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The Enterprise Social Media Relations Strategy: The Case of Maersk Line

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show and discuss how corporate social media usage is driven by people, not technology, and how the creation of a culture of participation on the part of a company, in this case the world's largest container shipping company with 25,000 employees worldwide, Maersk Line (www.maerskline.com), requires a systematic, user-driven listen-and-learn strategy with a clear selection of purpose and social platform according to audience and topics. This effort needs to be continuously dedicated and aligned, focusing on which relationships the company wants to form.

The promises of social media

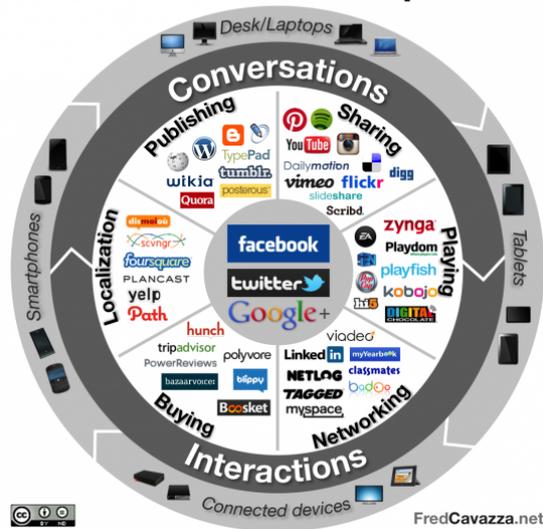
In today's informational, global and networked society (Castells, 2000), availability of and convenient access to information is one of the more empowering and revolutionary forces of the Internet (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Social media has emerged as a potential space for information sharing, idea generation, problem solving and relationship building; the basic idea of the service is crowdsourcing, also referred to as the wisdom of the crowds (Surowiecki, 2004), or 'co-creation'-model, a term frequently surfacing in business literature (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). According to this concept, consumers are actively involved in the design of the products they consume and the co-creation aspect is manifested in the new, hybrid consumer role, *producers*, in the sense that social media users are both potential users (in the narrow sense of information recipient) as well as potential producers of content (Bruns, 2007). Social media represents overall environments for the massively distributed collaborative of information and knowledge. The promises of social media are a facilitation of user participation and new ways of connecting, interacting and communicating with other people via blogging, social networking services and microblogging. Social technologies could then be said to be representatives of a second generation of knowledge management systems that are designed to encourage the development of communities of practice to stimulate knowing experiences, rather than merely facilitating transfers of knowledge. However, in primarily the manifesto-like literature like Wikinomics (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) there has been a tendency to argue the universal benefits

of an alleged democratized and collectivist digital space, giving rise to the mistaken notion that the social media technologies themselves are the solution creating a collaborative culture and co-creative strategy (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Before elaborating on why this notion is mistaken, let us take a look at the various definitions of social media.

Defining Social Media: An Affordance Approach

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of *user generated content* (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media are the means for any person to: publish digital content; provide and obtain real-time feedback via online discussions, commentary and evaluations; and incorporate changes or corrections to the original content (Dykeman, 2008: 1). In the social media landscape visualized below, the most common social media is highlighted and categorized according to its prototypical usage.

Social Media Landscape 2012



(The Social Media Landscape. Source: Cavazza, 2012)

At the center stage of the Social Media Landscape by Cavazza (2012), you find the social network sites, in this case exemplified with Facebook, twitter and Google +, on

