From Blogs To Twitter, Fashion World Rushes To Tap Into Social Media

Gucci is doing it. So are Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, Target, Urban Outfitters, Louis Vuitton and Rachel Roy.

Fashion houses, designers and retailers are rushing into the free social media phenomenon that is reshaping not only interpersonal communication, but how apparel, accessories and beauty products are marketed and sold.

They are tweeting, blogging and updating their profiles in an effort to mold their brand personalities on real-time global platforms and form relationships with a community of customers, particularly consumers for whom the Web is as important as a limb.
"Customers can feel like they are part of the brand's extended family, and therefore the brand itself, while the interactive element further deepens that relationship," said Alex Bolen, chief executive officer of Oscar de la Renta. "These characteristics address and satisfy that tribal part of the fashion consumer the way in which people identify themselves by the brands they buy."

A key component of social media "is real-time feedback an ability to accurately measure marketing results," Bolen said. "While this aspect of the Internet's promise has yet to be fully realized, one can adjust, fairly quickly, to emphasize those initiatives that are working best."

The newness of the platforms has made quantifying the sales impact of social media tough to pinpoint, although companies cite rising Web traffic and more customers using promotions.

"How do you quantify something that prevents a customer service problem that could've been a disaster, & [that] can create new buzz for a new product?" asked Paul Argenti, a professor of corporate communications at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business. "How do you quantify that? Where else can you get that kind of instant feedback? It's all unquantifiable and all incredibly useful."

Reggie Bradford, ceo of Vitrue, a social media consulting firm, believes it's important to view the situation in reverse, saying a brand will ultimately be "measured in growth or losses by being there [on social media] or not being there."

More than any marketing medium, including print, where advertising is suffering, social media give brands a chance to be a part of a dialogue about their own companies. In this new and evolving framework, everyone is a participant. According to Forrester Research, Facebook, with an estimated 200 million users, classifies two-thirds of its users as being of post-college age, with 35-plus the fastest-growing demographic. Twitter, a platform for messages of 140 characters or less that had 20 million unique visitors in May, has 42 percent of its users in the 35-to-49 age range and 20 percent ages 25 to 34.

You don't have to be famous to get a following, but it helps. The king of the Twitter hill is Ashton Kutcher, who got into the game early and has more than 2.3 million followers. Oprah Winfrey, whose first tweet didn't come until April "HI TWITTERS. THANK YOU FOR A WARM WELCOME. FEELING REALLY 21st CENTURY" now has over 1.6 million followers.

The fascination with fashion has even helped breed followings for Twitterers masquerading as major industry figures, including fakekarl (Lagerfeld) and fakeanna (Wintour). WWD's own Twitter page has grown to more than 688,000 followers from a mere 200 since its launch in February.

Designers such as Rachel Roy and Charlotte Ronson share snapshots of their personal lives and their company's activities via social media.

Brands including Gap, Victoria's Secret, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Nike and Adidas also have tapped into YouTube, MySpace and other sites, where their videos, commercials, behind-the-scenes footage and fashion shows are posted.

"Everyone wants to know what makes [designers] tick, why they design, and get closer to the brand,"
said Frances Pennington, vice president of global marketing for Juicy Couture.

Ronson said she updates her Twitter fans at least daily "letting them know if something new comes in or something sells well. It's a good way to keep everyone connected."

The designer maintains a Twitter page for her business Twitter.com/shopronson with 2,084 followers since starting in the last three months. It includes examples of the Twitter-as-marketing technique, such as a recent tweet that said, "Just got in some great Rag & Bone items& hats, ties and belts& come check it out!!!"

Ronson's attention to her Twitter page has yielded results in her retail site's traffic. About 10 percent of Ronson's total site traffic originates on Twitter, and 93 percent are new visitors. Ronson also posts daily updates on her personal Twitter page, Twitter.com/cjronson, which has 11,946 followers, with musings about her day, such as, "I'm watching Funny Face, the musical with Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire& Need I say more&"

Roy tweets several times daily on Twitter.com/rachel_roy and has attracted 1,672 followers who frequently retweet the Twitter term for forwarding a message her posts. The designer mixes promotional tweets, such as, "The entire RR 2010 Resort Collection Lookbook has been posted on Rachel Roy's official Facebook Page. Check it out," with more personal tweets "I found some cute wellies by Hunter for my daughter and I green for me and purple for her. Here's a link to more."

