

Facebook's free ride is over: Free advertising virtually disappears

By Joe Dysart

Rinks smarting over Facebook's decision to severely limit their ability to communicate with people who like their business pages on the social network recently got an explanation from the Web titan about the policy change.

But many aren't buying it.

"Facebook wants us to pay for real estate that we used to get for free," said Leslie Nuccio, creative strategist, Meltwater (<http://www.meltwater.com>), a social media monitoring and press relations firm.

Before the policy change, rinks absolutely loved the Facebook 'Like' system. Essentially, any person who clicked a button and 'Liked' a business page on Facebook regularly received posts from that business in their Facebook News Feed. (The News Feed is the middle column on a user's Facebook home page, which shows posts from friends, posts from businesses they've 'Liked' on Facebook, and old-school advertising posts.)

The 'Like' was a marketer's dream, in that a rink on Facebook could stay in constant -- sometimes daily -- contact with customers by sending out interesting posts related to their product or services.

Indeed, even a corporate business that had, say, 300,000 people who Liked their business page on Facebook could post a text-and-image message to the social network, and all 300,000 people who were Followers of their business on Facebook would see that message -- at absolutely no cost to the business.

The smartest of these businesses also quickly realized that the way to stay Liked among current and potential customers was to engage in an authentic 'conversation' with Facebook users -- rather than launch old-school posts in promotional blast form. In the technical jargon of marketing, this ability to send posts for free to everyone who Liked your business page on Facebook is known as 'organic reach.' Marketers loved it.

Sadly, that cozy relationship between businesses and Facebook users began to degrade about two years ago, when Facebook decided to begin to severely throttle back the 'reach' of posts businesses were sending people who had Liked their page.

The result: These days, as little as six percent or less of people who have Liked a business page on Facebook actually receive any particular post that business sends over the social network, according to Marshall Manson, a managing director at Ogilvy & Mather.

Moreover, Manson predicts it's "only a matter of time" before the organic reach of businesses on Facebook will



Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, has cracked down on free business posts on Facebook.

plummet to zero (<http://www.slideshare.net/socialogilvy/facebook-zero-white-paper-31934430>).

Officially, Facebook insists that the only reason businesses on the social network are now only reaching a fraction of the people they used to reach is due to an enhanced content filtering process the social network has been fine-tuning during the past year.

Essentially, Facebook says its users are being inundated with too much content on a daily basis from both businesses and other users. So the social network is increasingly filtering the content that shows up in users' 'News Feed,' based on the data Facebook finds in those users' Facebook profiles and in their activity on Facebook.

"Rather than showing people all possible content, News Feed is designed to show each person on Facebook the content that's most relevant to them," said Brian Boland, lead, ads marketing team at Facebook. "To choose which stories to show, News Feed ranks each possible story -- from more to less important -- by looking at thousands of factors relative to each person."

This filtering process is an entirely benign, entirely innocent attempt by Facebook to ensure that Facebook users' News Feed is absolutely as relevant and interesting as humanely possible, according to Facebook's Boland.

"In our tests, we've always found that the News Feed ranking system offers people a better, more engaging experience on Facebook," Boland said. "We've gotten better at showing high-quality content. And we've cleaned up News Feed spam." Maybe so.

But in the view of many rinks and other businesses who've spent thousands upon thousands of dollars over the years reaching out to Facebook users

-- cajoling them, tempting them, rewarding them -- to Like their business pages, Facebook's move to severely throttle back their ability to post to those Facebook followers feels more like a money grab.

"To be fair to the brands here, Facebook has put on a real dog-and-pony show over the past several years to convince companies that building up their followers is a great idea and that the big payoff is the earned media that we were getting in those News Feeds," said Meltwater's Nuccio.

Indeed, Facebook's Borland is quick-to-note that any business that wants to override Facebook's content filtering system and get a post into the News Feed of all the people who have 'Liked' their business page on Facebook can still do so.

You just have to pay for it now.

In Facebook terms, that override is called a 'Boost.' And it's available to any business that is willing to pay for that added reach -- often billed on a 'per-thousand-users' rate scheme.

Again, this 'option' smells more like money grab to many Facebook business users. But like it or hate it, Facebook's Boosts, and its trumped-up content filtering system, appears to be here-to-stay for the long haul.

While it may take many businesses some time to accept that new reality, there are still some ways right now to deal with the new regime:

Encourage Your Facebook Followers to Check 'Get Notifications': People who have 'Liked' your Facebook page can signal to Facebook that they really do want to see posts from your business if they check the 'Get Notifications' option. They can check this option by:

Clicking "Pages Feed" on their Facebook homepage to see all the Pages

they've 'Liked'

Scrolling through those Pages to see a post from your business

Clicking on an arrow in the right-hand corner of your post

Highlighting and clicking "Get Notifications"

Encourage Your Followers to Recommend Your Posts: Facebook automatically increases the reach of a post from your rink if one or more of your followers recommend your post to a friend or colleague. Encourage your followers to do this with every post you make.

Beef-up Your Email Marketing: Many businesses are aggressively seeking the email addresses of people who have Liked them on Facebook. The theory: If people have gone out of their way to Like your business on Facebook, they've already signaled they want communications from you. With email, you can go direct to these people -- without worrying about a middle man.

Bite the Bullet, Buy the Boost: Even though the deal is not nearly as good as before (posts used to be free) buying a 'Boost' from Facebook to reach everyone who's 'Liked' your page is still relatively inexpensive compared to other advertising.

"Facebook placement is really, really cheap compared to other channels," said Meltwater's Nuccio. "I have a consultant friend who works with a charity, and they saw their organic reach tank by 90% -- from a reach of 750 to about 75 -- with the recent changes. They then spent \$200 for promoted posts, and they reached 4500 people."

Joe Dysart is an Internet speaker and business consultant based in Manhattan. Voice: (646) 233-4089. Email: joe@joedysart.com. Web: www.joedysart.com.