

# best practices in **online** conversational marketing

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[digg.com](http://digg.com)



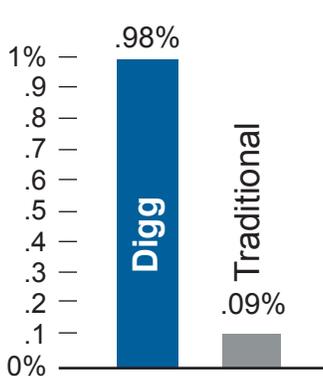
[socialmediagroup.com](http://socialmediagroup.com)

# introduction

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**Whether or not we planned on it**, conversations have become markets<sup>1</sup>. This shift in how people interact with brand messages and how they consume media presents new opportunities in digital marketing. This whitepaper seeks to highlight the competitive advantages provided by conversational marketing by presenting insights from recent successful advertising campaigns on **Digg.com**, the largest social news network online. To lend additional context, this paper includes actionable conversational marketing insights generated by **Social Media Group**, a leading independent agency that helps businesses navigate the social web.

**Comparison of Average Digg Ad Performance vs. Traditional CTR's on Display**



**In 2005**, Digg launched with a mission to let readers curate content by voting (or “Digging”) stories they think others should read -- an online newspaper of sorts where readers, not editors, determine the stories that appear on the front page. Members of the Digg community submit quality content they find on professional publications like CNN.com, independent publications and blogs like TechCrunch, video sites like YouTube, or even commercial websites such as Toyota.com or IBM.com. Other readers review these submissions and vote the best-of-the-best to the homepage. In other words, Digg readers care about the quality, relevance and timeliness of content, not whether the publisher is a publicly-traded media company, a Fortune 500 consumer electronics manufacturer, or an independent photographer posting pictures to her blog.

**Understanding that Digg readers** are willing to engage with quality, branded content led to the development of new social ad products on Digg. These ads allow brands to promote their own content, provided they're willing to let the community Digg them up (or bury them down), just like other content submitted to Digg. DiggAds, as they're called, are a simple idea. Consumers today trust their peers over brands<sup>2</sup> when it comes to credible content. If brands want their content to be considered more credible (and therefore be consumed), there is an emerging opportunity to let those same consumers curate their messages, too.

**This whitepaper defines the core tactics for successful conversational marketing.**

1. Play on “markets are conversations” from The Cluetrain Manifesto; <http://www.cluetrain.com/book/markets.html>

2. Edelman Trust Barometer: 17% trust information provided by corporate or product advertising vs. 44% trusting “people like me”; <http://www.edelman.com/trust/2010/>

# Speak the “local language”

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**Even though media and communications** technologies are changing quickly, smart marketing best practices still hold true. Great marketing has always been a conversation; a conversation that companies need to listen to so that they can learn how to join in the discussion appropriately. More and more, that dialogue directly involves brands, including yours and your competitors. Digg users are already bringing you into their conversations on their own. For example, 166,000 pieces of content about the iPhone, 10,000 about Nike and 19,000 about IBM have been submitted by users over the last three years.

In the case of Digg, more than 40 million monthly readers speak a local language built around blue headlines that point to content next to numbers in yellow boxes; the higher the number in the yellow box, the more readers who think that story is worth a closer look. It’s language spoken outside of Digg.com, too, as more news sites integrate “Digg this” buttons and widgets and as social-networking sites like Facebook invite members to “like” status updates with the iconic ‘thumbs up.’

For marketers who want to join the conversation on Digg, keep these insights in mind about the reader culture and vernacular:

**Content is King.** Emphasize the content, not your brand. Millions of people flock to Digg solely for the content, so it’s imperative that your ad leads with content. Your DiggAd is the point of entry, the start of the conversation. You’ll have plenty of time to build brand preference while readers are enjoying the content you helped them discover. Likewise, images that accompany DiggAds headlines should relate to the content the reader will find on the other end of the link, not the logo of the company paying for the ad. We can see this in play with the IBM.com stories below. One points to the brand, while the other offers content from IBM.