The juxtaposition is engineered to nurture ties with customers. "I hope that my relationship with customers will become more intimate as they get to know me beyond my designs," she said.

Facebook relaunched its company page platform in March with more options for organizations to elevate "the power of the brand," said Tom Arrix, the site's vice president of U.S. sales. The result is a company page that looks identical to a user's page, with a "Wall" where the company and its fans can post messages, photos and video; a tab for information about the company, and additional tabs where a firm can add everything from sale promotions to trailers for new ad campaigns.

Facebook offers its users the ability to "fan" a firm or brand a component that sets it apart from a standard company Web site. Once a user has "fanned" a brand, the business has direct access to them and is able to send messages and updates via a constant news feed on the user's home page.

The result is a "powerful brand advantage&. The company is now in the middle of two-way communication with their consumer," Arrix said.

To join Twitter, a user creates a free user name and password and then sifts through a search function to find friends and companies the user would like to "follow." Once a user is following a company, the user's home page is refreshed with every update that company sends. For instance, if LouisVuitton_US tweets "Louis Vuitton's new Core Values campaign profiled in today's @nytimes," all 10,492 of its followers will see this message on their home pages.

Some naysayers may find it hard to understand why a person would invite a company into their virtual personal life by fanning a company on Facebook or following them on Twitter, but millions have done just
It remains difficult to decipher what an online following means for companies in the long term. The more established Facebook and MySpace now have retention rates of almost 70 percent, according to Nielsen Media. However, Nielsen Media estimated more than 60 percent of first-time Twitter users neglected to return to the site after a month.

Vitrue created a Social Media Index to measure what people are talking about online. The index is generated from an algorithm that scours the Internet for a specific term on searches and social media networks and produces a score. The higher the score, the more frequently that term has been mentioned on the Web. Vitrue looked at 35 major fashion brands and retailers from May 26 to June 1. The five most-talked-about brands were Gucci, Target, Gap, American Apparel and Urban Outfitters.

These brands are, not coincidentally, active on social platforms. They "leverage their presence on social networks, have great content [updated frequently] and tools for engagement and conversation," Bradford said.

"Fashion brands are emblematic of a person's personality and how they want to be perceived; it's woven into [her] identity," he said. "Everybody loves brands whether they're generic or Gucci. It's a statement."

Gucci first became involved with Facebook in November 2008 after noticing that about 50,000 fans had signed up for a Gucci page started by a person unaffiliated with the fashion label. So Gucci decided to launch a company page, raising the fan count to its current total of 402,502.

The weekly updated page contains original video uploaded to the site, photos from events and new product announcements.

The Gucci by Gucci label launched its Twitter page twitter.com/GuccibyGucci in March and has 2,840 followers.

The "currency of the Internet is such that if you're not updating on a timely basis, individuals are disappointed," said Robert Triefus, worldwide marketing and communications director for Gucci. "In fact, it can end up backfiring."

Target has used its Facebook page with 452,856 fans for advertising its latest designer collaborations. The retailer most recently posted a video of Dror Benshetrit explaining his collection for Target. The chain also used the page to publicize its philanthropic efforts through a user-interactive application. The company launched the "Bullseye Gives" campaign that allowed its users to vote on the charity to which Target should give money. When a user chose a charity, she was offered the option of publishing her choice to her own news feed.

For instance, if Facebook user Jane Smith voted for Red Cross, it would appear on her home page and on all of her friends' news feeds, with the message "Jane Smith voted for the Red Cross for the Target Bullseye Gives project," with a link to the Target Facebook page. This component is illustrative of the allure of Web 2.0 interacting with a customer who then spreads the company's message.
Gap has a Facebook fan page with 321,875 fans, and is active on Twitter with 5,269 followers. The Gap Facebook page has videos of designer Patrick Robinson talking about the brand, as well as photos of events and original content.

Urban Outfitters posts promotions and events, and encourages its 101,453 Facebook fans and 27,948 Twitter followers to get involved with the brand. A recent Facebook post read: "It's your favourite time of the year again Sale Time. Our Boutique sale starts today online and in store! This means Luella, See by Chloë, Anglomania by Vivienne Westwood, Thomas Burberry, Karen Walker, Peter Jensen et al. are all waiting for you; but not for long!"

Within four days, 72 Facebook users had responded to that post, one of whom recommended a particular Urban Outfitters location, saying, "Best sale upstairs at santana row!"

