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Understanding The Intricate Digital Behaviors Of Young Consumers

by Jacqueline Anderson
for Market Research Professionals



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An Empowered Report: How To Reach Young Consumers

by **Jacqueline Anderson**
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young consumers are now connected to media almost at all times — which would rationally lead you to think that the more places they are connected, the more ways there are (and the easier it is) to interact with them. This is where market researchers need to step in and push their companies to dig deeper than just measuring the time spent on a media channel. They need to truly understand these consumers' core motivations for using it. It comes as no surprise that almost half of 12- to 17-year-olds are online multiple times a day, the most of any age bracket. But while they're spending more of their time online, only 6% want to be friends with a brand on Facebook — half the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who do. For market researchers, this means that they're going to need a much better understanding of what young consumers are sharing on these networks — and who they engage with — in order to uncover more influential opportunities for their brands to connect with them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 **Looking Only At Online Activity Data Can Be Misleading**

Young Consumers Have Grown Up
Accustomed To Being Connected At All Times

High Online Activity Does Not Translate To
High Interaction With Brands

WHAT IT MEANS

8 **Uncovering Behaviors Will Help Find More Influential Opportunities**

10 **Supplemental Material**

NOTES & RESOURCES

We used data from the North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US) in the creation of this report.

Related Research Documents

["A Global Update Of Social Technographics®"](#)
September 28, 2010

["Introducing The Youth TechStyle Segmentation"](#)
June 26, 2008

LOOKING ONLY AT ONLINE ACTIVITY DATA CAN BE MISLEADING

It's common knowledge that young consumers set the bar when it comes to online activities, but examining the adoption of online activities among young consumers alone leaves a gaping hole in truly understanding this unique and valuable target market. Market researchers have the responsibility to present internal stakeholders with a complete view of these consumers to help them continuously adjust how their brands should be interacting with them.

Young Consumers Have Grown Up Accustomed To Being Connected At All Times

While Younger Boomers still can remember the introduction of the mobile phone, 12- to 17-year-olds will never know what it means to be unreachable. Constant access to the Internet at home, school, or on their mobile results in very specific behaviors and attitudes among members of this target population. Looking at the data from Forrester's North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US), it is easy to see that this segment is highly involved in online activities. We see that 12- to 17-year-olds are:

- **Used to having the Internet on all the time.** Consumers ages 12 to 17 live on the Internet. While 32% go on the Internet about once a day, almost half go online several times a day — up 7% from just last year (see Figure 1). They're going online at school, at home, and in the library, and when they're not at a location with a computer, they're on their mobile phones. Almost half of young consumers have access to the Internet on their phones, and about one-third of those with Internet access browse the Internet daily. Services like ChaCha, an SMS-based service that answers questions, found a strong niche trying to make up for the “unfortunate” other half who do not have Internet access on their phones but still want access to information at any time.¹
- **Active on social sites but less likely to create content.** Only 32% of 12- to 17-year-olds are Creators — a large drop from the 50% of 18- to 24-year-olds who are classified as part of this group.² These younger consumers, on the other hand, are more likely than any age group to be Conversationalists (67%). This means that while they are not heavy bloggers, they do share updates on sites such as Facebook and Twitter very regularly. Why are they less likely to blog, create videos, or upload writing? First, they still live in a very small world where they meet most of their contacts regularly in real-life — their updates serve another purpose. Second, these media are not conducive to the compulsive nature of young consumers who just want to share information quickly. The short-form of the updates allows users to stay connected more frequently, without having to put in the thoughts, opinions, or commitment required of a lengthy blog post.

- **Using several social networking sites, not just Facebook.** Members of this age group are highly active on social networking sites, with 66% reporting that they update their status at least weekly. Close to three-quarters of 12- to 17-year-olds have an account on Facebook, and there's no doubt that it is their go-to social network. However, of those who have a social networking account, almost 40% have an account on both Facebook and MySpace. There has also been an increase in the past year in the percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds who are reading posts on Twitter (up four percentage points to 17% in 2010), which is partly attributed to the number of celebrities signing on.³

High Online Activity Does Not Translate To High Interactions With Brands

The second piece to gaining a 360-degree understanding of how young consumers are using digital channels is to look at how they are engaging — or rather not engaging — with companies. Many brands are looking to social media as a strong digital channel to communicate with these consumers, since it's where 12- to 17-year-olds are spending so much time. But research shows that it is important to consider more than just consumers' propensity to use a specific channel: Almost half of 12- to 17-year-olds don't think brands should have a presence using social tools at all.

