WHY'S SOCIAL GOT SO SERIOUS?
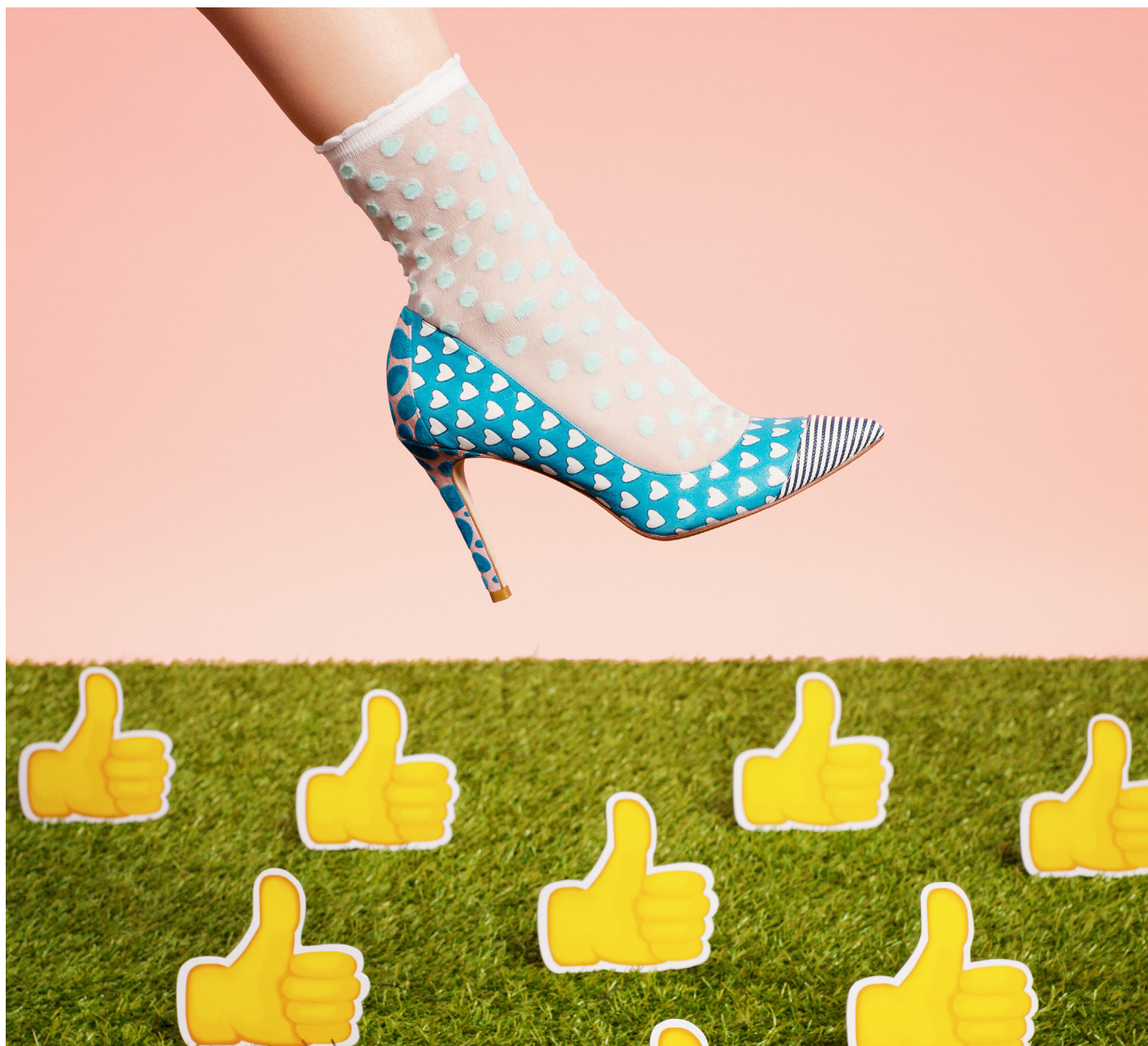
ADDRESSING THE LACK OF SOCIAL BRAVERY BY BRANDS TODAY

BY RACHEL WOOD, HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, ACNE LONDON

WHEN SOCIAL FIRST PROPERLY CAME INTO OUR LIVES, WE MARKETEERS FELL IN LOVE.

