time. Obviously, from the moment you did that initial analysis to today. How would you describe the state of social media today?

AJ

Well, because it was in 2008, I have to remind people that the number one social platform in 2008 was MySpace. It wasn’t Facebook. And MySpace isn’t even around anymore. So it speaks to your question about how do I see it today and how much has it changed? I mean, Instagram is only a decade old, roughly. It has the highest organic engagement. I was in the first 200,000 users on LinkedIn. I’ve been on LinkedIn for 20 years. That’s now a billion users. Facebook is 2.5 billion users. I’ve been on X, formally Twitter since 2008. So yeah it’s changed dramatically. It is you know, I’ve been on TikTok for five years. It is - but the other thing to highlight is I have a degree in film production. I worked in film and television. When you think now about where you get your news and your content consumption behaviour, for most people, it starts with social and not the other way around. The example I’ve given in some of my presentations, that highlights the dramatic change or shift that we’ve experienced.

You and I are both old enough to remember the final episode of MASH. That was, you know, 100 million people, and it was the cliché event television, 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 a new medium Netflix, and you could binge and you could consume on your phone, on your iPad, via your television, via your computer. It's far surpassed anything that MASH could have dreamed of or hoped for.

And so the way we consume content has shifted dramatically. The devices on which we consume that content has changed dramatically. Like I said, I have a degree in film production, and I can shoot a higher quality film on my phone than any of the equipment I had available to me at film school. I went to the film school I chose. Part of the reason I chose it was because I had a brand new building with all the latest equipment that can now be housed on my phone. So, yes, again, lots of change and not overnight, but dramatic.

SS

So we're dealing with certain massive fragmentation and marketing has lived in the mass world for so long. Let's shift the conversation to its impact on how marketing goes about its business. Now, it's 20 years since the emergence of modern social media. As you pointed out earlier, Facebook came along in 2004.

All these years later, and you're out there doing missionary work. You're an outsourcing company for a lot of businesses. How well is it understood all these years later by senior marketing management, never mind executive management? Is it still, notwithstanding everything you're saying about its massive impact on media habits and so on, is it still trying to prove itself within a lot of businesses?

AJ

There's still, I won't say skepticism. One of the big impediments that still exists is the marketers that we sometimes talk to, or marketers that are sometimes in the audiences, when I'm giving a keynote presentation, they put themselves in the shoes of those that they are marketing to as if they were the same as their target audience, the same as their customer, and then they conflate their own behaviour, the way they use social to be the same way that their target audience uses social. And I have to remind people saying, 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. And so I often have to say to prospective clients and current clients, saying,

forget yourself. Who you are trying to reach and how you are trying to reach them is best served by the following platforms in the following ways, and here's the data to back it up.

And so it's marketers trust data. So you have to come armed with data to justify the recommendations. And then, so let's say for the sake of discussion, we've convinced them. Yeah, okay, fine. Those are the platforms we should be on, and that's the way we should be using them. Because that's the other thing is sometimes they're using them all in the same way. They're just same content across all four channels, and it's just blast.

It's like no, Instagram, if you're B2B. People like to see corporate culture use it for recruitment, not to market. So you're indirectly marketing the organization. You're conveying an employer brand. LinkedIn is more professional than Facebook. But that's not to say you can't use them both in similar ways, but somewhat different. So you maybe want to mix up your content a bit. You have to look at each of the platforms distinctly and look 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 to the vanity metrics. They love a like, they love a follow, and they judge a lot of things by the number of likes and the number of follows. And I hate to burst their bubble, but sometimes they say, oh, that piece of content that got ridiculous engagement on LinkedIn, that was most of your employees. Now, did that help visibility of that content to their respective networks? Absolutely. But your employees are not your customers.

So you need to be looking deeper into the stats that validate that your content is reaching and resonating with your target audience that's beyond your employees. (10.18)

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. I imagine you must get drawn into those conversations quite a bit to say, build me the business case for social media, build me the business case for a budget that goes beyond the ten to 20% that I'm given today. Is that the case? Are you drawn into building the financial justification for investment in social media?