which publishing, sharing, gaming, networking, buying and localizing can take place in ongoing interactions and sometimes conversations. This takes place from a device such as the laptop, tablet, smartphone and other connected devices. A general feature of these interactions on social media platforms is that the higher the social presence, the larger the social influence that the communication partners have on each other's behavior. This basically means that the more you share and give to others on social media, the more you are bound to receive back in the form of likes, comments and shared content, negative as well as positive. This leads to another way of defining social media, which takes its point of departure in *social affordances* – affordances referring to the perceptual cues in the environment that facilitate interaction (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). In this understanding, social media affords two-way interaction with an audience, beyond any specific recipient, called *many-to-many communication* in which messages are broadcast to a wider audience that can then engage in an exchange. Social media combines features of one-way media (broadcast radio and television) and two-way media (email and blogs). Like one-way media, information is broadcast from one source to an (potentially unknown) audience. But like two-way media, individuals can react and respond to this communication through the same channels. The term indicates that the boundaries are not straightforward. Blogs, for instance, can have so many readers that they are limited to the broadcast pattern because you cannot interact with millions of readers. As the size of readership falls, loose conversation becomes possible, because the audiences are smaller, and when few readers engage, tight conversation can take place, where every reader is also a writer and vice versa (Shirky, 2008: 129). People can participate not only through the creation of content but through the reorganization of content through new curation¹ practices, or even just by drawing attention to the content of others (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010: 310).

Hogan & Quan-Haase (2010) talk about social media adoption and practice by stressing how each form of social media has developed its own niche in terms of the kinds of communicative practices that it supports. Facebook, for instance, affords users to create large networks composed of weak and strong ties, where Instant Messaging is used more to maintain intimate relationships that require in-depth exchanges. With reference to Latzko-Toth and his work on metaphors of synchrony, emergence and differentiation of online chat devices, Hogan & Quan-Haase mention the distinction of two different forms of synchronous communication: *conference* – a gathering in a virtual place where unfocussed interactions and group sociability occur, and *co-presence* – practices centered on the sustaining of contact between individuals who know each other. Social media of today blends both forms of communication, providing a forum for unfocussed

¹ The traditional notion of a curator is a trained expert who selects the finest objects. By contrast, social media is not a world of precious scarcity but of data abundance. Digital media can be copied, transferred, filtered, remixed, and sorted on the fly. (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010: 312)

synchronous exchanges and network sociability, as well as a space where people who know each other can stay loosely connected. Despite their variety, one common thread in these practices is whether they facilitate one-way, two-way, or many-to-many interaction (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010: 312).

The age of corporate transparency and user empowerment

Looking at social media in a business communication context, companies of today are faced with a reality where consumers speak freely and in a highly visible manner with each other, and where businesses have increasingly less control over the information available about them in cyberspace. In a branding context, Fournier & Avery (2011) point out an interesting paradox, which presented itself with the coming of social media. In social media everyone, and no one, was the audience. While YouTube served up over 2 billion videos per day, no one was compelled to tune in to a branded video, and most did not. Brand marketers had lost control of their brands' content, reach, frequency, and timing of the distribution of their messages to the consumers. Consumers had learned how to leverage brands for their own purposes and ends. As a response, marketers created Facebook profile pages and online communities to nurture relationships, but people came looking for price deals or a convenient place to complain and even hijack brand messages, exposing company weaknesses and shortcomings. Fournier & Avery call it a move from secrecy to transparency and the slope can be both slippery and scary for many brands:

In an ironic turn of the tables, consumers were using social media to target brands and companies, rather than brands using social media to target them. Branding had become an open source activity, where anyone and everyone had a say in matters of the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011:194)

Public Relations historically has been about companies creating the ability to control the information available about them through strategically placed press announcements and good public relations managers, whereas social media increasingly has relegated companies of today to the sidelines as mere observers without the knowledge nor the chance – or sometimes even the right - to alter publicly posted comments provided by their customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, companies can, and increasingly do, choose to develop a strategy for their own social media presence. When entering the social media spaces, they are expected to function in highly responsive and attentive ways, not only listening in but also be vigilant with rapid and targeted responses (Crawford, 2009). An example of this is Southwest Airlines. In July, when one of the flight company's airplanes skidded down the runway nose first when landing, they used

social media to give a rapid and targeted response to the public about the incident. The result was that the readers of the posts complimented the company for actually coming out first and telling about the accident instead of waiting for media pressure before doing so.