This was different, it was unchartered territory and it made us forget the dotcom bubble bursting. Facebook was shiny and new and useful to brands (unlike Second Home, Friends Reunited or MySpace). It was a direct relationship with consumers, it was outside of 'normal' marketing, it cut out the middle-man ie, retailers. It was the future.

What started out as brands dipping their toe into the world of Facebook pages (FB ads didn't kick-in until 2012) evolved quickly. With Instagram being gobbled up by Zuckerberg it quickly changed, expanding the explore function, adding in hashtags, promising increased engagement for the most successful. Twitter developed, providing the soundtrack to both our lives and to our moral compasses. Since 2018 there's been an expansion of YouTube, gaming and live streaming that has seen a content explosion hit all areas of our lives.

Fast forward to 2022 and our relationship with social as marketeers has changed dramatically. A whole new area of marketing is now dedicated to feeding the social beast - whose diet consists of ever-changing formats, a large volume of video content with accompanying keyword led copy, management of communities who vocalise their disappointments, frustrations and question ethically each and every brand at any hour of the day or night. There is no off button. Sometimes it feels like we've created our own shackles.

How have we ended up having our dreams messed with? Where did it all go wrong?

"The volume that is required for social media can be quite overwhelming especially when you have to create organic content e.g. TikTok saying we're actively restricting duplicate content. Brands need to put a lot of time into content creation and that can be a massive challenge especially at scale."

GEORGE PAVLOU
HEAD OF SOCIAL, THE HUT GROUP

THE ROAD TO CONFORMITY

Firstly, in our pursuit of excellence on all social channels, we have been driven and controlled by the platforms and their ever-changing algorithms. They dangle the carrot of more eyeballs and we respond. And by creating this increasingly normalised environment where content can perform effectively one day but not the next, we've become beholden to platforms telling brands how best to create content. These shifting sands have led to creativity coming second to the idea of format and 'beating the algorithm'.

There's a need for brands and their agencies to follow the 'rules' if you want content that will have the most reach, the most engagement and the most impact it could possibly have, then you'll want to know how many times a day to post, how many format types to use, how many hashtags to add. Unsurprisingly the answer is that the amount of content needed to be posted has grown exponentially over recent years. Meaning that the platforms are the hard taskmasters making creators become content-machines. A huge industry of creators and martech has grown around the need to feed the platform's desire for more content, all in the name of staying relevant in a world that moves at lightning speed.

"As we cover a very wide range of subjects – in fact, every topic under the sun - it can be challenging to get the kind of loyalty some brands, personalities or genre specific content creators cultivate. And like everyone else, we're in the lap of the gods when it comes to our content being gifted with reach by social platforms."

Dan Thorne Head of Social Media, Guinness World Records

Secondly, the pressure to conform has grown as social channels become the main way to engage. The ease of entry to social channels and the accountability offered meant that no brand wanted to miss out on such a great way to connect with potential consumers. What started as a supporting role within marketing plans ten years ago has now rightly become THE way to engage. Simple when it was just the Big 3 (FB, Instagram, Twitter) but much harder to contend with when platforms are fragmenting (Clubhouse, Weare8, Snapchat), some flash-in-the-pan, some chat-first and evolving so quickly. No one wants to sacrifice a platform with a well earned following, simply because it's getting harder and harder to create meaningful channel strategies for native audiences. But without sacrifice, the task to ensure social adds value diminishes.

THE RESULTS OF THE ROAD TO CONFORMITY

Brands are becoming worn out by the need to create content across multiple social channels, the amount of formats needed for each channel, the new updates that simulate formats from others successes. Social media teams have a job that's utterly relentless, mentally exhausting and unsatisfying (you're only as good as your last post). Plus the environment around risk is cut throat. Would anyone reading this have wanted to be a social manager around the time of the George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter moment (shall we post a black screen? What's our policy on this?!) or at the start of the invasion of Ukraine (what's our brand position on Russia?).

