



# 'Like' Me:

The Dynamics of Public vs. Private Social Media

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As sampling sites and Facebook Fan Pages continue to attract visitors, marketers are questioning whether they need to turn to other online venues for generating consumer insights. However, several recent studies suggest that large public sites and social networks may not be the best options for obtaining a deep understanding of customers and prospects.

Communispace Corporation runs private online communities for the world's leading brands and recently conducted a study which explored the behaviors and motivations of members in our communities compared to their experiences on other brand-sponsored websites. We found meaningful differences, both in what motivates participation and in how consumers view their brand experiences in *public* and *private* online venues.

Our findings suggest that consumers primarily go to public brand-sponsored sites to *hear* from brands, and prefer to *talk* to them in private online environments, free from the eyes of their friends in their social networks. We also found that if marketers simply rely on Facebook Fan Pages, or mining other public forums for insight, they will only hear from a skewed sample of the online population, and will only get a surface-level understanding of consumers.

## MARKING A DECADE OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

It's hard to believe that brands have now been engaging customers online for over a decade. Only yesterday, it seemed marketers were wondering if Web 2.0 tactics were a fleeting flavor-of-the-month.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the past ten years, brands' dominant social media strategy has been to offer customers insider product knowledge, coupons and samples in return for opinions and, hopefully, word of mouth (WOM). Here are some examples:

- In 2001, Procter & Gamble launched TREMOR, enlisting teenagers to spread WOM about consumer packaged goods, as well as new music and movies. About four years later, they followed with Vocalpoint, an online network that gives moms the ability to sample, voice their opinions and promote new offerings from P&G and other companies.<sup>2</sup>
- General Mills started Pssst... in 2008 by recruiting consumers through e-newsletters. Once registered, members receive samples, submit their feedback through blogs and share coupons and recipes with other consumers.<sup>3</sup>
- Also in 2008, Kraft Foods launched kraftfirsttaste.com, with all the usual social marketing features (providing insider knowledge, coupons, samples, etc.), along with discussion boards, member spotlights and a photo-sharing tool.<sup>4</sup>

For most of the last decade, marketers hoped that the more consumers they connected with, the more likely their efforts would translate to sales. Then came Facebook, which, by 2010, was touted as “the biggest relationship-marketing provider for many brands,” and brand-sponsored fan pages on the social networking site began to draw more traffic than some corporate websites.<sup>5</sup> Two of the top fan pages, sponsored by Coke and Skittles, create fun updates to engage customers and create buzz. Some brands, like Dove, have gone a step further, moving from customer engagement to customer management — using Facebook to answer questions and address customer concerns.<sup>6</sup>

But what if insights  
are your goal?

In the beginning of the decade, marketers began monitoring public websites where consumers congregate, initially looking for brand mentions, in order to monitor reputations and react to online detractors. Now, using Radian6 and other, more sophisticated, text-analytics tools, companies are trying to move beyond brand and sentiment monitoring, and are mining the Web to uncover emerging trends. However, this strategy is inherently passive and does not offer brands opportunities to ask consumers questions.

Marketers *can* ask questions of Facebook fans — using the site's own DIY survey function, or through third-party applications offered by companies like Zoomerang — but recent studies question the use of the social networking site as a viable venue for deeply understanding consumers.<sup>7</sup> In December 2010, SSI found that the population of Facebook users who are willing to participate in surveys is skewed towards younger consumers, and also noted that those willing to participate in surveys are not interested in participating in public discussions, thereby limiting the range of consumer input available to researchers.<sup>8</sup> A recent Razorfish study found that consumers do not view Facebook and Twitter as proper places for having conversations and building relationships with brands.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion was echoed in a study released by iVillage that found that women, in particular, are “more inclined to have serious discussions on focused community sites than on venues like Facebook.”<sup>10</sup> These findings — as well as those described in this paper — suggest that only certain consumers participate in research on Facebook, and those who do aren't willing to reveal that much about themselves in the context of a social network.

