

UNOFFICIAL FACEBOOK PAGES: BRANDS VS FANS

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Sometimes brands discover that fans thought about communicating on Facebook well before they do. Which strategy should they use to become leader again on social networks?

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When brands realize the importance of communicating via social networks, they usually discover something vexing: people have made it well before them. These people are 'budding' community managers who don't even know the name of their hobby. Worse, these people are just consumers. Even worse, the users believe they are hearing the brand itself.

In short, this discovery is an enormous disappointment for brands that are feeling they are no more at the center of the conversation with their consumers.

These amateur community managers prove to be able to use all the existing communication channels and well before anyone. Take videogames forums where fans came well before the industry did. But as Facebook and its features come ready to use on the screens of the most respectable households, users begin to show support for their favorite band or actress, and then one day, they create a fan page of Coca-Cola, just because they like Coca-Cola. Then one day, Coca-Cola come across this page and... ops!

Many urban myths started like that, but in practice, what can a brand do when the amateur community manager starts a fan page on his own?

Brands have several options:

Ignore the existing page(s) and create a new one, without caring of the already hundreds or even thousands of fans. The risk is obviously to animate this new page in a bad way, ignoring the best practices of the amateur page.

Try to become buddy with the amateur community manager, because he's a cool guy, and to impose an editorial line by becoming co-administrator. The principle is simple: in Facebook's interface, the admin chief is the only one who can decide who to add as a co-administrator. Brands just have to be very diplomat, because the cool guy may not give up his page (he thinks fans have become fans of him). The risk is that he may tell his 437,954 fans that in fact the brand is a piece of ****, because its products are manufactured by children and so on. At the end, the brand may pay a high price for the "coolness" he wanted to show and its reputation will be seriously damaged...

Call Facebook and tell them to close the group. If the brand asks, Facebook can perfectly do that while the fan won't see anything. Only the amateur community manager, tearful behind his screen, gasping, can understand what happened because the page has disappeared from his dashboard. Facebook can close up to five pages with more than 500 fans per request of the brand. In other words, the brand have to well target the pages to close, and then the "migration of fans" is launched (it lasts some days or even weeks, according to the advertising budget). Facebook says the service is free. Who has done all this before?

Ignore an existing page: the BossHoss example.

The BossHoss is a German band making covers of mainstream hits (Depeche Mode, OutKast, BritneySpears) in a country music style. Believe it or not, this band is very popular in Germany (where they can fill an entire arena), Austria, Switzerland and United States. They are basically unknown in France. I discovered BossHoss while in Leipzig, in August 2006, at the beginning of their success story. Once back to France, I couldn't stop hearing their songs. In July 2008 I started their Facebook fan page to pay tribute to their talent. In April 2008 I was proud of my 4,000+ fans. But I discovered The BossHoss (Official) page, animated only with links from Amazon.de and without even a press release.

I contacted the staff of the band in November 2009 to tell them I managed the page, I cared about it but I was keen to collaborate and optimize it with their help. No reply. And my page is not (yet?) threatened to be closed.

Both pages coexist. The official one seems to have a commercial purpose while the 'amateur' one hosts fans' comments during tours and pictures of the band dressed in a cow-boy style after I launched a competition for this. The problem is that one day fans asked for awards. And since I had nothing to offer, I stopped the competition and contacted the band to see whether they had anything to offer. But nothing happened.

Try to become buddy with the amateur community manager: the Kookai example.

Kookai is a French ladies' wear chain. When the fan page passed from being animated by an amateur to an official lead, the tone of the posts on the page changed dramatically. The posts before March 11 came from fans or 'likers' willing to sell their bag of the previous season or to advertise for uninteresting blogs. Worse, before this date, even the franchising fair advertised among future store managers who were of course Kookai fans.



KOOKAI Découvrez en images la toute nouvelle collection Homme PE 2010. Cette collection, en édition limitée, sera disponible dans une sélection de magasins KOOKAI dès le mois de MAI !

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Kookai seems to have well bargained with the amateur administrator: congratulations! But today Kookai doesn't show enough imagination in its community management even if it tries – with modesty. In a way, the brand used a minimal strategy: it just wanted to be present where the others are.

Call Facebook and tell them to close the group.: the Six Feet Under example.

You'll get everything in the below screenshot. If you want to hurt a fan, the best thing to do is to take him his passion.



The image shows two screenshots of Facebook posts from a fan page for the TV series 'Six Feet Under'. The top post, from 'about an hour ago', has 74 likes and 41 comments. The bottom post, also from 'about an hour ago', has 14 likes and 22 comments. It features two comments: one from Andrew Jack Rueth (35 minutes ago) who dislikes the post, and one from Matt Ward (20 minutes ago) who suggests creating a group or changing the page name. Both posts include a 'Write a comment...' input field.

Today the cable network HBO, that broadcast the TV series Six Feet Under, has got an official fan page which is not better animated but at least it is under (its) control. The fact of being officially animated does not bring more 'animation' to users. It's just to bring more security to HBO.

Conclusion: amateur community managers, here's my advice: don't persist in your beliefs. As long as the brand leave you in peace, keep animating your page. Your community will reward you. And if the brand finds you, please don't fight. Just write on your CV you are the founder of that brand's fan page.

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