Market researchers need to help their company dive deeper beyond just understanding the amount of time spent with a media channel and determine why and how consumers are using that channel, especially in the case of social media. By gaining this deeper understanding, and aligning brand interactions accordingly, brands will appear more authentic — and consequentially more influential — when trying to break through to younger generations. Here are examples of current brand disconnects with 12- to 17-year-olds:

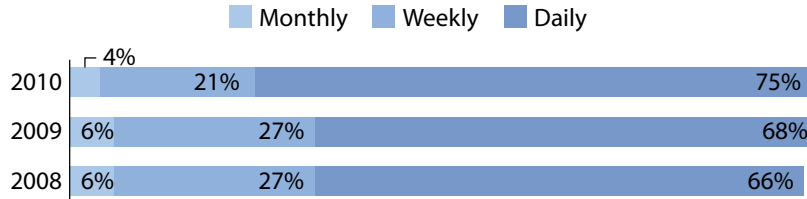
- **They don't want to be your friend on Facebook.** More than half of 12- to 17-year-olds are using social networks to stay in touch with friends — they're using this channel as an extension of communication with their offline friends. This explains why only 6% want to be friends with a brand on one of these sites — putting up a Facebook page for your brand is like trying to force yourself into their social circles. They also don't really trust communications on these sites: Only one-quarter of 12- to 17-year-olds trust social networking sites, ranking second to last in terms of the outlets that they trust (see Figure 2).⁴ Instead of trying to join the conversation, influence their behavior by infiltrating your brand through their existing social relationships, as Google and GE recently have done.⁵

- **They want brands to “speak when spoken to.”** While only 16% of young consumers expect companies to use social tools to interact with them, 28% expect companies to listen to what they’re saying on social networks and respond if they have questions. A great way to increase their trust of social networks and make them feel good about your brand is to earn that trust whenever they have a question, concern, or problem. Market research teams should be working with other departments to turn things they’re learning while listening into active conversations with consumers.⁶ While you shouldn’t be starting the conversation, you definitely should be listening so that you are ready to engage in conversations when consumers reach out.⁷
- **Social networks are their customer review sites.** While some brands are concerned about getting as many people as possible to “like” them on Facebook, these social channels actually act as a platform for more thoughtful consumer reviews for this group. Seventy-four percent of 12- to 17-year-olds tell friends about products that interest them, and across online channels, that conversation is most likely to be on a social network. In the past year, 12- to 17-year-olds shared their reviews about a product or service on Twitter and Facebook more than twice as many times as they posted on an online site with ratings and reviews. Due to the overall decrease in the number of Critics, it’s especially important to acknowledge that reviews from this segment may be on Facebook.⁸ Leverage reviews by explicitly asking for insights and feedback, and continue to monitor conversations taking place on social networks.⁹