**Why we did this study**

In addition to Web mining, sampling sites and Facebook Fan Pages, companies have sponsored private communities specifically for engaging customers and learning about how they think and behave. Communispace Corporation, founded in 1999, has created over 400 communities of consumers for some of the world’s leading brands in various industries. Throughout the years, especially since the emergence of Facebook, we’ve noticed our clients trying to pinpoint how our offering complements — or differs from — other social media strategies. Judging from the studies done by SSI, iVillage and Razorfish, we are clearly not alone in wanting to explore this issue.

To help marketers make sense of a changing social media landscape, we thought it would be helpful to hear directly from consumers about their motivations for and experiences of interacting with brands within a range of online venues.<sup>11</sup> We asked over 1700 consumers, across 13 of our communities, about the different places where they engage with brands online.

Specifically, we:

- Explored member motivations for engaging with brands in private online communities (“here”) and other brand-sponsored destinations (“there”)
- Compared engagement experiences “here” and “there”

By having members think of their engagement “here” compared to “there,” we revealed distinct differences between how they interact with brands in public and private online venues. While the sample is not strictly representative of the total online population, we feel our findings can help marketers navigate the waters of social media and match objectives with strategies in the coming decade.

**About the survey sample (n = 1796):**

<u>Gender</u>		<u>Age</u>		<u>Country</u>			
Female	71%	18-24	3%	United States	81%	Philippines	1%
Male	29%	25-29	9%	United Kingdom	8%	Brazil	1%
		30-34	16%	Australia	2%	China	1%
		35-39	16%	Singapore	2%	Other:	<1%
		40-44	14%	Canada	2%	<i>(Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Poland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Israel, Turkey, Japan)</i>	
		45-49	14%	India	1%		
		50-54	12%				
		55-59	8%				
		60-64	6%				
		65+	2%				

## WHY DO MEMBERS ENGAGE WITH BRANDS ONLINE?

“ I use the Facebook page as a way to GET information, not to give information.”

### Most members *don't* interact with other brands online

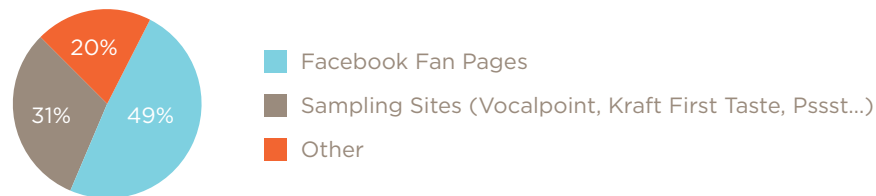
In order to determine if our members visit other brand-sponsored destinations we gave them the following examples to react to:

- Facebook Fan Pages (e.g., Pringles, Coca-Cola)
- Public brand forums (e.g., Xbox User Community, Harley-Davidson)
- Product promotion sites where you are encouraged to spread the word about a brand (e.g., Vocalpoint, Kraft First Taste)
- E-suggestion boxes where you submit new product ideas (e.g., Dell IdeaStorm)

Members were then asked, “Besides this community (where you’re taking this survey), are there other brand-sponsored sites like the ones listed above that you participate in?” Surprisingly, 62% indicated “No,” while only 38% indicated “Yes.”

Among those who do visit other brand-sponsored destinations, the majority do so in the context of social networking. Forty-nine percent (49%) of all the specific brand-sponsored sites were Facebook Fan Pages, followed by the big sampling sites (Vocalpoint, Kraft First Taste and Pssst...).

### Besides this community, where else do you interact with brands online?



Members also mentioned other destinations, like third-party WOM sites (BzzAgent), sites that allow for product reviews (Amazon), loyalty-reward-program sites (My Coke Rewards) and party-hosting sites (House Party).