With creative stimulation having much less of a role than it should, at the expense of best practice and optimisation, the need to be always-on is to the detriment of enjoyment. The risk of not following the 'rules' is now seen as too great for many marketeers, it's easier to produce the 33* pieces of unique content a

day, than to justify pulling a brand off a social channel.

For consumers the result is also noticeable. There's a distinct lack of social bravery that allows brands to truly differentiate themselves from their competitors or from brands with similar target audiences. Brands all use the same cultural calendars, produce content that tries (and normally fails) to adopt trends delayed by internal sign-offs and makes content that pushes purpose to suit agendas. Don't consumers deserve better than for their social feeds to be full of lazy content with multiple buy-me messages a week to remain relevant to consumers?

"Consumers are looking for brands that align with their values.

Brands need to have a lot more personality compared to just a few years ago when brands avoided having a strong opinion or taking a stand. In the current social media space, brands need to be act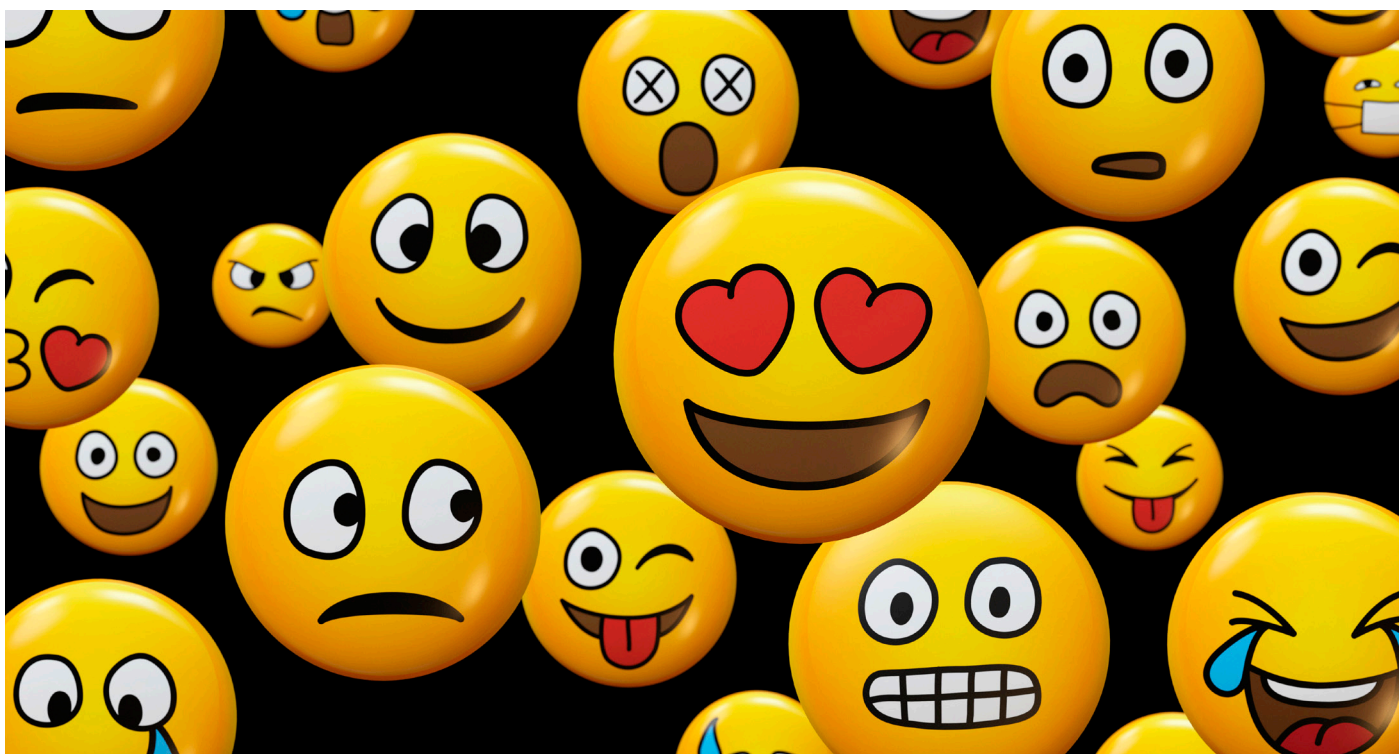ivists, pioneers or spokespeople for their communities. That's what makes brands feel more human, and that's what consumers are looking to connect with. Consumers are so much more savvy these days."

