BUSINESS


Social
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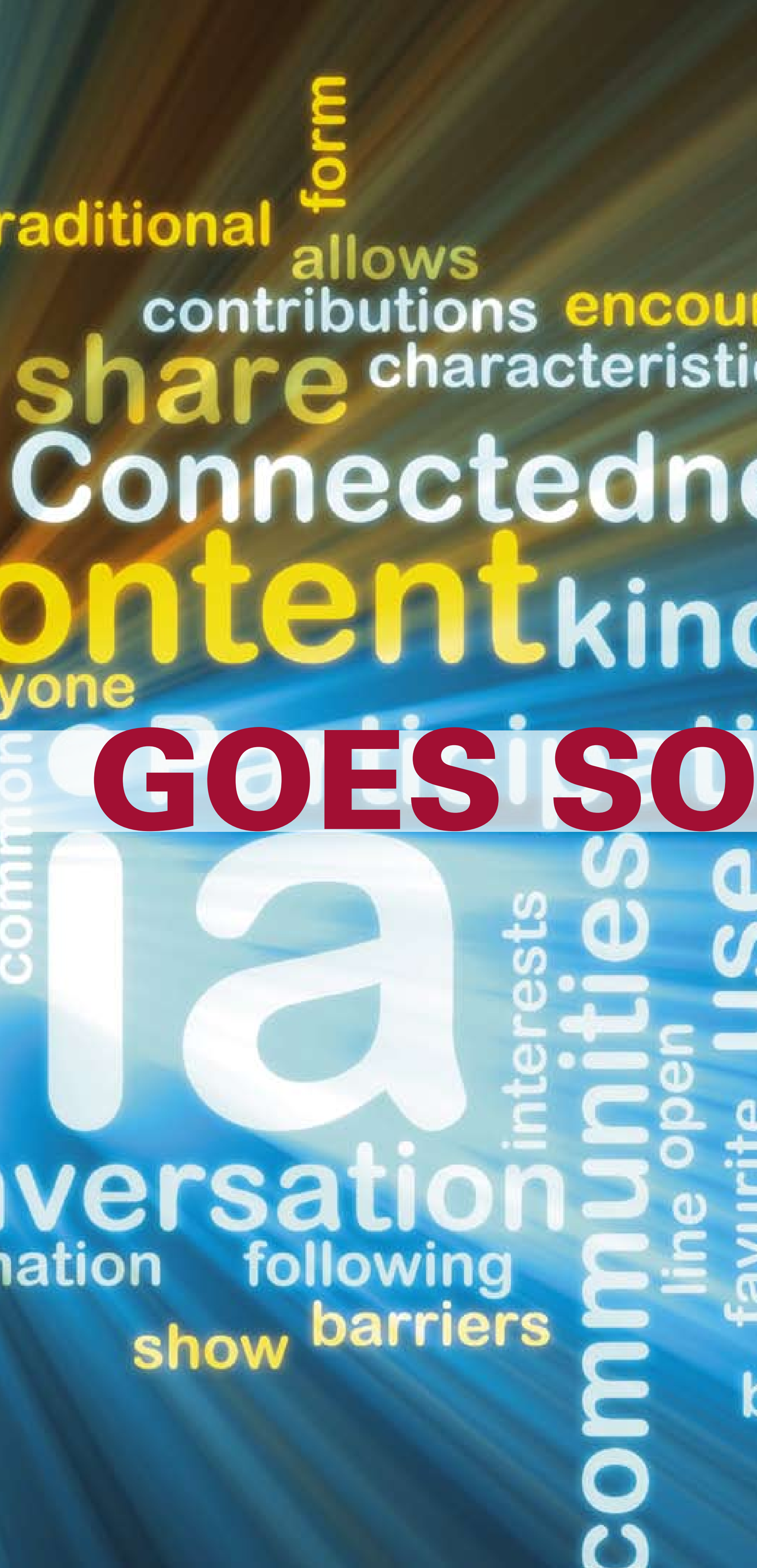


Social media is the buzz. A look at who is coming to the social media party – and why! **Arun Katiyar** looks at corporate India's first few exploratory steps to leverage a tantalising opportunity.