### Public sites are for *hearing from* brands and private communities for *talking to them*

Members indicated that their main reason for going to public brand-sponsored sites is to learn more about brands. This was deemed more important than giving feedback on products and voicing their opinions.

#### Top “Public” Motivations\*

1. To learn more about the brand
2. To help the brand make better products
3. To get the brand to hear my opinions

#### Top “Private” Motivations\*

1. To help the brand make better products
2. To get the brand to hear my opinion
3. To learn more about the brand

In contrast, members said that in private online communities they are more motivated by helping brands make better products, and by getting them to hear their opinions, than by learning more about the brand.

**They're "fans" of information, discounts and promotions**

Members said they mostly joined Facebook Fan Pages in order to get information on brands. Brands are "liked" in order to learn about sales/discounts, new products and interestingly, local events.

“ I only receive posts from this fan page and have not participated at all.”

“I don't really share on those pages. I just use them to keep track of sales and new products.”

“The other places I belong to are all on Facebook and I joined them to get discounts and find out about local events.”

These data points suggest that consumers have different motivations for participating in public and private brand-sponsored websites. They prefer to go to public sites for getting samples, discounts and information about brands. This is more important to them on fan pages than having their voices heard, and these data complement the SSI study, which determined that (aside from 13- to 17-year-olds) consumers just aren't interested in submitting their opinions via Facebook surveys. In contrast, consumers prefer private communities for giving their feedback and opinions on new products and brands.

We were surprised to find that most of the members we spoke to do not interact with brands on other sites. This suggests that if brands rely solely — or even primarily — on mining public social networking or marketing sites, they may be hearing from a different population than if they engage in panel or online community research, where participants are targeted and recruited.

## COMPARING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ONLINE BRAND EXPERIENCES

“ I really just became a fan on FB because I get coupons and special offers on items, so it's very superficial. Here at [community name], I feel that my comments make a difference. They are taken into consideration and actually read!”

### Sampling sites offer hands-on product experiences

When asked to describe their experiences on other brand-sponsored websites, members said they enjoy receiving products (or coupons for products) that the company wants them to try and give feedback on. They particularly enjoy tasting and reviewing new food offerings.

“ I've shared opinions about items tested that they sent. I gave feedback from actual product test, not just ideas that I gave feedback on.”

“At Kraft First Taste, I've actually got to taste new products that they send to me and then express my opinion about the product.”

### Private communities are open, safe places

Experiences in private online communities were described as being “personal” and “open.” Members made comparisons to the popular Vegas tagline.

“ This site seems to be more personal and open to feedback. The others are just occasional, vague surveys with no other interactions. Plus, here it really does feel like it's a community. This site offers more than any other I've been a member of.”

“As the Vegas saying goes, ‘what happens here, stays here.’ We keep it in confidence in this community.”

### Consumers value courteous conversations

In private online communities, members interact with each other over a period of time. They get to know one another and are accountable for what they say. This is not always the case in public forums, where anonymous posts can get nasty. Members appreciate how their conversations are moderated in private communities, which minimizes conflict and leads to more productive exchanges.

“ I can express my opinions more openly here, without having to worry about being attacked by others. Sometimes, people on other forums can be SO RUDE. You aren't allowed to have an opinion unless it is the same as the more popular members of the forum.”

“I trust this community; I don't trust Facebook, since there are too many snotty ‘dig me’ exchanges, rather than a true exchange of ideas and opinions. I like that this community does not allow negative personal remarks aimed at other members just because they choose to have a different opinion.”

## Deeper discussions

Members said they are more likely to broach certain topics, such as family issues and health concerns, in private communities and not in public ones. Some have felt comfortable enough to ask for help during difficult times.