EMMA BENNETT
CONTENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, ODDBOX

CHANGING THE RULES

Consumers want to be part of something joyous, or at least stimulating to the senses.

Our role as brand guardians is to wow them with the new, to make people feel special and to be part of a community that has a connection that makes them feel good about their choice. And to flip that - what they don't want is content for the sake of content. It should still be seen as an honour for a person to follow a brand, it's an acquisition (of sorts), something that has almost been forgotten these days versus when this was the key objective of any social campaign.

We, the industry, need to rejig our thinking about why people follow brands - it's not for daily product images, it's to align with what the brand stands for - what it creates and what it can offer.

And why is now a good time to change? The love affair with social is quickly changing. Meta announced its first drop in revenues earlier this year, Gen Z are actively looking to reduce or stop their consumption of some social platforms, and Snapchat is laying off staff this month and moving to a product strategy. BeReal is a clear sign that there's a whiff of revolution in the air and brands could do well to take stock.

"From an audience perspective, they're now a lot wiser so brands need to be more careful about positioning and marketing via social. We're now here to build longer term relationships rather than just using it to quickly sell products because audiences, particularly younger ones, are more attuned to that. It's about striking a balance between still being innovative, remaining creative and telling a story on those channels."

Ben Lancaster-Nogueira Social Media Practice Lead, Deloitte Digital

THE WAYS TO START THINKING ABOUT PUTTING THE FUN BACK INTO YOUR BRAND'S CHANNELS.

#1 RULE THINGS OUT

Social is evolving quicker than brands can keep up with - BeReal and Lapse are current new additions to the landscape that show us that Gen Z's ability to pivot away from the mainstream platforms will always be a marketeer's headache. The challenge is upon most social teams now to keep up with the amount of content required to work to best practice on each platform - and there will be more on the horizon.

This creates a clear need to challenge the channel strategies that simply keep in every mainstream platform in order to not miss out potential audiences. The job to edit channel use is hard and requires a prioritisation of the channels that will most effectively deliver the type of content your brand wants to share.

"When it comes to the big three (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) brands don't seem to want to leave them because there are already established followings and communities there – but they're becoming harder and harder to maintain."

BEN LANCASTER-NOGUEIRA
SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICE LEAD, DELOITTE DIGITAL

#2 REFLECT THROUGH ACTION

Action gets attention. When Lush Cosmetics came off their social channels (for the second and final time in 2021) it created a stir. Their philosophy of wanting to do good with a target audience of younger females hit a crunch point when a Facebook whistleblower admitted they knew the harms that young people are exposed to because of the current algorithms and loose regulation of this new area of our lives. They walked the talk in a very brave and commendable way, even now their pages land on text that says "Be Somewhere Else". This is an extreme example, but it shows a spirit that's needed to make the most out of social - to be seen to be taking action that reflects the personality and values of the brand.

How many brands have Creativity as one of their values but end up producing 'expected' content? Who has Bold as an attitude but simply follows the algorithm needs in order to keep up the expected metrics? These are brand behaviours that need to be acted on in demonstrable ways. Often it simply means that they get watered down into content that doesn't perform.

Consider Balenciaga who now use their Instagram account like a digital whiteboard. Removing all their content each season to allow for fresh content. They're not the only ones, other fashion houses are doing the same - John Gaultier and Bottega Veneta. They want to be seen as changemakers and they are, how they use social is getting column inches not just what content they put on it.

"Here (at Channel 4) we're more open to risk taking than many organisations. We've had a couple of big initiatives recently – we're putting some of our full episodes onto YouTube – not just the archive, but current shows too…if we didn't take risks we'd never progress or innovate."