GOES SOCIAL

The marketing revolution apparently is taking a little detour from the regular Kotlers, Porters and Friedmans. Right now, the buzz words include Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare, podcasts, wikis, social bookmarks and Second Life. If your business is marketing, these are exciting times – tools, not theories, rule.

In September, Microsoft announced that it was going to give marketing and advertising folks an opportunity to test their capability in the social media stream through their product christened Looking Glass.

Just a month before Microsoft's announcement, twtCRM was launched by Bengaluru-based Cheese Care. The product helps brands track their mentions in social media and allows support teams to respond to the mentions.

And just a little before this, Raj Mruthyunjayappa, managing director, Talisma Corporation, another Bengaluru-based global provider of customer relationship management (CRM) products

STAYING IN TOUCH

Several domestic and international corporates use social media to extend their reach and stay in touch with their audience 24x7. They include:

- Infosys
- Wipro
- Acer
- Dell
- Lenovo
- *Bangalore Mirror*
- *Hindu Business Line*
- *DNA*
- *India Today*
- Max Healthcare
- Wildcraft
- India PR Wire
- Fastrack watches
- Kingfisher Airlines
- Channel V
- Manpower
- Maruti
- NDTV
- Sify
- Tata Docomo
- Trident Hotels
- Bombay Stores
- MSN India
- MakeMyTrip
- Deccan Chargers

and services, launched a social CRM and online reputation management tool, hoping to change the way large corporations monitor and leverage social media. Mruthyunjayappa refers to social media as "communications on steroids".

In mid-October, Airtel launched tweet-SMS, a third party application that allows you to receive Twitter updates directly on your phone. With India becoming the third largest user of Twitter (5 million subscribers) and mobile growth going through the roof, do not be surprised if social media gets skewed towards the cell phone.

Somewhere in between all this, Jessie Paul, the savvy chief marketing officer of Wipro Technologies, launched her book on social marketing called 'No Money Marketing' (McGraw-Hill). Says Jessie, who has a pulse on corporate India's usage of social media: "Just as we have specialists for media relations, analyst relations, investor relations, branding and websites, we should have a team focussed on this channel. The bigger challenge is in setting up the infrastructure to get good content and insights on a real-time basis from the larger organisation."

