Social Sharing Manifesto

The Arguments For and Against The Rise of the Sharing Consumer

Simon Salt

There are arguments for and against the rise of the sharing consumer. It is an argument of values and value, enlightenment and entitlement. In this manifesto, I will take both sides, beginning with the argument against.

The Argument Against: The Emperor Has No Clothes

The age of enlightenment, which rose in the 18th century and had at its core the critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals, a strong belief in rationality and science, and lasted well into the 20th century, is slowly being replaced by the age of entitlement.

Much as its predecessor had, this age has at its core critical questions for the traditional institutions, customs, morals and belief systems which have been held so dear by so many for so long. The past decade in particular has seen a rise in social technologies that have encouraged, empowered and enabled people to share their thoughts, their online and offline discoveries and even the most tedious minutiae of their daily lives.

Initially, this stream-of-consciousness sharing went mostly unnoticed. The mainstream response to all this sharing was a resounding, “who cares?” But, gradually, different platforms on which to share started to appear, and the ability to share became easier. Suddenly it was no longer limited to geeks who, for the most part led lives that were only really of interest (and then only barely) to other geeks. Now, anyone who could operate a word processor or type an email was able to create a website and share the unimaginably mundane details of their lives.

As more people realized what was possible, more companies produced different ways of sharing. Wordpress, Moveable Type and Typepad enabled the creation of online journals which required no programming knowledge and could be setup in minutes, unlike more traditional websites.

Flickr, Picasa, and others encouraged the sharing of pictures. Youtube, Vimeo and others appeared and encouraged the sharing of video. Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk and more appeared, spawning micro-sharing, which initially simply increased the volume of people sharing the dull happenings of their lives.

Suddenly the online world was swamped with people sharing what was happening to them, around them and what they thought about all these happenings. The effect was similar to that of walking into a symphony hall only to find that everyone in the audience had brought their own instrument and no one had brought sheet music—everyone just played their own song. As the initial glamour of being "published" started to wear off and a large number of people ran out of "taking the dog for a walk tweets," the symphony hall turned into an echo chamber. Those who had little or no content of their own to share started to reshare content that they saw others sharing, which was often content that had been produced by yet another author.

The tools enabled this. Twitter implemented the "retweet" function after they found that it had become a popular use of its platform. Blogging platforms enabled auto posting to other sites. Tools to capture feeds from blogs and other sources enabled people to publish while away from the platforms, and so the volume of noise rose without the volume of content rising in the same ratio.

As with so much else where noise to content ratio is out of balance, the cream quickly started to rise to the top. Swiftly dubbed the "A-list", a select group of content producers became recognized as being trusted sources within their niches. Suddenly the masses realized that they had something to aspire to. After all they saw the "A-list" start to be courted in much the same way as the 20th century had seen its silver screen idols courted by the media and marketers. Now the idols of the LCD screen were being courted, and because the medium they used was much more accessible, replicating their success became the aspiration of many.

This was the birth of the age of entitlement—the masses started to ask questions of traditional media, of brands, to doubt the rules of traditional commerce. For centuries, pre-dating the establishment of formalized currencies, human beings have traded products and services on a fair-exchange basis. One side offers something in exchange for something else of perceived value. It is a one-to-one relationship.

The age of entitlement has led to an incentive/influence economy. Simply put, in addition to the product or service being offered, a brand must now offer additional incentives to purchase and encourage the consumer to share their purchase via the social technologies and create additional purchases. Now both sides are offering additional value to the transaction.

Traditional Model:
Brand(Offering) = Consumer(Payment)

Entitlement Model:
Brand(Offering)+(Incentive+Reward) = Sharing Consumer(Payment)+(Loyalty+Influence)

However, while this new model is being widely accepted by the sharing consumer, many brands are continuing to struggle with the concept. They find it increasingly difficult to define both the value of the incentives that should be offered and the value of an individual's Loyalty/Influence. Brands, especially large brands, are not used to dealing with the concept of programs that apply to individuals, but rather they deal with groups of consumers. The issue is primarily one of scale. If a multi-location brand now has to deal with customers at a local level and act like a mom & pop store, where are the economies of scale? How do they create a program that has broad appeal, yet is attractive enough to sway influencers and have them act as a force multiplier for the brand message?

While the sense of entitlement amongst sharing consumers spreads, and they continue to ask "don't you know who I think I am?" brands are left wondering what happened to the intrinsic value of their offerings and what happened to the days when just putting their logo on a bag or a piece of clothing was enough to get people to "pimp" their brand.

At the same time, brands who do embrace this new economy are left trying to justify the methodology without being able to track results directly to sales. If all this sharing is so great for a brand, where are the revenue numbers to justify it? Any program that simply raises awareness (unless the brand is unknown or the product completely new) and doesn't move the revenue needle is most likely a fairly empty campaign. There has to come a point where the testing of shiny new objects meets the harsh realities of revenue-driven activity.

