

The year of the network

Key trends show that the online and offline worlds are coming together in one big network fusion

Our second trends report, *Swarming in the Statusphere*, is out today. In it, we highlight 50 key trends that show how the online and offline worlds are coming together in one big network fusion - we're calling 2011 the year of the network. Fitting, then, that we are using an offline magazine article to point interested readers online in the direction of our website, from where the book can be downloaded. Appropriate too, given the book's subject matter, that we are gathering the great and the good from our network to celebrate its launch on 25 November.

In so doing, we are exemplifying one of the trends outlined in the book: swarming. New thinking among US military strategists has it that 'many and small' beats 'few and large'. John Arquilla, a professor of defence analysis, has pointed out that the US army became more effective by learning to operate like Roman legions, which could operate as a whole or in small units. These work on a 'hider-finder' basis, while larger ones are 'mass-on-mass', which are comparatively inefficient.

Several smart brands have used swarming techniques as an effective way to reach markets that may be resistant to 'mass-on-mass' brand activity or do not justify large marketing costs. We are adopting a swarming approach ourselves - inviting a select few to our event, giving them an exclusive hard copy of the book and encouraging them to go out and spread the word.

As our book makes clear, there are no online or offline trends. There are just trends. Brands can tap into these to make themselves more attractive to consumers, wherever they are.

Here's one for you: Microhoods. These are small urban areas - sometimes just a few streets leading off a specific stretch of road - with a strongly defined character that sets them apart from the neighbourhoods



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around them. Creating and delivering hyper-localised content online is one of the great strengths of the web, particularly when people are allowing their social network to see where they are. So, serving up specific, timely, relevant and culturally nuanced content to members of the Microhood might help you sell a whole load more cupcakes.

If *Swarming in the Statusphere* tells us anything, it's that we are now living in the age of the network, where people quickly gather around common interests and issues. For businesses, creating communities of customers around their products and brands is becoming familiar. But creation is one thing; management is another. Once a group of interested, engaged, happy or even dissatisfied customers has gathered, the question of what to do with it is vexing businesses the world over.

Marketing teams are not used to the sustained, day-to-day nature of engagement required. They are happier knocking out stand-alone campaigns. What happened to the thousands that gathered online to urge Cadbury to bring back Wispa? How is P&G maintaining relationships with the millions who enjoyed Old Spice Man's YouTube videos? Ten million people have checked out the Tipp-Ex bear hunting video. What next for them?

This is a big challenge for marketers. When bringing communities together or looking to participate where they have already gathered, brands need a clear approach to ongoing engagement: to entertain, to be useful, to answer questions and resolve issues, to offer incentives and support. Understanding the ever-changing micro-trends that inform their view of the world can only help do that.

Enjoy *Swarming in the Statusphere*. You can download it from Shinecom.com. Or drop us a line if you'd like a bit of good old-fashioned print.

Mark Pinsent is head of social media at Shine Communications

Views in brief

What's the best brand campaign you've seen on Facebook?

Shine's recent campaign for the Indesit Party Laundrette ticked all the boxes - exclusive content, great incentives and constant engagement with the fans.

What's the key to managing a brand's Twitter feed?

Put a real person's name on the account or make it clear that a number of people post. Monitor constantly and respond quickly to direct engagement and questions. And remember it is a channel for dialogue not broadcast.

How can in-house PR people encourage people from all departments to get involved with a company's digital strategy?

Clear support and involvement of the board always helps! Give people an objective, incentivise them, but give them clear guidelines.