When American Apparel and its CEO, Dov Charney, were embroiled in a lawsuit filed by Woody Allen over unauthorized use of his image, the company used its Twitter page, with 31,167 followers, and Facebook page, with 133,577 fans, for direct access to customers by posting its official statement on Facebook and linking to Twitter. "We were able to speak and reassure customers," said Ryan Holiday, an American Apparel spokesman.

According to company estimates, 10 percent of all traffic to americanapparel.net originates from four social media sites Facebook, Twitter, Chictopia and LookBook.

Oscar de la Renta and Donna Karan have each dedicated a Twitter page to their "PR Girls" Twitter.com/OscarPRgirl and Twitter.com/dkny. OscarPRgirl, which promotes itself as "reporting from inside one of the world’s most prestigious design houses," began tweeting on June 4 and has 162 followers. A recent tweet: "Hathaway is the new Hepburn: Anne H. looking impossibly chic @ the tony awards in Oscar de la Renta."

The DKNY page, which launched on May 8 and has 981 followers, bills itself as providing "behind-the-scenes scoop from inside DKNY" written by a "PR girl." The tweets are personality-laced messages that promote the Donna Karan label, such as "So great! Karen Olivo won the TONY (Award for "West Side Story") . She looked so chic in Donna. Huge pic in the @dailynews."

"I hope that my relationship with customers will become more intimate as they get to know me beyond my designs."
Rachel Roy

Betsey Johnson began her Twitter page, Twitter.com/xoBetseyJohnson, Jan. 23 and has 8,068 followers. The page is updated several times daily with promotional tweets such as "Don't miss out on our Memorial Day sale! Tomorrow is your last day to save 30%!" mixed with attentive dialogue with her followers for instance one follower said "doing some damage on the @xoBetseyJohnson Web site. retail therapy" and xoBetseyJohnson responded "Nice! Everyone needs retail therapy! Xox" ).

"We saw [social media] as a real opportunity to reach out to customers, to use it as free advertising and be a human voice for the brand," said Agatha Szczepaniak, public relations director.
Kate Spade coined the term "tweetwriter" a combination of "Twitter" and "typewriter" as a tool in the company's venture into social media. The Tweetwriter is an antique typewriter, which was set up in the brand's Fifth Avenue store in May. The staff encourages customers to type messages they would like to see on the Kate Spade Twitter page, which has 641 followers. Eclectic entries such as, "from 135 5th ave: i could watch the clouds pass all day" fill the page, giving it a quirky feel. Lindsay Stevens, director of marketing and strategy, said the aim is to project "a collective point of view from our customers."

Juicy Couture launched an interactive social media platform on its own site, called Club Couture. The technology allows consumers to put together looks from the collection and share the outfits with friends who can then rate the outfit and create their own.

This social interaction has resulted in a conversion rate 162 percent higher than any other part of the site meaning a user who happens upon the Club Couture page on the company's Web site is 1.62 times more likely to purchase an outfit on the site than if she had been browsing any other page on juicycouture.com.

It is essential for businesses to have a clear strategy and goals regarding social media, said analyst Diane Clarkson of Forrester Research, who wrote the report, "How Twitter Can Influence eBusiness." Diving in without them is not a viable option.

Social media is "a little bit of a Pandora's box," Gucci's Triefus said. "If you're going to get involved, you have to have the resources to be able to do it correctly."

If a brand isn't vigilant, a constantly adapting, public organism like Twitter or Facebook might do more harm than good. For instance, a "Twitter storm" is a digital mob of sorts that forms around a topic or current event which, when negative in nature, can harm a company's image if there's no counterpoint from the brand in question.

"We've seen Twitter storms with fast backlash when a company does something that [fans] don't like," Clarkson said. "I'd want someone accountable for the brand to be behind that."

What appears certain, however, is social media platforms will keep evolving, proliferating and gaining influence.

"The fashion world is shifting, needs are changing and people's shopping habits are changing& .It's clear that [consumers on social media] are part of the overall fashion conversation," Roy said. "And I don't think that is going to change."

For more on how companies are using social media, seeWWD.com.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Donna Karan's Twitter page bills itself as providing "behind-the-scenes scoop from inside DKNY."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Gucci's company Facebook page has more than 402,500 fans.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Oscar de la Renta's "PR girls" tweeted about Anne Hathaway at the Tony Awards.