AJ

Well, I can show them that with data, why social media should be part of their marketing mix. But I'm also very transparent with them. I will tell them, social media will not be your salvation. It should not be your sole marketing effort. You know, email is ubiquitous. Not everyone is on Instagram. Not everyone is on LinkedIn. Even if people are on LinkedIn, many of them are passive. They are net consumers of content. But they're lurking. They're not necessarily - may not have a sense of them engaging.

So you need to just be prepared for that. And so the way we approach it is to say, let's put social media aside for the moment, or park it. Let's talk about your corporate objectives. And so I'll often say to the marketers that are potentially engaging this, I'll say, what's your focus for the next six months? How will you be measured? So here we are. We're recording this in June. I'll say, what's the latter half of this year look like coming to the end of the second quarter? What are you, what's your mandate? What are you going to be measured on come the end of this year? What are you focused on? Oh, we're focused on brand awareness. Oh okay. We're focused on thought leadership for some of our key executives. Oh, okay. Oh, we're focused on lead generation. All the above. Okay, fine.

And then I look at where and how social media can complement it. And you've mentioned the book, I talk about it in the book, that social media should be an overlay to what the company's doing versus trying to bend the company's will to social media.

We do use the vanity metrics, like a follower, a like, but we refer to it as the three c's of social media ROI. The first C is community, and that includes fans and followers. But it's not for vanity. It's for, we want to leverage that community for them 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 that are highly engaged and more likely to amplify your content.

The second C is content. We want to show over time that the content that we produced in conjunction with our clients perform well from an engagement, from a, not just a like, but, you know, hopefully a share, etcetera. And if we're writing content for their website, or we're creating rich media, like an audiogram or a video clip, well, then we can show in views how well the content performed.

And then the third C is conversion. And this goes back to like, as you said, sometimes it was like, what's the point of social? Well, we want to show that over time, the referral traffic to your website driven by social. We're not going to replace organic or direct ever. But can we show that social's portion, that we moved the needle, the piece of pie associated with social got bigger. And we're sending people to their website to read a blog, to listen to a podcast, potentially that's embedded in their website, to register for a webinar, to sign up for your newsletter, or to, you know, fill out a contact form because they want sales to contact them. Whatever the criteria of success stemming from the website is what we're focused on. And that's even though I said 3C's, that third C is the most important because it's on a property you own, which is your website, and it's focused or aligned the most strongly with your corporate objectives.

SS

I mean, part of the challenge here is that for so long it was treated as this department. And what you're describing is social media really infuses every aspect of marketing today. You can't separate it out from any part of the communications channel, because it is the communication channel in many cases. (14.57)

AJ

It should. The joke is that social needs a seat at the table. But like we're telling clients, oh, so what conferences are you attending? And they'll say, this, this and this, and I'll say, can you just take a picture of the, you know, poster board or whatever at the front of one of the breakout sessions, or the agenda or whatever? Take a picture. If you're speaking on a panel, you're speaking, can someone take a picture of you on stage?

I was recently speaking at a conference and exhibit, and I got two lanyards, one for speaking, one for exhibiting. Put them on my exhibition table, took a picture and said, great to be back at DigiMarCon. Looking forward to speaking and exhibiting for two days, and I wasn't in the picture. It was just a picture of two lanyards on a table. And it got lots of engagement. But I'm used to it. It's a habit I have formed. When we're talking to clients and they've got staff going to an event, it's foreign to them to start thinking about, oh, this could be content. Oh, this could be content. Just a simple picture. And we've shown them saying, 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, you know,

an Annie Leibovitz-quality picture. 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

Well, and the popularity of TikTok really emphasizes that point, which...

AJ

Absolutely.

SS

...we're going to come back to the impact of TikTok on the entire business. I'm still caught up a little bit in the integration of social media into businesses. And one of the things in your book that's brought out quite clearly is it can be a drain on time and resources. Content generation alone is relentless as you're describing it. You do have lots of tips in terms of gaining efficiencies, but certainly it's a resource heavy area. Is that why, and this is the outsourcing question, a lot of companies just choose to say, I don't want to have to handle this internally and hire the staff and find the specialist and devote that. I'd rather outsource this. Is that more the preferred model today? Or is there some other hybrid organizational model that organizations are happy with? In other words, outsource the content, but will in-source the day to day management of posts coming in and comments coming in from customers. How do you see it working best today out there in the real world?

