

# **The Power of the Mighty Pin: Pinterest Examined**

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## **Introduction**

In less than a decade, social media was created, became highly influential, and now life could not function the same in its absence. Social media is defined as, “Internet based tools and platforms that increase and enhance the sharing of information. This new form of media makes the transfer of text, photos, audio, video, and information in general increasingly fluid among Internet users” (“What is Social Media”, 2012, p. 1). Social Media is an outcome of Web 2.0, a progressed version of Web 1.0. Web 1.0 relied on HTML markup that was purely semantic and static. The goal of Web 1.0 was to convey information – like a newspaper. The Internet was not engaging or interactive. But with the introduction of Web 2.0, along came web-languages, such as Javascript and PHP, that allowed for interaction, participation, and server-based communication. There have been various social media sites, such as Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter, which arose out of Web 2.0, that have changed the way people communicate, and the way news is spread. Social media websites allow users to gather information about current events, post their own thoughts and view current trends. Even more, one out of every four and a half minutes of Internet usage is spent on these social media sites (“Social Networks/ Blogs,” 2010). In a document produced by *The Pew Research*, it is reported that “digital was the only media sector seeing audience growth” in 2011 (“Key Findings,” 2011, p. 1).

With this growth, the opportunities for companies on social media are endless and can be utilized freely. Companies can choose, among a variety of social tools, which social networking sites would produce the most return on investment (ROI) for their business. The large amount of interactions between businesses and their customers (stakeholders) on social media sites is what characterizes the new era of marketing. Ninety-six percent of Americans use Facebook. One hundred and forty million tweets are sent each day. Eighty-two percent of 18-29 year olds use some form of social networking (Esposito, 2011). However, one of the newest social networking, Pinterest, is beginning to take over. Pinterest, the social photo-sharing site, is the fastest growing social media site. As of March 2012, Pinterest was number 4 on the top social networks in terms of hit-wise data and number 16 in terms of traffic among all websites in the U.S. (Aguilar, 2012). Based on that current trend, this paper seeks to examine the use of Pinterest for an organization, specifically looking at third-party endorsements, as well as propose best practices for harnessing the power of the “re-pin” through effective strategy and copyright cautions.

## **Socially Engaged**

There are over 100 social networking sites, and each site tailors to its niche market’s needs. Facebook, with almost one billion users, is the top social networking site, according to Nielsen Wire (2011) digital report for the end of 2011. Facebook is most commonly used to stay connected to friends and family and share photos and videos. Other top sites include Blogger, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and one of the fastest growing sites, Pinterest. Pinterest, developed in 2009, is now one of the top ten websites within

Hitwise's Social Networking and Forum category (Dougherty, 2011). The concept behind Pinterest lies with pins, pin-boards and re-pins. Pins are images that are either uploaded from a computer or added by the "Pin It" button from a website. If the user likes the image they can "re-pin" the image on their board for others to see. Eighty percent of pins on Pinterest are re-pined from another user's board (Moore, 2012). The value of Pinterest for organizations lies in understanding the power of third-party endorsement and the coveted "re-pin." According to a survey by Aronica (2012), Pinterest drove more referral traffic than Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube combined. It is a close third to Twitter in referral traffic. Pinterest, due to its responsive and fluid HTML and CSS, is convenient to use – compatible with tablets and mobile phones. Pinterest is also fun to use; it incorporates online bulletin boards and sharing pins of similar interests.

In just under six months, Pinterest's unique visitors expanded exponentially, rising quickly to higher numbers. Pinterest has reached over 11 million monthly unique visitors. ComScore reported Pinterest is now the fastest growing site in history to pass the 10 million mark (Fox, 2012). Not only are people visiting Pinterest, they are interacting with its content on extremely high levels. Pinterest is retaining and engaging its users 2-3 times more effectively than other sites – such as Twitter, and Americans are flocking to Pinterest: with 54% of users coming from the USA. On a global scale, during the month of January 2012, users spent an average of 89 minutes on Pinterest, while only spending 21 minutes a month on Twitter (Silverman, 2012). Pinterest users are predominantly female (87%) and are mostly in the 25-to-54-age range. Thirty-seven percent of users' income varies from \$25K to \$50K (Fox, 2012).

Pinterest has become a great incubator for products because re-pinned products by users act as third-party endorsements for the brand. While the goals and strategies discussed in the next few sections are in regards to Pinterest, many of these techniques can be carried over to all social media campaigns. Simply put, Pinterest is a corkboard of wonderful ideas that can lead to promotion. Companies are slowly adopting Pinterest as a new way to advertise and connect with consumers. While Pinterest may not be for every company, especially if the company has nothing visually to share or does not have interest users, many brands have increased their website traffic and sales through referrals via Pinterest. Mashable's community manager Meghan Peters commented about Pinterest, "Its novel design allows users to experience the web in a way that makes them feel productive and inspired. In addition, there's plenty of monetization opportunities with brands jumping on the bandwagon" (Waldram, 2012, para. 12). Pinterest is reshaping advertising, and companies must take on a whole new level of interaction for their Pinterest boards to be successful.