Is the economy of sharing and the age of entitlement that it has created a case of the emperor's new clothes? Are marketers just too scared to be the ones to point out that all this sharing, while very nice, doesn't actually mean anything beyond the competition of having more "likes," "followers," "fans," etc. than their rivals? Has the myth of social media influence become accepted in the same way that the earth was once perceived as flat—we are told it is true by those we hold in esteem, and therefore it must be true? Are marketers and other professional communicators so convinced of the value of "earned media" as sold to them by PR companies that they now truly believe social media is free media and that partnering with an over-sharer can replace their previous media buys?

Some pundits want to have their cake and eat it too, recommending spending on ads that are known haunts of the sharing consumer in an attempt to drive earned media. In this way, the focus becomes one of producing something "viral," so much so that job titles have been changed or created to reflect this—"Director of Viral and Social Marketing" is the title of a job posted as recently as January 2011 for a well known technology company based in California. But if it's almost impossible to know what will go viral, how do one "direct" it? What does "viral" look like? Is it a bare-chested man on a horse comparing himself to the man on the couch sitting next to you? Is it rapping gerbils selling cars? Is it electronics being blended? Is viral marketing, to quote the old and slightly worn adage, like pornography—you know it when you see it?

Will all this investment of hope and money into "viral" marketing achieve anything beyond the redefining of the "chattering classes?" A term once ascribed to journalists who posited themselves as arbiters of conventional wisdom, will the new chattering classes be the over-sharers, the citizen journalists currently typified by both traditional and new media's favorite social media category that of the "mommy blogger?"

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Who buys into this type of media, who closes their eyes to the nakedness of the emperor? And why do they choose to believe that, even in the face of no sales numbers, this methodology is still sound? Perhaps David Ogilvy, writing nearly three decades ago foresaw this trend as he did so many others, when describing the "new" wave of advertisers:

"Their stock-in-trade includes ethnic humor, eccentric art direction, contempt for research, and their self-proclaimed genius. They are seldom found out because they gravitate to clients who, bamboozled by their rhetoric, do not hold them responsible for sales results." David Ogilvy – Ogilvy On Advertising 1983

When finally the emperor is revealed to be naked, what will cover his embarrassment, what will the gurus, snake charmers and experts replace the power of the sharing consumer with next?

The Argument In Favor: The Emperor's New Airwalks

Nothing has really changed, even with the popularity of terms like social consumer, sharing consumer etc.—people have always shared. Whether sitting around the campfire, standing at the water cooler, or chatting over the garden fence, human beings share their opinions with others. If those opinions prove to be useful, that person will be sought out for an opinion about other things and on a more frequent basis.

Social technologies have simply provided the ability for opinions to be s hared with a much larger audience. Brands and marketers are recognizing that certain individuals share their opinions more frequently than others and because these sharers are erudite, entertaining, well researched or just shocking, they attract listeners. These listeners will often repeat what they have learned from the original sharer and this can lead to an echo chamber effect that can make it challenging at times for people to find the original source of the information, making identifying influencers difficult.

Of course, the type of sharing varies from consumer to consumer, not all choose the written word; video, audio, and pictures are also part of the sharing consumers' toolbox and this variety allows for greater levels of creativity. Persuasion is no longer limited to just the best orator, but can be created through great visuals as well.

Technology figures greatly in this trend toward the visual with applications that can create special effects, enhance, modify and even insert elements that are purely virtual into a picture, and therefore provide the sharer with a level of skill that otherwise might have eluded them. But does this technology-enhanced sharing really make a difference to brands and marketers, or is it just fluff that has no connection to the bottom line?

There are a growing number of case studies that show this not to be true.

Take, for example, the case of the partnership between shoe brand Airwalk and location sharing app GoldRun. Following the trend for “Pop-Up” stores (the temporary stores that allow the marketing of a particular product or service without the expense of a more permanent location), Airwalk used the GoldRun app to create a virtual store that allowed users of the app to view and purchase a limited edition line of shoes. Airwalk had 300 pairs of men’s and 300 pairs of women’s shoes available, and they sold them all through the location sharing, picture sharing app. In addition, Airwalk received more traffic on its website than it had since its inception. The virtual stores themselves were tweeted over 20k times and were covered on nearly 100 sneaker/style blogs. This additional coverage can only be described as earned media.

Selling a product from a store that doesn’t exist and driving record setting traffic to an online store by simply having people share pictures of themselves with a virtual product is definitely a clear indication that sharing is a powerful tool and, done in the right way, most definitely impacts the bottom line of businesses. What this example also highlights is that while it is great to have an “A-list” influencer sharing about a brand, having sufficient numbers of less elite sharers can have a significant impact as well.

Sharing consumers are more sophisticated than their more traditional counterparts, they are aware of the value of their sharing. Some use tools to monitor that perceived value. Tools such as Klout assign a rating to a sharing consumer which is meant as an indicator of that sharing consumers’ ability to influence others into taking action.

