Executive Summary

The Social Media landscape is constantly changing and evolving. Rapid innovation in devices, communication, and software platforms is allowing people to interact in ways no one had imagined before. Also, social media is now regarded as the cornerstone for audience engagement and retention. In spite of its growing maturity and adoption, a few challenges remain in the development and execution of a sound social media strategy roadmap because of the inherent complexity and dynamics of the social media landscape.

In this new hyper-connected world, how can traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, and TV leverage the social media ecosystem to enhance their reach and improve customer engagement?

This white paper looks at some of the fundamental strategies that media firms must employ to stay relevant in the new world order. The authors first give an overview of the social media landscape and then discuss key strategies that can be leveraged by the media industry. While strategies may slightly vary within the industry, depending on the type of media, we focus on fundamental themes that hold good regardless.

Social Media Landscape

Let’s take a look at key trends in the social media ecosystem that are either already big influencers or are likely to see steep growth in the coming days:
Micro-Blogging and Content Sharing

Even though Facebook and Twitter started with different objectives, both have become platforms of choice for audiences looking for ways to share content, opinions, and media with their social connections.

At a deeper level, however, these platforms are significantly different in many ways. While Twitter is largely a network for ‘broadcast,’ Facebook is seen as a platform for ‘sharing.’ Facebook has a rich API (Application Programming Interface) that allows external applications to run within its environment (for example, social games) and also provides a sign-on service for external systems to access profile and connection data. Twitter, on the other hand, has a simpler model and focuses on providing the best experience around sharing short (140-character) messages on a very large scale. Twitter’s open API, which allows other services to integrate with it (TwitPic for image sharing, for example), has helped create a larger, more open ecosystem.

Local Deals and Couponing

The deals and couponing phenomena is one of the biggest success stories of businesses that leverage social networks. These businesses integrate with Facebook and tap into its “social graph,” allowing users to engage in group buying. The group business model is inconceivable without a solid social network to back its buying process – it solely relies on the fact that buying decisions of individuals are heavily influenced by their friends and social connections.

At a basic level, the concept of deals and couponing is fairly straightforward – users are incentivized to share a deal with their friends, so that a critical level of demand for the deal is met. The primary objective of merchants offering deals on these platforms is getting access to a large, local customer-base.
without making significant investments. The deals and couponing vendors gain by making money on every purchase and also by developing a vast customer preference database.

The online deals and couponing segment is an example of how social networks have created an entirely new industry worth billions. Groupon and LivingSocial are two of the largest names in this business.

**Location-based Social Networks**

Location-based social networks focus on facilitating interactions between people in and around a particular physical location. There are four key factors that have led to the rise of location-based social networks:

1. Explosion of GPS-equipped mobile devices
2. A mature software platform (iOS and Android) that allows easy and constant access to a person’s location (of course, with permission from the user)
3. Easy access to mapping data such as that provided by Google Maps and other providers
4. Rise of services, such as Simple Geo, that offer easy access to location-specific data such as nearby restaurants or weather.

It is interesting to note that although location-based social networks (such as Latitude and Loopt) have been around for a while, the increasing popularity of networks such as Foursquare and Gowalla can be attributed to their game-like functionality. For example, a user must announce her presence at an address by checking-in and is awarded a ‘higher status’ in the community if she checks-in more number of times. While check-in is like a game from the users’ perspective, the feature allows service providers and businesses to track how many people visited a specific location, business, or event.

Most location-based networks expose their APIs that allow outside parties to consume their data. These outside parties can, thus, incorporate location activity/stream into the online experiences that they offer to their users.
**Future Trends in Location**

As location-based social networks evolve, newer technologies will give rise to a host of new features around them. One such technology is NFC – Near Field Communication, which allows devices to communicate and exchange data within a short range without requiring an elaborate ‘pairing’ of devices as is required by Bluetooth. This new technology will allow businesses to broadcast any type of data to devices in local range, allowing them to develop local contexts.

Shopkick exemplifies the possibilities of such technology by delivering deals to shoppers for simply walking into stores (although Shopkick does not use NFC yet, it is an example of what technologies like NFC can enable).

**Media-Focused Social Networks**

Another growing class of social interactions is sharing of light-weight media – small images and videos – using mobile phones. Media-focused social networks such as Instagram, Path and Socialcam encourage users to share photos, primarily using mobile devices.

Such networks leverage photo and video capturing capabilities of mobile devices to allow users to capture and instantly share small/ lightweight images and short videos. Small data size allows media-focused social networks to work over wireless data networks at great speed.