AJ

It's a continuum or a spectrum. So we have some clients who, and I'll just use us as a company as an example, who hand over the keys like, you do it all and there's minimal conversation between us and them. You know, we do a lot of work in financial services, but some of our clients that aren't in financial services and don't have the constraints of compliance or regulatory requirements, yeah, they can hand over the keys and be quite comfortable to be just like, just tell me what you're doing, you know, periodically, and just keep me in the loop, but like, run with it. It's all, it's all on you, because they're busy doing their thing. And then we have the other end of the spectrum where we have financial services clients where they cannot, and I completely respect it because I, the former Head of Social Media for the Royal Bank, 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. we have some clients that do French and English, so the copy is approved, translation follows, things like that.

And some clients, we are advisors, and we provide advisory support and analytics. We do the designing of the content, and some do their own scheduling. So it can be anywhere along that spectrum. Like, do you want us to do it all or a percentage, like some of it, and we can decide what that percentage is or what the focus should be.

You know, many of our clients have digital marketing resources in place, but they're doing a million different things. And as you identified, social is always on. And one of the reasons we focus solely on social media is because of that, the level of demand. You don't, 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 I'm not diminishing any of those. Those are all critical, of critical importance. But social is the only one of the digital marketing realms that is on every single day that demands content. (20.05)

SS

If a company chooses not to outsource, if it chooses to, in-house the function, where does it reside or where should it reside? I mean, some people, some companies put it in communications, some in marketing. there's the whole content marketing group that somehow, you know, has to collaborate with social media, obviously, or treats it as a channel. How do you see that best working when it's in-house by a company? When a company really takes social media seriously and says I need to make this part impossible, our everyday business, how do you see that working?

AJ

The most heated answer is it depends, because it depends on the size of the organization. So if you have distinct business units and it's sizable. So the Royal Bank was 90 plus thousand people. It had insurance, it had retail banking and technology and operations. It had wealth management and you had communications people in each of those divisions. Then we sat in the brand and communications, enterprise brand and communication.

So we sat above it all. And I don't mean that from arrogance point of view, it was the brand and communications enterprise. Brand and communications had visibility across the entire organization, and I used a model that had been

developed by this, we're going back nearly 15 years. There was an organization called the Altimeter group that was an early thought leader in social media, and they talked about well there's the sort of the military general and the different platoons and business units below that.

So there was looking at all the different organizational structures and there was this idea of so laser authority and down is it, you know, satellites. So every business unit has its own autonomy. Well then you ended up with like a multitude of social channels. And this can happen in any organization. You end up with a dog's breakfast of social accounts, no coordination of efforts between business units and it can detract from the brand. And so the organization has to decide, do you want to be a mile wide and a foot deep? Do you want to be on one or just a few and really well execute on the few? And as well, like who has the authority? So is it branded communications, is it marketing, is it digital? My sense is, or I tend to recommend forming, whether literally or loosely, a steering committee. Even if there's not a figurehead, some sort of collaborative committee that represents - you've got the digital, you've got brand and communication, you may get marketing,...

SS

Customer service.

AJ

...customer service, because customer service can be an absolute goldmine of insights, about one, how the organization's perceived. I remember Salesforce, they had bought a company called Radian6 which was a social media listening. They would use it to listen for mentions of their competitors, but specifically mentions about features and loves and hates about their competitors. And that information would be routed straight to the product group. The product group did not have to have a presence on social, to benefit from social. The company was listening and giving the insights back to the appropriate stakeholders.

So to go back to your question about who should own it, oftentimes that's one of the most challenging. I had an engagement with a direct to consumer organization, situational analysis, stakeholder interviews, strategic plan, strategic recommendations. And I said, well, my engagement is over. Who owns this after I'm gone? And it was one of the longest, most awkward silences as all the group around the table, because there are some people who

see this, oh, this is my chance to soar. And others go, no, I don't want to be, 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 you can, if it's a highly collaborative organization, that everyone's rowing in the same direction, wanting the company to succeed, well, 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 missed, just absolute ton of missed opportunities as well. (25.23)

SS

Well, it's Byzantine, and your book makes that case quite explicitly, which, again, one of the treasures of the book is it opens your eyes to just the complexity of it all. I want to move into slightly different territory, and this sort of goes back to my question earlier about the state of social media. And it's interesting because in the last few pages of your book, which I presume was written during the pandemic or around the end of the pandemic?

