Using Social Media to Promote and Support Breastfeeding

Todd Wolynn

Last year, I lamented the loss, in less than 100 years, of a tradition literally hundreds of thousands of years old: exclusive mammalian breastfeeding. In the space of three generations, breastfeeding rates plummeted, formula reps became more important than mothers and grandmothers, and doctors and healthcare providers were complicit in the process.

Last year, I told you how those same doctors and healthcare providers, armed with a little bit of knowledge, a little less fear, and just enough of the right mindset, could work to reverse that trend. How they—how we—could begin to rebuild that village it used to take to raise a child before we turned them over to the (formula) factory.

This year, I want to tell you about the next step we need to take in that critical, life-and-health rebuilding process: the use of social media to promote and support breastfeeding.

Why? Because of Y

In spite of passionate grass roots support, irrefutable bench research, revealing population-based/epidemiologic analyses, and impressive financial modeling, breastfeeding duration and exclusivity rates are poor. We spend millions upon millions of dollars annually, trying to reverse that trend, (for the most part) unsuccessfully encouraging and cajoling new mothers to breastfeed. Is it a lost cause? Are we trying too hard? Or are we just not trying the right way?

The vast majority of women now having babies belong to Generation Y—a generation that, across racial and socioeconomic boundaries, shares one great, defining characteristic: they’re always online. They’re wired, connected, jacked-in. They’re on computers, tablets, smartphones—sometimes, for some of them, on all three at once—tapping and thumbing away to stay constantly “in the loop.” For them, image isn’t everything; the app is everything.

Generation Y parents—the ones we most want and need to hear our message about the importance of breastfeeding—have some other defining characteristics. They’re cause and concept oriented. They’re skeptical of traditional media and marketing, preferring to leverage their relationships, and their savvy, through social networks and (you guessed it) social media. Their most trusted sources, and resources, are their “friends”—not just as we traditionally define them, but also as they have redefined them: as the people and organizations within their online, social media networks.

Generation Y is, in short, suspicious of any information from any source they’ve not already preauthorized with a Like, a Follow, or a Feed, or a Circle. For Generation Y, the most valuable information, and the most critical calls to action, come from within.

We have an important, life-altering, pretty righteous cause. We have valuable information and a critical call to action. For it to be heard by the people who most need to hear it, we need to get inside their world. In 2012 and beyond, the only way to do that is through social media.

Some (Staggering) Numbers

Generation Y’s social media world is growing at a rate we can barely comprehend. As of this writing, Facebook has 900 million users. Twitter, 500 million. Google+, which is only 1 year old, has 250 million. Orkut has 65 million users—and I don’t even know what that is!1–5

To put those numbers in perspective, here are a few more: the total U.S. population is 313 million, or about one-third the size of Facebook. The total world population is 7 billion, or about 7.7 times the size of Facebook.6 Then consider, for a moment, the number of people in the world who don’t even have running water, or electricity, much less an (Apple) iPhone® and a WiFi connection.

These numbers are staggering. And abundantly clear. The vast majority of the world, and the U.S., population with Internet access is online and connected. The vast majority of the Generation Y is online (all the time) and (intimately) connected. And they’re not going to disconnect any time soon—especially when, for most of them, an hour without their smartphones hits them harder than a month without almost anything else.

On the Y Axis

We can’t beat those numbers, but we sure can join them. The first step is to understand how Generation Y has redefined the notion of a “friend.” In the age of social media, “friend” carries an entirely new meaning. Generation Y’s “friends” certainly include their friends from school, from church, from work, from camp. They also include their family members. But—and here’s where the big shift occurs: “friends” also includes the “friends” of their “friends,” as well as their favorite bands, artists, actors, athletes, and social/cultural organizations. There are no local, regional, national, or even continental constraints; you can have a trusted “friend” across

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town or across the globe. Millions of Generation Yers have “friends” they’ve never met, “friends” whose faces they’ve never seen and whose voices they’ve never heard.

But just because you’ve never heard your “friend’s” voice, that doesn’t mean you haven’t heard them. And listened to them. And trusted them with advice on everything from love to money to taking care of your newborn baby. Social media networks, and the trusted communication they produce, can literally wrap around the globe with the click of a SEND or POST button. The real magic happens when various “friends” chime in from wherever they are, whenever they want, with whatever they know. The group-think—or, as it’s called in social media terms, the “crowdsourcing”—can be incredibly powerful. And empowering. (Arab Spring, anyone?)

Breastfeeding advocates aren’t looking to overthrow governments, of course. But we’re looking to have our message heard, our expertise trusted, and our cause picked up and carried from one mother and home and region and state and nation to another. The best, and most effective way to make that happen in 2012, is to position ourselves firmly on the Generation Y axis. Which is to say, firmly on the axis of social media.

Push, Not Pull

How does social media breastfeeding advocacy happen? Why would it work? What do we need to know? I have one word for you: PUSH.

The old information paradigm—the one that worked from cave-wall paintings until about 5 years ago—was PULL. You wanted information, you had to go out and find it. You went to a library, found a publication, sought out an expert. You wanted to know if your favorite band had a new album out, you had to read about it in Rolling Stone. Then you Googled it or went to their Website. You had to go out and actively “pull” that information from somewhere. People still pull information, of course, but it’s sooo last decade. Last century. Last eon.

Now the experts, publications, information comes to you. You know your favorite band has a new album coming out long before it actually does, and long before you read about it in Rolling Stone because the band tells you about it in your Facebook news feed and your Twitter aggregator. The smart bands and brands, the savvy experts and advocates, “push” their information through social media straight to the screens and phones and pockets of their core audiences. It’s not enough to put your information out and hope someone finds it. You—put your information out and hope someone finds it. You—have to go where the people are, make ourselves available and relevant and valuable in their social networks and in their social media platforms, and then push our information to them every month, every week, every day. We have to show up in social media platforms, and then push our information to them. People still pull information, of course, but it’s sooo last decade. Last century. Last eon.

Consider just one great example of how a decidedly unhip, 20th century source made a tremendous 21st century social media splash: in May 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention marketed their 2011 Hurricane Season Preparedness Kit with an edgy and unexpected tie-in to the Zombie Apocalypse pop-culture craze. It was a great and clever idea, but its runaway success—typically generating daily traffic of 1,000–3,000 hits, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention servers crashed after 60,000 hits on the first day of the campaign!—came not from its own pull, but from a social media push. The incredible response to the campaign and the crippling run on those servers was fueled by Facebook and Twitter feeds, by “friends” sharing with “friends” sharing with “friends,” with a (pardon the appropriate pun) viral spread that hundreds of thousands of people had seen and followed and forwarded by the time the servers crashed and long before the mainstream media even knew what was going on.

Pushing is fast, convenient, almost effortless, and highly effective at reaching its target(s). It’s the kind of communication at which social media excels and the kind to which Generation Y—and, if those staggering numbers are any indication, a whole lot of other generations—is happy to consume, to consider, and to adopt as their own.

If a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one there to hear it, it still makes a sound. If a breastfeeding advocate talks in the world and no one on a social media site is there to hear it, he or she may as well not even exist. We need—and there’s really no other way to put this—to get out of our own bubbles and our own networks and get ourselves into the bubbles and networks and daily social media lives of Generation Y and every generation that follows them. If we don’t, we’re never going to rebuild that village and create the change we all so desperately want. If we don’t, we may as well be that tree in that forest, with nothing but the other trees to know we ever made a sound. Or that we ever even existed.

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References


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