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iHeartMedia: The Influence of Social Media in Conjunction with Radio

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Author

Nowak, Sydney

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Dr.
Department of

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair, University Honors

Abstract

Many individuals use social media platforms as a form of entertainment or as something that allows them to keep in touch with today's society. We, as a generation, have become attached to cellular devices, the desire to keep in immediate contact with each other, oversharing personal information, and access to the internet. This past summer I had the opportunity to work alongside the Social/Digital Media Team as one of two Digital Media interns at iHeartMedia in Burbank. My internship was specifically aligned with iHeartRadio, a subdivision of iHeartMedia. Within the iHeartMedia Burbank office, there are 8 in house radio stations that fall under iHeartRadio and cater to a range of different markets and have a reach of around 12.5 million people every week. Their in-house stations, in no particular order, are 102.7 KIIS fm, 104.3 MYfm, KOST 103.5, ALT 98.7, REAL 92.3, KFI AM640, LA Sports AM 570, and The Patriot AM 1150. Looking more specifically at the subdivision, iHeartRadio is a free broadcast and internet radio platform that supports the streaming of their in-house radio stations, national radio stations, podcasts, and many other features like artist specific playlists. I was able to witness the importance of social media from the perspective of iHeartMedia as a mass media communications company, from the perspective of their subdivision marketing of iHeartRadio, and from the perspective of the individual radio stations within the building.

Throughout the course of my internship, I learned the significance of engagement, content, branding, and marketing on social media within a large mass communications media company such as iHeartMedia. The Burbank Digital Media Team was in charge of social media profiles for the eight in house radio stations under the iHeartMedia name in the greater Los Angeles area. Each individual on the team was assigned to specific station(s) that aligned with the genre they were most familiar with. My specific duties were: creating, uploading, and managing daily blog content for various audiences to increase traffic on the official 102.7 KIIS

FM, 104.3 MYfm, KOST 103.5, and AM570 websites, producing and publishing recap articles for various on-site iHeartMedia events and performances, such as the AT&T Sound Studio live performances and Album Release parties at the iHeartRadio Theater, coordinating with sponsors to write and schedule on-air promotions packages that target station-specific audiences for various shows, such as LA's #1 rated morning show, 104.3 MYfm's Valentine in the Morning. After seeing the impact that a strong social media team had on such a dominant, contemporary company, I was inspired to seek evidence between the correlation of social media in conjunction with radio drawing specifically from my personal experiences within the market. Prior to this internship, I was unaware that social media use could be a determining factor in whether a major company or brand with well-established subdivisions has long term success or not. After some research I realized that because social media is relatively new and constantly evolving, there is not much data or reporting on why social media engagement and interaction is an important aspect of business in this modern digital communications world.

Starting from the very beginnings of radio and mass communication methods, radio was of the first technology-based methods of mass media communications. It was a way for broadcasters, news anchors, politicians, companies, and advertising agencies to reach their audiences who were listening from the comforts of their own home. Radio, similar to the premises behind social media, was that individuals were able to take it with them wherever they went in a portable version and had the leisure of enjoying within their home. It was their background noise, their source of information, news, music and entertainment listening. However, once the television was invented, individuals were able to put faces to the names of the individuals delivering their news and providing their entertainment. Having the ability to see the faces of individuals provided the feeling of a more reliable source of information due to a sense

of familiarity; therefore, individuals were more likely to use a television as their source of entertainment if they had the financial means to do so.

This shift aided in the decline of radio usage over time - although some people still use(d) radio as their main source of mass communication. Not long after the invention and accessibility of the television, there was an introduction to the internet. The internet gave people the opportunity to not only see, but to interact with large sources of information. It allowed individuals to search for information they were looking for by simply typing a keyword into the search bar instead of relying on a news anchor to deliver the information they were seeking. Additionally, it allowed for a wider variety of information to be accessed and shared. This included allowing unrestricted or minimally restricted access to international websites and a global pool of varying topics of information. Along with internet access came the development of websites, social media platforms, and digital advertisements. Social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking (microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos) (Merriam-Webster). Social media sites not only allowed for a platform where individuals could interact with each other, but it allowed for a space where individuals could directly interact with major companies and vice versa. Before this instant connection was available, the accessibility of major companies like iHeartMedia seemed near impossible. The invention of the iPhone and other smartphone devices allowed for a new age of mobile internet experiences as well as the ability for social media to be accessed anywhere at any time (Laugesen and Yuan, 93). In regards to mass media companies and their subdivisions, such connection gave consumers the opportunity to be more interconnected with what they are purchasing and being entertained by. Moreover, it is because the consumer has more

