

Part One

STORY: TELL IT WELL

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1. WHY WE MUST SHARE

'Those of you who think you are creating online content, take note: your success will be directly dependent on your ability to create excuses for people to talk to one another.'

- Douglas RushKoff¹

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Content isn't king, but the conversation is. It always has been. We need to be social with other people. Don't get me wrong; 'content' is important, but only because it gives us something to talk about, and a way to be social.

Many working in the business world today have never been required to be social with customers. Mass media marketing techniques took business people away from real conversations, replacing them with ad campaigns. But social media has brought those conversations back.

What we're realizing for the first time in decades is that we need to personally return to the fundamentals of passing along stories of value to the public, stories that come from our professional expertise but that can then be passed along again and again. We must learn to share if we want to have an online presence that matters.

We are all newcomers to this online realm. My background is in print magazines. I still have a deep love for magazines, even though I know I can get their content in digital form. I like the feeling, the experience. It's a bit like being a DJ who likes vinyl records. Someday these great bound collections of dead-tree pages and toxic inks will be consigned to a specialty store. Despite having absolutely no shortage of digital content, I still love seeking them out.

Those of us who come from the print era know that magazines and books are difficult to share. Sure, we can always give them to a friend when we are done with them, but then we no longer have them ourselves. Or we can recommend that a friend also buy and read them. Ultimately, our goal is to be able to sit and have a conversation about the subject matter which touched us.

Shifting to the web was an inevitable leap for me. For you, in whatever your industry, it will likely be inevitable too. The sooner you become a master of this new domain, the better off you will be. The web allows us to quickly share and consume interesting subject matter with other like-minded people, and then have conversations about those stories.

When I came to the web, I brought with me my magazine instincts. Curate: find cool stuff that I think my audience will like. Build up a big audience to share it with. Lather, rinse, repeat. Originally I thought, like many publishers still do, that the value I could monetize here would be the same that I monetized in the mass media era: the size of the audience.

But along the way I discovered something crucial, and now obvious: social media isn't mass media. This isn't broadcasting from on high. This isn't about putting ads in front of as many eyeballs as possible. This is something even better: creating enduring relationships with people who can unlock all sorts of new business opportunities.

This began with hanging out with my so-called readership every day – the same way I used to hang out with work

colleagues around the water cooler. Albeit the water cooler was getting pretty big, it wasn't long before there were more than 10,000 – about the same as the monthly print run at the last magazine I worked for (I never knew a single one of my readers in the print days).

But my audience was also contributors. And the whole process clearly became a type of conversation – a sharing of ideas among a group of like-minded people.

These people are still there. So are the conversations. The relationships are deeper now. And the communities that we reach collectively are larger than ever. The trust we have within these communities is also strong.

But communities require constant attention. The more you can contribute the better. You need to be sharing stories, relevant stories, stories of value, stories that help the community make sense of the ever changing media landscape. You need to be sharing about that which you have expertise in. Or that which you care about. Or any ember of passion you feel towards anything. Don't worry, if you're not sure what this is, I'll help you cultivate that later in this book.

For now, let's just make sure we are clear on the importance of sharing in this decentralized network era. Sharing is the foundation of conversation, the foundation of social media and the foundation for all relationships.

There is a lot of psychology at work in a relationship, and therefore to be Socialleaders we will need to develop an understanding of why we 'like' different things. This will help us pick and choose the most valuable content to share.

You Know How to Share Gossip

Professor Robin Ian MacDonald Dunbar, British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist, never set out to explain social media, but much of his work has helped Socialleaders make sense of what is going on today.

Dunbar argued that gossip, in its broadest sense, is a ‘fundamental prerequisite of the human condition’.² From my experience in social media, I’d have to agree. So unless you are somehow living outside the human condition, you can’t really say you don’t know what gossip is – or how to partake in it. This means you understand the basics of what makes social media tick.

The content that we share online is sometimes referred to as social currency. It’s a useful way of thinking about content. Sometimes it has more value, sometimes it has less. It depends on the context of the situation and who is involved in the conversation. I’ll go more into that later, but for now anything that feels like gossip to you will likely make for turbo-charged social currency:

‘What is told in the ear of a man is often heard 100 miles away.’

– **Chinese proverb**

‘Do not repeat anything you will not sign your name to.’

– **Author unknown**

The last anonymous quote, quite ironically, is crucial. Everything we share through social media has our name, or our company name, on it. So we must be careful what we share online. This isn’t ‘off the record’ gossip in the back of a bar.

Social media is public record, and no one wants a reputation of being a horrible gossip.