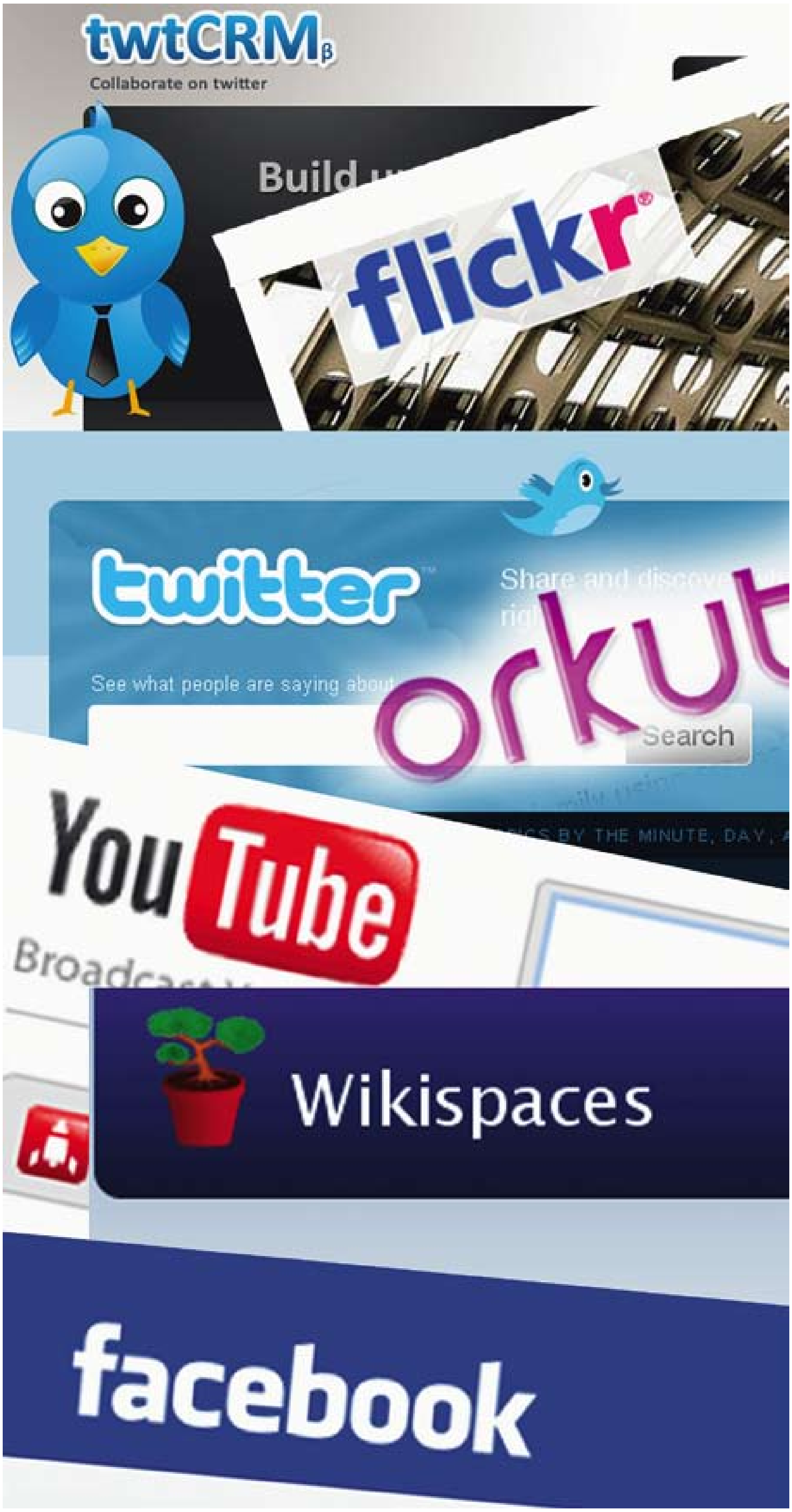
> The bigger challenge is in setting up the infrastructure to get good content and insights on a real-time basis.
>
> **Jessie Paul,**
> chief marketing officer, Wipro

Not surprisingly, to help fill this gap, social media experts are sprouting all over the Internet landscape. Today, a quick scan of the net shows that Social Wavelength, GizaPage, Cheassy and scores of others offering Social Marketing expertise to corporates and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), who do not have a handle on social media but are keen not to miss the boat.

Says Mukundan Regunathan, ceo, Pepper Square, a Bengaluru-based digital and interactive design company that has been taking bold steps in the social media space for its clients: "Social media usage has gone up several-fold in the last 10 months. Today, more than creating a website and getting their messaging and communication right, clients want to be on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc."

Mukundan believes that firms in IT services, healthcare, software products, adventure and outdoor gear, food products, recruitments and consumer goods, besides non-profit organisations can benefit from social media.

Pepper Square has a team of 10 experts, who manage the needs of 25 corporate customers in the social media space. Their experience and knowledge in



GET A GRIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

There are three kinds of social media:

- Share – Newsvine, Slashdot, StumbleUpon, digg, del.icio.us and reddit, where anyone can promote anything. Thumb rule: share content your audience wants and enjoys.
- Publish – Flickr, Upcoming, YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia and Squidoo, where you publish your content and let others comment, improve it, redefine it and add to it. Thumb rule: Get your customers to publish.
- Network – Facebook, mySpace, LinkedIn, Care2 and bebo, where you meet interesting people and extend your network. Thumb rule: Answer questions, share connections.

the emerging area is extensive and their thinking is cautious. Comments Regunathan: "Everyone wants return on investment (ROI). It is very hard to get measurable results in social media as of today. Many clients think that having thousands of followers or fans is measurable. I do not think it gives any measurable outcomes, but it can surely give visibility. Take any company that is on Facebook, more than 80 per cent of the fans hardly interact, most of the time." But it is Pepper Square's expertise that stimulates the network, bringing results for its clients.