accessibility to the company, the consumer is more exposed to alternative options making it more competitive in regards to consumer loyalty. Losing customer retention rate on these platforms can lead to serious matters in terms of financial inadequacies. One example would be a music festival, such as the KIIS FM's Wango Tango, a large concert with performances by musical artists who are extremely relevant in today's society, that relies on individuals to purchase tickets, other companies/brands to partner with iHeartMedia for advertisement opportunities, and to generate revenue to pay for the event while still making a profit. The newfound consumer accessibility that came with the invention of the internet coinciding with cell phones aided in making social media one of the fastest growing sources of marketing within companies. In addition to companies being able to directly interact with consumers, "this form of media "describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues" (Mangold, 357-358). This means that individuals are able to engage in conversation about the quality of services or the reliability of a company on a public platform that is immediately shared worldwide. Having this non-traditional type of relationship removes the privacy of company to consumer relations and can have a significant impact on the company in ways that were not feasible when using conventional advertising/promotional methods.

Individuals continue to use social media for the same reasons that individuals used mass communication forms like press, radio, and television. Social media, replicating its preceding forms of mass communication, offers a wide variety of topics such as entertainment, breaking news, e-magazines, politics, games with interactive chat rooms, video streaming, and photo sharing. It combines all aspects of traditional forms of media and communication while

incorporating new technologies all in one place. Nearly every individual uses some form of social media as a resource for information whether they realize it or not. So how many people use social media for entertainment exactly? In a study on social media use conducted by Anita Whiting and David Williams, statistics show that among survey respondents, 88 percent of social media participants use social media for interaction, 76 percent use social media to pass the time, and 64 percent use social media as a source of entertainment. Moreover, the platform and premise of social media allows for convenience and access to all individuals regardless of their financial status. There is no starting price that coincides with an individual's non-business, personal social media accessibility to owning their own profile on said platforms. This is referring to sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, but excludes interactive websites owned by the company. Anyone that has access to the Internet is capable of accessing said platforms and creating an online profile from anywhere in the world. This kind of maximum exposure is ideal for companies that work internationally or in alliance with major advertising corporations.

In order for companies like iHeartMedia to narrow down their demographic per station specific social media account brand as a whole, they try to define a specific target audience for each station or brand name. A target audience is a carefully determined group in which the stations, brand names, account, etc. is aimed to please, attract, and engage. This information is gathered through information from social media analytics and user data which will be discussed later in the report. An effective use of target audiences would be when the advertisements and branding of the company seek to engage a specific demographic and the result is an increase in listeners, interactions, social media engagements and participation in events. By using social media in collaboration with having a strong, reputable online presence, companies like

iHeartMedia and subdivisions like iHeartRadio who have specific demographics per radio station are able to find avenues that allow them to “more effectively communicate with their target markets” (Mangold, 365). Due to the way social media aids in making users feel included, the more a social media account makes their viewers feel as if they are included within something exclusive will assist in their account growth and overall popularity amongst consumers. Although companies are not able to change what their consumers have to say about their company/station/personalities/event/etc., they are able to control what their social media presence image is. This plays an important role for the sake of their brand name due to the fact that, “social media is [now] perceived by consumers as a more trustworthy source of information regarding products and services than corporate-sponsored communications transmitted via the traditional elements of the promotion mix” (Mangold, 360). This new age of marketing and consumerism has rapidly progressed over the years. It has forced companies to utilize their social media platform presence in order to remain in business and able to host events with large success rates within any company industry - especially prevalent within the entertainment industry.

Owing to the fact that social media has created an ever-expanding and highly competitive market, companies that do not incorporate social media account profiles or digital media marketing strategies slowly decline in relation to their more socially active counterparts. Companies that require live event attendance, social interaction, and audience participation for prolonged success were most likely to feel drastic impacts as a result of lacking an online social media presence. Ultimately, making money is the primary object of a company; therefore, companies are willing to rise to the level of competition and navigate the fluctuating consumer demands in order to stay afloat.

In prior research, it has been noted that “One cannot afford to have no existence on the social programs if the competitor is creating waves with its solutions and items” and that especially “...for companies it symbolizes a marketing and promotion opportunity that transcends the standard middleman and connects companies directly with clients. This is why nearly every organization on the planet—from giants like Starbucks and IBM to the local ice cream shop—are exploring social media promotion projects” (Sajid, 1). However, it was also noted that social media alone is not enough for promotion and progression, but it must be used in conjunction with additional conventional promotion methods. Other conventional promotion methods would include sources like television, magazines, and billboards.