### **Third-Party Endorsements**

Third-party endorsements, or user-generated comments, are positive comments from a user regarding a company or product. One of the biggest benefits of being on social media is that word of mouth becomes world of mouth (Qualman, 2011). Companies have been built, and destroyed, through user-generated comments about a brand. When searching for a product, the majority of people will get their family and friends' advice on what to purchase, especially on a more expensive item. The second place they will look is on the Internet to find customer reviews. Companies should keep in mind the goal of creating third-party endorsements, as it is very influential in recruiting or regaining customers. There is a new wave of user-generated comments that is being pushed through by new social media sites like Pinterest. Consumers are *pinning* their favorite products, which all their followers see. Although the consumer might not actually say anything about the product, the fact that they pinned it means they like the product and it is worth viewing. A re-pin for Pinterest is considered a retweet for Twitter, and an

organization should always push for that third party positive content. Since Pinterest is gaining in popularity, this medium should be studied as a hub for third-party endorsements.

Many companies have already established their brand on Pinterest and are seeing amazing results. For companies establishing a presence on Pinterest, there are a few guidelines that must be followed. First, pins should be visually stimulating as well as helpful to other pinners. Jones (2011) explains the two key parts that create a great pin: "Pinterest combines two of the most compelling elements of social media: visual content and sharing who you are" (para. 5). Pinterest gives companies the opportunity to be human, in the sense that companies can show their personality through their pins. A great example is Chobani Greek Yogurt. Chobani brings a human feel to their Pinterest account, and it has resulted in over 3,000 pinners following and re-pinning Chobani pins. Chobani has pins ranging from healthy recipes (using yogurt of course) to traveling and fitness. The slogan they adopted for their Pinterest was "Nothing but Good." They even have a board, titled with their slogan, which is only filled with inspiring quotes, pictures and videos. Their about-me-space even says, "Nothing but good pins from America's #1 Yogurt," incorporating their slogan completely through their Pinterest - leading to brand identity (para. 1).

Chobani's example gives other companies a good path to following four distinct ways. First, get discovered by having a human side to the company that encourages dreams and inspires healthy living. Second, show off core values through the company's various boards. Let the consumer know the company is looking out for their better interest through the pictures and advice the company pins. Thirdly, use the different boards to target different audiences. Unlike Twitter, which shows the user everything, Pinterest allows users to choose what to follow. Fourth, do not go overboard but make sure each board makes sense and has enough content for people to want to follow. Fifth, share and be responsible by pinning other users' pins and not just your own. Lastly, pin hopes, dreams and goals (Dishman, 2012).

If a company can translate their products into great, eye-catching pictures with helpful links, they have a good chance they will succeed on Pinterest, with the advantage of third-party endorsements and purchases. The reason Pinterest has such a high referral rate is because its users like to pin products that they hope to purchase later. Pinterest makes this easy by linking the pinned photo to the actual webpage it is on and by showing more Pinterest results by that company. The strategy is in what the company's consumers want. Pinners will not pin something they are not interested in. Pinners look for pins that will improve their life. This comes in the form of recipes, fashion, design, traveling or things they want to do. Businesses such as magazines, travel companies, household products and various other organizations that can translate their product or services into pictures will do very well on Pinterest. Pinterest users are building their world virtually with the ability to purchase the products and bring them into reality. Instead of casually seeing an item they like and then forgetting it, Pinterest holds the item and will be a constant reminder that they want that product.

### **Pinning Strategically for Endorsements**

Pinterest can be used to achieve multiple goals a company might establish, but Pinterest must always remain inside an integrated marketing campaign, with goals, objectives, strategies, and a plan for Pinterest. Pinterest can be monitored like a large focus group to help companies determine their SWOT or what their customers think about a particular product or service. This benefit is huge in getting into the mind of a company's consumers. Other common goals companies should consider include: building brand loyalty, raising awareness, selling products and engaging consumers. Since Pinterest is visually

stimulating, it completes the first step of the purchasing process in a consumer's mind (MacManus, 2012). Companies should personalize these basic goals and can add a few of their own that are specific to their company.