(Southwest Airlines uses Twitter to publicly address an airplane accident. Source: Boyd, 2013)



(Southwest Airlines uses Facebook to publicly address an airplane accident with direct crisis response. Source: Boyd, 2013)

What is important to mention regarding the use of social media for crisis responses, like in the case of Southwest Airlines, is that in these cases it often becomes obvious which

companies are used to and already active on social media platforms in their daily communication with stakeholders, and thereby know the premises and dynamics of these media, and those who are not: if the company is already familiar with the social media platform and its strengths and weaknesses in communicating with target audiences, the more likely it is to use the platform strategically and precisely targeted during a crisis response. On the contrary, if the crisis becomes the reason for entering social media, the company will most likely be badly prepared for how to handle the reactions and the fast pace in which the social media interactions occur, in a time and situation where the company might be in a more vulnerable position than usual.

Open leadership and strategies of listening

In her book on open leadership, Charlene Li also addresses how social media has shifted this balance of power, but Li stresses how it does not necessarily mean a complete lack of control for companies. Rather it calls for an understanding of the shifting roles and boundaries and looking at the business strategy as a place where people empowered by social media want to contribute to companies. According to Li, the key points of a social media strategy are to recognize the key relationships for your business and how you want to interact with customers, employees, online activists and/or other key stakeholders. A company needs to know what these relationships should look like in action and find new boundaries and look for ways to build a sense of responsibility and empowerment into the relationships with employees and customers and align the organization with these new boundaries and relationships, including social media as support for the relationships instead of the focus (Li, 2010):

Mastering social media is not about the latest shiny technologies; it is about having a clear idea of the relationship you want to form (Li, 2010).

Once you get the attention of the audience, a crucial part of the strategy is listening. Crawford (2009) addresses the concept of listening as a metaphor of paying attention online and *having a voice*, be it in blogs, wikis, social media, or discussion lists. In this sense, Crawford uses the metaphor of listening to offer a productive way to analyze forms of online engagement and modes of online listening used by individuals, politicians and corporations. Crawford underlines how the value of listening could be considered in three ways: being seen to participate in a community and hearing people's opinions; utilizing a rapid and lower-cost form of customer support (as compared to the telephone); and gaining a dispersed global awareness of how a brand is discussed and the patterns of consumer use and satisfaction using social network sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, as giant focus groups and customizable databases for market research,

where companies can listen in for positive and negative views of their products (Crawford, 2009: 532). Since social media as spaces for observing various types of listening are the focus of Crawford's work, it provides a useful background for online listening strategies in the context of Maersk Line's social media relations strategy, which will be elaborated in the following section.

