



Nicole Perrin,
Senior Editor
nperrin@emarketer.com

What You Need to Know About Earned Media

Executive Summary: Thanks to the social Web, anyone can publish their opinions for the world to see. As a result, word-of-mouth reaches further than ever. That gives brands a tremendous opportunity. They can tap into their loyal customers and advocates to help spread their marketing messages through earned media.

The earned media landscape encompasses everything a brand does not pay for: consumer blog posts, Twitter mentions, Facebook updates, forum discussions, virally shared videos and more. Though marketers can try to direct and harness earned-media activity, ultimately these consumer-led conversations are unpredictable and hard to control. But because earned-media postings come from real people, not marketers, consumers trust them more and view them as a major influence on purchase decisions.

That extra trust makes earned media extremely valuable for brand marketers. However, measuring the return on investment from brand chatter is more art than science.

What Is Earned Media?

The media landscape can be divided into three spheres: what you own, what you pay for and what you earn. The earned portion is a key component of social media marketing, as it represents everything consumers are saying about your company and your brand—on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and elsewhere.

In this Series:

- [10 Best Practices for Success with Social Media](#)
- [Slideshow: Social Media Marketing by the Numbers](#)
- [Five Reasons Why Marketers Need to Have a Social Media Strategy](#)
- [Where Does Social Media Fit Within an Organization?](#)
- [What You Need to Know About Earned Media](#)
- [Seven Guidelines for Achieving ROI from Social Media](#)
- [Social Media Misfires: How to Head Off Trouble Before It Hits](#)
- [The Future of Social Media Marketing](#)



Earned Media Defined

Wikipedia defines earned media as “favorable publicity gained through promotional efforts other than advertising, as opposed to paid media, which refers to publicity gained through advertising.”

The concept is not a new one. The first use of the term dates from 1988, in reference to favorable news mentions of political candidates. But with the advent of social media, it has taken on new importance for marketers.

In the past, earned media referred largely to free mass-media publicity, such as news coverage or letters to the editor. Today, consumers themselves are a mass-media outlet, spreading word-of-mouth further than ever before.

Earned media can take many forms across the social media landscape—and it can be both a positive and a negative. Marketers can help seed discussions and incentivize social media users to talk about brands and products in a variety of ways:

- Include a social media sharing button on banner or video ads
- Make branded virtual gifts available on sites such as Facebook
- Develop outreach efforts to provide items for review to influential bloggers
- Give brand evangelists access to insider information that they will be eager to share with others
- Provide a forum for customers to get together and interact with one another

The possibilities are numerous, but they share a few important qualities: In all cases, the goal is to have authentic, sincere third parties talking about your brand and getting your message out for you, without relying on paid placements alone.

“To really reap the benefits of earned media, we need [to] paint its universe with the broadest possible brush. ... For instance, I have repeatedly argued that customer service is a form of advertising—classic earned media, in fact—but getting it right is far from easy and requires upfront investment and expertise that’s well out of the scope of most media planners.”

—Pete Blackshaw, executive VP, digital strategic services, Nielsen Online, in *Ad Age’s DigitalNext blog*, April 13, 2009

Why You Should Work for It

Trust is a vital component of marketing efforts and is important for more than just earned media. But consumers’ propensity to trust just about anyone more than marketers is part of what makes earned media so valuable.

Studies agree that word-of-mouth, especially from friends, family and “people like me,” tends to be the most trusted—and most influential—type of recommendation. Nielsen Online, for example, found in April 2009 that more than 90% of Internet users in North America trusted recommendations from people they knew. Other top media were likewise earned rather than paid: consumer opinions posted online and editorial content came in ahead of all types of ads and sponsorships.

Advertising Tactics/Media Trusted* by Internet Users in North America, by Age, April 2009 (% of respondents)

	<20	Total
Recommendations from people I know	96%	92%
Consumer opinions posted online	66%	72%
Editorial content such as a newspaper article	81%	70%
Brand Websites	82%	69%
E-mails I signed up for	55%	67%
Ads in newspapers	68%	66%
Brand sponsorships	77%	62%
Ads in magazines	70%	62%
Ads on TV	75%	61%
Ads on radio	73%	61%
Ads before movies	75%	53%
Billboards and outdoor advertising	65%	53%
Ads served on search engine results	46%	37%
Online video ads	35%	33%
Online banner ads	26%	24%
Text ads on a mobile phone	26%	18%

Note: *participants responded that they trusted each tactic “completely” or “somewhat”
Source: Nielsen Online, “Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey,” July 2009

105666

www.eMarketer.com

In addition, research from strategy and communications agency Cone found that 64% of new media users had a more favorable impression of a brand if they had seen a friend interact with the brand online.

