Don't build a social community, then destroy it with product changes

Posted At : 20 June 2013 08:02 | Posted By : Shaun McCran
Related Categories: Social media, Architecture

The key to social media platforms, of any variety, is the user base. Phase one of any social platform launch is "how do we encourage users to join, and how do we keep those users interacting enough to stay, and encourage more users to join". It's the social media circle that marketing agencies add by default into pretty much every web project produced since 2000.

The problem with social media, from a company point of view, is that you have to maintain the user base. With traditional software models people typically pay a license to use your product. Making changes to it is risky, but you essentially know how to shape your product roadmap, and how your buying customers are going to react. With social media every change of functionality is a test of your customer base.

They joined your site / use your application / manage their profile all because it's social. There is a social investment created. Profiles mature, people record their interactions, their scores, their achievements. Any change to your platform HAS to be backwards compatible; otherwise you are throwing away all the credit that has accrued from your users actually using your system.

Online games almost always feature a competitive friend ranking system, with platforms like Facebook now allowing aggregation functionality for non-Facebook based gaming (look at Candy Crush as an example) it is incredibly easy for applications to pull your friend list and create a points comparison scale, or an achievement ladder. The users buy into this social aspect. Developers and marketing have changed their mindset to make this a goal in playing the game. You can't mess with it. As EA recently found out.

EA learns to hard way

EA Games recently took control of the Scrabble game from Mattel. Their first move was to refresh the game with new functionality that erased the history of the players. This caused outrage in the customer base as people had been encouraged to invest time and money in this game, improving their scores, and generally creating a richer account, with depth of statistics. This was EA saying 'we don't care about your data'. Why build a rich profile with a history you are proud of, if a company can just erase it with a software update?

They also changed the functionality of the game, but not everyone is going to like all your feature changes, that is just part of the product lifecycle.

The worst thing about this? EA could have probably written an ETL process to migrate the account information into the new database format for the new revision of the game. They just didn't think it was important enough.

You can read more about the EA story on the BBC website:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-22905191