

SXSW 2011

Brands Go Big and Get Intimate



WEBER SHANDWICK

Advocacy starts here.



The Pepsi MAX Lot was a focal point of SXSW engagement and fun. (Photo by Liang Shi, licensed under Creative Commons.)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BRANDS BRING IT TO AUSTIN: SXSW 2011

CHRIS PERRY, PRESIDENT, DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

“...the real triumph of the show was how certain brands engaged at SXSW.”

2011 was the year of the brand at SXSW. While no single technology emerged as the big hit of the conference, there was an overwhelming sense that the real triumph of the show was how certain brands engaged at SXSW.

Weber Shandwick's clients were prominent players on the ground in Austin, Texas. Our client PepsiCo, for example, partnered with Fast Company to host “flash panels” of killer content that ran simultaneously with the official program and was featured on a dedicated page on fastcompany.com. Everyone from author Gary Vaynerchuk to the founders of breakout group messaging app GroupMe made appearances on the PepsiCo Plugged-In Stage. The PepsiCo Playground featured a portfolio-rich sampling station where participants could down a cold glass of Izze, snack on Sabra hummus and Stacy's pita chips, and visit with friends.

Samsung, another Weber Shandwick client, presented the Samsung Lounge. Live music, book signings by the likes of Guy Kawasaki, and “un-panels” of content based on the latest topics to emerge from SXSW got significant attendance and coverage. The lounge became one of the main areas for bloggers to gather, create, and take a break from the hectic speaker circuit.

The brand offerings at SXSW 2011 set a new standard for engaging in “the social layer.” By becoming more social, engaging, and human, these companies showed how a combination of words and deeds can alter the relationships customers have with them. Brands gave people something to do, something to talk about, and something to remember. The bar for SXSW 2012 has been set sky-high — and Weber Shandwick will be there to help our clients soar above it.



The CNN Grill was a focal point of activity at SXSW. (Photo by Liang Shi, licensed under Creative Commons.)

CELEBRITIES, MAINSTREAM NEWS REMAIN KEY INFLUENCERS

ADAM KEATS, SVP, DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

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For all the talk about technology, group messaging, Twitter and Facebook, if we learned anything at SXSW this year, it's that traditional news and big celebrities remain pretty darn influential in our day-to-day world. How we choose to share that information may continue to evolve through social channels and via word-of-mouth, but mainstream news remains a primary source from which we pull relevant information to disseminate to our peers.

Nobody at SXSW proved that better than CNN, who took over Max's Wine Dive at the corner of 3rd and San Jacinto, branding the entire venue right down to the custom rotating neon sign. The CNN Express RV, a staple along the political campaign trail, was parked right in front of the grill to broadcast live. Around the corner, graffiti artists took to the walls with their own analog version of "tagging" for CNN. Officially, the CNN Grill was a "broadcast center bringing select SXSW attendees, newsmakers and members of the media together to participate in live CNN reports and enjoy special musical performances."

Duran Duran, Conan O'Brien, and Rainn Wilson didn't walk the trade show floor. They didn't sit at the back of a session. They went to where they could quickly take their message to the widest audience, via the largest cable news channel. They didn't limit themselves to the large crowds gathering outside the building.

Bottom line: Digital has immense value, especially when used to capitalize upon the waves of influence it can create. Done right, those waves should reach the also valuable mainstream media. If your strategy for digital doesn't anticipate contact with traditional, you may want to re-think your approach.



Austin, the home of SXSW, is renowned for being interesting. (Image by Mike Licht, NotionsCapital.com, licensed under Creative Commons.)

“
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THE OTHER ROI

ALAN KERCINIK, EVP/CREATIVE DIRECTOR

One of the biggest movements in communication is the idea that consumers should be out advocating on your behalf. More than ever, they have instant access to the tools and platforms that make advocacy easy.

But when was the last time you told your friends about a completely vanilla book, movie, song, or restaurant? “Boy, there is this place that is completely average. I really want to tell you all about it!”

Never.

The new mission is to be interesting. But the challenge is that being interesting is dangerous. It means being provocative and thought-provoking. And that can be hard to get through legal. It can tick off stockholders. It can offend your board. It's also becoming THE way to ensure a solid connection with the people you are trying to sell to.

Developers are tuning their technologies so that content you're interested in comes directly to you. Zite, the app that delivers a personalized magazine based on content you like or read, is the latest example.

The recommendation engine, like the one that powers Netflix and Amazon, is going to drive every relationship we have. And that that includes between people and branded content.

Suddenly, being interesting is the cornerstone for business sustainability, not just communications impact. Interesting isn't a campaign, a strategy or an initiative. It's about corporate DNA.

Because if your product doesn't match up to the promise of your incredible, imaginative campaign, you've got bigger problems. Consumer disappointment becomes the fuel for the brand story being told online.

