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Q&A - ALEXANDRA WHEELER: Bring digital to life by building relationships

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**Abstract (summary)**

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Alexandra Wheeler became director of digital strategy at Starbucks four years ago. Starbucks believes that social media is central to building the future of its business. In an interview, Wheeler discusses how the brand now uses web-based channels to engage with customers and employees. Wheeler says Starbucks has 20 Facebook pages to co-ordinate globally.

**Full Text**

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Starbucks believes that social media is central to building the future of its business, but this was far from the case when Alexandra Wheeler became its director of digital strategy four years ago.

Mark Choueke discovers how the brand now uses web-based channels to engage with customers and employees

MW: Starbucks has overtaken Coca-Cola as the most popular brand on Facebook with more than 10 million fans on the social media site. How important is that to you>

AW: Numbers feel great but our Facebook presence has to be about the quality of interaction. It's about making sure that we do our job every day to give those fans some sort of meaningful value. Having 10 million people on Facebook who like us would be useless if we did nothing with it.

MW: So how do you interact with all your markets?

AW: I have 19 people reporting to me in Seattle and we work with all of the regions where Starbucks operates. We have 20 Facebook pages to co-ordinate globally. They are all run locally but we talk to the local Facebook teams daily.

We help to set the pace and the tone of what Starbucks should be doing in those social media spaces by offering training and guidance in everything from basic set-up and how to use our pages, through to what tone of voice the brand should use.

MW: How does your role fit in with the rest of the business?

AW: My mission is to bring digital to life as part of the Starbucks experience, making it meaningful and relevant for customers and our employees. I want to show the business and the brand how digital can round off the customer's Starbucks experience.

I work across the business. I'm a marketer by design - my background is marketing and advertising - but I work to the rule that digital at Starbucks has to be marketing, PR and customer service agnostic. Digital has to serve all of these parts of the business.

I've looked at a lot of the Fortune 500 companies and how they are organized. It seems that quite a few of these companies have somebody in marketing who controls the website and somebody in PR who "owns" social media and someone in CRM who is in charge of email. That is the fastest way to get nothing done.

MW: Many argue that great digital marketing is about choosing and creating the content that your brand fans are going to find relevant. Is that your responsibility?

AW: Yes, I'm the highest level of person within Starbucks that can drive strategy from an online point of view. But Chris Bruzzo, vice-president for brand, content and online, is a great leader for me and has given me room to create and execute the strategy. The team led by Chris is very much the arbiter of what is content is relevant. We say no a lot more than we say yes to content suggestions across the organization. We fancy ourselves as content archaeologists, working with different people across the organization to find things we think are valuable and which we want to share.

We have to keep engaging with our customers in relevant ways. That might involve engaging them in a story around the brand. We might, for example, make a video documentary of a trip to Rwanda to show people how we source our coffee.

MW: Can social media work for every kind of brand?

AW: Everybody has to pay attention to it. Social media is part of the new marketing mix. However, there are brands and products that don't have an authentic connection or engagement with customers, so I think it's a stretch to imagine they can build an active online community.

It also doesn't work if you only think about profit and approach it from a purely commercial perspective. If you do, then you're not doing the channel justice because it really is about building relationships with your customers. If all you want from it is to take information from social media and use it to drive sales, then it's not going to be successful.

MW: Has the emergence of social media and co-creation really changed communications?

AW: Businesses should be preparing for a different future. To those who embrace and understand co-creation, it is not a threat but an opportunity. But the idea of co-creating does mean your business has to open itself up.

I was the first digital strategy person hired at Starbucks four years ago and the company didn't really know what to do with me. They knew they needed something in the "interactive" or "digital" arena and that it should sit within the brand team, but nobody was clear about what my role should be.

MW: How did you overcome that?

AW: I worked with Terry Davenport, (the senior vice-president of marketing) and Chris Bruzzo to get people engaged. The business took some convincing. My first 18 months were spent selling the idea that digital mattered to the leadership, even if that just meant building a vision for Starbucks.com, which had not seen investment for a number of years and was a terrible website.