This brings us to the way companies and brands are able to influence consumers opinion on what makes them unique, trustworthy, and appealing to the masses. Social media brings to light a type of open-source branding, which implies “participatory, collaborative, and socially-linked behaviors whereby consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content” (Gensler, 194). As brand control now largely resides outside of the firm, they argue that in this paradigm, the focus is on protecting the brand's reputation, making brand management more similar to public relations (Gensler, 253). Social media allows companies to be able to project themselves on to consumers differently and more directly than they ever have before. The instantaneous connection between companies to consumers and the ability for their content to be trending globally within hours has unlocked a highly competitive market that can be hard to navigate if the company is not already well established. Sharing content is when one individual chooses to share the content, blog post, website, etc. of another profile on their personal profile. This can be used for advertisement, to reinforce personal opinions or beliefs, and to even help that individual profile brand themselves better on social media. Some companies or brands use

paid influencers or sponsors to promote, share, and provide good reviews of their products or events on their social media platforms. Because of this never-ending desire for maximum exposure, some companies incorporate key individuals that they partner with to help market their brand through social media. While many individuals might partner with similar products, rarely do they ever pledge their allegiance to one company or the other – they have the freedom to partner with companies that are rival competitors within the market. These influencers are a small, yet significant advantage of social media marketing and it raises the bar in terms of attention to product detail, exceptional customer service, and catering to the demands of the market.

Mass media companies alone tend to be powerhouses within today's industry, but being combined with radio makes it even stronger as a company. It is because of the prominent name of iHeartMedia and its affiliation with multiple radio stations, like the ones that iHeartMedia Burbank houses, and the well-known celebrity names that are within their company that they are able to have a starting advantage within the market. Through this modern platform, "social media can be used to provide an identity about the companies and the items or solutions that they provide" (Sajid, 3). Basically, it is a curated sense of reality, a persuasion, or an influence by other individuals that these activities, events, and brands are worthwhile. While it is possible for individuals to write negative comments on a company's social media account post, these companies have the option to delete the comment so that it will not show up on their page; therefore, social media can be altered to promote a strictly positive reinforcement of their brand. As of recently, social media platforms have given users the ability to turn off commenting. This means individuals would not be able to respond on the post made by the account, but it does not stop consumers from sharing the information in whichever way they choose. However, it has

been a salient topic that social media sites have taken to responding to their unhappy customers through their professional account profiles in an attempt to appease them or showcase their superior customer service. Some companies are growing to be notorious for their sarcastic responses to customers on social media that gain them publicity through their ability to appropriately assimilate with their targeted market. In these circumstances, “it is a strategic and methodical process to establish the company’s impact, reputation and item within areas of potential clients, visitors or supporters” (Sajid, 2). This can be seen in today’s culture that includes aspects like the influencer advertisement mentioned above, individuals’ ability to gain partial celebrity status or at the very least global acknowledgment through online achievements such as followers, a culture basing their decisions off of socially constructed slang like FOMO (fear of missing out), and glorifies the consumption of lavish experiences and materialistic items.

Continuing with the concept of celebrity endorsement or partnerships, iHeartMedia having affiliations with names like Ryan Seacrest on 102.7 KIIS FM, Big Boi on REAL 92.3FM, Valentine from Valentine in the Morning on 104.3 MYfm, and Ellen Kay on KOST 103.5FM, iHeartMedia has been able to climb the social ladder faster than their competitors with aid from their established relations. Using contemporary, influential individuals within the entertainment market, such as celebrities, to assist in branding a company is one of the best tools a company can use within social media. With so many multiple sharing platforms and a consistently growing number of users daily, there is no doubt that social media is only going to have higher significance over time when it comes to branding and marketing companies.

