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# How Consumers Use Social Networks

by Charlene Li  
for Interactive Marketing Professionals



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## How Consumers Use Social Networks

This is the first document in the “Social Networking” series.

**by Charlene Li**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook have seen tremendous growth over the past two years, attracting a young and engaged audience. Frequent users of these social networking sites not only engage in more activities and have a more positive attitude about these sites, but they are also far more interested in profiles from their favorite companies. Marketers interested in reaching their audiences on social networking sites should: 1) dispense with traditional Web marketing tactics, 2) encourage “friending,” and 3) regularly refresh content.

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### NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester surveyed 5,197 adults for Forrester’s NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey and 5,062 youths for Forrester’s NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing and Finance Online Survey.

#### **Related Research Documents**

“Social Technographics”

April 19, 2007

“Why You Should Care About Web Widgets”

February 7, 2007

“Social Computing”

February 13, 2006

“Profiles: The Real Value Of Social Networks”

July 15, 2004

## ADULT AND YOUTH SOCIAL NETWORKING USERS DIFFER

On the surface, it's easy to dismiss social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook as the province of the young. To see what online consumers were doing on these sites, Forrester conducted studies of both adults and youth about their social networking usage. We found that:

- **Most youths and some adults use social networking sites.** Youths are much more likely to use social networking sites — nearly 60% of teenagers (12- to 17-year-olds) and 80% of young adults (18- to 21-year-olds) are using them (see Figure 1-1). In contrast, 30% of adults (18+) use social networking sites, and only 20% use them to contact other people.
- **Youths use social networking sites more frequently than adults.** Of the youths that use social networking sites, 60% of teenagers and 67% of young adults visit them *every day* or more (see Figure 1-2). In contrast, only 42% of adults that use social networking sites visit them daily or more. And one in four adult users visit social networking sites monthly.
- **MySpace dominates usage among both adults and youth.** MySpace receives the most usage among consumers who use social networking sites (see Figure 2). Moreover, more than half of all youth social networking site users ages 12 to 21 visit MySpace *daily*. Facebook also receives regular visits from Gen Yers (18- to 26-year-olds) because of its original focus and in roads into college campuses.

While overall adult usage (weekly or more) of MySpace is less than youth usage, breakouts by generation show that 69% of Gen Y social networking users (18- to 26-year-olds) and 54% of Gen X social networking users (27- to 40-year-olds) in the US use MySpace.<sup>1</sup>


- **Most adults joined to stay in touch with friends and family.** A third of US online adults said that connecting with friends and family was the biggest reason to use a social networking site. But many were also driven by curiosity — 26% said they were curious to see how the system worked, while another 15% said they wanted to see if someone they knew was a member. Only 5% said it was to find a date. Some other responses included:

“I wanted to keep tabs on my teenage son.”

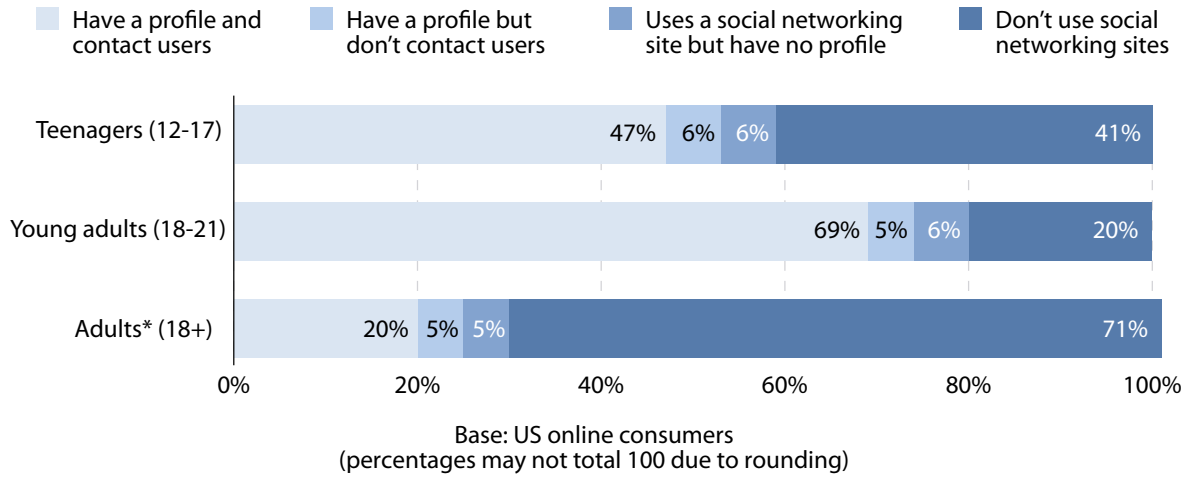
“My friends wouldn't leave me alone until I joined. They still don't leave me alone!”