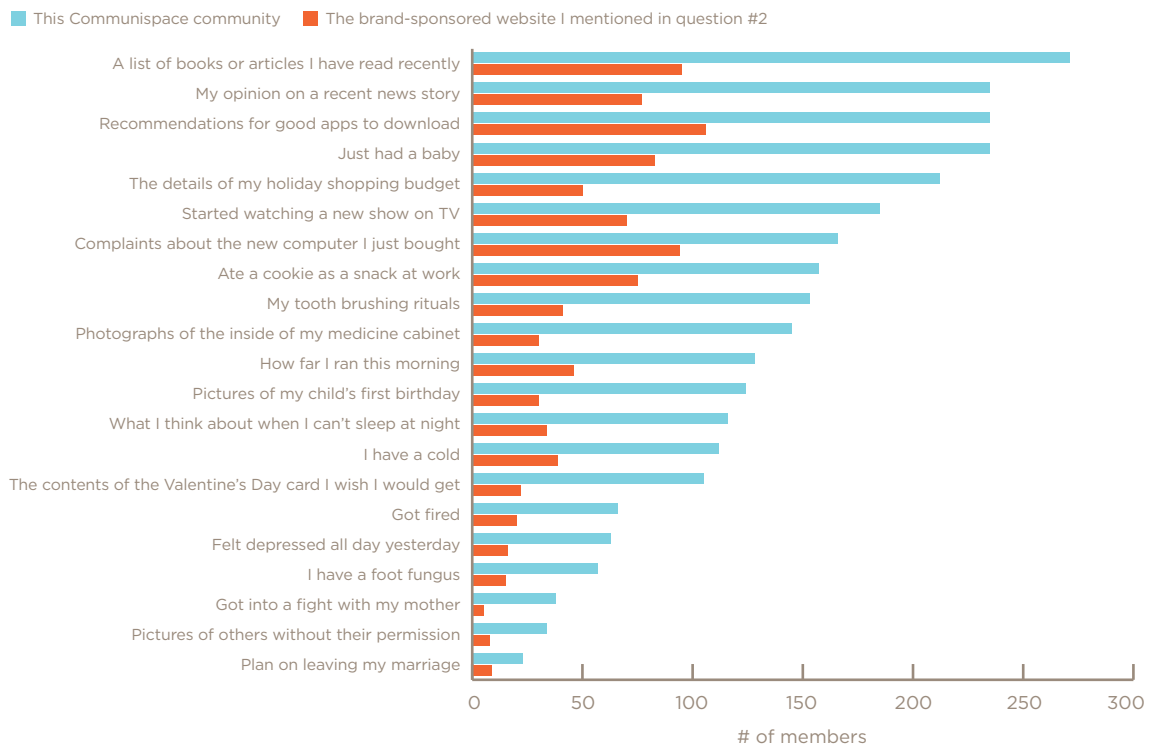
“I shared my son’s ‘bullying’ experience here. I would not have posted that on FB, as it would not be understood by most.”

“I don’t talk about my skin problems on other sites. I feel more comfortable talking about these issues here, because the site isn’t open to the general public.”

“I asked for help when a friend’s child died. I would only feel comfortable doing that here.”

In order to test levels of comfort, we gave members a list of personal information and asked them where they thought they’d feel comfortable posting each item. For every item on the list, they indicated private online communities over the other brand-sponsored websites they mentioned.

### Where do you feel comfortable posting the following types of information?



Taking a closer look, we can see specific types of information (contents of Valentine’s Day cards, inside of medicine cabinets, tooth-brushing rituals, etc.) that consumers would be unlikely to spontaneously post on public sites, especially Facebook where they know their friends are watching. Yet, they do talk about these things in private communities, simply because they are asked. These ethnographic details can be very important for marketers and would not be revealed if one were to only mine the Web.

## More than Q&A

Surveys are the typical form of feedback available on other brand-sponsored websites. In private online communities, members are given a variety of ways to express their opinions, and members said they take more time and give more of an effort in their responses. They said they appreciate opportunities to give detailed opinions, share ideas and use their imaginations.