AJ

I finished it around July of 2021. So yeah, it was the first. We were still locked down when I finished. And it was released in March of 2022.

SS

So it was interesting because in the last chapter, in the final few pages, you make this point that, and you hold up this hope, and I'll quote to you here, your hope that we have moved beyond the polarization we have experienced, quote unquote, in the pandemic. And then your hope is that we're going to return 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. Is it just a fact of life now? How do businesses insulate themselves from it? How do they not get drawn into this? And this kinds of points you're just raising, which is, it can be so fragmented within a company and customer service is often on the front lines of some of this. Is it even possible today? Do businesses have to think about, strongly think about, how they deal with this element,

unfortunate element, this duality in the human species where we're good and bad? And how do you manage through all of that?

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 be or not.

SS

They're being asked to take sides. Yeah.

AJ

Yes and so there's a lot of, you know, and I can't say that, there's no easy answer, but if you are an organization who has any monetary ties to certain regions, or certain sides of a debate or a conflict, you are going to have to be prepared to speak to it to some degree.

Sure, having prepared remarks is not the same as - a prepared statement that happens once is not the same as months and months of being asked to take a side. But it can run the range from - We had an engagement with a pet food company, who I was referring to earlier, where someone jumped onto their Facebook page and said, your pet food killed my dog. And that was escalated all the way to the CEO overseas.

Half the battle is, if there's a willingness, half the battle in those sorts of circumstances is to acknowledge that people have an issue, they've raised an issue, and it can be that, and I don't mean to say that someone complaining about the pet food killing their dog is the same as people expressing their feelings about the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Let me just state that. But anytime someone has an issue and they bring it to a brand, first step is to acknowledge it and say, we hear you, we understand that you have an issue. And it's not that they have to take a side.

Acknowledgement is oftentimes enough to diffuse the situation and they can decide. We're open to discussing this further with you if you'd like to call our 1-800 number or whatever it might be.

This Israel and Hamas conflict, that's a far more complicated situation because there are financial ties. They're like, you know, universities that are having protests on campus, and people that are not students are coming on to the campus to participate in those protests.

And then you have the schools that have, especially in the US, endowments that are from one side. They're in a precarious position. Students go to university, they learn critical thought, they learn to question authority. And so the very things that they learn that are now applying make it so like, oh, the university was successful in teaching them to question authority and apply critical thinking. Well, now it's being applied. You know, they're in a sense, biting the hand that feeds them. And that's creating a real problem.

We did some work with a financial services company where a member of the, so the CEO of the company happened to be Jewish, a member of staff was posting pro-Palestinian content on their personal Facebook page, which was their right to do. But their Facebook, 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 this whole thing about social media policies and rules of engagement. And so we often advise companies to say, put down what you will allow on your social media accounts. You will not allow for content that contains hate, misinformation, whatever your criteria is. Some are quite willing to have open debate and that's, ah, progressive, it's forward thinking. But you can also say what you will allow and what you won't allow and where and how you're willing to engage in a dialogue.

It's very easy to say that, but in this heightened era of polarization, but unfortunately, as much as many organizations would like to, you can no longer sit on the sidelines. Inevitably you will be drawn in. And so you have to be prepared, whether you call it taking sides or at least having some prepared remarks, to say, this is our corporate position.

But increasingly from a recruitment, the younger generation are looking at organizations and how transparent they are with their values, which infuses into their employer brand. And so if you are not aligned with my values, I have no interest in working for you or working, you know, supporting you. (32.19)

Or potentially buying your products.

Yes.

SS

AJ

SS

I'm going to move on to, we referenced it earlier, TikTok. So it's obviously been a massive game changer. We know the US is now trying to force it's sale or even banishment. Certainly the states have moved forward on that. But outside of the whole data issue, how has it permanently altered the landscape of social media? And if it is bad, if it does disappear, I mean, it's got, what, its the third largest platform now. It's got a massive generation of Gen Z'ers following it daily. It's hard to imagine anything taking its place. But in the event that somehow it does disappear or sold, what takes its place? So what's your perspective on the future of TikTok? And again, its impact on social media.

