

IM, Blogs and Podcasting – The New Media and Women

by

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You've heard the terms, IM, blogs and podcasting. If one listens to the hype of young male "techie" as they talk about, sell and use the newest, fastest version of new media tools that allow communication in a dizzying array of new channels you might assume that new media "will be owned" by the male market men – and you would be wrong.

I remember attending a national conference of web and software developers in the 1995. Everyone was discussing the market and who would embrace this new communication form - the resounding answer was men. After all, they were more tech savvy, they were the early adopters and they were not afraid of technical challenges, but women, well they just didn't like technology. Fast forward to 2002, the year that women became the majority on the Internet. What a big difference 7 years made, and the 2005 Pew Internet and American Life study confirmed that women under 65 still out pace men on their web usage.

Social Software and Relationships

The new technology offerings that facilitate communication can be referred collectively Social Software. This term is especially suited to women because sociability and relationship building are both key attributes which differentiate women from men in terms of their communication style and the purpose or their communications.

Because women have been designated, not formally, but through societal and gender evolutionary norms, the *Director and Manager* of most social activity for herself and her family, the forms of new media provide a perfect platform for doing what comes naturally. They have given her a voice and a means to be heard as never before. And 24/7 access to family and friends no matter where they are, AND at a price that is affordable.

Gender and Communication

Many sociolinguists¹ have reported through their studies that women use language primarily as a tool for facilitating social interaction. Men on the other hand, use language primarily for conveying information. Women use communication to nurture and develop new relationships, men use conversation more as a "means to an end". These two ways of communicating views can be viewed as a "social (female) versus informative (male)" style.

The findings of these studies should come as no surprise. Anyone who has been around women and watched as they network, form clubs, undertake large volunteer efforts collectively - all while making sure that birthday cards and dates are not forgotten and sports practices are never missed - would agree that one of women's key strength is her

social nature. It is this fundamental difference that will drive the women's market to rapidly adopt the use of new media formats.

The Need for Social Interaction

Years ago, women connected daily with their friends and neighbors over the fence, in the park with their children, and in their neighborhoods during informal social gatherings. Their need for continual social interaction was facilitated through proximity and availability. Today, mobility, long work hours, and the multitude of ongoing demands that chip away at social time, leave women little time for creating new and sustaining important relationships in their lives.

Social Software – The Great Relationship Facilitator

Studies have shown that women have more extensive social networks. Sustaining these personal relationships requires that women invest time and energy – two commodities that continue to shrink with each new responsibility.

Blogs mirror the written daily diary – the private book she once wrote in as a teenager, where she talked about important happenings in her everyday life. Shared only with her closest friends, it silently listened to her thoughts, dreams and ideas. Today, women are creating online diaries and inviting others into their world. They may or may not know all their readers, but they share one thing in common, a need to communicate and be heard by those that understand a share in a common female sisterhood.

Telephones of the past tethered her to home or office, and cell phones were great for sharing longer conversation. Combine the ease of IM with the capabilities of camera phones and women can share important events and build memories together with her closest friends. Women's desire to share a mutual experience with someone close to her serves to sustain her important relationships and eliminate the barriers of time and distance, if only for the moment.

Today, women are faced with many situations that demand ongoing learning. For the almost 50% of the market that are single, buying a home, investing for retirement and care giving for parents demands that she learn and keep current on these critical topics. For those married and for career women, keeping current on the latest in child care or the newest trend in business is just as critical. Podcasting is bringing education to her when she wants it and where she can listen to it. As Podcasting matures, and content and channels of distribution become as common as iTunes, it will become an indispensable part of her day-to-day life.

Implications for Marketers

Studies have shown that women's communication styles are manifesting the same characteristics online as they do off line. A recent study about Instant Messaging³, email and camera phone usage⁴ all indicate that women talk longer, spend more time and provide much more detail in their online conversations. This means that rich, meaningful dialog which can guide product development, enhancement and increase customer service can take place through these new media tools.

As marketers, we want to build relationships with our female customers or clients. The creation and maintenance of these relationships require the same ongoing attention that we see women exhibit as they work to assure the friendships are not forgotten. These same new media channels that she is embracing for her personal life can be used in your marketing strategies, the key is to design conversation and information sharing that is relevant, needed and respectful of her limited time.

References

¹Cameron 1998;Coates, 1993;Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 2004, Romaine 2003)

²Moore, 1990; Walker, 1994; Wellman, 1992)

³Gender Issues in College Student Use of Instant Messaging, Naomi S. Baron,
Department of Language of Foreign Studies, American University

⁴ How and Why People Use Camera Phones, HP Laboratories Technical Report HPL-2004-216