“About all I do on most other brand-sponsored sites is fill out surveys — nothing special.”

“Here, I participate in special projects and assignments. Nowhere else do I put the kind of time and effort into answering questions and participating in everything I can, like I do here.”

“This community is much different from Vocalpoint ... I feel that here we express our opinions about products, but we are also asked about things on a more detailed level.”

“I think it's neat to be able to openly discuss and help out a corporation with ideas! And they listen and respond back!”

“You guys make me use my imagination. Facebook never does that.”

## Listening leads to trust, and consumers feel more heard in private spaces

Ninety-two percent (92%) of members said that they feel their opinion matters in private online communities, as compared to only 66% of members who said they feel their opinion is being heard in the other brand-sponsored websites they mentioned. On public sites, particularly Facebook, members feel their opinions can get lost in the crowd. In private communities, they feel the brand is actually listening, and this makes them feel more invested in the brand.

“I feel that my opinion is heard here, and easily found amongst all the opinions, whereas on Facebook my opinion can be lost. I may simply ask a question on a fan page, but here I think a lot about the questions.”

“I really feel like my opinion matters. I go into more detail here and am invested in the products now. I look at the ads differently and tell my friends about the products I have tried.”

Seventy-seven percent (77%) of members said that they trust the sponsoring brand more than before they joined their private online community, while only 55% said that they are more likely to trust the brand that sponsored the other websites they mentioned. We suspect that this difference in trust is due to the ongoing connections members experience in private communities vs. the episodic connections they experience on other brand sites, as well as the feeling of intimacy of private communities.

These findings suggest that consumers' experiences on public and private brand-sponsored websites are quite different. Public sites, in general, do not seem to provide opportunities for meaningful conversations and building relationships with brands. This parallels the Razorfish study, which showed how consumers do not view social networking sites as appropriate places for brand engagement. Experiences within private online communities are considered more open and personal. Consumers feel comfortable discussing the personal details of their lives in conversations that are courteous and focused. This corresponds to the iVillage study, which described how women prefer to have meaningful conversation in focused sites, rather than in large social networks like Facebook.

Based on the findings of this study, as well as those from other studies, we can conclude that efforts to engage consumers on public websites may not be the best strategy for gathering insights into their lives.

## IMPLICATIONS

By exploring our members' motivations for — and experiences in — our communities, compared to other brand-sponsored websites, we uncovered meaningful differences between how consumers view public and private social media strategies. We suggest carefully considering how you match objective with strategy in the coming decade:

- **Remember why your fans are there:** Keep in mind that consumers are more interested in hearing from you than in talking to you, on social networking sites. Use sites like Facebook and Twitter for creating a presence by “pushing” information about your brand. Continue to create and maintain “fans” — let them be the first to know about new products and discounts — but don't mistake “fans” for the broader consumer base.
- **Know who you're listening to:** Not all consumers publically engage online, and those who do may be reticent to share certain types of information. Mine the Web and “pull” data about trends and monitor your brand's online reputation. Realize, though, that you are getting a surface-level understanding of your customers.
- **Create safe, reciprocal environments:** Consumers are more likely to have insight-generating conversations if they feel safe and know they're being listened to. Make sure you monitor conversations in order to keep the dialogue respectful and productive. Close the feedback loop, whenever possible, by letting members know how their contributions are being used.
- **Don't confuse sampling with insight:** We found that consumers go to public brand-sponsored sites to sample new products and to get coupons and discounts. Posing public questions about their lives is risky, because that's not what consumers sign up for. Create private online communities for gaining deeper insights into not only what consumers think about your brand and products, but how they live their lives. Then, take advantage of longitudinal contact, move beyond Q&A and give consumers opportunities to go into detail.

## Endnotes

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- 7 “Subscribers, Fans and Followers: The Collaborative Future,” Exact Target Report, 2010.
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- 11 We wish to thank Emerson College for helping us develop the survey used in this study.