Figure 1 Young Consumers Continue To Increase Their Dependence On The Internet

1-1 Young consumers are signing on more frequently

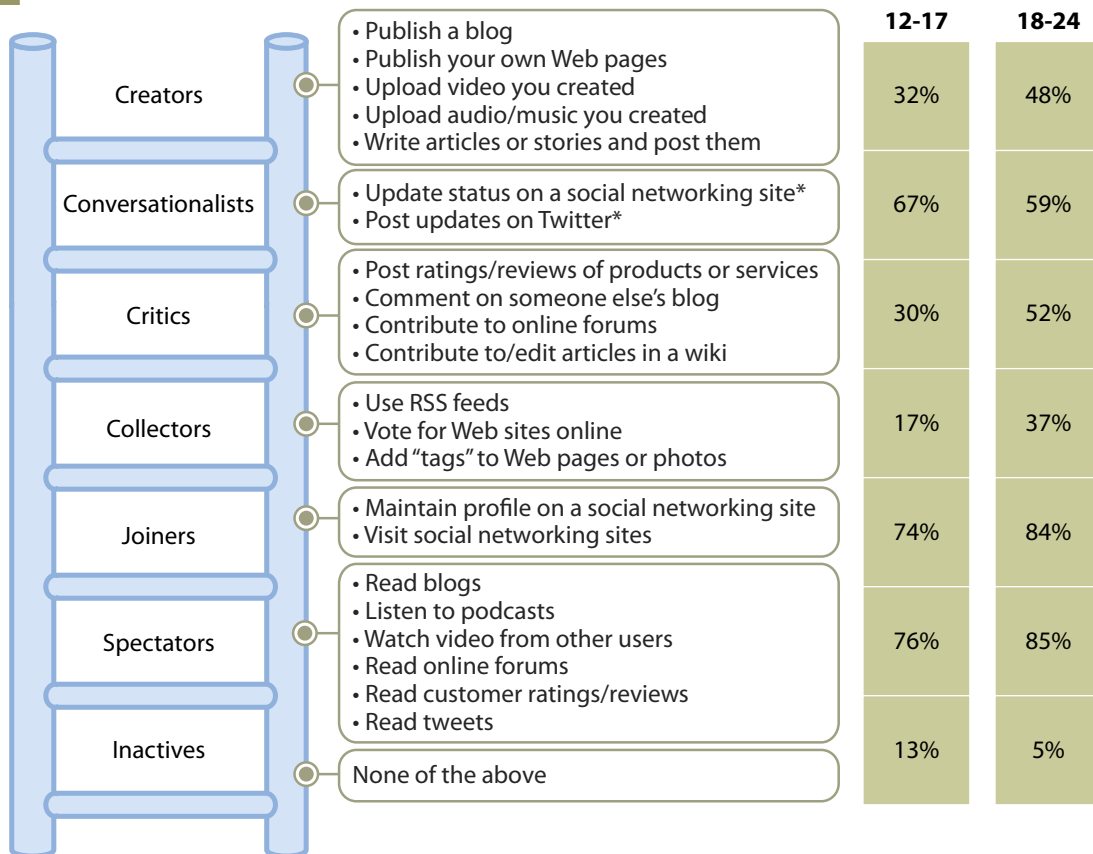
“How often do you go online? This includes access from home, work, or elsewhere to an online service, the Internet, or the World Wide Web.”



Base: 4,681 US online consumers ages 12 to 17
(percentages may not total 100 because of rounding)

Source: North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US); North American Technographics Youth Online Survey, Q2 2009 (US); North American Technographics Youth Online Survey, Q2 2008

1-2 Twelve- to 17-year-olds are more likely than any other age group to be Conversationalists



Base: 4,681 US online consumers ages 12 to 17; 4,306 US online consumers ages 18 to 24