AJ

The pandemic was instrumental in its growth. I'll use one. There was a hashtag called Moms of TikTok, using that as an example. 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 moms of TikTok hashtag, exploded to a community of, like, you know, billions, like, I think it was, the usage was astronomical. It was one of the largest single communities on TikTok, because women that found themselves, like, dealing with all that they were dealing with during the pandemic wanted to find other people. They wanted to find their supportive community. They either wanted a virtual shoulder to cry on, or an outlet to rant, or a place to find and share a laugh. And all of that commingled.

And that was one of the biggest communities and biggest, I'll call it instruments of growth for TikTok during the pandemic. And though now there's, Book TikTok, then there's Film TikTok and all these distinct communities, and the algorithm there. I don't have to follow anyone if I don't want to, of, just how I react to the content based on my interests.

Now, this is going to sound weird, but coincidentally, 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, and so on. Well, I've watched, and the proper, I would say proper, but the other word for, blacksmith is farrier. And there is Farrier TikTok. There's tons of videos of blacksmiths or farriers shewing horses, or there's vets working on the infected hoof of a cow. And these, some of these videos are getting, like, hundreds of thousands of views. And it's like, no, 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 that is TikTok, is testing your interests and what you'll respond to and then giving you more and more of it.

Now, because of that, it has this outsized influence, and because it's not controlled or regulated by the US government like the others are, and not necessarily subject to, I think, whatever Section 230. And Mitt Romney said this on a panel: because it was showing pro-Palestine content at a much higher ratio than pro-Israel content, it was concerning to them. So they said the quiet part out loud. And I don't say that to take sides. What it is, is it shows that the politics is infusing itself into the situation. And because they can't control the message, it concerns them.

The ironic thing is they can't control the message. But both the prospective Republican nominee and the Democratic nominee, I'm just using US examples, are on the platform because they recognize if you're trying to reach Gen Z's, 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. I'll watch content from TikTok, from TV stations or TV channels or cable channels. I'm not watching them on their channels. And that's the same with the other 2.5 billion users. They're getting their news, they're consuming their content, on especially TikTok. And the media outlets, you know, like some shows by a host on MSNBC, are getting half a million viewers, live. But their six minute summary clip is getting viewed a million times on TikTok. The writing's on the wall. (37.47)

SS

Yeah, it's crazy. Now, Facebook, just to talk about the impact of TikTok, has been kind of looking enviously over at its rise and wondering what it could steal or borrow. It created Reels out of the gate as a response. But really, interestingly, they've also done something else recently. I want to get your thoughts on this. I mean, Facebook is back to growing again. The years of stagnation as they watched this other generation migrate to a different platform. Now, apparently, they've altered their algorithm to shift away from promoting friends and family content, which is what the platform is all about now, to expanding the algorithm to recommend content

more broadly based on user preference and interest. Again, in other words, taking their cue from TikTok, what's your perspective on where Facebook is today and where it could be going?

AJ

It's the TikTok effect. It goes back to what I was saying earlier about, you want to be a mile wide and a foot deep, on all, or do you want to be on a select few? And it comes down to, if you're starting a Facebook page today, and I have some clients that were starting a Facebook page today, they are warned, 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. So, having said that, but if you are doing paid, it is one of the most cost effective platforms with one of the most high potential reach possible. And, as well, if you are trying to get people over 40, there are certainly over 40s on TikTok and over 40s on Instagram. But the largest percentage of people over a certain age is Facebook. So, this goes back to, again, who you're trying to reach and what channels are most conducive to reaching them.

So, you know, we have some clients in wealth management. They're all about retirement, or people that are already in retirement. Oh, well, that's going to be Facebook. But if you're trying to reach a Gen Z, that's, you know, university age, it's Instagram and TikTok, you know, mid-thirties, that's into fashion and beauty and travel, probably Instagram with a bit of TikTok. And then one of the surprising things, LinkedIn, one of the biggest growth areas, is under 30, because the Gen Z's are recognizing whether they don't like LinkedIn or not, that they have to have visibility, they have to network their way into opportunities and things like that.

So, Facebook is responding to market forces. They are becoming more TikTok-like, because TikTok didn't rely on family and friends, they had a ridiculously good algorithm that just kept presenting more and more content that was interesting.

My daughter, who's 23, soon to be 24, she 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, that TikTok served to us, because we respond to many of the same things. But I'm considerably older than her, so I do have different interests.