So how does a brand take this from concept to execution? I'd suggest starting with a transformative tactic: be interesting. Have that inform all of your choices — from research and development through compelling communications.

Your ROI — Rate of Interesting — is going to drive your ROI. Because being tame, not taking chances, is the real gamble.



It's not just the meat that's on fire at SXSW. (Photo by Jeremy Keith, licensed under Creative Commons.)

“
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JUICY CONTENT FOR FUN AND PROFIT

CHRIS VARY, SVP, EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

In addition to being known for tech product launches, indie film premieres and breaking hot new bands, SXSW has also become foodie heaven. From gourmet grilled cheese stands to curbside taco trucks and local bacon cone vendors (yes, that's right: cones made of bacon, filled with deep-fried, Cap'n Crunch-encrusted meat), you can't leave Austin with an empty stomach.

This struck me as I observed the number of content creators offering their varied menus of fare to attendees. Today, smart brands are spending less time creating flashy sites and more time trying to communicate via truly original content. Consumers are taking in as much juicy goodness as brands can put on their plates.

But this abundance makes it even more important for brands to differentiate themselves in a noisy environment. Highly engaging, clever content needs to be fed on a frequent basis to popular social channels and brand sites where people are already gathering.

To keep pace, brands and agencies are eyeballing producer networks, PR agencies, and companies like AOL, PopTent, and Tongal. These groups provide the prolific, accomplished “kitchens” where easily digestible, enjoyable content is cooked up.

Take PopTent as an example. They will take a creative brief from a brand or agency and deliver it to a content producer network. These producers deliver videos that are unique, on-brand and imaginative. Brands buy the videos that represent their brand and style.

Winning the content contest means that brands and agencies must develop the ability to collaborate with many creative resources. Staying on top means continuous elevation of concept and execution are required, not optional. You can hand out bacon cones and get a lot of attention, but the final product can't taste like a joke — and the next one has to be even better. Bacon cinnamon rolls anyone?



The Chevy Volt lets owners control the car via mobile app. (Photo by Adam Jackson, licensed under Creative Commons.)

“How do you execute killer content in a “content everywhere” world?”

FUTURE PERFECT: THE TIME FOR CROSS-PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT IS NOW

PATRICK CHAUPHAM, SVP, DEVELOPMENT

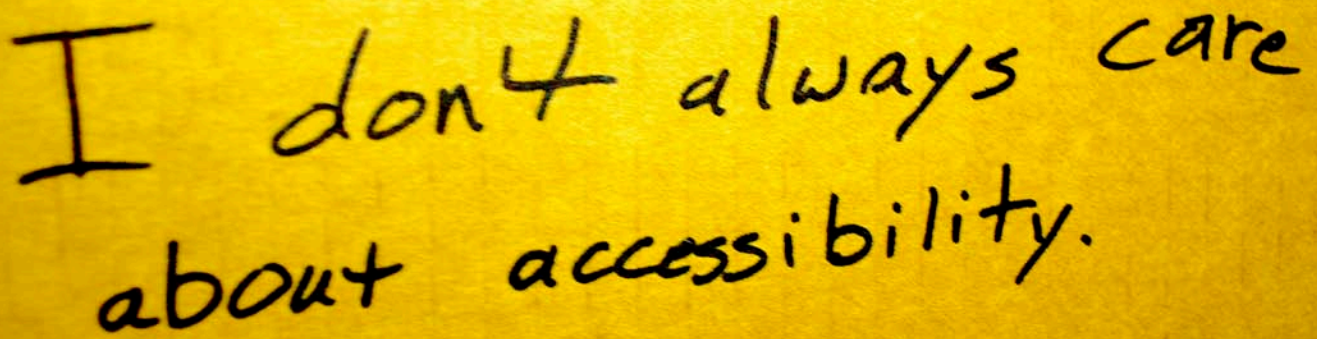
Between tablets, cell phones, laptops, e-readers, and game consoles, we're living in an age where a disconnected gadget is highly unusual. All these platforms call for sophisticated, robust content syndication.

We all know the aggravation of a site that looks beautiful on a PC and barely functions on our mobile device. But what happens when you want to deploy that content to wired accessories (like watches), gas pump touchscreens, connected household appliances and TVs, and even cars?