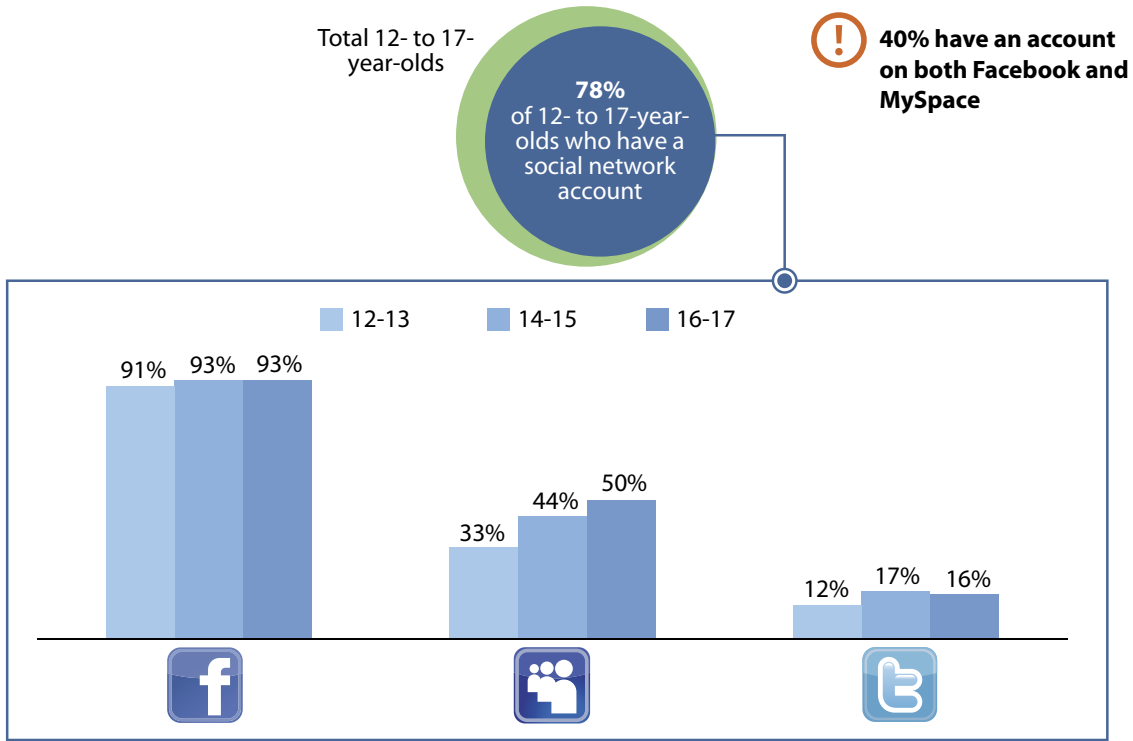
Source: North American Technographics Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US); North American Technographics Online Benchmark Survey, Q2 2010 (US)

*Conversationalists participate in at least one of the indicated activities at least weekly.

Figure 1 Young Consumers Continue To Increase Their Dependence On The Internet (Cont.)

1-3 While Facebook is young consumers' go-to site, it is not their only social network

"Which social networking sites do you have an account with?"



Base: 3,658 online consumers ages 12 to 17 with a social network account (multiple responses accepted)

Source: North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US)

Note: LinkedIn and "another social networking site" were not included due to limited sample size.

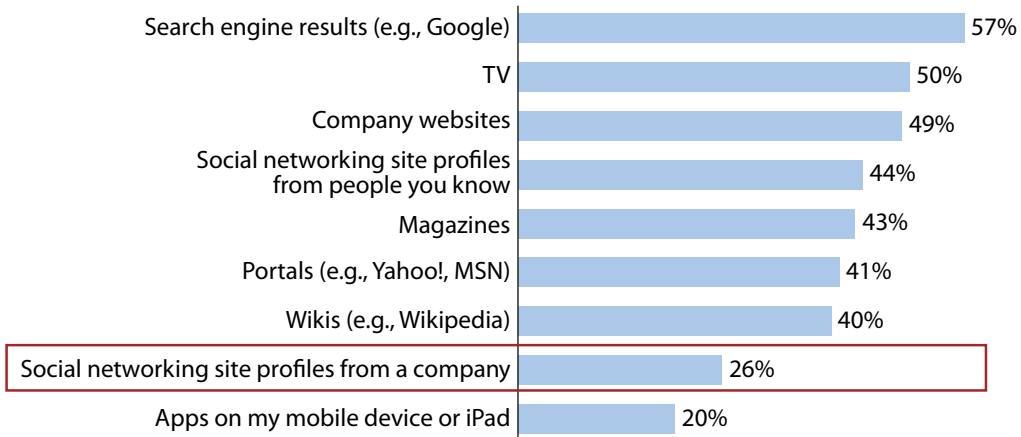
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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Young Consumers Are Particular About How They Interact With Brands Online

2-1 Trust is a barrier to reaching young consumers in the social space

“How much do you trust the following information sources?”
(4 or 5 on a scale of 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely])



Base: 4,681 US online consumers ages 12 to 17

2-2 Young consumers have high expectations of companies online

“Which of the following statements, if any, describe how you expect companies to use social tools like blogs, discussion forums, and social networking sites?”