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. (41.41)

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? No one seems to be too optimistic that it's going to survive. And if so, what do you see as the eventual go to alternative? Is that Threads? Is it something else? What's your thought? What are your thoughts on that?

AJ

Let me say, LinkedIn and Twitter or X now, but 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 from there, and some of the funniest stuff, too.

And 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 just finished a book called *Breaking Twitter* that highlighted his first year running it. And 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 so, as much as we say, oh, he's running it into the ground. And then you have the day that the guilty verdicts about Donald Trump were announced. And where do they have their largest engagement? Where does news still break to this day? Twitter. And again, every time we dismiss it and say it's over, that's where we go back to.

SS

Well, because there's no alternative at this point, is there? Like, no real alternative.

AJ

None of the other platforms. So from day one, Twitter was set up for, to disseminate what's happening or what are you doing? So the, and I include this in presentations I give, the plane, you know, crashing in the Hudson River broke on Twitter. The raid on Bin Laden's compound broke on Twitter. You can name event after event after event, and the starting point for news dissemination, or you're wondering what's going on, people go to Twitter first. Instagram doesn't move

as fast as Twitter. Facebook doesn't move as fast as Twitter. TikTok doesn't move as fast. I would say it's a close second. But when I was at the bank, there was a Twitter account called RBC News, zero engagement, because it served one purpose, disseminating bank news. And the account was just followed by news outlets and journalists, because they wanted a direct pipe into the announcements of the bank. And, you know, that I couldn't make it any more blatant. It was for news dissemination or the dissemination of information.

And we do a lot of social media listening. And Twitter, or X, continues to be the proxy for all the other platforms, from which we extract insights from our social media listening, even though it's still where news breaks. Engagement is down, usage is down. We're recently on an engagement with a client in the healthcare space, and they asked us to grow their following on Twitter. And the healthcare industry in Canada is bigger on Twitter than it is on Instagram. And we were literally following doctors and physicians that had those keywords in their bio and had been active in the last 90 days when we were engaging their account, and they weren't following back at all. And this was a healthcare organization, and it's just that we're all left scratching our head going, what is happening on Twitter?

So, I remain hopeful that someone will take over, take the keys away from Elon. But he continues to operate erratically. He re-shared content from what he thought was the American pediatrics. It was about transgender transition surgery. And it turned out that he had re-shared a basically a hate group that poses as a pediatrician or organization, but nobody looked close enough.

And so that tweet of his, I don't know how many, I forget how many millions of likes and shares. And so he's actually at the core of it disseminating misinformation. So, if the CEO's sharing misinformation, what hope do we have for the laypeople? (46.47)

SS

No kidding. A couple of other platforms I just want to touch on, and then I want to talk about something completely different in terms of infrastructure. Reddit just did its IPO. Content moderation has been the bane of existence for many social media platforms. I'm thinking of Nextdoor as an example. It's been a terrific challenge for them. But Reddit's, somehow after being basically a sewer for the worst of humanity for a long time, figured it out, and

they straightened it out through proper governance and moderation. What lessons do they have to offer to some of the other platforms? If they can do it, is it not replicable by all the platforms to take the misinformation, disinformation, you name it, out of the conversation?

AJ

Well, it should be said that while they might be looked at now, as, you know, doing a better job of moderation, are they finished the journey? No. Did they have a woman CEO who was absolutely victimized by misogynistic content, that like, was so mistreated and so like a victim to, ah, undeservedly so, by Reddit communities, that, you know, she left. And then one of the co-founders, I believe, returned and one of the big mandates was like, and in order to go public, they had to have this under control to some degree.

But this speaks to a broader issue, and some will remember Tumblr. One of the often most, I won't say overlooked, but sort of dismissed or sort of like, don't look over here kind of things, aspects of the Internet is the - I used to work in e-commerce, and I would talk to companies that provided merchant accounts for taking credit card transactions in the US that would work with the software that we did for e-commerce, for small to medium business. And one of the things they didn't like to talk about was just how much money they made from porn and gambling, from credit card transactions.

So e-commerce is the small tip of the iceberg, but beneath that is this gigantic iceberg of gambling and pornography and the technological advancements of your ability to put in a credit card and have it safely encrypted to do a transaction, such that your credit card would not suffer from fraud, was driven by advancements in the porn business or the subscription.