“Social marketing works best when it’s earned, not paid for. It’s a matter of leveraging the inherent trust consumers have in each other.”

—Geoff Ramsey, CEO and co-founder, eMarketer, in “Seven Predictions for 2010 from eMarketer’s CEO,” December 14, 2009

Trust and deep engagement also become increasingly important for marketers. Consumers have become less tolerant of traditional banner advertising, and click-throughs have fallen sharply. Advertisers cannot assume that attention follows eyeballs.

Consumers' dissatisfaction with traditional advertising has led to one of the key, unique qualities of social media marketing: the emphasis on dialogue. Brands can no longer talk and expect to be heard; they need to participate to gain the attention of customers and prospects. While this may mean it's more difficult for brands to get in front of consumers in a meaningful way, it also means that when the right connection is made, consumers are truly engaged—and willing to become brand evangelists in turn.

“Among the 150 million blogs, 200 million global Facebook accounts and tens of millions of daily tweets, there’s more than a few Super Bowl ads worth of earned media sloshing around. And in a business where favorable media impressions build brands, that counts.” —Pete Blackshaw, executive VP, digital strategic services, Nielsen Online, in *Ad Age’s DigitalNext* blog, April 13, 2009

Earned-media campaigns based on branded virtual gifts have performed strongly compared with traditional banner advertisements on social sites. Ad Age reported that Nestlé fans sent more than 1.1 million Nestlé Toll House cookie virtual gifts on Facebook over two weeklong periods in fall 2009. About 3% of recipients opened the gifts, compared with a banner ad click-through rate on Facebook of about 0.02% to 0.04%. Nestlé saw a 16% brand lift and a 17% lift in intent to purchase, according to the magazine.

The Path to Earned Media

Building brand buzz does not require a magic formula, but it does take hard work and deep involvement. The best way? Market a great product or service.

Most discussions of brands in social media are not direct responses to ad campaigns but responses to real interactions with the brand's products, services or representatives. Twitter users who tweet their rants and raves are probably responding to an experience they had using an item, dealing with a customer service rep or shopping in a store.

“We all know that the best thing for brands is not to have a social media strategy, but just to make really good stuff. Make really fantastic stuff and people will want to talk about it.” —Katy Lindemann, senior strategist, Naked Communications, on her blog, *Seemingly Unconnected*, November 27, 2009

One-third of companies worldwide surveyed by Econsultancy and bigmouthmedia in September 2009 reacted to negative brand chatter by improving the products and services they offered, which can prove a great way to turn the conversation around. Companies that are known for being less than loveable have a chance to change their image, fix bad experiences and enjoy satisfied customers who will turn around and tell all their Facebook friends.

“Some people think that earning media is about getting free space when budgets are tight. In my experience, earning media is a not necessarily a cheap option, and is certainly more time-consuming than buying media with big networks. More importantly, earning media is about engaging with consumers on their terms and gaining trust based on genuine understanding.” —Daniel Goodall, senior marketing manager, Nokia, on his *All That Is Good* blog, March 2, 2009

Earned Media Is Not Free

“Earned media” may contrast with “paid media,” but that doesn’t make it free. Marketers may not be shelling out for media buys, but they are still working for the attention of consumers and social media personalities. Brands can be talked about only if they are doing something—posting fresh content or interacting with customers, for example. The link love will die out quickly if a blog or Twitter feed stops being updated.

Here are some tips for boosting earned media:

- Give people good content, especially content they can personalize and send on to their friends. The better the content, the more likely they will be to share it.
- Good creative in an ad campaign that resonates with viewers will help spur social sharing and online discussion.
- Actively enable sharing by adding distribution buttons on Facebook, Twitter and other sites.
- Provide a contest or other incentives to encourage people to pass messages along.

“When we have great commercials, before we even can place them online, they’re up online and consumers are talking about them and they’re telling their friends and it’s generating a huge amount of traffic. So when we have great content, I think it travels whether we start it or not.”