Delivery and consumption of content across these platforms needs to be seamless, while the message needs to remain consistent. What I saw at SXSW solidified three key questions we need to tackle:

1. **How do you optimize real estate?** It's a simple question that's not to simple to answer from a content developer's viewpoint. A website, Facebook or any social network/community has infinite possibilities and room to tell a story. A 5" LCD screen at the gas pump or 3" smartphone has a lot less real estate.
2. **How do you prioritize what content is most important for the user based on the platform on which the user is consuming it?** Google has been taking the "mobile first approach," asking their designers to build the mobile version of a product first, as it's usually the most elegant version. At what point do they start asking them to develop the digital watch version first?
3. **How do you execute killer content in a "content everywhere" world?** Imagine a world where you had to call someone back every time your voice provider switched your connection to another cell tower. What a frustrating user experience that would be! We never want consumers of our content to feel that friction.

This may read like an agenda for the future for some, but Weber Shandwick is already on it. The time is now.



I don't always care
about accessibility.

Secret confession of a UX designer, scrawled at SXSW. (Photo by George Kelly, licensed under Creative Commons.)

“...what if you’re just plugging shiny new tactics into fundamentally flawed strategy?”

BACK TO BASICS

JOEL DALY, VP, EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Last year at SXSW, a key theme that permeated many of the user experience discussions was the “gamification” of online experiences. Sessions had titles like “Add Some Xbox to Your UX” and promised to help practitioners focus on integrating game theory into interface design. All very cool — but what if you’re just plugging shiny new tactics into fundamentally flawed strategy?

Thankfully, this year’s UX track at SXSW really brought things back to basics. Careful, strategic approaches to engagement and interaction took center stage. At Weber Shandwick, we force ourselves to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, the business objectives of our clients, and the needs of their users, ensuring that we deliver the most valuable product for everyone in the equation. So it was refreshing to see industry-wide recognition that this is what it all boils down to: the best overall experience.

That experience must include smart, engaging content, though it is often the first thing to be overlooked in web design and development. This year, conversation at SXSW centered much more on the importance of content strategy and how it feeds into a complete user experience (and vice versa).

Making the web usable and valuable for everyone, regardless of physical capabilities, also came up again and again. Too often, accessibility is a checkbox on a list of requirements, without holistic integration with process and products being executed. It was heartening to hear accessibility concerns and strategies raised in several talks that extended beyond the realm of UX, such as design and social media topics.

The key UX lesson from SXSW 2011 is to remember the foundations of the user experience practice. Gone are the days when deliverables or activities for their own sake had any place in UX. Driving value for the brand by making the overall experience for the user the best one possible is the goal. That’s our philosophy at Weber Shandwick, and it’s nice to see others arrive at the same conclusion.



At SXSW, the focus is on moving from inspiration to activation. (Photo by Jared Goralnick, licensed under Creative Commons.)

“...the social space is trending in our direction.”

SMALLER SOCIAL CIRCLES, LARGER REWARDS

COLIN MOFFETT, SVP, SOCIAL IMPACT

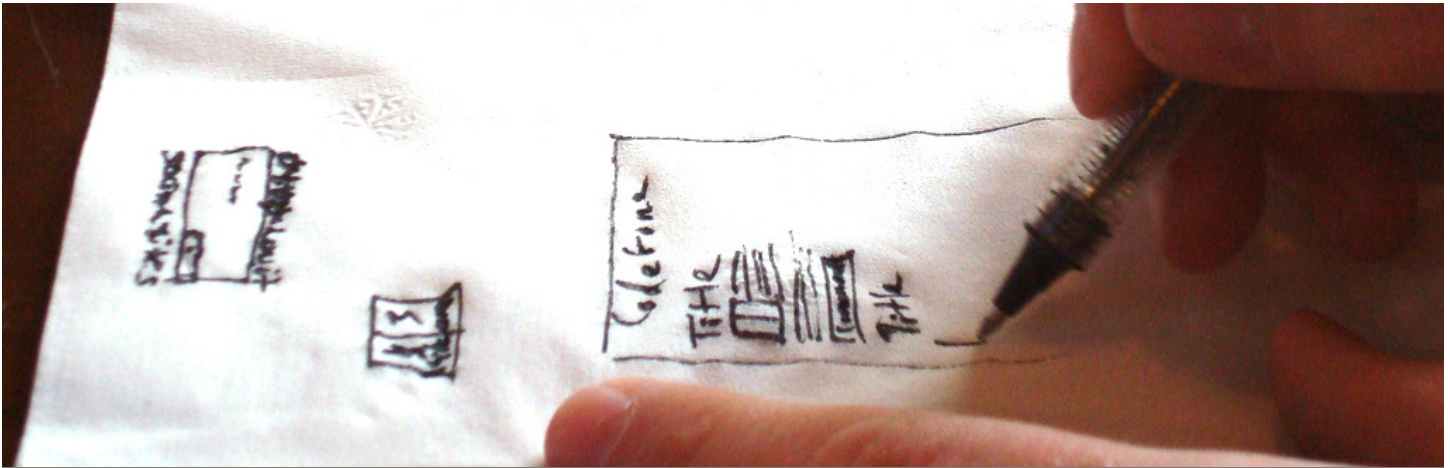
Technology has made information travel at amazing speeds and connected people in unprecedented ways. Despite these advances, some of the best ideas still come to life when people are together in the same room.