And I'm not trying to get dark or take us in a difficult direction, but Tumblr had tons of pornography on it, which fed into its engagement and user base, which was fed into its valuation and Yahoo decided to buy it. Yahoo buys it, publicly traded company can't have porn, and I'm not here to support pornography on platforms. It had to purge a lot of the objectionable material. Once it did, like, some of the, Tumblr got bought for a few million dollars by somebody later. Reddit had to purge a lot of objectionable communities, and threads and so on, which it needed to be done. (50.22)

SS

Well, and that's what it did, right? That was the secret sauce, is 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

And there has been a bit of back and forth between some of the moderators, or mods, as they call them, because they're not paid, but they empowered some moderation to certain things. But they also, to your point, have tried to put in some community standards that you as a mod have to adhere to these standards or your community isn't going to, aren't going to house it anymore.

And one of the interesting developments to tie this into AI, there's a solution called Perplexity that competes now with Google as, Google's a search engine, Perplexity calls itself an answer engine. And so you can use it as an AI solution to conduct research to rewrite content. But one of the interesting things about Perplexity is you can actually narrow it in terms of where you point it to crawl content and you can point it solely at Reddit.

So I was doing some research about prompt engineering, and I can basically, instead of, like, sifting through all the disparate communities on Reddit, I can use a solution like Perplexity to make me more productive, to extract more value from a platform like Reddit.

The reason I want to tie it back to your mentioning of Reddit, I'm wondering if something like Perplexity in some of these other emerging AI solutions, working in conjunction with Reddit will even potentially have influence on increasing its value and its usefulness to people. Like a lot of things, there's a lot of times things go viral on Reddit that end up on the other social channels, unbeknownst to people. I may not recognize where this video went viral. Well, it's probably weeks old and hot on Reddit, but now it's spilled over onto the other platforms.

SS

Well, I just, I particularly love the Reddit discussions around Loblaws these days because it's such an easy, easy target for people, Shoppers.

AJ

But this is, we were talking about brands there, so we were doing social remodeling for a financial services wealth management firm around the first time, GameStop was going crazy because it was happening on Reddit. So, we were

monitoring Reddit to see whether or not the dialogue about GameStop and as well, what our clients, competitors were doing. And this is where, if you're in a regulated industry, Reddit is the wild, wild west, because there's anonymity behind your profiles and so on. So, should companies be aware of what's going on on Reddit? Absolutely. Are they prepared to, you know, jump into it? No. There have been examples of people going onto Reddit posing anonymously, slugging a competitor, and then potentially getting outed and getting fired as a result. So, yeah, there's some interesting shenanigans going on, on Reddit.

SS

So we're almost out of time, and I can't abandon this conversation, which I found absolutely fascinating today. It's almost like we need a part two to handle all the other questions that I have occurring to me.

AJ

Let me know if you want a part two.

SS

Well, there's a whole conversation, maybe we should set up around just the formation of customer communities and the role it's going to play going forward. But we don't have time for that. But maybe I can ask you about the Fediverse, which a lot of people scratch their heads over, but one of the big complaints about social media, obviously, is these big dominant private enterprises that own the social media space and the use of data and privacy and all that - is the Fediverse at this point, do you believe a genuine alternative? It's early days, but eventually, and I'll turn to these centralized platforms. And I ask that because even Zuckerberg has said, he's been publicly quoted, that, quote, "a privacy focused communications platform will become even more important than today's open platforms".

What are your thoughts on the Fediverse and its likelihood eventually to become the domain of conversation? When you think about it, it's certainly a logical infrastructure model. It operates like email and posts can come in from anywhere and you don't have to worry about your data having to be replicated across different platforms, etcetera. Do you see that as a likelihood or is it too technically out there for the average person to adopt? (55.01)

AJ

Well, if you're talking about, I'm federated, so I can basically move all of my data kind of like a wallet, I'll use Mastodon or Discord. So to the layperson who has to figure

out, well, which server should I be on? And then not having the, I think back to. So there's that end of the spectrum of the Federated approach. A Mastodon or Blue Sky to some degree, or a Discord.