Currently, some of the country's leading brands such as Infosys, Wipro, Acer, Dell, Lenovo, *Bangalore Mirror*, *Hindu Business Line, DNA, India Today,* Max Healthcare, Wildcraft, India PR Wire, Fastrack watches, Kingfisher Airlines, Channel V, Manpower, Maruti, NDTV, Sify, Tata Docomo, Trident Hotels, Bombay Stores, MSN India, Make My Trip, even the Deccan Chargers, use social media to extend their reach and stay in touch with their audience 24X7.

Many of them have used it tentatively, unable to figure out what direction to head for and the investment to make in terms of time and resources. In many

EXPERT TAKE

As chief marketing officer of Wipro Technologies, **Jessie Paul** has successfully implemented several social media initiatives. She is also the author of **No Money Marketing**, which discusses the use of social media. Jessie's views on how corporate India responds to social media.

Do you believe that corporate India has been slow to leverage social media?
Given the state of evolution of the social media channels, it is not a given that all target audiences for a company are on the Internet, which is the primary channel for most social media. With only 7 per cent of the population with any Internet access and only 5 million people with broadband connectivity, the current users are a very, very small sliver of the target audience for many companies.

So from a consumer outreach lens, I think companies can be forgiven for slower adoption of these channels. Social applications built on a mobile phone platform, such as SMS GupShup (which claims over 20 million subscribers), on the other hand, show mass potential in India where mobile penetration is around 30 per cent. Corporates with a larger consumer base could benefit by moving faster.

Where I think corporate India could do more is using these channels for their employees, many of whom do have Internet access at least during office hours. YouTube, wikis, blogs are powerful platforms to share ideas and managements should encourage these. The slow adoption is due in large part to the fact that social media adoption is rather low among users older than 50, who are often the decision-makers in corporate India. It takes a visionary chief information officer to enable the use of channels that they personally do not use.

Does not social media get hijacked the moment corporates begin to populate the social media networks with their barely disguised sales pitch?
Social media is an opt-in model. If users do not like the sales pitch, they will opt out of receiving those messages. The company can then either figure out how to make its communication more relevant to its customers or it can stick to advertising on these social media channels.

Yes, advertising here is not as powerful as getting word-of-mouth endorsements, but if you think about it, there are many organisations today that do not benefit much from PR and focus on advertising and direct sales.

Gartner has predicted that 60 per cent of Fortune 1000 companies will connect to or host some form of an online customer community by 2010. They are, however, rather pessimistic - they also believe that 50 per cent of those communities will not be very successful!

Corporate philosophy dictates control over what employees say and hear; social media aims to change that by making individuals provide their own spin to company goals and values. Won't this lead to Chaos 2.0?
Yes, initially. Guidelines both corporate and legal will have to be set. The line between your 'personal view' and 'official views' continue to blur. Employees can be a company's best ambassadors and we have to move from a model of gagging them through PR guidelines to enabling them to function in a way that neither jeopardises their right to free speech, nor creates an untenable contradiction between employee views and the corporate views.

This is still the Wild West with a lot of teething problems.

> Everyone wants return on investment. It is very hard to get measurable results in social media as of today.
>
> **Mukundan Regunathan,**
> ceo, Pepper Square

instances, companies have not been able to understand how to engage in a conversation, who should respond and what is a 'worthy' response.

Many companies are 'listening' to what is happening to their brands online but are unable to articulate their response effectively or quickly enough. This is because one of the critical factors affecting Social Media usage is metrics to gauge the success of the initiative.

But it is a matter of time before companies figure out what to respond to, the tools to use, the resources to put behind the effort and the success metrics. While social media guidelines are still emerging, the trend towards usage is clear and undeniable.

In January, Windchimes, a Mumbai-based online communications agency, did some research on the Indian social media landscape. The findings serve as a pointer to the shape of things to come. The study was done covering 105 respondents – in the 18 to 35 age group – in Bengaluru, Mumbai and Delhi. When asked what medium they use to acquire information on new products or services, 63 per cent said blogs, websites or social media (1 per cent claimed mobiles, 23 per cent television and 13 per cent newspapers).

But many companies are not waiting for media studies or tools to show the way. They are forging their own path. Who knows, for once, they may find themselves actually talking to the most important category: their customers.