On the technology front, one of the most buzzed about platforms at SXSW was something that helps facilitate small-but-strongly connected groups for offline action.

GroupMe is a group messaging app that helps you set up mobile chat groups so you can quickly communicate with and organize people in your networks — for example, coworkers, family, or your bowling teammates. Apps like this help us to reach small, targeted clusters of people within our vast and disparate networks.

This is part of a growing trend of nurturing our connections more deeply and selectively. Chris Perry, Weber Shandwick’s President of Digital Communications, summed it up in his blog post from SXSW, writing that: “Intimacy, not surprisingly, is looking to be the killer app.”

This is great news to those who organize people around events and causes. Social media has been an invaluable tool in reaching large numbers of people. But we have been longing for ways to leverage the strong ties within our networks. Those of us who help clients rally thousands of people within grassroots networks around causes, hoping that we’ll get 50 committed people to show up somewhere in person, can take solace in the fact that the social space is trending in our direction.



SXSW spawns many brainstorming sessions, but moving into action can be tricky. (Photo by Robert Banh, licensed under Creative Commons.)

**Only
empowered
workers
can serve
empowered
customers.**

- **Josh Bernoff**, Forrester Research
analyst and co-author of *Empowered*

BEYOND THE TRENDS: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING AND DOING

GREG SWAN, VP, DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

In the agency world, we talk at length about digital best practices, social media strategies, and the opportunity cost of not empowering online advocates. But in the business world, companies have bottom lines, limited resources and fractured attention spans.

For companies rooted in their ways, translating knowledge into action is no small feat. The real dilemma for business now is implementing social strategies to succeed in a corporate environment that's steeped in legacy thinking and process structure.

In their SXSW panel on change management, Forrester Research analysts Josh Bernoff and Ted Schadler, co-authors of *Empowered*, shared their strategies to address these challenges.

According to their research, while nearly half the population was untouched by social media in 2007, today only one in five people are untouched by social technologies. More importantly, people know how to use them. For example, an upset customer can have significant impact with a single tweet. But on the brand side, organizations may not have the culture to support and empower these customers.

In fact, many of today's employees are dissuaded from innovating, sharing new ideas and participating in online discussions on behalf of the company — even if that would mean a better experience for the consumer. As Bernoff pointed out, "Only empowered workers can serve empowered customers."

Getting over fear or legacy thinking to implement change management is not an easy process for any company. But one thing SXSW makes clear is that each year we're seeing the companies who adapt and innovate in this emerging marketing succeed over competitors, attract the best employees, and make their mark. Next year's panels in Austin will be filled with their stories. Will yours be one of them?



At the Samsung Blogger Lounge hosted by TechSet. (Photo by and copyright to Ken Yeung.)

“...the fates of Silicon Valley and Madison Avenue are entwined as never before.”
- Brian Morrissey, Digiday

ALL GROWN UP!

STEPHANIE AGRESTA, EVP/MANAGING DIRECTOR, SOCIAL MEDIA

SXSW has long been an important event in the social media and digital landscape. This year, the interactive conference grew in size and stature, solidifying its role as a must-attend event for brands interested in tapping into the power of digital influencers.

Conference attendance was up almost 36% from last year with paid attendance at the interactive portion alone at a reported 19,364 people. I was on the ground both years, and my guess is that the actual number was almost double what was officially reported.

With more participants came an even greater level of sophistication when it came to brand activations. Sponsors executed programs that brought tangible value to attendees. From the Samsung Blogger Lounge to the Pepsi MAX Lot, direct attendee engagement was the key tactic employed by the brands. Given the crowds at both locations, it's easy to see that this strategy was well-received by the community.

But in an increasingly digital world what's the importance of face-to-face consumer engagement? Digitally savvy brands understand that events are a critical part of any social media and community management strategy. Building relationships offline with influencers increases the power of relationships online. Successful engagement requires the right mix of content, influencer outreach, timely direct response, customer service, and real life connection. Events like SXSW have become an efficient way to bring community engagement to life, especially for those who care about the intersection of culture, technology and marketing.

As Brian Morrissey from Digiday wrote:

“It was clear in Austin, of all places, that the fates of Silicon Valley and Madison Avenue are entwined as never before. SXSW holds unique place in the constellation of digital shows. No other conference has a blend of attendees that includes developers, artists, musicians, celebrities, entrepreneurs, brands, and agencies. It's where we gather to push this industry forward. And after this year, there's no question that anyone interested in being part of that equation will make sure they attend. SXSW Interactive is officially all grown up.”

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