DIANE GLYNN
HEAD OF SOCIAL MEDIA, CHANNEL 4

#3 USE METRICS THAT ALLOW FOR IMPACT

Engagement and interaction metrics are the first port of call when considering the success of any social content. However for those braver brands, these are limiting because the impact of bold actions can come in many different forms - not just ones that are measured within the platform. It can come from earned PR, increased brand conversations, associations with new keywords and discovering opportunities with new audience segments.

To move away from the perceived norm of the use of social platforms takes courage of conviction, not easy when the data can show numbers going down that need to be justified. So be prepared. Before any campaign, content or action is done that changes the game for a brand, make sure that the performance metrics are altered to allow for success to be shown where it is due. Preparing from the beginning for the tough questions will make for a confident approach to moving the dial on how your brand uses social.

"People forget the value of community management and that's something we've focused on. Taking the time to reach out with your community from those who are commenting and generally engaging, helps to draw people into your platforms."

SAMMIE MAN
SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, SONY PICTURES

"Creativity is one of our core objectives alongside the more tangible KPIs around audiences and revenue. As a creative organisation that's important to us, which is why we're investing in initiatives such as Channel 4.0, experimenting with virtual reality and why we are constantly pushing the boundaries by bringing new content and talent to our social platforms."

DIANE GLYNN,
HEAD OF SOCIAL MEDIA, CHANNEL 4

"Social channels used to be about a public forms of engagement where likes, comments and follower growth were the be all and end all. Whereas now, what we value much more is the 'dark side of social'. Saves and sends are much more of a priority to us as a brand. These less (publicly) visible metrics are how we track if people are valuing and engaging with our content."

EMMA BENNETT
CONTENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, ODDBOX

#4 DON'T RUN BEFORE YOU CAN CONFIDENTLY WALK

The bright lights of the metaverse are easy to get excited about and we all love a new shiny toy to think about.

But the continuing depth of engagement actually should make us all take stock of the channels we already have, and whether they're used in ways that strengthen the brand and deepen the consumer relationship.

Fundamentally it's about having a team that is built to find its own success, that can develop a winning mindset to work with a brand's niche communities within a clear social strategy and build confidence by knowing what works. A smart social strategy should be one that is unique to that brand alone.

Before we rush into this new area, don't we need to mend a failing love affair with social channels before we start making the same mistakes again?

"A lot of it is about having confidence as a social team – and the confidence that your brand can stretch. It comes from knowing who you are and what you stand for. Not just having an amazing strategy but that everyone within your team will support you, even down to how a CEO reacts to you and what you're doing. They need to know that their next moves can be done."

RACHEL WOOD
HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, ACNE LONDON

IN CONCLUSION

A seriousness seems to have draped itself across social channels. Social media has heralded a new kind of engagement with consumers, a directness that has moved the world forward from traditional advertising and our industry has relished this. As social starts to become a more traditional format there has to be a way of building on the sophistication we've all garnered to put brand bravery at the top of 2023's wishlist.

"Social media really is a specialism – and there's a fair few management teams that still see social as a new thing which you can give to an intern for them to crack on with. If you have someone who doesn't know your brand values and hasn't had the right training, that can be a massive risk."

GEORGE PAVLOU, HEAD OF SOCIAL, THE HUT GROUP

Social is now the fundamental fabric of any communication strategy, and yet so often it is neglected as a key brand building tool by those who should know better. And now, when consumers are so overseeing brands on social media who just turn-up but don't offer any value, it is a great time for many brands to really consider how they can make their own impact. Rising above the seriousness to find their own fun. Injecting creativity into the heart of their strategies and making some bold decisions to make the channels work for them and the wonderful, extraordinary niche communities they can connect with.

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* Based on the optimal (not maximum) amount of content recommended by the platforms and/or specialists to ensure best use of current 2022 algorithms: TikToks - 3 times a day, Facebook - 1 a day, Twitter - 15 times a day, Pinterest - 10 times a day, Instagram - 2 times a day, LinkedIn - 1 a day, YouTube - 1 a week.