“I was interested in keeping in touch with schoolmates.”

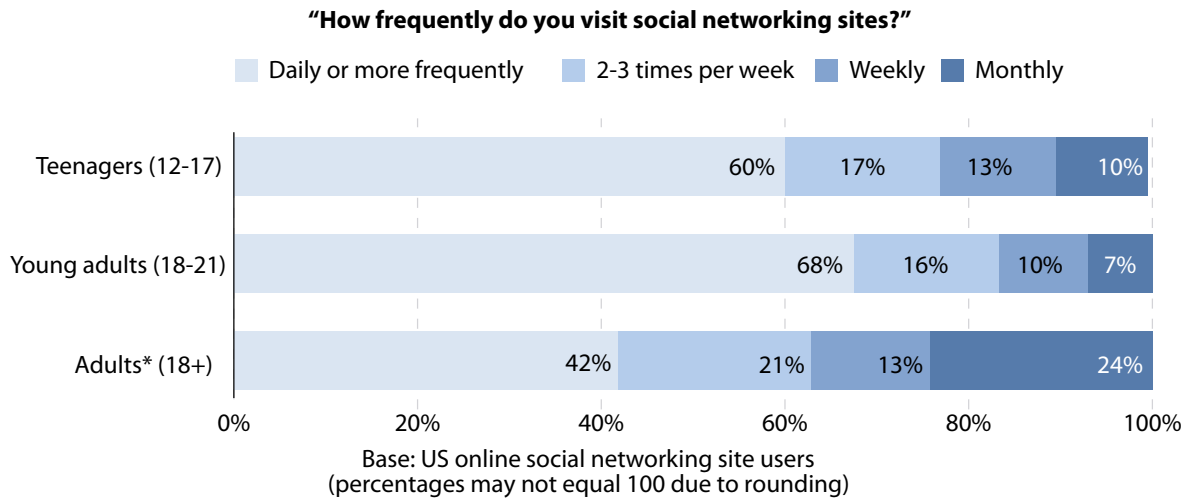
**Figure 1** A Third Of Online Adults And Most Youths Use Social Networking Sites

 A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.

**1-1 Percent of US online consumers who use social networking sites**



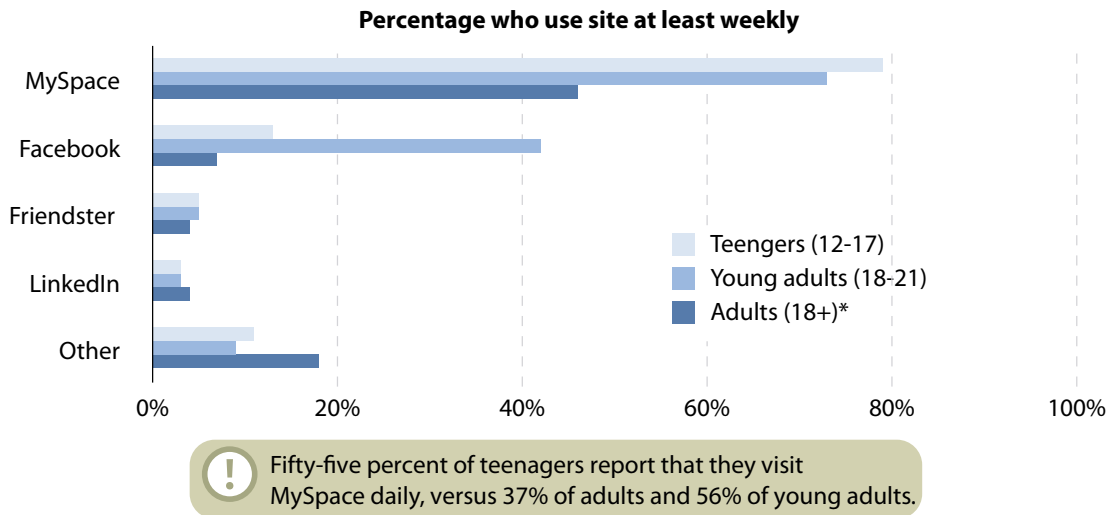
**1-2 Youths are also more likely to be frequent, regular users of social networking sites**



Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey

\*Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey

**Figure 2** MySpace Dominates Social Networking Usage, With Facebook A Distant Second



Base: US online social networking site users

Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey

\*Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

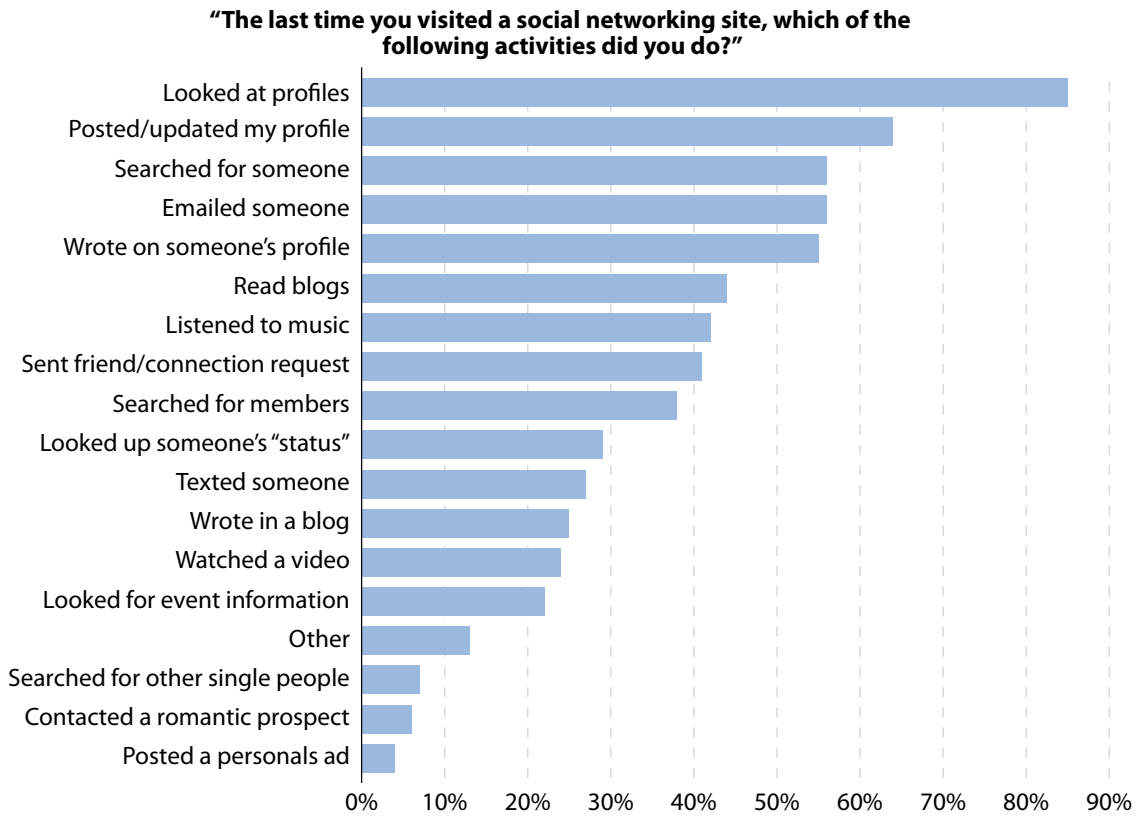
### Youths Incorporate Social Networking Into Their Lives

For youth US online consumers, using social networking sites isn't just another activity to do online — for many, it is their life online. This is because their friends form the central point of their social networking activities, which revolves around communicating — and not media consumption. Our survey found that:

- **Youth activity on social networking sites focuses on communicating.** The most popular activities done by youths on social networking sites revolve around looking at profiles, searching for someone, or updating one's own profile (see Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> Media- and content-related activities like looking for an event, watching a video, or listening to music take a significant back seat to relationship-building.
- **Age and activity level influence youths' opinions about social networking.** Most youths believe that most of their friends use social networking sites regularly (see Figure 4). But those who use social networks daily are more likely to rely on them to keep track of friends and to use them to meet new people. Significantly, a third of teenagers and occasional users of social networking sites don't trust what they see on social networking sites.

**Figure 3** Daily Users Of Social Networking Sites Engage In More Activities

 A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.