I was saying: "Here's where you can drive customer satisfaction, here is where you can drive sales and here is where you can save money." I had to begin by talking in these terms as well as talking about engagement and the role customers can play.

MW: At what point did your management team become convinced about social media's potential?

AW: Starbucks' first entry point into the social media space was launching My Starbucks Idea (a website where Starbucks customers and staff can suggest ways to improve the company's services and products). That started with a conversation between our chief executive Howard Schultz and Michael Dell about Dell's IdeaStorm, which is a similar concept.

Howard liked what Dell was doing and we all agreed that My Starbucks Idea was the best way for the brand to get into the social space. The website was all about ideas that staff and customers had for the Starbucks experience, the products and the stores.

It felt authentic because the Starbucks experience has been co-created from the very start. The music you hear in our stores came via an idea from an employee, who decided that we should be creating our own music that we could then sell in our stores.

And the Frappuccino blended ice drink was launched in LA organically by local stores, so there has long been a culture of co-creation within the organization.

MW: How do you action the customers' "Starbucks Ideas" that the business wishes to put into place?

AW: We need the voice of our customers and we need to engage and understand what is important to them. We have operations and people behind that site who evaluate everything that the community votes for.

How far each idea goes depends on what part of the business it might affect. There is an executive within every part of the business to evaluate the ideas that come into their section.

MW: How do you measure what you're doing in the online world?

AW: We understand the various metrics of success that we can measure our social engagement by. We can look at how we used social channels to drive an offer like "free pastry day" in the US that got 1 million extra people in-store to buy coffee and claim their free pastry.

Another measurement might be how many people are persuaded to join our campaign to bring in a reusable cup, which is about behavior change and being co-responsible for our environmental impact. So, there are both qualitative and quantitative measures to look at. Some of it is going to be about measuring brand trust and brand love, and some of it is going to be actual transactions. I can't give figures but digital within Starbucks is absolutely accepted as a growth area.

MW: Are concepts such as co-creation and crowdsourcing being widely adopted by consumer-facing businesses in the US?

AW: There is definitely an increased sense that co-creation and crowdsourcing can be useful among businesses in certain sectors, but there is also a varying range of authenticity. There are those brands which think it is the thing to do, but may not be honoring it the right way, and those that truly understand the potential of a genuine cultural change.

The advertising campaign run by Microsoft for its Windows 7 operating system is based around a theme of co-creation, even though the company didn't actually use crowdsourcing to create the product. Microsoft's suggestive creative campaign is tapping into a customer insight that people like to feel they had some say in how new products should look.

But many US companies are not in a position to dive straight in to co-creation. It's a big investment. Most businesses are just at the listening phase, trying to tune into conversations their customers are having. They have to work out how to act on what they learn.

I feel that we really jumped a number of stages in a short period of time because we wanted to engage with our consumers and staff straight away. That was a really significant commitment of resources, innovation and time. You have to make sure that social media makes sense not only for your corporate culture but for the business aims too.

MW: Will you be launching some of the most recent US-based innovations such as My Starbucks Idea and free Wi-Fi in the UK?

AW: We're bringing the My Starbucks Idea site to the UK in the autumn. Although we have an international aggregated section on the site, we're building a site specific to the UK to get a deeper understanding of the local view of the brand. Unfortunately, we can't yet offer free Wi-Fi in the UK, but it was very exciting to announce it in the US and we will continue to look at it market by market.

MW: How do you plan to develop mobile?

AW: I'm super excited about mobile, which in terms of social media is the next place for explosive innovation and growth. Mobile is a different channel from the web, but even within the web, Twitter should be treated as a different channel to Facebook and, indeed, the company website.

Sometimes our work with mobile might be something that we need to develop and create. Sometimes it will be tagging on and adding value to another application. But we'll have a multifaceted approach to mobile in order to reach people, wherever they are.

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