—Carol Kruse, vice president, global interactive marketing, Coca-Cola Co., in an interview with eMarketer, September 17, 2009

Opportunities Are Everywhere

It doesn’t take a hip video with a social-sharing hook to earn media exposure. Any and every action a company or brand takes could potentially end up as news, and a lot of very traditional, very nonsocial media can generate social uptake. A great billboard or poster might make a consumer want to take a photo, upload it to Twitpic and tweet about it.

“Every object can potentially become a social object and a point of conversation. The gravity of conversational tools simply sucks in everything worth talking about.”

—Asi Sharabi, head of HyperSocial at UK agency Hyper, on his No Man’s Blog, March 27, 2009

An example cited by Daniel Goodall, a senior marketing manager at Nokia, on his blog bears this out. He posted a photo of a guitar store that had designed its grille and awning to look like an amp. The image was so intriguing that a passerby could not resist snapping a photo and uploading it to Flickr. As Mr. Goodall wrote, “You have created a piece of social media without access to the internet.”

Flipping It Around: Making Ads from Earned Media

Earned-media exposure can also be turned around and incorporated into traditional campaigns. Christian Haas, creative director of Omnicom’s Goodby Silverstein & Partners, told The Wall Street Journal that hot Twitter personalities would achieve mass-media fame in 2010, when their tweets would grace movie and car advertisements alongside quotes from traditional reviewers.

Some marketers have already begun similar efforts. In December 2009, Trident ran a full-page ad in USA Today and other newspapers for its new Trident Layers chewing gum. The ad consisted of real tweets from regular people, found through monitoring of brand chatter. The tweets ranged from short and sweet (“Omg. Trident layers. <3”) to explicitly gushy (“Running behind for a meeting and all I can think about is leaving time to pick up more #Trident Layers strawberry gum.”), and the ad incorporated Twitter usernames as well as the tweets’ time stamps.

Using brand chatter to create a traditional ad would seem like an opportunity to generate further earned-media exposure, and the Trident ad did direct readers to its Twitter feed. However, that feed had only a tiny number of followers when the ad appeared, stalling real viral uptake. Trident Layers did not seem genuinely involved with Twitter before creating the ad, and as of mid-January 2010 the account still had fewer than 300 followers.

Can You Pay for Earned Media?

While seeding content on sharing sites and even buying paid placements to kick off earned-media campaigns can be important, there is a line between helping a conversation begin and actually paying for it to happen. In the end, you cannot buy word-of-mouth.

Attempting to do so can create backlash if social media users see efforts as unethical. And the disclosures that would be necessary to make the actions ethical—and, in light of recent Federal Trade Commission guidelines, legal—can make chatter fizzle before it begins. If a consumer has received anything of value in return for a tweet, blog post or other piece of content, that fact must be disclosed. This can give the impression that the “earned media” is less than sincere, hurting its key value proposition.

Measuring Earned-Media ROI

Figuring out the return on earned-media conversations has the same problems as most social measurement. Metrics abound—such as number of mentions, how many people were reached by mentions, how many click-throughs from social sites. But the question of what each of those metrics is really worth remains.

Ultimately, that depends on each marketer’s goals. Do you care about clicks on a specific new campaign, or overall lift in brand awareness, or behaviors further down the purchase funnel? The following are a few possible paths—and pitfalls—for measuring the ROI of earned media.

A Look Back at Traditional Metrics

Before the rise of social media and the possibility for anyone to broadcast thoughts and opinions, earned media was found in mass-media venues. That made for much easier measurement: If someone wrote a letter to the editor that was X column inches, how much would X space in ads have cost? If your product appeared in a TV news segment for Y seconds, how much would the same amount of commercial time have been worth? Multiply that figure by the extra trust gained by having an authentic third party excited about your brand.

It’s more difficult to make the same conversion now. Consider tweets as an example. Marketers can count how many microblog mentions they get, but what is a tweet actually worth? Some organizations and celebrities do charge for tweets, so it’s possible to come up with dollar figures, taking into account reach and influence. And a value must be determined for each new media venue. Considering that Econsultancy found about only one-fifth of companies worldwide know the relative value of a visitor from a social media site compared with one from another channel, there is still a long way to go in this basic area of measurement.

Measuring the Whole Funnel

A joint study from comScore, GroupM and M80 emphasized the importance of earned media along with the difficulty in measuring it. The report, titled “The Influenced,” suggested that the value of earned media and other social media exposure must be measured in terms of its influence further down the purchase funnel. Social media users exposed to earned-media messages may not take any measurable action or behavior until later, when they are more ready to purchase.