Maersk Line's media relations strategy: Supporting a culture of participation

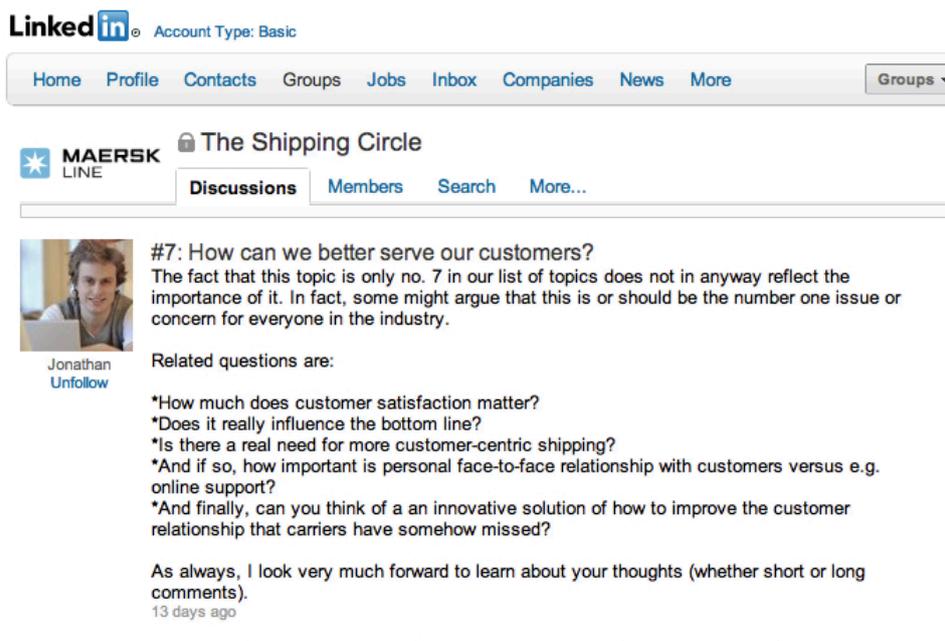
With a clear and simple focus on coming closer to their customers in the industry and within different segments on the B2B market, the story of Maersk Line on social media is the story of building relationships online and creating a culture of participation. When searching for business cases on corporate social media usage, there seems to be a higher number of B2C examples, compared to B2B cases on social media usage. According to Evans (2013) from the Forbes digital publishing platform, *Brand Voice*, a conventional-wisdom trap exists saying that B2B means Boring-to-Boring, implying that B2B companies are doomed to being so industrial-strength impersonal that they do not have a place on social media. Evans points to the case of Maersk Line on social media as a remarkable break-through example of B2B on social media that has proven this conventional-wisdom trap to be wrong.

The Danish worldwide shipping company, Maersk Line, entered the social media sphere in October 2011. The company went from being a hermetically closed organization communication-wise to inviting stakeholders in as proactive co-producers of content on social media platforms (www.maersklinesocial.com). The Danish container shipping company with 25,000 employees and operations in 125 countries has marked their footprint with their corporate social network usage after having won the European Digital Communication Award in September 2012 for their social media campaign, being an example for other B2B companies to follow. In less than 11 months, Maersk Line attracted more than 400,000 fans on Facebook (today the number has passed 1 million fans) and established a presence in nine platforms with nine different purposes (Cambié, 2012). According to the communication manager at Maersk Line, Klavs Valskov, the company followed a simple "try-listen-learn-redo-fun-lean" approach, being explorative and trying different channels out. First, Maersk did some *background listening* before deciding whether to be on social media or not, and how:

In October 2011, Maersk Line finally got going with social media. Up until that point in time we had been in what we termed "a listening phase", trying to digest what social media is about and decide whether or not it makes sense to be there for a B2B company like ours (maersklinesocial.com: 'Why social media').

Getting the right people on the digital bus

Another listening strategy that Crawford proposes, and which I find useful to explain the strategy of Maersk Line on social media, is *delegated listening* which means that corporations listen in and gain information through ‘giant focus groups’ (online communities). The approach of Maersk Line has been ambitious and chances have been taken, according to Valskov. Google +, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are the social media platforms at the center of their strategy. As an example, *Facebook* is used by the communication team to reach out to followers including NGOs, employees, potential employees, competition, suppliers, regulatory bodies and as Valskov points out ‘a surprisingly large crowd of shipping nerds and enthusiasts’. Many of the employees are seafarers and they publish tons of pictures of e.g. pirates and heavy weather at deep sea. *LinkedIn* is used as a professional forum where the company can have conversations with customers, a tool for monitoring and spotting trends that affect the container industry and innovation, which Valskov considers much more vital than a survey.



LinkedIn Account Type: Basic

Home Profile Contacts Groups Jobs Inbox Companies News More Groups ▾

MAERSK LINE The Shipping Circle

Discussions Members Search More...

 **#7: How can we better serve our customers?**
 The fact that this topic is only no. 7 in our list of topics does not in anyway reflect the importance of it. In fact, some might argue that this is or should be the number one issue or concern for everyone in the industry.

Jonathan
Unfollow

Related questions are:

- *How much does customer satisfaction matter?
- *Does it really influence the bottom line?
- *Is there a real need for more customer-centric shipping?
- *And if so, how important is personal face-to-face relationship with customers versus e.g. online support?
- *And finally, can you think of a an innovative solution of how to improve the customer relationship that carriers have somehow missed?