There is much debate over the accuracy of these tools and what they are in fact measuring. Are they measuring popularity or are they measuring influence? Perhaps they are measuring an as yet undefined social phenomenon singular to the sharing consumer community. Whatever it is that they are measuring, the sharing consumer utilizes these tools to find ways in which to enhance their own status and therefore finds strategies that will increase their perceived influence.

This, in turn, creates a refined category of sharing consumer, the ultra savvy sharing consumer who shares not just because they wish to provide useful information to others, but do so to enhance their own reputation, to become known as the go to person for information about a particular topic—or range of topics. They are, in effect, building their own personal brand.

This is not a bad thing. In fact, for brands, this is excellent news. While these ultra savvy sharing consumers are working hard to become recognized as reliable sources in a particular area, brands can both assist them by providing useful, timely information and by creating partnerships that enable the brand to utilize the network built by the sharing consumer as another channel through which its message can be communicated.

Of course, to some this sounds somewhat soulless. However, it has to be remembered that this is a business practice we are discussing, not a lifestyle choice. The sharing consumer understands the new paradigm and embraces it. They seek out brands that are also embracing it and want to partner with them. Perhaps there is an intersection of a previous brand affiliation for the sharing consumer or, perhaps, having noticed that the brand is already partnering with some sharing consumers they will consciously decide to join the conversation and promote themselves to the brand in the hopes of being rewarded more fully.

There is a synergy in these partnerships. The brand gets access to the network developed by the sharing consumer, and the sharing consumer gets an enhanced reputation by being seen in association with the brand by their network—along with whatever rewards the brand has created to entice the sharing consumer to continue sharing about them in the first place. The more exclusive these rewards are the better, because the sense of exclusive access is what helps enhance the reputation of the sharing consumer and makes them the focus of their network. When they are perceived as being the holders of inside information, of having access to information before others, then their value amongst their network will rise.

For example, creating an exclusive event, something that has shareable moments—especially those that can be photographed, videoed, etc.—and that will show just how much exclusive access the sharing consumer has, is a tactic that has shown itself to be a good investment for brands seeking to engage the sharing consumer.

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The sharing consumer is the cyber age's celebrity. Often recognized at events, they in turn become objects of sharing. Other, lesser known sharing consumers want to be seen with these cyber-celebrities. Interestingly, personalities from the more traditional media such as television and film are also exploiting the same tactics as the sharing consumer as an alternative channel to promote their own brand within this growing community. In doing so, they fuel the drive toward celebrity through sharing.

Starbucks ran a campaign during the holiday season of 2010, utilizing the cup sleeves at their outlets with the slogan "Stories are gifts–Share" and this is exactly what the sharing consumer wants to hear from a brand. They want to know that their sharing is welcomed, encouraged and will ultimately lead to a reward.

Of course, brands must be aware that the sharing consumer isn't just the kumbaya singing brand advocate pushing the party line out to their network. They are also critics. When a brand gets it wrong, these sharing consumers are the first to out the brand and to do so very vocally.

Without the appropriate outreach channels in place, a brand can be left struggling with a sense that the story has gotten away from them before they have even had the chance to respond. Having a network of its own, in the same way that a sharing consumer has, is one way for a brand to defend itself - providing of course that they have also taken the appropriate measures to fix the problem, as no amount of brand advocacy will cover a problem that is not being addressed effectively.

At some point we can expect to see the sharing consumer reach a threshold of activity after which they will simply achieve a saturation point within their network and will start to see a diminishing return on their sharing—information overload—which rather than enhancing their reputation will only diminish it. Brands need to monitor for this as much as they do for new influencers; having a reputation as a brand that burns out its advocates is definitely not the way to create engagement.

In the final analysis, the sharing consumer is here to stay. They are not a new construct of the digital marketing age, but simply the latest manifestation of the storyteller in a consumer driven age. **As both brands and consumers wake up to this reality and start to embrace the new paradigm of the sales relationship, we can expect to see more and more people engaging in this type of activity.**

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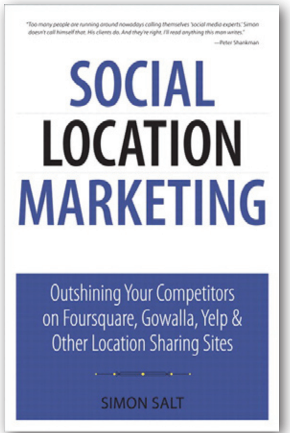

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Salt is CEO of Marketing Communications Agency IncSlingers. He is a Blogger, Writer & Entrepreneur—though not always in that order. His new book, *Social Location Marketing*, was published by QUE in February. He speaks nationally on the topic of Social Media and works with major brands as an online brand advocate. He keeps a business blog at theincslingers.com and a personal blog at incslinger.posterous.com.

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