Gossip, even in the broadest sense, has had such a bad rap for so long that we can't really talk about it as a useful tool. So let's call it 'story sharing'.

These stories can be false, faked or otherwise untrue. Stories can misrepresent and take matters out of context. Stories can be cold hard truths or complete works of fiction. But more often the stories are 'true enough' and they matter. They have to be trustworthy, come from a trusted source and carry information we can act on because without story sharing, we can't sustain communities. Our story sharing acts like building maintenance for societal groups. Without it, our groups crumble into rubble.

Dunbar asserts that our story sharing 'is the central plank on which human sociality is founded'.³ It is certainly the central plank on which social media communities are founded. And it will be the plank on which we build our own online presence.

The stories you share will determine the crowds you attract, which will determine your online influence.

So you need to begin with the end in mind. The central plank of stories you share from the outset will determine where you end up – because it will determine whom you begin to bond with.

Sharing Stories Creates Bonds

Try getting through a whole day without sharing some sort of 'news' with someone. You would be a pretty lonely

person. It's less about the content and more about the social bonding.

But bonding is not what we first think about in the rush to 'engage' in online conversation. Instead of asking, 'What exactly are we going to engage customers about? What was this so-called conversation supposed to discuss?', the tendency is to start pushing out brand message the way we were accustomed to doing in the Broadcast Age.

Too often, like some self-centred brute on a first date with an attractive woman, we meet with our customers (virtually) and proceed to talk non-stop about ourselves. It doesn't take long before they tune us out and start looking at their watches. That is *not* bonding. That is not what is meant by sharing, engaging or conversations.

Broadcasting isn't really sharing. Putting out your own carefully crafted message serves your own purposes. It serves your brand, your product, your service. But rarely has this served others very well. Seldom have we provided a story that, like gossip, can continue to be shared and, every time it does, deepen bonds between people.

The catchphrase I hear all the time among serious social media practitioners is 'sharing is caring'. While this platitude sounds like something your kindergarten teacher might have told you, it is actually an important sociological type of 'social grooming'.

Social media is more about the 'social' than they are about the 'media'. To become masters of this medium, we need to think like monkeys. Yes, monkeys. Caring monkeys that groom each other. Sharing stories of interest among our like-minded monkey tribe is a bit like how real monkeys

pick fleas out of each other's fur. This lights up our primate brains with an emotional charge and is an age-old, fundamental bonding ritual.⁴

But the stories you share must be valuable in some way to those around you. You only bond with fellow monkeys who are good at picking out your fleas. And to be good at picking out someone's fleas, you need to know where they scratch the most.

To know where someone scratches requires connecting with that individual one-to-one. It's about you, not your company – YOU! To be successful with social media, you need to keep in mind that you are going to be living with yourself online forever more. Rebooting your online presence years from now will be nearly impossible. We need to take responsibility for building relationships, and that begins with taking responsibility for finding great social currency to share.

What is Social Currency?

It's important to understand that there is something a little bit more complex about the idea of sharing stories to build relationships. This is where the term 'social currency' comes into play.

The term, as I'm using it, was coined in 2000 by the American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff. Social currency isn't a new term to those working in the world's top advertising agencies or to those who study sociology, where the term has been in use for much longer. It gets talked about a lot these days. But like everything else that gets talked about a lot, people often get it wrong.

To be clear: social currency is the information you acquire, then share, to start, maintain and nurture your relationships. It's important to think of it as a bit like money, although not as a direct analogue. If you give social currency of value to someone, you can then pass it on as something valuable to another person. With real money, when you give it away, you have it no more. However, when we share stories, we still retain those stories, and it's the excitement of the conversation they evoke that we truly value.

Viral videos, hot gossip, good jokes: these are social currency with a high pass-on value because they get us talking. When we are sharing stories to create bonds with other like-minded people, we want to give them social currency with the highest pass-on value we can. The more they can share what we give them, the more people they can talk about the experience with, the deeper our relationships become.

Social currency can help us feel like we belong to a community, that we get an inside joke, or otherwise feel significant.

If this is the first time you've heard the term 'social currency' expect that it won't be the last. Often when we finally have a term like 'social currency' to describe what we have seen going on, we begin to see it in action all around us every day, and everywhere we go. You will see social currency exchanges every time you see people having conversations.

Social currency forms the 'central plank'. Sharing it is the 'social grooming' that holds communities together.

How We Lost Our Way and Have to Find it Again

Social currency exchange has been with us since the very beginning. The reason it feels so new in the social media age has a lot to do with where we've been during the past half century or so. We need to put the 'media' side of social media into perspective so we can better make sense of the revolution we are living through.