As always, I look very much forward to learn about your thoughts (whether short or long comments).
13 days ago

(*Debate and knowledge sharing in The Shipping Circle on LinkedIn.* Source: Wichmann, November 2012)

From the LinkedIn group and the discussion among shipping experts that takes place, Maersk Line has created user innovation in the form of a container that can be folded when empty:

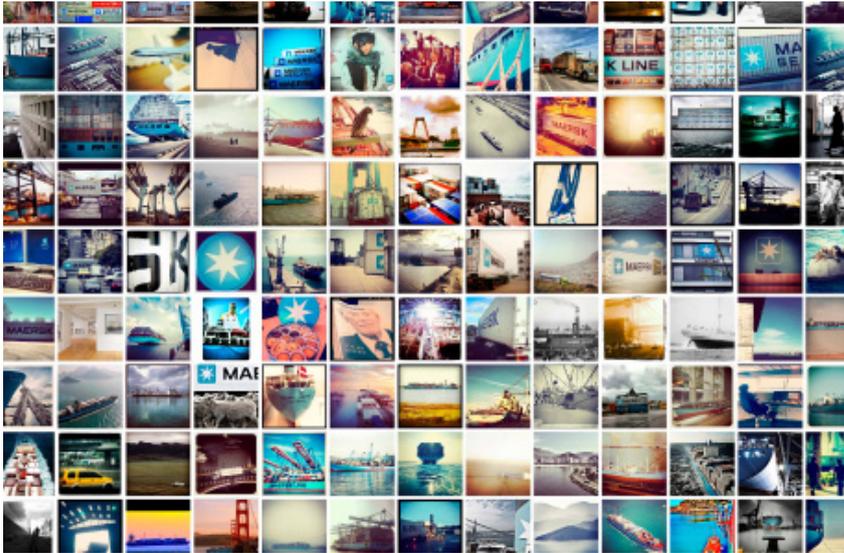
It goes to show that if you open up online and create the right conditions for a discussion, you could come across ideas that are worth billions (Valskov, in: Cambié, 2012).

Google + Hangouts are used to hold smaller press briefings when the company is launching new initiatives. Three to four journalists can log on and have a live videoconference with some of the executives. *Twitter* is used by the many journalists that follow Maersk to download press releases and receive news from ten official Maersk tweeters including a chief commercial officer, the head of anti-piracy and business managers. To locate and recruit these tweeters, internal blogs and the Maersk Line intranet were used. Many legends and myths exist about the founder Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller, who died recently, and Maersk Line has for the first time published historical photos from the Maersk archives that were never made public before.



(Maersk has published photos from the archive that were never made public before on their company profiles on the social sites Instagram and Pinterest. Source: Maersk Line on Flickr)

For this they use the visually oriented social media sites *Instagram* and *Pinterest*, and users from all over the world show a great interest in these, clearly fascinated by the legend and myth. *Instagram* is used for visual branding and spotting trends. The photos uploaded by the users around the world have been collected and gathered in a mosaic, which is hanging on the wall in the office of Maersk Line's CEO Søren Schou and in the cafeteria at the headquarters:



(The visual story of Maersk, told by users around the world through photos of Maersk Line. Source: Maersk Line: www.maersklinesocial.com)

These are just a few of the nine social platforms in which Maersk is present, and each has a specific writer(s), purpose and target audience.

Corporate storytelling

Apparently, Maersk Line has done more than listening and responding. The company has set the scene for social media engagement on the various platforms and has a story to tell. Maersk Line's entering in social media is grounded in the phenomenon called corporate journalism. According to the former head of social media at Maersk Line, who was the person responsible for developing and launching the Maersk Line social media relations strategy, Jonathan Wichmann, the interesting part for companies using social media is that they have an opportunity to be publishers of their own story and become their own news media in their own right and not the official press' and the journalists' rights. Maersk Line spends human resources in the digital media and recruited a person, Jonathan Wichmann, with journalistic and communicative background to be the overall supervisor. His job has been to tell, with the required integrity and authenticity, what is going on inside and outside the company. It is about being honest and sincere:

If you do not admit your mistakes, no one learns from them. And then you have an undynamic, static company not moving anywhere (Wichmann, 2012).