Media-focused social networks are distinctly different from traditional photo and video sharing social networks such as Flickr, YouTube, or Vimeo, in that these relatively traditional social networks are used for higher resolution/ large size media that require higher bandwidth and more time for sharing.
Citizen Journalism

Explosive growth of mobile devices has given rise to a key concept for the news media industry – Citizen Journalism. The concept has been around for a long time but remained in experimental stages until recently. The new breed of mobile devices has introduced new capabilities and created the right ecosystem for citizen journalism to be executed with much greater promise. Following are some examples of citizen journalism features that are now possible either through new technology or the use of existing social networks:

> Audiences report/ track a developing story through Twitter messages marked with a story-specific hash tag.
> Audiences use their mobile devices to capture and stream images and photos on a story (existing services such as Instagram could be leveraged depending on availability of APIs).

It is important for content owners i.e. media companies to create a community/ following of their own and offer incentives to their audiences for participating in developing the stories. Some of the new themes for developing users’ interest in citizen journalism include ‘gamification,’ wherein audiences are engaged and incentivized through virtual goods and/ or virtual statuses/titles (like for example, ‘Chief Correspondent’) for popularizing/ following a story.

Social Media Integration – Key Themes

A key objective for using social media effectively is to engage the audience and increase reach. As the social media ecosystem continues to expand, it does not make sense for content publishers to reinvent technology. They must instead look at smartly integrating their core product – content – with a host of social media platforms, and provide a consistent user experience to their audiences. Social media platforms, on the other hand, thrive on content that is produced outside their networks and, therefore, provide rich integration services to content providers.

To look at some common themes for media firms to integrate with social media platforms, let us first outline some key aspects of audience behavior that will help us identify the right use of social media:

> When audiences don’t know what they are looking for, they prefer content that interests them.
> Audiences are likely to give more weight to content that is recommended by those who influence them, such as friends whose opinions they value, or content that is generally ‘popular.’
> Audiences view content that is ‘real-time’/ ‘breaking’/ ‘right-now’ differently than generic content; they value conversations, ideas, or opinions that are delivered to them in real-time.
> If convenient, audiences may share opinions about a piece of content.
> Audiences like consistent experiences.

Personalization

Audience science has long been considered key to understanding and targeting consumers, particularly since the advent of the internet. The Media industry uses audience science to create targeted content, while advertisers use it to develop targeted advertisements and promotions.
While the internet has facilitated collection of vast amounts of user behavior data, its efficacy as an authoritative definition of audience tastes is debatable. User data, usually submitted anonymously online, lacks the details required to build a definitive profile that can be used effectively to channel targeted content to users.

However, social media has changed this. Users of social media channels willingly share enough information about their likes and preferences, which in turn can be effectively leveraged by content providers, albeit after taking privacy issues into consideration.

Both Facebook and Twitter have rich APIs that allow third-party content publishers to query a user’s profile (with permission) and build a tastes/preferences profile to help channelize content that is most relevant to them. Trove and News.me are examples of services that have been created around this model. Trove integrates with users’ Facebook account to build their profile, and provide personalized content on their website, trove.com, whereas News.me uses Twitter data stream to create a personalized content channel on the iPad.

Building an effective ‘personalization engine’, of course, involves significant new technology development – heavy-duty parsing of data, application of machine learning, statistics, natural language processing, etc. However, such an investment will not only allow media firms to spread their audience base, but also stay competitive and relevant.

Content Sharing
An important aspect of social media integration is two-way flow of information. While machine-curated content provides users with what they are most likely to consume, a media service should also allow users to share content that they like. While this is not new and has already been implemented on a vast scale on the Web, here are some key aspects to be borne in mind for content sharing:

> Content sharing should be easy. Test each social media service to ensure that sharing takes not more than 2 or 3 clicks.
> For a single product, keep the sharing process consistent across content categories, websites, and devices.
Ensure that the measurement and analytics platform can track sharing activity at a detailed level.

Content sharing through social media not only widens reach but also helps build a richer taste profile of customers. It is also fundamental to providing an engaging social experience to users; audiences are more likely to engage with content that their friends and others in their network share. Thus, a combination of the following channels of information can be used to determine what might be most compelling for a user:

> What does the user share on his/her own social profile(s)?
> What kind of content engages the user’s friends and what is their level of engagement (read, viewed, commented on, recommended, shared with their friends, etc.)?
> What content is generally the most popular in or outside the user’s social graph?

**Group Deals and Couponing**

Traditionally media companies that have local presence in major cities are best positioned to introduce a group deals/couponing business. A key factor in leveraging such deals effectively is a sales force that prepares a pipeline of deals to be presented every day. Media businesses that already have sales support, therefore, come with significant competitive advantage.