Technology has, many times, altered the course of society, by making it easier to exchange social currency. The arrival of the printing press marked a dramatic shift away from what had been mostly a one-to-one exchange. Newspapers ushered in the dawn of mass media.

Newspapers provided us with our daily 'social currency', the news and opinion that we traded with colleagues, friends and family. Everything from politics to sport: more than enough to sustain you through all those encounters with other people during the day. No one bought the paper so they could read it and keep the information to themselves. Newspapers were designed to be discussed and argued over. It was all about the conversations, just as it is today.

Then came radio and television. And the Publishing Era begot the Broadcasting Era. Mass media got even more massive. Millions of us were all reading and watching (and talking about) the same things, selected by relatively few people.

Let's remember that this was a radical departure from anything that had gone before it. Mass media was a powerful

stage, with high barrier to entry. Its reach and influence were beyond anything previously possible.

This made mass media ideal tools for promoting brands, and with their arrival began a tradition of businesses talking *at* consumers, indirectly, via advertising. Ads were also big business and created a business culture to which the concepts of ‘conversation’ and ‘engaging’ meant running focus groups.

Soon advertising became all about the art (and science) of persuasion. And while ad men analyzed audiences for demographics (age, sex, income bracket), they treated everyone in that demographic as equal in terms of their respective influence (or lack thereof). There was no way to identify or create a special relationship with the ones who were particularly well regarded around the water cooler.

With the rise of mass media and mass marketing also came mass production. Retail began to evolve to take advantage of this scale. With this came the demise of something we all seem to cherish: the small-shop feeling of being a customer known by name, treated with individual care and respect. We lost our sense of community.

I was born into this era. I watched my small town turn into a much bigger town and the local hardware store, convenience store, grocery store – even the independent video rental store – all disappear with the arrival of the big box super stores.

Now I’m not here to disparage the big stores. I just want to illuminate how we’ve reached this cross roads. The mass media era wasn’t the default state of human civilization, but

rather a brief time of exception – a time that, with the emergence of social media, is coming to an end.

This, more than all the psychological reasons, is why we must share. Why we must cast off our mass media thinking and become Socialleaders. There is a massive change coming to the way we do business. The rising ‘social’ component requires a return to the mom and pop shop mentality. It requires a ‘humanization of business’.⁵

If we want to see the canary in this coal mine, we need only look to the newspaper that ushered in the mass media era. We don’t depend upon the newspaper for our social currency. We can find our current events, our reviews, our sports, our coupons in many more relevant places online. In fact, these things often find us now through social media. As a result, circulation rates for the vast majority of newspapers and periodicals have been on a steady decline.

And it’s not just the newspapers. All mass media have been impacted by the wave of change that is sweeping across our societies. It’s no secret that we aren’t buying music like we used to. We aren’t watching TV like we used to either. We aren’t shopping like we used to. We aren’t behaving at all like we used to during that brief era of mass media and mass marketing.

We *are* behaving like we used to behave before that era.

Social media has brought us back. And for those of us who can’t remember how it really worked before, we need to seriously start to understand how to connect with people again.

As the newspaper did before, social media acts like our central bank of social currency. It is online that we will find everything we need to talk about. And blogs are the first stop.

Blogs began as ego projects, and bloggers were dismissed as people with too much time on their hands. Today we can no longer afford to treat blogs, Facebook and Twitter as toys of ego. That 'egosystem'⁶ has evolved into the professional production centre of value for our social currency economy.

Blog posts are especially important because, in a radical departure from mass media, they are easy to share. In fact, most bloggers want you to share their social currency – not outright steal it, of course. But if you are willing to give them a mention and a link (the standard for respectable, social capital building sharing), then you are welcome to turn it into social currency to share with your community.

With blogs and later the micro-blogging tools, our personal oral tradition went digital, and the exchange of valuable social currency accelerated at a breakneck pace. Every water cooler and bar room conversation seemed to suddenly be online.

And here is where the new problems begin. Since both blogging and sharing of blog posts through social media is easy to do, the noise levels have grown and grown.

Filtering the noise to find quality stories and share them effectively among all the noise became, and remains, the valuable craft. It's this craft that attracts an influential and loyal audience. It's a craft that used to belong to news editors. It's now the turf of Socialeaders.

Take Away Express #1

- Conversation is king. It's the sharing of content and the discussions that ensue that truly matter.
- Everyone knows how to share gossip to maintain social bonds. So no one can claim they don't get how to use social media.
- Prepare to interact with people one-on-one. Social media isn't mass marketing.
- Story is the currency of social media. Building relationships requires exchanging social currency.
- Social media is like a bank. You need to deposit before you can withdraw.

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