(Post on Facebook about Maersk Norwich's clash with a whale. Notice the likes and shares are almost 1-1. Source: Maersk Facebook page, June 8, 2012)

Maersk Line has also done what Crawford refers to as *reciprocal listening*, which means hearing and responding to comments and direct messages (as opposed to a broadcast-only model, leaving no room for dialogue). According to Jonathan Wichmann, the approach has been systematic, controlled by the users, experimental and visual. "It is lean", he says. The key to the high engagement score in Maersk Line's many social media platforms is not about being on this and this many platforms, it is in the way that the company works with social media. The key has been the aligned approach and breaking down the silence, inviting the public in and creating room for doing so. From the beginning it has been a goal not to use social media as marketing platforms but as communication platforms to come closer to the customers. Instead of transmitting messages, Maersk Line wants to engage the users and create content and communication that is trustworthy. On the Maersk Line Social site it says:

Social media is about communication, not marketing. It's about engaging, not pushing. And social media is definitely not just about the media side (...)

*Social media is a mindset, a way of thinking and working together.
(www.maersklinesocial.com)*

In Maersk Line, they are also highly concerned with internal communication leadership and spend a large amount of time on internal discussions about the right platforms. What most companies do is use social media narrowly in their marketing, recruitment and HR. What Maersk Line has done is a strategic use in all processes in the company's external (and to some extent internal) communication, strengthening the relations and collaborations both externally and internally. To Maersk Line, the value of their social media efforts has been to become wiser about the company faster and cheaper than ever before and with a better result.

From a critical view, especially at one point, Maersk Line's social media relations strategy is particularly vulnerable. The success of Maersk Line's social media usage is highly pointing back to one person, Jonathan Wichmann, who has been the key driver of all the online activities, assuring the alignment of the different efforts and their differentiation. This poses a risk if and when one day this person is not there anymore and the responsibility is delegated to someone else². Another challenge is keeping the audience tuned in. Many companies that have entered social media have received a lot of attention simply for doing so as maybe the first in their field, like in the case of Maersk Line and the B2B market perspective. With time, the interest might fade out and the picture look different when more companies and brands start to invest heavily in social media presence. Will Maersk then be able to keep the number one position that they seem to have gained within the social media usage in a B2B context? Time will tell. There are, however, no indications of Maersk Line slowing down their efforts on social media. On the contrary, the future of Maersk Line on social media will, according to Wichmann, extend the present use of maersklinesocial.com grounded in the communications department to also include customer service, sales and the internal use of social technologies for collaboration (Wichmann, 2013).

² Since the writing of this article, Jonathan Wichmann has left Maersk Line and joined a consultant house, starting November 1, 2013.

Take-aways from the case of Maersk Line's social media relations strategy

Maersk Line's social media relations strategy serves as an example of a listen and learn approach going all in, and gives an indication of the results of a clear strategy for framing, maintaining, embracing and developing the social media efforts continuously. Clearly, every B2B company cannot copy-paste what Maersk Line has done, since every social media effort will be highly industry and company specific. However, with point of departure in the case of Maersk Line on social media and the researchers Kaplan & Haenlein's advice about corporations using social media, the take-aways more generally speaking can be summarized as this: choose carefully when you pick the application, or make your own; ensure activity alignment; be active; be interesting; be humble; be unprofessional (do not be afraid to make mistakes and avoid overly-professional content offerings); do not hire outside professional writers to manage your corporate social media sites, but hire one with the appropriate background for the purpose who can drive and maintain the process and delegate the writing to key persons in the organization; and last but not least, be honest and respect the premises of the internet and its users.

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