



Amy Showalter January 3rd, 2012

# Social Media – Should It be the Driver or Passenger in your Grassroots Influence Strategy?

Several years ago our Innovate to Motivate conference hosted then Gallup Managing Partner Ron Balmer to talk about Gallup's research on customer engagement and how it applies to grassroots organizations. It was one of our most highly rated workstorms. Gallup has been at the forefront of engagement research; they define it as the degree to which people will work for or against your organization or brand. I think most of us would agree that definition of stakeholder engagement is worth pursuing. They have published recent research which reinforces Ron's prescient admonitions.

Engagement matters because the world is driven to distraction. With engagement, your stakeholders give you the benefit of the doubt when you screw up. They also have your brand as a part of their own identity. They can't imagine a world without your organization or cause, and criticizing your organization means criticizing themselves.

Gallup conducted research with over 17,000 social media users to determine how people interact with social media and its effectiveness as a marketing tool. Gallup doesn't conduct shoddy research, so I think it's worth our time to see if there are applications for those of us in the grassroots persuasion business. After all, we are marketers of ideas and action.

In this post, I'll feature the first engagement myth busted by Gallup, and feature additional research findings in subsequent posts.

**Myth #1 – Social media initiatives drive loyalty and acquisition.**

**Gallup Fact: Engagement with a brand drives social engagement.**

Many of us believe that if we get enough online participation, it will lead to offline engagement. But according to Gallup, *organization-sponsored* social media initiatives "have very little impact on decision making." Nor do they drive prospects to recommend your cause to those in their social network. According to Gallup, it's actually the reverse: engagement with your brand drives social engagement. In other words, as my very smart colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads said, "It's the dependent variable. Social media is the result, not the cause. It is the result of political or social action and conversations. It's a marker that something is happening."

I was reminded of this rule when talking with my friends at Southwest Airlines. They are frequently asked to speak at marketing conferences about their social media prowess. They said that as much as they hoped other organizations could maximize their customer relationships through social networks, the inherent challenge for their audience members is that their corporations belatedly came to the “customer is king” philosophy; Southwest has held that belief system and ingrained it in their culture since its genesis. A corporation that uses social media to drive customer loyalty like what exists at Southwest Airlines will fall short because they aren’t Southwest Airlines. Online engagement is the result, not the cause.

What does work? Engagement is the result of psychological needs and rational needs. For your organization to benefit from social media, it must create stakeholder engagement by meeting those needs.

### **How You Can Drive Engagement**

Now, so that we don’t see too many rainbows and unicorns, here is my real-world application on how you as a grassroots leader can, through your behavior and creating a culture of engagement, fulfill those needs. I have listed these from the lowest level of engagement to the highest. At the lower end we have the rational logical elements of engagement and then we get to the good stuff – the emotional side, where your behavior can make the difference.

1. An overall satisfaction with the organization – not particularly outstanding performance, but you are honest, forthright and don’t try to manipulate your audience.
2. Delivers on promises – you do what you say you’ll do. You don’t over promise. I see this most pervasive when we exaggerate the power of “advocacy.” Sometimes we make our advocates believe that their form email or letter will change a lawmaker’s mind, or that one good story is all it takes to persuade someone. If that were true, every group would win its legislative issues.
3. Treats me fairly – When you screw up, you admit it and make it right. Have you ever had a grassroots volunteer treated poorly by a legislator or his or her staff? How do you address that situation? Who do you defend? Do you make excuses for the legislator or kindly remind the lawmaker that such behavior isn’t appropriate?
4. Treats me with respect; I feel proud to be a customer – Do your grassroots volunteers get to use their talents? Do you know what they are? Do you ask for their opinions, either formally or informally? Do you incorporate their suggestions?
5. Can’t imagine a world without your organization – At this level, your stakeholders will mentally resolve discrepancies about your organization or brand in your favor. You get the benefit of the doubt. This is exemplified by volunteers who view you as a friend, coach or mentor vs. a transactional figure.

The bottom line? Encourage your team to be evangelists with their networks, and focus on the most engaged volunteers. As the Gallup report stated, “They are most likely to advocate on your behalf and least likely to criticize you.”

Do you know who your most engaged volunteers are? How will you engage them on your behalf in 2012?

*Don't forget to sign up for K Street Café's mailing-list to receive news about exclusive content and events.*  
 (/web/20141126122841/http://eepurl.com/uVYnz)