Base: 4,681 US online consumers ages 12 to 17
(multiple responses accepted)

Source: North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US)

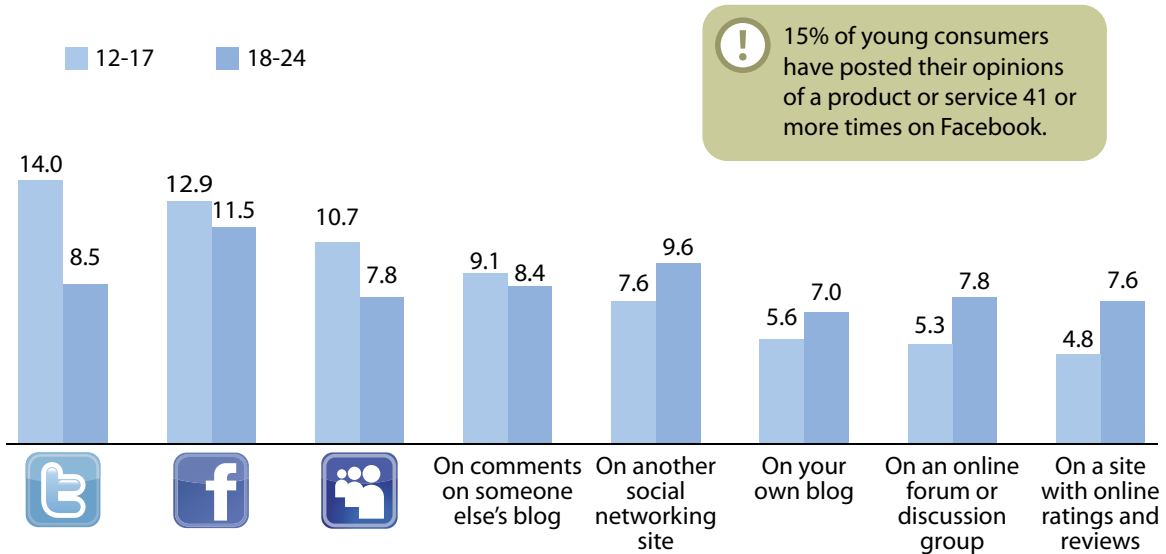
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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Young Consumers Are Particular About How They Interact With Brands Online (Cont.)

2-3 Twelve- to 17-year-olds are more likely to be posting their reviews on a social network

“Thinking about the past 12 months, how many times did you post or write your opinions of products or services (large purchases, ongoing services, or other choices) in the following places?”



! 15% of young consumers have posted their opinions of a product or service 41 or more times on Facebook.

Base: 3,658 online consumers ages 12 to 17 who have a social networking account

Source: North American Technographics® Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US)
Note: LinkedIn not included due to limited sample size.

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

WHAT IT MEANS

UNCOVERING BEHAVIORS WILL HELP FIND MORE INFLUENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

Researching the greater picture of how young consumers are using social channels will help uncover opportunities that unlock the true strength of this medium — exponential word of mouth. With 78% of 12- to 17-year-olds having a social networking account, its power is undeniable. But it's not enough just to look at these channels based on what 12- to 17-year-olds are consuming; it's how and why they're consuming it. Without tapping into these deeper motivations, so much of this opportunity will remain unearthed. To truly understand the usage and behaviors of this target group, you must:

- **Understand the role of traditional media.** Yes, they spend more time online than offline, but young consumers' trust varies for these channels. Understand how traditional and nontraditional media can be married together. Use traditional media that they already trust more, and extend trust to outlets that they're frequently using (i.e., social networks or video-sharing sites). For example, the History channel recently partnered with foursquare as part of a multichannel campaign to promote its new series *America The Story Of Us*. The promotion was equally beneficial, resulting in record-breaking ratings for the show's premier and increased traffic to the emerging mobile application — making History the third-largest profile on foursquare.¹⁰
- **Align with what they're already talking about instead of starting a new conversation.** Young consumers are already talking to each other about a lot of different things, and although your product category might not be one of those hot topics, there are ways to become part of these conversations. For example, 12- to 17-year-olds are more likely than any other age group to express their opinions about music (64%). The rapid transformation of the music industry — and a need for new revenue sources — presents a mutually beneficial opportunity for artists and brands to collaborate.¹¹ For not-so-hot brands, creatively working with artists allows for brand association and a more authentic way to infiltrate existing social conversations.¹² Market researchers should be monitoring the hottest topics and developing a strategy around how their brands can partner with some of the trending topics and how all parties can benefit.
- **Consider new ways to “play.”** Emerging media outlets have already begun to capitalize on the insight that consumers instinctively love to play games, and this is especially true with 12- to 17-year-olds. More than one-third of 12- to 17-year-olds who own a mobile phone play games on their phone at least weekly, 70% play video games online at least weekly, and more than one in five play games on social networking sites. On top of their sheer love of games, they also love to talk about them: Video games are the third most popular category that they talk about, a 54%. Market research professionals should test some emerging technologies in order to spark conversations and also look for ways to find out how this group likes to integrate these new technologies with social networks.¹³
- **Explore social research options.** Social listening is one piece of the puzzle, but market researchers also should begin to understand how brands can mine reviews. While younger consumers have a while before they achieve the spending power of Boomers, it is important to recognize the high level of expectations they have already formulated for their online experiences.¹⁴ Research, evaluate, and analyze their reviews and current brand interactions online so that the organization can gradually prepare to deploy new strategies and meet these expectations in the future.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Methodology

For the North American Technographics Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US), Forrester conducted an online survey fielded in September 2010 of 4,681 young US individuals ages 12 to 17. For results based on a randomly chosen sample of this size (N = 4,681), there is 95% confidence that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 1.4% of what they would be if the entire population of North American online individuals ages 12 to 17 had been surveyed. Forrester weighted the data by age, gender, and broadband adoption to demographically represent the North American youth online population. The survey sample size, when weighted, was 4,681. (Note: Weighted sample sizes can be different from the actual number of respondents to account for individuals generally underrepresented in online panels.) The sample was drawn from members of MarketTools' online panel, and respondents were motivated by a sweepstakes drawing. The sample provided by MarketTools is not a random sample. While individuals have been randomly sampled from MarketTools' panel for this particular survey, they have previously chosen to take part in the MarketTools online panel.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ ChaCha reaches 95% of all mobile phones through SMS text messages. Users can text any question to 242242 (spells "ChaCha"), and they will receive a text answer within a few minutes. Source: ChaCha website (<http://answers.chacha.com/about-chacha/>).
- ² For more information on each of the Social Technographics® segments, see the January 15, 2010, "[Introducing The New Social Technographics®](#)" report.
- ³ MTV did an exceptional job of integrating Twitter into its live broadcast of the 2010 Video Music Awards this year. Viewers watching the show at home could tweet in updates that could appear in two spots on the TV — on the VMA white carpet, which was announced by MTV's first "Twitter Jockey," and on a 95-foot-wide screen that was visible during the main show. The success of the integration was obvious when Kanye West generated 4,300 tweets per minute. Source: "Kanye West's VMA Finale Sets Twitter Ablaze," MTV press release, September 13, 2010 (http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1647682/20100913/west_kanye.jhtml).
- ⁴ These sites trail far behind traditional media outlets, with 50% of young consumers reporting that they trust TV and 43% trusting magazines. Source: North American Technographics Youth Online Survey, Q3 2010 (US).
- ⁵ Brands like Google and General Electric have been infiltrating networks in a less direct way online by, in some instances, proving to be more successful than advertising on cable TV. GE recently recruited 15 YouTube stars who had organically grown their own audiences by creating YouTube videos over the past three or four years. It paid these stars to post videos for its "Tag Your Green" campaign and ended up attracting more than 12 million views in just three weeks — quite a success considering that many cable programs bring in fewer than 100,000 viewers. Source: Brian Morrissey, "YouTube Stars Brands Love," *Adweek*, November 7, 2010 (http://www.brandweek.com/bw/content_display/news-and-features/digital/e3i4ef51a35fea2a26d7440d31470df172f).