In addition to a strong local sales force, media firms have two more assets that can drive deal conversions:

> Their ability to position deals next to relevant content in a manner that is likely to influence audiences the most. For example, a newspaper website with a big restaurant review section can position restaurant deals strategically to drive conversions.
> Demographic data that provides crucial information about users’ interests and preferences that significantly impact their purchasing decisions. Used effectively, this data can be used to target deals to consumers who are most likely to buy in.

While media firms can leverage Facebook in a similar way, a common mistake is forced implementation of deals across all audience touch points. For example, it is not uncommon to see the same deal or set of deals splashed across a wide range of online media. Deeper thinking and better planning need to go into such implementations. Media companies should ask themselves:

> Do you have enough audiences to offer more than one deal a day?
> How can you target deals based on audience demographics or context, so that deals are more relevant contextually and to each visitor?
> Do you have niche content verticals that are well positioned for contextual targeting of deals?

**Connecting the Old and New Worlds**

A challenge that traditional media companies face frequently is bridging the old and the new worlds. Most newspaper firms today have digital editions and TV broadcasters are looking at internet-enabled broadcast technologies to provide a more immersive experience to their audiences. Even as new hard-
ware platforms evolve, current technologies can be employed to bring the old and the new worlds together. For example, newspapers could print Quick Response (QR) codes next to print articles having digital counterparts to allow readers to use a smartphone to bookmark a web page or initiate a social update on the printed article.

Similarly, TV or video content broadcasters can immediately integrate a Twitter hash-tag stream with their TV/video feed to provide a more inclusive experience, without any software platform.

Independent mobile applications such as Into Now are leveraging innovations in the mobile landscape to create new experiences around TV.

**Leveraging Location**

For media firms whose business revolves around local news and events, location-based networking offers a new way to personalize content and engage audiences. Since a lot of innovation is happening in the field of location-based social networking, media firms must experiment with modes of engagement enabled by such networks. For example, a user browsing through the Local Events section of a site can be shown a list of friends who have checked in at a specific event. A leaderboard of featured events along with number of check-ins at each of them is another way to use location information effectively. Media firms can also run specials or deals based on location. For example, you could offer a special for a subsequent sponsored event if fifty people check-in within a span of one hour.

**Swarm**

50+ people are also checked-in here - it’s a foursquare flashmob!

**One Content – Many Outlets**

Audiences typically consume media from a variety of devices. However, there are still very few media firms that provide a single, consistent experience across popular devices. Through a simple, rich, pure
HTTP API, most social media services can be made accessible on all devices that are connected to the internet -- internet-enabled televisions, tablet computers, eReaders, smartphones, and game consoles. In addition, most of these devices have mature Software Development Kits (SDKs) that allow building social media capabilities, while maintaining a consistent product experience. Netflix – a US-based provider of on-demand internet streaming videos – follows an effective content strategy by making a clear attempt at offering a consistent experience across its products, regardless of the type of device or form factor.

Measuring Social Media Effectiveness

While the strategies outlined above are effective in maximizing reach and engagement, one must constantly monitor and measure their efficacy across platforms and channels. To measure the effectiveness of social media channels, it is important to isolate the social media source of each audience action and be able to answer questions such as:

- Which social media channel/content categories led to the highest engagement?
- By how much has personalization increased audience engagement?
- Has personalization led to increased content sharing among audiences?
- Which content categories benefited the most from real-time chatter around them?
- Are there any platforms or devices that utilize social media features lesser than others?

While an analysis of clickstream data on media Web properties is a valuable source to such information, one must invest in technologies such as URL shortening services that allow detailed information collection across a range of social channels and devices.
Conclusion

Social media will continue to evolve, and take on new forms and dimensions. Social interactions have introduced a new way to attach value to content, thereby adding a new dimension to the internet. Therefore, the key to successfully using it is not in simply integrating the most popular networks. Instead, it is critical for media firms to ask how they can create experiences that best allow their audiences to engage with their services. They could employ a combination of the many social themes we have outlined in this white paper or do something as radical as developing an entirely new technology to enable new ways of engagement. Regardless, media companies will benefit most by staying on top of major social trends and having a well-defined, consistent, and measurable social strategy.
About Tavant Technologies

Tavant Technologies is a specialized IT solutions & services provider that leverages its expertise to provide impactful results to its customers. We have leveraged our unrivaled capabilities and domain insights to create game changing results for leading businesses across chosen industry micro-verticals. We are known for our long-lasting customer relationships, engineering excellence and passionate employees. Founded in 2000, we are headquartered in Santa Clara, California and service customers across North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific.

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