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**3** diggs **IBM - United States**  
ibm.com — The IBM corporate home page, entry point to information about IBM products and services (Submitted by vtaranov)  
0 Comment Share Bury Submitted Jan 12, 2010



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**1168** diggs **Anatomy of the Linux Kernel**  
ibm.com — The Linux kernel is the core of a large and complex operating system, and while it's huge, it is well organized in terms of subsystems and layers. In this article, you explore the general structure of the Linux kernel and get to know its major subsystems and core interfaces. (Submitted by IdaAshley)  
31 Comments Share Bury Made popular Jun 9, 2007

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**Actionable Insight:** Digg is not a search engine. Readers of Digg are not in Google mode -- searching for a particular thing -- they are browsing content that others deem newsworthy, interesting, or entertaining. Don't squander the headline: use your character count to sell the consumer on the content experience that waits on the other side of the click.

**People love lists.** Headlines that point to lists — “3 Tips to Do This” or “5 Ways to Improve That” — garner more Digg and clicks than similar content that isn't organized in a way to save readers time. Stories that people want to bookmark as a useful resource (i.e., a music download platform that offers a valuable, evergreen list such as “The 10 Best Classic Rock Songs of All Time” rather than an impulse-purchase offer such as “\$0.79 downloads for a limited time only!”) also perform well with the Digg community. Below are two examples of the power of the list, one is a mainstream topic (dining out), the other a niche topic (UNIX programming).

**4666** diggs  
**13 Things Your Waiter Won't Ever Tell You**  
rd.com — Waiters share insider secrets about restaurants -- from what days to avoid dining out to how much to tip. (Submitted by Burento)  
1249 Comments Share Bury Made popular Jul 13, 2008  
digg

**55** diggs  
**10 Steps to UNIX Nirvana**  
ibm.com — This article provides 10 effective methods that can increase your productivity. The examples in this article use tcsh version 6 as a reference, but the ideas are portable to all variants of UNIX® shells. This article also refers to several open source tools available for the UNIX platform. (Submitted by chris1234)  
0 Comment Share Bury Submitted Jul 9, 2009  
digg

**Don't bury the lede.** Since the dawn of the news business, editors have understood the importance of the headline. What is it about the story that's timely, unexpected or important? Successful DiggAds — like successful organic Digg stories or tweets — aren't bogged down repeating the first paragraph of a news release; they capture the most urgent, vital aspect at the heart. Attention is such a scarce commodity it's crucial to understand what is valuable to your audience and to provide your content and related message in the most succinct, relevant and appropriate way possible. Both stories below point to Toyota's corporate pressroom. As you can see, the one that points to specific, timely news attracts a bigger audience than the one that points to the press release homepage.

**1** digg  
**Toyota Newsroom Home Page**  
pressroom.toyota.com — Newsroom : Newsroom Home Page / Toyota (Submitted by Crown2)  
0 Comment Share Bury Submitted Mar 4, 2010  
digg

**315** diggs  
**Toyota recalls 2.3M US cars to fix sticking accelerator**  
pressroom.toyota.com — TORRANCE, Calif., January 21, 2010 -- Toyota Motor Sales (TMS), U.S.A., Inc, today announced it would recall approximately 2.3 million vehicles to correct sticking accelerator pedals on specific Toyota Division models. (Submitted by FirstCuts)  
65 Comments Share Bury Made popular Jan 22, 2010  
digg

**Let them in on a secret.** News junkies have abandoned print publications because the Internet gives them access to breaking news and information in near real-time. The vanguard of this movement take this one step further. They are using social media platforms to get news even faster — because they want to be in-the-know first and leverage the social capital that comes from being first in their own networks. Leverage exclusivity within social ads to drive engagement and conversation.

1776  
diggs

#### 7-Minute X-Men Sneak Peek

dell.com — The seven-minute preview of 20th Century Fox's X-Men: The Last Stand, aired on Fox now exclusively at Dell.com/X-Men! Check out Beast (Kelsey Grammer) and Angel (Ben Foster)!!!! (Submitted by Namor)



109 Comments



Share



Bury

Made popular May 12, 2006

### Let them kick the tires before you go for the close.

When these social capitalists browse sites like Digg looking for informative, timely or entertaining content, it's a great moment to offer them informative or timely or entertaining content about your brand. Tread lightly though, because if you interrupt their experience by asking them to make an impulse buy, you will lower your odds of success and risk annoying, or even alienating this crucial group. This isn't to say DiggAds don't work for direct-response initiatives; rather brands with the most success with DiggAds use content to first engage customers who are most likely in the market to buy and pivot to the offer second.