- ⁶ For examples of how some brands have strategically interacted with their customers on Twitter , see the October 14, 2009, [“Using Twitter As A Customer Service Channel”](#) report.
- ⁷ Dunkin’ Donuts is a brand that consistently responds to consumers in real time on its Twitter account. One exceptional response to some of their Twitter fans: “Dunkin learned from Twitter that a couple of Dunkin Donuts fans from Buffalo had decided to take up Jet Blue’s offer of an ‘All You Can Jet’ pass (\$600 to go wherever you want) to visit dozens of cities for twelve hours each. The company decided they represented the spirit of its ad campaign ‘America Runs On Dunkin,’ sent them gift cards for the different cities, and met them when they landed in Boston and took them (to) the company’s corporate box for a Red Sox game.” Source: Josh Bernoff, “11 retailers that have embraced social applications,” *Empowered* blog, December 6, 2010 (<http://forrester.typepad.com/groundswell/2010/12/11-retailers-that-have-embraced-social-applications.html>)
- ⁸ For more information on trends among the Social Technographics segments, see the September 28, 2010, [“A Global Update Of Social Technographics®”](#) report.
- ⁹ Threadless is a customized T-shirt company that has added an application to its Facebook page in the hopes of resolving customer service issues more quickly. Shoppers can submit questions, and Threadless employees will respond to those that are not included in the company’s FAQs. Not only does this help improve customer satisfaction, but Threadless is also able to prioritize issues by monitoring key terms in the inquiries. Source: Thad Rueter, “Threadless leans on Facebook for more customer service tasks,” *Internet Retailer*, November 18, 2010 (<http://www.internetretailer.com/2010/11/18/threadless-leans-facebook-more-customer-service-tasks>).
- ¹⁰ The History channel promoted the premier of its new TV series *America The Story of Us* to young consumers by partnering with foursquare. Foursquare users could check in to historical locations in their area and receive pop-ups of facts. It rewarded players with the History badge and a chance to enter a branded sweepstakes. The partnership drove record-breaking ratings for the premier and also made History the third-largest profile on foursquare. Source: MediaPost Communications website (<http://www.mediapost.com/events/?/showID/OMMAAwards.10.NYC/type/AwardWinner/itemID/1663/OMMAAwards-Winners.html>).
- ¹¹ As the effects of the music industry meltdown bite, record labels and artists alike are turning to brands and product companies for new revenue opportunities. See the February 23, 2010, [“Music Strategy For Brands: When Brands And Bands Collide”](#) report.
- ¹² One brand that has done this well is ZYNC from American Express. ZYNC underwrote the first four episodes in the Pitchfork.tv POV concert series. Pitchfork.tv launched its POV installment as a way to expand the audience of a live concert to viewers online in a way that was truly interactive. With POV, viewers have the ability to watch a concert and to pick and choose their angle as they watch in real time — something that has never been done before. Source: “UPDATE: Pitchfork.tv Launches Entirely New Perspective on Live Performances,” Marketwire press release, August 24, 2010 (<http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/UPDATE-Pitchforktv-Launches-Entirely-New-Perspective-on-Live-Performances-1308933.htm>).

- ¹³ Coke recently partnered with SCVNGR, a mobile gaming company, to reach teens on Black Friday. The campaign, called Coke Secret Formula, went live in 10 malls, and teens were encouraged to complete “Coke Challenges” in return for rewards. Coke gave away \$100,000 worth of gift cards during the promotion. Source: Jennifer Van Grove, “Coke Targets Teens With Black Friday SCVNGR Promotion,” *Mashable* (<http://mashable.com/2010/11/19/scvngr-coke-rewards/>).
- ¹⁴ For more information on the spending power of Boomers, see the September 21, 2010, “The State Of Consumers And Technology: Benchmark 2010, US” report.

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