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BY JOSH BERNOFF
✍ joshbernoff@forrester.com

What the Splinternet Means for Marketers

Did you realize you were living in the Golden Age of the Web?
Did you realize that it was about to end?

Josh Bernoff is a vice president at Forrester Research in Cambridge, Mass. His book, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, was published by Harvard Business Press and was named book of the year by the **AMA**. To read past columns, go to MarketingPower. com/marketingnews and click on "featured contributors."

Those with long memories remember when the interactive world (we called it "on-line services" back then) meant AOL, Compuserve and Prodigy. These were closed little worlds, walled gardens of content and interface. The AOL consumer dialed up AOL, logged into AOL and used AOL-designed interactions to connect with AOL content and other AOL members. You could look at anything you wanted, as long as it was on AOL, and e-mail anyone you wanted, as long as it was another AOL member. Marketers were interested in these worlds, but chafed at the restrictions and costs, both of which were set by … AOL.

Well, it's been more than 15 years since those days and things have changed. Web standards are so pervasive that they've become second nature. It matters not if you're on a Mac or a PC, using Firefox or Internet Explorer or Safari, on a tiny netbook or a 21-inch flat screen. The Web is pretty much the same. Adobe Flash brings additional interactivity to all browsers on all computers. PDF makes documents look right. MP3 adds sound.

Built on top of this layer of standards is everything that makes online marketing work. Your microsite works on all these devices. You can measure click-throughs. You can use analytics. Your banner ads work on whatever content site you place them on. Major pieces of the marketing toolbox, from search engine optimization to ad networks, function because the Web is all of a piece, all connected, all standard. And what a business it is: Interactive marketing generated $25.6 billion in the United States in 2009, 12% of all advertising spending, according to Forrester Research.

But the pervasive benefits of the Internet have created two huge trends that will shatter all this: proliferating devices and password-locked megasites.

Apple's iPhone is at the thin end of the Splinternet (a term I borrow from Rich Tehrani and Doc Searls). One in four online consumers use the mobile Web at least once a week. How does your Web site look on an iPhone? That's a three-and-a-half-inch screen that doesn't run Adobe Flash. Maybe you built a Web site for mobile and split your Web strategy. Or maybe you built an iPhone app—one of more than 140,000 available at last count—that won't run anywhere but on iPhones and the new iPad. If you did, you're now living in a

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world where the analytics you used to use are being replaced with … well, let's wait and see. And every app you do create has to be approved by Apple. Remind you of any walled gardens you used to live in?

I'm not picking on Apple. You're in the same boat if you wrote a BlackBerry app, a Google Android app, an Xbox app, a widget for Verizon's FiOS TV or an eBook for Kindle. Like the iPhone, all these devices support different standards and leave the interactive marketing infrastructure behind. And none of them are compatible with each other. Even if HTML5, the widely touted new standard, eventually standardizes elements of mobile phone interaction, you'll still be dealing with a wide spread of different devices with different screen sizes and capabilities.

So let's leave devices behind and move on to sites. Take Facebook. By our calculations, of every 10 instances of people sharing information about products with each other on social networks, six happen on Facebook. You have to be there. But again, you're leaving the open Web for a walled garden where policies, applications and standards are set by the platform owner. And what happens on Facebook isn't visible to Google. You could have a vibrant fan community there, but members' privacy settings mean a lot of that activity won't be visible to Google. Another splinter.

The open Web remains, and remains vibrant. But a lot of the most exciting elements of interactive marketing are happening on proprietary devices or on

social networks behind proprietary passwords. Those platforms aren't connected with one another and they lack the infrastructure you're used to.

What should you do?

Ignore the new platforms? Not a good idea, when your customers are loving what they are getting from these platforms. They're there; you must be there.

Pray for standards? Go ahead, if you want. But don't *wait* for standards. Apple and Facebook get enormous value from the control they have over these platforms. Apps won't interoperate any time soon.

Dive right in? Sure. But open your eyes and remember you're entering a world where all the normal rules don't apply. If you choose the wrong site to advertise on, you can just move the banner ads elsewhere. If you choose the wrong platform, you'll need to spend a whole lot of effort to start again somewhere else. So recognize the sunk costs.

Concentrate a little harder on measurement. It's harder, but even more important, to tell what's working in these platforms. This is a good chance to measure hard business metrics, like leads or sales, not just the impressions and click-throughs you have gotten accustomed to in the Web world.

Finally, recognize that these new environments require an experimental mindset; they don't work the way you're used to. The Splinternet can be a wonderful place. It's just not as comfortable and familiar as the Web has gotten in the last 15 years. **m**