Base: US online youth social networking site users between the ages of 12 and 21  
(multiple responses accepted)

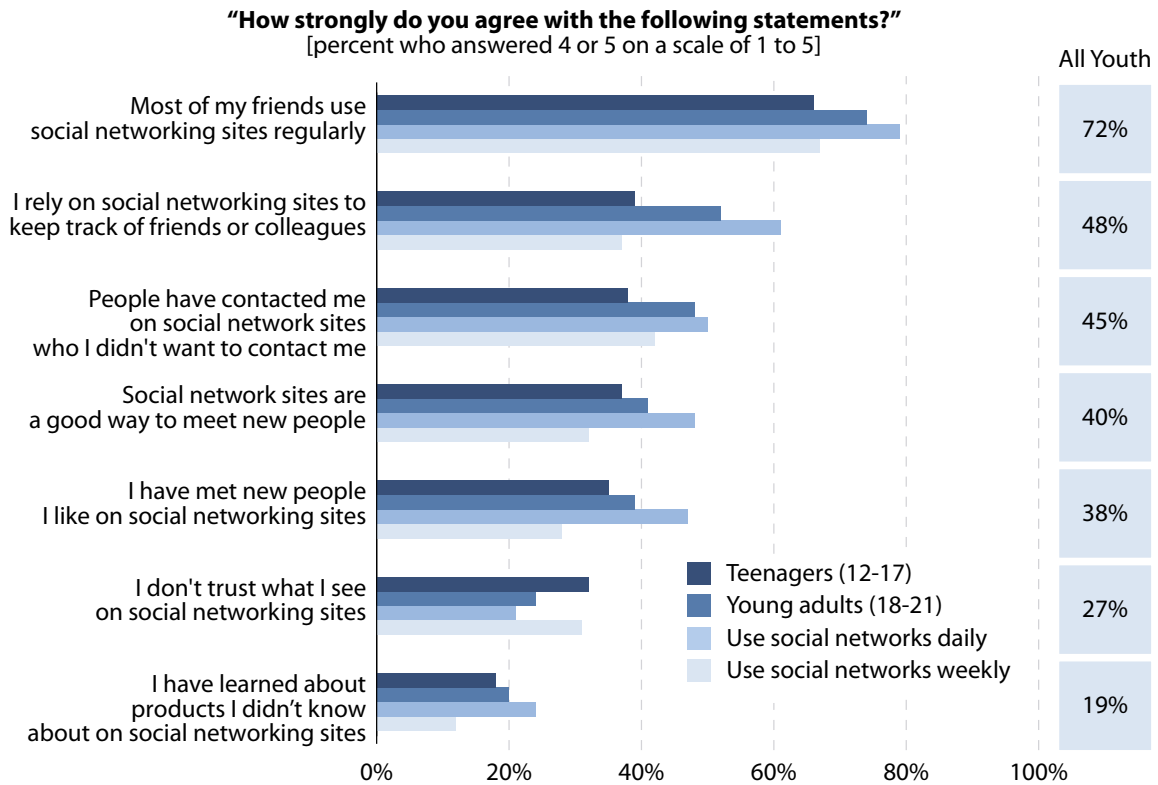
Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

**Figure 4** Usage Also Impacts Youths' Opinions About Social Networking Sites

 A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.



Base: US online youth social networking site users between the ages of 12 and 21

Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USERS ARE OPEN TO MARKETER PROFILES

With more than 53 million and 10 million US visitors each month, respectively, MySpace and Facebook attract the attention of marketers interested in reaching those users.<sup>3</sup> The most common approach is to set up a profile on these sites that members can then join, or "friend"; for example, the movie "X-Men: The Last Stand" has more than 2 million MySpace users as friends.<sup>4</sup> But can this approach work for marketers who may not have such a strong entertainment appeal to the core youth audience? Yes. And here's why:

- **Younger users are more interested in a favorite marketer's profile.** While teenagers and young adults are equally interested in marketer profiles, Gen Yers show the greatest interest, with 37% saying they would be interested in seeing marketer profiles on social networking sites (see Figure 5-1). And Gen X isn't far behind, with 31% showing interest. Even companies that

