



Warc Trends: Seriously Social 2015 - How social strategy can drive business results (Executive Summary)

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Seriously Social 2015: How social strategy can drive business results

This is the summary version of Seriously Social 2015, a Warc Trends Report. [Download the full version](#)

This report draws lessons from the world's best social strategy. It is based on expert analysis of the shortlist of the Warc Prize for Social Strategy 2015, a global competition that rewards smart social and 'earned' media thinking that leads to business results.

The winners of the Prize were announced in June 2015. Each showcases strategic thinking that both drove social effects and had a business impact for the brand.

The Seriously Social 2015 report, authored by marketing consultant Peter Field, looks at the 32 shortlisted entries as a single body of work. It considers features of all entries on the shortlist and compares trends to analysis of the 2014 Prize, analysing the drivers of social effectiveness.

To do this it uses:

- tagging data applied when the case studies were published on Warc.com, including analysis of media channels, budgets and creative approaches;
- an in-depth survey with the authors of shortlisted papers;
- analysis based on different 'models' of social strategy – top-down versus bottom-up, and cause-driven versus brand story-driven.

Full details of the methodology behind this report can be found in the full version.

Paid social media

The first theme to emerge from the research is the shift to paid social. Changes in social media algorithms have restricted brands' ability to achieve exposure without paying for reach. In 2015, the average budget of shortlisted campaigns has increased almost 40% from the average budget in 2014. Not all case studies had large budgets, however, and many had to be very creative to achieve social success without media spend. Broadly the case studies can be categorised as low-budget campaigns looking for substitutes for money, and higher-budget campaigns that paid for reach.

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The growing use of paid social media seems to be increasing the need to demonstrate returns from social investment, and an increase in short-term evaluations. This short-term focus has seen a reduced emphasis on using long-term measures of brand equity, and reduced usage of emotions, storytelling and consumer-generated content in the campaigns. These trends point to an emphasis on short-term sales rather than longer-term brand building.

As well as paid social, there were more traditional media used alongside the social channels in 2015, particularly used by the campaigns with larger budgets to improve their reach.

Social channels have also evolved since 2014, with online video of increasing importance. While Facebook and Twitter still dominate, YouTube and Instagram showed strong growth.

Drivers of social success

Two currencies for social success were identified – the innate 'sharing power' of the social idea, and the money required to deliver reach, more significant in 2015 because of the constraints on organic reach imposed by some social media players. The survey of shortlisted authors found that the feature thought most important to social success was the originality of the idea, cited by 83% of case study authors. Creativity has become an essential driver of organic social reach as well as facilitating paid reach, as many of the winning cases demonstrate. Other notable drivers were utility, highlighted by 42% of authors, and a worthwhile cause and an experiential element, both cited by 38% of authors. The campaign feature that least drove social success was offers and prizes. While this tactic is often cited by brands as a preferred strategy for social, it does not drive long-term effects and value for the brand. The analysis shows the most powerful use of social strategy is as part of a long-term brand-building effort, and optimum length for a social campaign is more than six months.

The report also considers these drivers of social success in relation to the type of social strategy and how the importance of campaign strategies changes depending on the time over which social success is observed. Experiential elements, creativity and usefulness service are seen as more important features to long-term success than short-term for a campaign. The features more important to short-term success were association with causes, sports and events, and consumer-generated content. The difference is whether the feature works to strengthen the brand and so lead to long-term effects, or to prompt behaviour and generate more immediate activation. The ideal campaign would comprise both these strategies.

Drivers of commercial effectiveness

The report also examines business, activation and brand effects to determine drivers of commercial effectiveness. The first factor examined is timescale. The study shows long-term social campaigns achieve greater sales and market share growth through new customer acquisition.

Business effects of brand story and cause-driven campaigns are shown to be similar when considering all budget levels. However, significant differences are seen when looking at low budgets – here the cause-driven campaigns greatly outperformed those with a brand story strategy.

In terms of creative strategy, there were some general trends even though most entries used a range of overlapping strategies. Consumer-generated content results in powerful activation effects but was less successful for long-term business and brand-building effects. Partnerships and affiliations produce powerful activation and brand-building effects, but tend to drive less significant long-term business results. Finally emotional social strategies result in powerful effects across metrics,

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but particularly in business and brand effects.

Social in the media mix

The 2015 campaigns confirmed the finding from 2014 that social strategy should involve multiple channels. There were no cases among the 2015 shortlist that used fewer than three social media. The average number of other channels used was 6.9, although 41% of campaigns used just three to five other channels aside from social. This is a different pattern to 2014, when the trend was for using more channels alongside social media. This focus on fewer channels seems to enable brands to utilise budget more effectively given the increased cost of achieving reach. There were changes in the other media used compared to last year. Low-budget campaigns that perform well tend to use games, search, point-of-purchase and product sampling alongside social media. The most successful high-budget campaigns focus on point-of-purchase as well as newspapers, ambient, cinema, outdoor, PR and television.

Television was used by 75% of high-budget campaigns, closely followed by outdoor (63%). These two channels also saw the largest growth as lead media alongside social across the two years of the competition.

In conclusion the most successful strategy, whether for a high- or low-budget campaign, is to partner social media with traditional offline media, particularly those that offer high visibility for the budget. The increasing difficulty in achieving reach through social alone means that using social media as the only channel is unlikely to achieve the desired result.

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