**Actionable Insight:** Learn how to “speak the local language” through testing of different styles and approaches. To drive best results, figure out what attracts your audience to a particular media product or platform (whether it's ESPN, MTV or Facebook), and then speak to that audience respectfully using the same grammar, tone and format.

## brand content as social object

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**Brands are, in essence, publishers** – each distribute messages through owned and earned media channels and each use paid media to reach their target customer in large numbers. There are challenges in integrating these channels in a new media environment. Branded content creation is expensive and highly specialized. Owned media channels are frequently siloed across multiple departments, and paid media is simply not working as well as it once did.<sup>3</sup>

3. 62% of advertisers feel that TV ads have become less effective in the last two years.  
[http://blogs.forrester.com/marketing\\_leadership/2010/02/advertisers-are-increasingly-disenchanted-with-tv-advertising.html](http://blogs.forrester.com/marketing_leadership/2010/02/advertisers-are-increasingly-disenchanted-with-tv-advertising.html)

The beauty of conversational marketing is the opportunity to repurpose existing marketing or third-party assets that have proven (or have the potential) to generate conversation. Compile what you already have — especially content assets that have a track record of appealing to your customers -- or favorable third-party commentary about your brand. Tweak it, drop it into a new place and start new conversations between new people about your brand for a small fraction of the production costs of “traditional” advertising. Essentially, consider your assets as social objects and pay to place them in places where people can share, discuss, interact and engage around them.

**Meta assets:**  
the content that users  
generate around your  
content, including  
comments, Diggs,  
ratings, shared links  
and other traceable  
online interactions

Assets on their own have limited value; a video buried on your website with a non-descriptive title or a simple link to a blog post are not engaging and will not be engaged with by your audiences. Where engagement starts to happen, and value starts to emerge, is in the conversation around the asset. In effect, this conversation (whether it includes comments, social gestures, sharing and personal commentary on platforms such as Digg, Twitter or Facebook) starts to become an asset in and of itself. Think of your original piece of content as the grain of sand and the conversation around it as the pearl. By recycling and repurposing existing assets on social platforms, you are creating **meta assets** that are both distributed (the only place they may exist as a complete record is on a search results page) and also highly credible. Given the affordability, flexibility and adaptability of social ad platforms, these new assets are not related to the scale of investment. The only way these conversations can be created is if you provide good content (from any source), in the right way and place, to people who are interested in it.

Digg users regularly submit advertising and other corporate material. So the question for brands is not whether to engage in social platforms - it's how. How can you make your content better, more engaging, accessible and something the community will want to interact with and share? How do you need to shape the metadata around your assets to be most effective? Finally, how can you make your conversational marketing so good that it starts to create it's own earned media effect?

**Actionable Insight:** Will your brand name enhance the credibility or quality of an asset? In A/B testing, results show that brand mention in the headline or text can have an extremely negative impact on CTR, in some cases cutting it by more than half. Including brand names for no reason other than to meet brand impression targets can actually hurt performance on conversational marketing platforms. Digg users do not discriminate based on content source, however. There is no consistent trend across content sources (MSM, UGC, marketing materials, etc.) content quality is what matters most.

Some of the most successful advertisers using DiggAds are movie studios. They have a wealth of content that can be re-purposed for conversational marketing purposes. These Digg ads perform very favorably against user-submitted content, primarily because they have a wealth of high-quality content (video trailers, etc.) to leverage as conversational assets.

## keep it fresh

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**Content Consumption Cycle:**  
the time after which your content will be “stale” and no longer likely to be consumed/interacted with by a meaningful number of users

**The Internet is synonymous** with immediacy and real-time information. Online, freshness is everything. Gone are the days when you might produce one round of advertising creative and repeat it over and over again for weeks or months. Luckily, most companies can evolve their traditional approach to content production to take advantage of conversational marketing opportunities. With the meta conversation and assets created around your content, you do not have to create completely unique assets for each **content consumption cycle**. Instead, the opportunity is to re-architect your approach to be that of a news editor, advancing the story as you progress through the content consumption cycle, tweaking and adding layers to keep it fresh and engaging. Look for new angles of your own and from the community. Readers will evolve your story as well, in the form of new conversations and new content produced in reaction to the “grain of sand” you have placed online. Low-cost content refreshing and repurposing, understanding the content consumption cycle and peak timing for dropping stories for maximum spread are key to success in conversational marketing.