“While waste in the traditional sense can be eradicated, it may not always be in the best interest to try and directly tie ROI to each marketing channel.” —comScore, GroupM and M80, in *“The Influenced: Social Media, Search and the Interplay of Consideration and Consumption,”* October 2009

In this case, the researchers looked at the synergy of search and social media, comparing users who saw search ads and social media that was considered relevant to the brand with a control group who saw only search ads. There was a 19-percentage-point lift in searches on the campaign brand among users exposed to both relevant social media and search. Relevant social media included blogs, message boards, user reviews, social networking sites, microblogging and video-sharing sites relevant to the category—not just social ad campaigns. There was a further 13-point lift among those exposed to social media that contained distributed marketing content from a brand’s social media program.

The report described a perceived “ROI void” when it comes to nonpaid media, but found that if marketers viewed it collectively with other media, the lift in engagement through the purchase funnel made investing in earned media an easy choice.

The Danger of Silos

Including links to share an advertisement via Facebook, Twitter or e-mail helps seed earned-media exposure and tie it to a specific campaign, making for easier tracking. But one potential pitfall of encouraging this kind of sharing is that it may conflict with other calls to action. For example, a banner ad that encourages viewers to send it to a friend may also have the goal of racking up click-throughs. The sharing activity may actually push down the click-through rate or other direct-response metrics that the marketer cares about.

This can cause problems if earned-media efforts are in a separate silo from other marketing.

Ian McKee, CEO of word-of-mouth agency Vocanic, broke it down by the numbers [on his blog](#), the Power of Influence:

“Consider a marketer running display ads to drive traffic to its site, and (generously) 1% of consumers click the ad. Say that marketer adds sharing functionality [and] the click-through rate (CTR) drops to 0.8%, but another 0.7% of consumers share the ad with their friends. In the latter scenario, that can be lumped together as a 1.5% engagement rate, but instead the marketer will be held accountable for the 20% drop in CTR from 1% to 0.8%. . . . The shared version of that ad . . . would need a 29% CTR to generate enough clicks for those marketing strategists to keep their jobs. Then they have two choices in this admittedly oversimplified scenario: they have to demonstrate the value of the ad’s pass-along rate, or they have to go back to generating clicks as efficiently as they can.”

Measure Only What Is Relevant to Your Marketing Goals

Marketers cannot pay attention to every possible metric of social media performance—there are too many, and they will not all make sense for every campaign. Choose the most relevant measures of success, including some less obvious ones, and track them carefully. This can include both accurately tracking simple stats, like referrals, as well as remembering other ways your brand benefits from earned media.

In a [study](#) of referrals from social sites, digital marketing agency iCrossing found that Twitter seemed strangely underrepresented. It turned out that was a function not, as some might suspect, of URL shortening services, but of the use of third-party clients to access Twitter, rather than the Twitter Website. When a Tweetdeck user, for example, clicks on a link in a tweet it is not shown as a referral at all. Instead, it appears to be a direct visit, the same as if someone had typed a URL into the browser window. So your Twitter traffic may be higher than you think.

One way around this problem is to uniformly use a shortened URL to link to your content, and check the shortening service for referral analytics. This still won’t capture everything, though: Users may decide to share your content independently, bypassing the short URL that you set up. And it raises the danger of double-counting, if some direct visits are attributed to Twitter clients.

It’s important to put a value on gains from earned media other than brand-building. For example, monitoring brand-related chatter on social sites can be a form of market research or customer service and reduce costs in those areas. Richard Binhammer of Dell told Econsultancy that not only can the computer manufacturer trace some \$6.5 million in sales to Twitter but that it has also changed products and processes in response to brand chatter. He said the company finds out about problems with its products some six weeks earlier than it would have in the past. Cost savings such as these can fly under the radar of marketers used to looking at measures of awareness and click-throughs, but they still make up a part of earned-media ROI.

Is ROI the Right Question?

Accountability is becoming only more important to marketers, especially with the rise of digital and its ease of tracking. But in the social marketing realm, where hard measurement is difficult, experts often raise the issue of whether it’s worth it to try to look at ROI in traditional ways.

For more information on the dos and don’ts of measuring social media ROI, see the eMarketer Insight Brief [“Seven Guidelines for Achieving ROI from Social Media.”](#)

Earned Media and ROI at Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola is a leader in the social media marketing space. eMarketer spoke with Carol Kruse, vice president of global interactive marketing, and Michael Donnelly, group director of worldwide interactive marketing, about earned media efforts and how they measure ROI.