Back to the heyday of the emerging Internet and AOL, where all I had to do was I clicked the icon on my desktop, AOL launches, just use, AOL keyword, Oprah. And I didn't have to know anything about, and I wasn't on AOL. But I mean, that's how simplistic it was for onboarding use and adoption.

And now if you wanted to use Midjourney, you had to have a Discord, like have a Discord account, and you had to figure out how to navigate into Midjourney via Discord. Well, I mean, that helped to a certain degree to sort of gatekeep. But if you want adoption, if I'm a corporation, if I want adoption, I have to remove as much friction as possible. And if I have to educate people just to the advantages and strengths of being federated, but that means that I'm going to set an arbitrary, like, it's just going to be circumstantial, that my community is going to be capped at whatever a server can manage, well, then most of my money and time will be spent on the infrastructure. But not necessarily - and also, at the end of the day, like the why? Why are we doing this?

So users feel better because they're federated? And I'm not saying everything has to have a monetary approach to it, but organizations are struggling to make social, to just manage the volume of activity related to social media. Well, now I've got to be monitoring, like, I won't say a bazillion, but a number of Discord servers, Mastodon, whatever. Like, good lord. And to what end? Like, if I look at the image, social network, like, you can have boards.

SS Oh, Pinterest.

Yeah, Pinterest. So Pinterest, we had a client that was an apparel company. We don't use Pinterest a lot because it's mostly direct to consumer. But you were doing all this pinning of other folks. There were like, tons of effort from next to no return. So great for fashion brands, great for travel, but that's about it. And e-commerce brands. And this issue with federated platforms makes me think of Pinterest, that for certain organizations, certain industry categories, yeah, it's going to be well served. But not for everyone because people are going to go, the amount of time and energy that I have to

invest with an uncertain return. Oh great. My customer, my end consumer might feel better from a values perspective about us being connected to one another through a federated platform mechanism, great. But if that constitutes like less than 2% of my audience, but the cost of the energy required, it isn't worth it. So it becomes a problem.

SS

Certainly the complexity issue is a big barrier, at least at this point. But, who knows?

AJ

Mastodon has been around for a while, like five, eight years, maybe even a decade, but not to any degree of popularity. Even with Elon, you know, it had a blip of activity. But one of the things that held it back from mass adoption was this whole federated mechanism to the layperson who had, what do you mean another server? Like, pick a server. Like, I think back to Second Life, when I did the social media research project. Like the amount of things you had to go through to join Second Life, but the ridiculously high barrier to joining. But once you were on and found your like-minded people there, the one thing it had that no other social network had was magic, is why I described it. I could fly from one island or one community to another. I could walk through people, you know, if I wanted to be a three foot tall midget that carried a sword and when I say a midget dragon. I could be whatever I wanted. But then 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.

SS

It certainly does. Hence the need for somebody to come in and help organizations sort it all out. Because it is complexity, it's constantly evolving and changing. We can have this conversation three months from now, we'll be talking about entirely different things as well. So, I just want to appreciate the time you've spent today. You're one of the top experts in Canada for a reason. Your knowledge is quite extensive. The book is great, a great guide, so I quite enjoyed it. It's very easy and accessible to read as well, and it's very well structured, so I certainly encourage anybody to read it to get up to speed on what they should be doing. You certainly ask all the right questions, so I appreciate you answering my questions today. It was a very productive hour.

AJ

Thank you very much. I really enjoyed it and appreciate the opportunity to share some of my thoughts. Thank you.

That concludes my interview with Andrew Jenkins. As we learned, social media is no longer a media outlier. Originally intended as a way to connect with friends and family, it is now permanently sewn into the fabric of society. It is the first place people turn for information and advice – their preferred method to stay in touch with each other - a town hall where they can make their voice heard. For marketers, the implications are clear: social media management has to move from the periphery of marketing and become the epicentre of engagement with customers. But brands can only join the conversation if they have something meaningful to contribute. And that demands more agile and imaginative content creation. It means being able to scale up content production to meet the high pressure demands of the business. But most importantly, it means operating with a cohesive strategy and plan connected to the goal of creating a more personal dialogue with customers.



Stephen Shaw is the chief strategy officer of Kenna, a marketing solutions provider specializing in customer experience management. He is also the host of a regular podcast called Customer First Thinking. Stephen can be reached via e-mail at sshaw@kenna.ca.