**Actionable Insight:** Content on Digg becomes stale within 36-48 hours. If an asset is going to work, you’ll know within the first 12-24 hours, as users engage (or don’t). The ability to identify and speedily turn around appropriate assets within hours is essential to ensuring best performance. CTR rates drop by half within three days of launch, though the number of Diggings vary throughout the creative flight (the majority drop off, others remaining relatively steady). Timing is everything: weekends provide a significant lift in both Diggings and CTRs on headlines on DiggAds.

## far more than CTR’s

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**Traditional online advertising measures are binary**

– click or no click. This is very useful when the ultimate goal is also binary  
– purchase or no purchase. But when it comes to more subtle measures (branding, reputation or product awareness), social ad platforms and the

complexity of the metrics they offer can provide far more insight than CTRs, CPCs or CPMs. Measuring and analyzing the different activities within the meta assets around your assets – the comments, likes or shares, just to name a few – can provide valuable intelligence about how the market receives your messages. Content assets with low click rates may have other social gestures tied to them that indicate the community is connecting with your message on a different level than by just reading it. This form of engagement may also be very effective in helping you achieve your awareness, reputation or branding goals.

Metrics on social advertising sites have CTRs that explode traditional benchmarks for display, because the best ads are quality content that readers find valuable. It's also not a fair comparison. When you're doing conversational marketing well, you're creating content that people actually want to consume – like a hit TV series or a blockbuster movie – not something that gets their attention by distraction or interruption. It's like comparing apples to oranges.

**Actionable Insight:** *We've identified something we call the "Moral Digg". In our testing of the DiggAd platform, readers often didn't take the time to read a story about environmental or sustainability efforts. But they apparently felt them worthy of greater exposure and/or wished to reward the sentiment behind the story. This translated into a greater proportion of Diggs than actual click-throughs (in one case, one of the lowest-performing ads from a CTR perspective actually had one of the highest number of Diggs), in direct contrast with other content tested. This effect could be harnessed to great effect for stories where the message in the headline exposure/positioning is of equal or greater importance than the story itself, and also demonstrates that CTRs alone are not a suitable solo metric for DiggAds.*

## a word about experimentation

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**It's not about creating** multiple assets from scratch to experiment with on these new paid social platforms. Because value comes from the conversation around the asset, experimentation should focus on the meta data around the asset. It's about testing the headline, the body copy, and the thumbnail. Your opportunity is to recycle and repurpose assets that have started conversations in other places. This is incredibly cost effective. If you have the right process in place to capture content generated by other parts of your business (thinking back to your earned and owned channels),

production costs for your social ad program should be low, while engagement by your traditional measurement standards will be significantly higher.

You need to have an approach that gives you a healthy mix of experimentation and accountability. Don't just throw content at the wall and see what sticks – be methodical; experimentation is a scientific process. Plan on making multiple iterations and take an agile approach to drive success. The ultimate litmus test for a good DiggAd is to ask yourself, “Would I send this link to a friend?”

**Actionable Insight:** A beta test of the DiggAds program used 14 pieces of content ranging from earned to marketing assets, across product lines, and key message areas were tested with two iterations of headlines (A/B variable). Results for the same piece of content, treated differently, varied widely, so testing, evaluating and iterating on approach in a methodical and measured fashion are core to mastering any social ad platform. ■



*With more than 40 million unique visitors a month, Digg is the leading destination for people to discover, curate and share the best content from anywhere on the Web. From the largest online destinations to the most obscure blog, Digg surfaces the best content on the Web, as voted on by the community.*

**Contact us at: [sales-inquiry@digg.com](mailto:sales-inquiry@digg.com)**



*Founded in 2006, Social Media Group is one of the world's largest independent social media agencies helping business navigate the social web.*

*Pioneers in their field, SMG has developed organizational social media strategies, built internal social media capabilities and executed top-flight creative campaigns for some of the best-known brands in Europe and North America.*

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