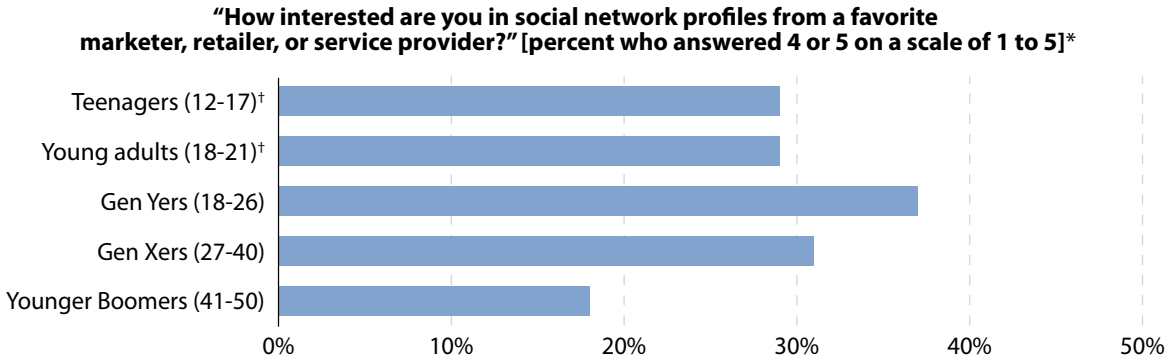
may not be on the radar of younger users are having success; for example, Ernst & Young has a presence on college-oriented Facebook, primarily to recruit new employees.<sup>5</sup> An E&Y employee frequently responds to questions posted by students, ranging from on-campus interviewing deadlines to qualifications for specific openings.

- **Daily users show significantly more interest in marketer profiles.** Almost half of all adult daily users of social networking sites say they would be interested in seeing marketer profiles on social networking sites (see Figure 5-2). This compares with a little more than a third of daily youth social networking site users. Users who use these sites just slightly less frequently — for example, two to three times a week — are less than half as likely to be interested in profiles. But, remember, frequently updated content such as a blog keeps users engaged and deepens the relationship with the marketer.
- **Social networking users represent an attractive audience for marketers.** Daily adult social networking site users are more likely to be younger, read blogs more often, and publish their own blog (see Figure 6). Moreover, social networking site users are naturally viral — 50% of adult users often tell their friends about products, while 61% of those interested in marketer profiles do the same. Youth demographic and psychographic profiles are similar to those of adults, but with one significant difference: Two-thirds of youth social networking site users often tell their friends about products that interest them, and 77% interested in marketer profiles do the same. J.P. Morgan Chase partnered with Facebook to provide an affinity credit card through which users can redeem points for Amazon gift certificates or for donations to their favorite charities.<sup>6</sup> The twist: Groups like fraternities can pool their points, so getting friends in the network becomes a key incentive.

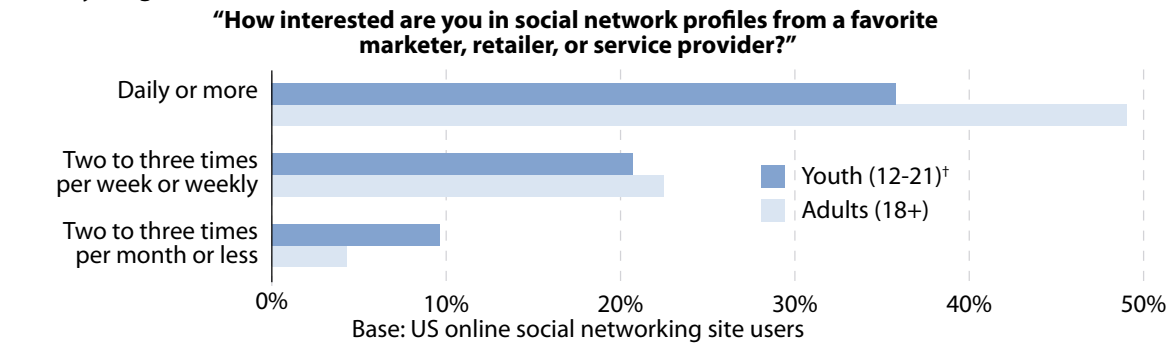


**Figure 5** Age And Usage Are Major Drivers Of Interest In Marketer Profiles

**5-1 Percent of social networking site users interested in marketer social network profiles, by age**




**5-2 Percent of social networking site users interested in marketer social network profiles, by usage levels**



Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey  
 †Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey  
 \*Note: Bases for Older Boomers and Seniors were too small to report values.

**Figure 6 Social Networking Site Users Represent An Attractive Audience**

 A spreadsheet with additional data is available online.