Goals on Pinterest are not helpful to a company's campaign unless they are accompanied by objectives. Think of objectives as concrete mix and goals as the rebar. Rebar holds the concrete together giving it form and stability. The rebar needs to be placed down first before pouring the cement. Both are incomplete without each other, just like goals and objectives. A company needs to develop both goals and objectives in order to have a solid foundation to their campaign on Pinterest. Objectives should clearly state a timeline, a measurable amount, and what exactly is going to be achieved. Each goal should have multiple objectives that lead to accomplishing the goal.

Once a company has established its goals and objectives it needs to make it S.M.A.R.T. If there are no strong goals the campaign will not drive success. First, make the goals specific. If it is a big goal, break it down and clarify the various parts (Weinberg, 2009). For example, if the company wants to see \$100,000 generated on Pinterest for their company, the goal must be broken down into small, measurable segments with links to analytics. Weinberg (2009) put it this way: "You can't manage something that you can't measure, and you should establish concrete criteria for measurement" (p. 33). Having measurable goals goes hand-in-hand with making sure the company's goals are achievable. Goals should be realistic but at the same time challenging to the person who will be carrying out these goals. Next, ask whether your goals are relevant. Pinterest goals should have short and long-term objectives to guarantee that the goal will continue to be relevant throughout the strategy (Reece, 2010). Lastly, make sure the goal is timely (Weinberg, 2009). Create deadlines for each goal, like steps in a ladder to help the company reach the top on time and effectively.

Once a company develops their goals and objectives, they should create their overall plan for accomplishing them. This is called a strategy. Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema explained that strategy should be based on one of three things: operational excellence, product leadership, or customer intimacy (Reece, 2010). Begin building a strategy by using LLC Content Connections' ACCESS acronym, which stands for audience, concept, competition, execution, social media, and sales viability (Safko and Brake, 2009). This model can be used to determine strategies for all social media sites.

The first step is to determine the target audience. This could be broken down by demographics, values and beliefs, behaviors, needs, personas, or even people grouped by general interests (Safko and Brake, 2009). In general, on Pinterest, the target audience would be ladies 30-50 with kids, but make sure this target segment aligns with the company's goals and would be the most beneficial choice. If that fits, next, develop a concept; the concept is how the company will appeal to those consumers who would be interested in purchasing their products. It would make no sense to have an online community of people who would not purchase that company's products or services on Pinterest. A company's strategy should focus around their brand promise, value proposition, and positioning statement (Reece, 2010). Positioning is a term used to explain how a company wishes to be viewed by their target segment and why consumers should choose their products over other similar brands.

In addition to understanding their media and themselves, a company should also understand its competition as well when entering Pinterest. Companies will have similar concepts and target segments; therefore, a company needs to be specific about how it will win over its publics. The biggest determining factor in this mix is content. Companies should not settle for subpar content if their competitors are superior in that area. They need to aim their content strategically to win over potential consumers. Pins

on Pinterest or any type of social communication such as blog posts, pictures, or videos should be more than just a news announcement but should strive to connect with their readers to build a relationship. Content should also align with the company's brand messaging.

In this digital age, consumers want to connect and see the personality of companies on their social media. A company's branding should be consistent across all of the company's social networking sites. The company needs to consider how to execute their message before entering any social networking sites (Safko and Brake, 2009). Consistent branding will give credibility to the company and attract their core consumers with a strong and memorable brand image.

### **Best Practices**

Since Pinterest is relatively new on the social media shore line, companies and employees should experiment with the following strategies on Pinterest to see what would work best for their particular company. Companies should also follow big pinners to see what they pin and also to tag them into the company's pins so they can spread the pin to all their followers (Fox, 2012). To do this, just include the @-sign in front of their Pinterest name. John Boitnott (2012) suggests companies become active members in the Pinterest community. Do not just pin products for advertising but post other helpful and inspirational pins. Re-pin other users' pins to build goodwill so they will re-pin the company's pins. Lastly, Boitnott suggests diversifying the company's pins and boards. On Pinterest, users can follow another pinner's boards without having to follow the pinner himself or herself. Diversifying the company's boards allow for pinners to customize the content they get from the company.

Many companies are using Pinterest like a digital catalog. While this may be successful in a few cases, it does not work for all brands that do not have already visually appealing pictures and links to pin. Scotty Monty (2012) offers his opinion on Pinterest's usability for marketing: "The brands that will succeed here are the ones that go beyond just using Pinterest as a store front and use it to unite people and passion points" (p. 1).

Companies also need to invest in careful keywords for Pinterest. Just like SEO on search engines, companies should keep in mind that most Pinterest users search by keywords, not by brands. Searching on Pinterest is like searching a Google – the keywords are crucial. Tagging a company's pin with words users would search will give the company a high chance of being discovered and re-pinned or followed (Flannery, 2012). To tag a pin, simply put a hash tag in front of the keywords. If a company would like to show the price of one of their pinned products, place a dollar sign and price in the comment section of a pin. Pinterest will automatically put the pin in their gifts tab and a banner will be shown across the pin showing the price.