For example, if Ryan Seacrest, an iHeartMedia employee and morning show host, who has a following of 4.2 million followers actively promotes iHeartMedia/iHeartRadio events, there will be a spike in activity in regards to the number of viewers on whichever

brand/event/website/etc. that he is promoting (Seacrest). An added bonus to social media is that this information has the ability to be shared by all parties involved in the post and even amongst users and across their personal social media platforms. By doing so, they are personally advocating for the company and in a way are inadvertently offering free advertisement for whatever they share, like, or comment on a potentially global scale. Additionally, when high profile celebrities such as iHeartMedia affiliate Ryan Seacrest host interviews with someone as influential as Taylor Swift (who has a reach of 117 million followers) on an iHeartMedia platform there would be a combined reach of a little over 21.2 million people (Swift). That reach will have a significant impact on the company itself in terms of ticket sales, audience interaction, and overall listeners regardless of region. Consistently producing content such as high profile artists interviews, exclusive insight to information regarding specific topics or individuals like artists that are showcased under the subdivision iHeartRadio, and an exceptional social media representation brings immense amounts of credibility to the brand or company being advertised. This kind of celebrity rapport, endorsement, and credibility through social media can be extremely important when promoting advertisements for projects such as live events that produce major sources of income.

One might wonder how are these statistics measured and how a company knows when their strategic efforts have created a successful, working social media branding strategy. To answer this, most companies incorporate key performance indicators (KPIs) and customer relations management (CRM) systems that assist in gathering analytics for each post or online interaction for deeper company to consumer engagement. Furthermore, companies will use detailed, third-party analytics sites to track information such as: what material and content is resonating with their audiences, what is lowest versus highest in terms of audience

engagement/interaction, ways to better target their specific audience through content, what branding material works well, what content style to incorporate, and what posting times work best to maximize their advertisements/promotions. Having this insight is quintessential for a large company subdivision such as iHeartRadio in order to amplify their success through social media.

iHeartMedia focuses on bringing their audience an all-encompassing variety of music, pop culture, niche markets, and news. One of their largest sources of income comes from hosting live events that aid in the exclusivity of their brands and stations. While the radio stations themselves drive a majority of the traffic, promoting the brands and the stations on social media helps grow audiences larger than their targeted reach. Exclusivity is key to driving a successful company because it makes the viewing audience feel as if they are a part of something nobody else in the market can offer. It ensures that individuals come to their social media accounts, events, radio stations, and websites to get their information and entertainment. Since social media allows accounts to share videos and pictures, entertainment media profiles are allowed to give their audience an exclusive sneak peek or a behind the scenes look at projects like interviews, artist content, pop culture events, and major company produced events.

With iHeartMedia and their subdivisions that host massive events that require major social media coverage and advertisement, like Jingle Ball, Alter Ego, Wango Tango, iHeartCountry Music Festival and the iHeartMedia Music Festival, it is principal to have a social media team who is able to provide content that makes their iHeart produced events appear to be something people will want to attend due to its exclusivity with iHeart affiliations and subdivisions. These events are funded primarily by advertisement sponsorships and income is heavily dependent on the outside advertising sponsors, brand partners, and audience attendance

at the event. A small, unreliable turnout will lead to less sponsorships, less tickets purchased, less advertising for the host company, and an overall decrease in income. Therefore, it is integral to the success of iHeartMedia and their subdivisions that they are prevalent on social media platforms.

One of iHeartMedia's biggest social media successes comes from the branding of live events. By using platforms that offer live streaming services, like Instagram, users are able to see what the quality of services being offered and what the atmosphere of these promoted events are like in real time. Some platforms allow this type of real time sharing to be displayed on the profile permanently. Snapchat is the only platform that does not allow content to be permanent on a page; therefore, it is not one of the primary focuses in terms of social media advertising. Social media accounts might have a Snapchat profile in order to showcase that they are up to date with social media culture, but it is not a primary platform for branding. Again, this goes back to the idea that social media allows for companies and brands to better market themselves on their own terms, allows for word of mouth marketing to ensue, caters to the culture that thrives off of feeling in connectivity with the world around them, and aids in exclusivity by catering to those who could not attend or are not in attendance at the event. All of these working together, if the company exceeds the expectations that they have set, is predicted to lead to an increase in ticket sales for the next event that is hosted and so on.

Having a specific social media or digital media marketing position within the company is quintessential to the success of the company on social media. These employees work individually or in a collaborative team to decide what is the best way to engage in these social media platforms to allow for maximum positive company or brand exposure. Accordingly, the individual(s) that hold these positions must be educated on the topics that are salient within the

news or culture that is relevant to the brand that is being represented. One example of this would be that it would not be beneficial for information posted on KFI AM640, a radio station specifically tailored to politics and breaking news, would not see great success if shared on the social media page for REAL 92.3 FM, a radio station dedicated to R&B and hip-hop genres. While all content could be run by one individual, there would be a significant loss in the amount of detail put into each station. Most individuals who run social media accounts are also responsible for capturing in studio performances, behind the scenes sneak peeks for concerts, events, artist interviews, and company/station promotional clips. Therefore, it would not be physically possible for one individual to cover all stations as each station has multiple events or artist interviews that sometimes have an overlap in time.