**6-1 Adult social networking site user demographics and psychographics**

	Adult social networking site users	Site usage daily or more	Interest in marketer profiles
Mean age in years	37	32	33
Male	52.9%	52.8%	53.3%
Average household income	\$63,390	\$61,688	\$63,595
Percent college degree or higher	33%	28%	27%
Percent Gen X (27-40)	43%	45%	49%
Percent read blogs weekly or more	34%	50%	50%
Percent publish own blog weekly or more	21%	39%	35%
Average number of social network sites used weekly or more	0.79	1.38	1.26
"I am a natural leader — people always listen to my opinion" <sup>**</sup>	33%	32%	49%
"I often tell my friends about products that interest me" <sup>**</sup>	50%	47%	61%
"I like to show off my taste and style" <sup>**</sup>	14%	18%	27%

Base: US adult online social network users

<sup>\*\*</sup>Percentage of respondents who agree with this statement

Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey

**6-2 Youth social network site user demographics and psychographics**

	Youth social networking site users	Site usage daily or more	Interest in marketer profiles
Mean age in years	18	18	18
Male	46%	43%	45%
Average household income	\$62,523	\$64,065	\$63,296
Percent read blogs weekly or more	51%	60%	60%
Percent publish own blog weekly or more	43%	53%	52%
Average number of social network sites used weekly or more	1.25	1.53	1.51
"I like to show off my taste and style" <sup>**</sup>	36%	38%	45%
"I am a natural leader — people always listen to my opinion" <sup>**</sup>	48%	50%	60%
"I often tell my friends about products that interest me" <sup>**</sup>	67%	69%	77%
"I find I spend more time giving advice to friends than getting advice from them" <sup>**</sup>	46%	50%	57%

Base: US youth social networking site users between the ages 12 and 21

<sup>\*\*</sup>Percentage of respondents who agree with this statement

Source: Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing And Finance Online Survey

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### SOCIAL NETWORK MARKETING NEEDS A NEW SLANT

Before diving headlong into social networking, marketers need to consider how they will approach this community, especially the heavy, frequent users who are most likely to virally spread their enthusiasm for a new product or service. As a case study, look at Victoria's Secret and its PINK® campaign, which succeeded by its smart approach to social networks. Marketers should:

- **Dispense with traditional Web marketing tactics.** Marketers that set up a presence on social networking sites often import what they consider to be the most innovative elements of their Web sites — streaming video, online games, and interactive contests. But on a social network, these features can feel flat; as seen above, social networking site users want to join in a conversation or start a relationship, not be spectators on the sidelines. Victoria's Secret uses its presence on Facebook and MySpace to encourage users to talk about their latest lingerie purchases, upload PINK-related photos, and download backgrounds and badges for their own pages to further encourage viral spreading of the campaign.
- **Encourage “friending.”** On the surface, it seems somewhat ridiculous to become a “friend” of a brand — after all, friendships exist between people, not between a person and a company. But marketer pages on social networking sites can be a place where friends develop a close relationship with the brand. For example, the PINK Victoria's Secret profiles had 203,000 friends on MySpace and 314,000 members on Facebook at the end of March 2007. This means that the PINK logo appears on more than 500,000 user profiles, further encouraging users' friends to click on it and visit the Victoria's Secret profile page.
- **Regularly refresh content.** As in any relationship, the same dinner topics grow stale quickly. Marketers should have a plan for how they will engage their most ardent fans — what interactions, content, and features will keep users coming back over and over again. In Victoria's Secret's case, the profiles feature updates, merchandise, and promotions, as well as photos from the latest PINK celebrity parties.

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The underlying spreadsheets for all figures are available online. Additional data cuts are available online for Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6.

The consumer data used in this report comes from two sources. The first is Forrester's NACTAS Q3 2006 Media & Marketing Online Survey, an online survey of 4,679 US individuals, conducted in August 2006. The second is Forrester's NACTAS Q4 2006 Youth Media & Marketing and Finance Online Survey, an online survey of 4,556 US youths between the ages of 12 and 21, conducted in October 2006. Forrester weighted the data by age, income, and broadband adoption to demographically represent the US population.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the accompanying online spreadsheet for additional generational breakouts of which sites are used by online consumers.
- <sup>2</sup> See the accompanying online spreadsheet to see additional breakout of activity by usage levels.
- <sup>3</sup> From Nielsen//NetRatings's unique audience for February 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> "X-Men: The Last Stand" MySpace page can be viewed at [www.myspace.com/xmenthelaststand](http://www.myspace.com/xmenthelaststand).
- <sup>5</sup> The Ernst & Young Career's Wall group on Facebook can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2204439307> (requires registration to view).
- <sup>6</sup> The Chase +1 group on Facebook can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2204844222> (requires registration to view, and membership is restricted to college networks).

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