Coca-Cola 2.0: New recipe for branding success

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Although most brands have ventured into Web 2.0 marketing, doubt and caution are the watchwords, as reflected in advertising budgets.

For a small firm with limited resources, the impact of a clever campaign on Facebook or Twitter can be tremendous.

But for a product that is already universally known, to what degree does it need to devote resources for promotion and communication via online channels and social media?

For Coca-Cola Spain, the benefits are not so obvious and the risks are great: the possibility of negative publicity and losing control of the corporate message.

Learning how one of the world's best-known brands treats online communication is the subject of the case study, "Coca-Cola Spain: Branding 2.0," by Julie Michelle Ziskind, Julián Villanueva and Guillermo Armelini.

Uncharted territory

Despite the risks and problems associated with Internet marketing, no brand can afford not to have a strong presence on the Web.

But given the extent to which social media are still uncharted territory, this is often easier said than done.

In an attempt to establish a strong presence on the Web, Coca-Cola's unit in Spain faced two major challenges.

The first was to determine how the existence of online channels would affect the way the company communicates. The answer was not clear, since the Spanish marketing strategy still relied heavily on traditional media.

Would these traditional media be enough to maintain the brand? How would the global accessibility of social media affect the relationship between the Spanish unit and the parent company?

The second major challenge was to determine what specific communication goals could be achieved through the various platforms available.

The company needed to determine which approach would be most effective for each of the targets, and what style of communication and content would yield the best results.

The company had to decide whether it was better to be present on many platforms or to concentrate on a few, and also whether to differentiate the online presence of each brand or opt for a unified image for the entire product range.

Maintaining the personality and communication strategy of each brand could get quite complicated, especially given that Coca-Cola Spain handles more than a dozen brands.

Standing out

To these challenges one might add another: How to maintain Coke's status as the undisputed leader via a communication channel in which consumers have much more of a say in the company's campaigns.

Even though the Spanish unit had been awarded for its excellent handling of the brand, Spanish executives had to rethink their online strategy after several years of uneven results.

The questions posed by this case study are far-reaching: Do online communities really constitute the future of communication media?

What is the next phase for branding a product that everyone already knows, in order to guarantee its continued leadership over the long term?