Some companies, like iHeartMedia, prefer to have two stations with similar target audiences assigned to one individual, a large station shared between two individuals, or one individual assigned to one specific station. One qualification that is key to having a successful social media is finding someone who personally aligns with or understands the content being shared. It is implied that an individual who is responsible for managing a social media account for content they are not familiar with will face hardships when attempting to successfully showcase said content to said targeted audience.

The impact of targeted audiences varies significantly and is much larger than one might expect. For example, the 102.7 KIIS FM official website reaches 1.4 million MUV (monthly unique visitors) per month. A unique visitor is an IP address that has not yet visited the page; therefore, if the same IP address visits the page more than once over time, it will still be counted as only one visitor. That means there are about 1.4 million new visitors to the website every single month. These individuals hired as social media/digital media managers might often be

required to write daily blogs and generate content uploads on the official websites for each station. The content for these uploads would be recaps of what was discussed during the station specific talk shows, audience specific news, and trending or breaking headlines that are prevalent within the world media. Doing this entails the overall success of the company within the atmosphere of the world wide web. Blog posts and constant content boost posts to the explore page making them apt to generate higher volume of audience views and interaction. Within social media sites, the explore page auto-populates information that is catered to specific interests of an individual based on their previous searches or most liked social media sites and their content. Programmers for social media sites are constantly creating new algorithms, which are a way of sorting posts in a users' feed based on relevancy instead of publish time; therefore, it is more likely that a specific station will have higher views on the uploaded content if the information being shared is in alignment with their target audience and is relevant within a worldly scale. Since there is a constant influx of entertainment events and information regarding pop culture, entertainment media, breaking news, and trending topics it can be hard for companies and brands to come up on top in terms of trending. By uploading constant material on these topics before the trends/news breaks or being the first to post on breaking news allows sites such as station websites to come up first on trending search sites and search engines like Google.

Larger companies, like iHeartMedia, tend to do better because of their extensive access to exclusive interviews with artists and their flexible income allows them to be able to spend more on social/digital media experts who devote their time to bettering the station's online presence. While social media advertising and marketing is relatively contemporary, there is some research that provides grounding for the importance of social media integration. In the Journal of Event and Festival Management, looking at the specifics of entertainment venues, Philip C. Rothschild

recommends that in order for venue managers to maximize their event success that they should implement a “social media strategy that includes hiring or assigning staff to support this important area of social media marketing” (Rothschild, 139-150). Additionally, when looking at statistics, it is noted that “those with a defined social media strategy report increased revenue, while those without a defined social media strategy do not” (Rothschild, 139-150). This information statistically proves the success of entertainment companies who provide experiences specific to large events where audience participation is crucial to success. Furthermore, social media platforms, like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, reward social media accounts with a high number of followers by offering incentives like better advertising platforms, sponsored posts, addition of links to story posts, profile analytics, and much more.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the extant literature on the growing importance social media on radio and companies like iHeartMedia in numerous ways. Social media has not only influenced but helped the entertainment media industry adapt to be success in today’s modern market. The information provided above aids the Media and Cultural Studies department at UC Riverside in understanding the importance of social media within the area of mass media communication. More importantly, this research advocates for an emphasis on social media marketing within collegiate spaces to further advance students in the field of entertainment and expanding to business marketing. The overall understanding of a contemporary promotion method provides insight for the entertainment media as well as the radio broadcasting community in regards to the significance of social media marketing. Due to the culture of today’s consumers, it is likely that if you don’t have social media, new age consumers are less likely to trust your products because it is not in their immediate sphere of information. iHeartMedia and its subdivisions, specifically looking at iHeartRadio, is a prime example of the impact social

media has grown to have on the success of a major mass media communications company as a whole. My first-hand experiences and overall understanding of the roles of a Social/Digital Media Manager assisted in bringing new insight to a topic that is increasingly relevant and under researched within today's entertainment marketing society. Finally, I would like to make it known that while the information I have accumulated in regards to social media and its successes specifically with large media companies such as iHeartMedia, in order to have a more accurate representation of how social media aids in the growth of companies in all ranges there would need to be extensive, additional research collected on companies in different markets and situated at varying financial standpoints.

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