Companies can boost consumer engagement on Pinterest by using some simple steps. First, running contests on Pinterest can promote the company and gain more followers and, hence, third-party endorsements through re-pins. Contests can be anything from who creates the best board to who has the most re-pins on their picture of that company's product (Aguilar, 2012). Second, Pinterest allows for creative communication between customers and companies. Companies should utilize Pinterest to create a strong brand personality for consumers to really get to know their company. Brands can even post sections of their company displaying office space or employees. Lastly, Pinterest provides the perfect environment for new product approvals, whether it is a TIME magazine cover or a new design for a baby bottle. Pinterest acts as a large focus group to see which products will be re-pinned and how

users are commenting or liking the product (2012). Companies can determine from this feedback if their product will succeed or if they need to change a particular feature to better serve their customers.

### **Evaluating Success**

One of the great parts about social media is that it is easy to measure. Most sites provide analytics for the company, and if not, there are multiple free sites that can help analyze if a company's social marketing was successful or not. Reece (2010) highlights the importance of evaluation in her statement: "Marketing is a process of continuous learning by tracking results, understanding the underlying factors that created the results, and making adjustments" (p. 23). Companies should look out for five metrics to help evaluate their social media and determine if there was an ROI and how much. The first is "reach," determined by how many re-pins or likes a company receives and how many times their story was linked or shared. Next, analyze the traffic the social site is receiving. This can be determined through Google Analytics, a free site that tracks traffic and other statistics on a specific URL. Another way to determine traffic and shares from your company's Pinterest is to use the following URL but include the company's Pinterest name where it says "your site name": <http://pinterest.com/source/yoursitename.com>. This URL will take you to a site that shows what pictures are being re-pined, how many times, and who has *liked* the pin. Third, measure the influence the company has on users shown through quality of comments on pins shared. The more discussion there is the more chances the comment or product will go viral. Conversations and transactions are another way to see if people are actually going from your social site to purchasing one of your products. Lastly, determine if the message from the company's social strategy is sustainable and will stick with the consumer (Weinberg, 2009). These five metrics should help a company determine what they need to keep doing or change in order to be truly successful.

### **Cautions**

One last caution, be careful pinning. Pinterest has a strict copyright policy. For any company hoping to use Pinterest to expand their ROI and connections, the user must be well informed with Pinterest's policies concerning copyrights. Pinterest (2012) copyright policy is as follows:

Pinterest ("Pinterest") respects the intellectual property rights of others and expects its users to do the same. It is Pinterest's policy, in appropriate circumstances and at its discretion, to disable and/or terminate the accounts of users who repeatedly infringe or are repeatedly charged with infringing the copyrights or other intellectual property rights of others (para 1).

Posting links from other sites, or personal sites, such as a store, or a product is not an infringement of copyright according to the policy. Since Pinterest creates a URL that links back to the original location, the product and owner receive credit – and the copyright is not broken. Even more, this is excellent third-party endorsement. What company does not want their product pushed by third parties? The violations occur when the user of Pinterest uploads a picture and no link is created back to the original creator. When a person uploads their personal images, that is not a violation of copyright, but companies must be careful uploading pictures (when no URL link is generated back to the original content) and claiming the image as their own. That is a violation of copyright.

From the early beginnings of Pinterest, the ethical issues of Pinterest arose. Is it acceptable to post other people's content? Is Pinterest not just a puddle of murky copyright infringements waiting to happen? But as Pinterest has grown, these questions have subsided because the reward has outweighed the cost.

Companies and individuals do not have an ethical problem when they 1) receive credit for work, and 2) get their product out in the consumer's eyes.

### Conclusion

Pinterest is growing at a phenomenal rate that will continue to dramatically change the face of business to consumer relations. Third-party endorsements are the gold nuggets of marketing and the best part is they are free. Companies should utilize Pinterest to build relationships with their consumers in order to encourage their fans to comment positively on their products. Third-party endorsements can even be as simple as re-pinning a picture on their board of a product they like from that company. Monitoring and growing a company's Pinterest and other social networking sites will highly influence consumers' perception of the company's products or services. Consumers are giving companies a chance of a lifetime to directly interact with them on such a personal level. Companies should keep in mind that with this great opportunity does come potential threat. Hiring a community manager with the right skills will aid the company to successfully use social media to increase awareness of the company's products and have a substantial return on investment. Pinterest is growing in popularity among companies as one of the most effective ways to produce third-party endorsements on the social web.

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