Ms. Kruse includes Websites, mobile applications and mobile marketing as well as social media marketing and e-mail in the earned-media category.

Video, she said, is “both paid and earned. If you put video in an ad unit or you bought preroll video, it would be paid media. If it’s creating video content and putting it on the Internet, that’s earned media.”

She characterized social media as difficult to measure but noted there are a lot of “solutions for getting at engagement metrics—how many people participated, how much time was spent, did they tell a friend and are they a repeat visitor? I think there are perfectly adequate engagement metrics in place.

“We want to take those to the next level, which for us is driving brand value. It’s about bringing incremental increases in brand love, purchase intent and actual purchase,” Ms. Kruse explained. “But for some brands, like if it’s a new brand ... the brand strategy is building awareness and trial. What are you going to measure there? You’re going to measure awareness and brand recall. There’s not one pat answer of what we’re looking to measure because it depends on the brand and the business objectives.”

Mr. Donnelly said that in addition to looking very closely at putting a value on Facebook fans, comments and “likes,” Coke is taking note of more unusual metrics.

“I recently created a tag cloud from 750 random posts [that mention Coke] on Facebook,” he said. “The word ‘love’ is, at minimum, 300% larger than any other word within the tag cloud. So from a brand marketer’s perspective, it simply doesn’t get any better.”

That’s a fairly soft measure, but Mr. Donnelly does not ignore the scientific approach. “Buying media on social platforms is just like buying media anywhere,” he told eMarketer. “There’s an algorithm or there’s an equation that has to be figured out for every type of media.”

For more from Carol Kruse, see the eMarketer interview [“Coke Weighs Value of Social Media.”](#)

For more from Michael Donnelly, see the eMarketer interview [“Coke Crafts Social Media Marketing Blueprint.”](#)

Next Steps

In a world where word-of-mouth has become a mass-media activity, earned media has never been more important. Smart brand marketers will not fear what consumers might say about their products and services but will see earned media as an opportunity to get marketing messages out through influential and trustworthy channels.

Those channels can be seeded and directed, with good brand content at the heart of any successful strategy. And those strategies must be long-term. While a single blockbuster campaign might result in thousands of positive tweets or dozens of blog posts, earned media is also about sustained brand building—and, yes, your brand is at least partly in the control of the consumer in the brave new social world.

More Information and Analysis from eMarketer

For related information, see these eMarketer reports, articles and interviews:

[Coke Crafts Social Media Blueprint](#)

[Coke Weighs Value of Social Media](#)

[Social Media and Brand Reputation Strategy](#)

[The Synergy of Search and Social Media](#)

External Links

[Bought Media Will Never Become Earned Media](#)

[Liar Liar, Pants on Fire \(Or When Earned Media isn't Earned\)](#)

[Owned, Bought and Earned Media](#)

[The Influenced: Social Media, Search and the Interplay of Consideration and Consumption](#)

Contact

eMarketer, Inc.
75 Broad Street
32nd floor
New York, NY 10004

Toll-Free: 800-405-0844
Outside the US: 212-763-6010
Fax: 212-763-6020
sales@emarketer.com

Report Contributors

Susan Reiter
Debra Aho Williamson
Joanne DiCamillo
Dana Hill
Daniel McMahon
Allison Smith

Managing Editor
Senior Analyst/Project Director
Production Artist
Production Artist
Senior Copy Editor
Director of Charts

About eMarketer

eMarketer is a business service unlike any other. **eMarketer** does not conduct research. It aggregates and analyzes all the available research, surveys and data on a given topic. So you see far more than a single source could ever provide. **eMarketer** doesn't deliver one point of view—it gives you thousands. Providing overviews and insights available nowhere else, **eMarketer** reports on the reports, analyzes the analysts and dissects the data.

A Trusted Resource

eMarketer serves as a trusted, third-party resource, cutting through the clutter and hype—helping businesses make sense of the numbers and trends. **eMarketer's** products and services help companies make better, more informed business decisions by

- Streamlining research sources and reducing costs
- Eliminating critical data gaps
- Providing an objective, bird's-eye view of the entire landscape
- Better deploying and sharing information across the company
- Building solid business cases backed up by hard data
- Reducing business risk
- Saving valuable time

To learn more about subscriptions to **eMarketer**, call 800-405-0844 (outside the U.S. and Canada, call 001-212-763-6010), or e-mail sales@emarketer.com.
