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From Greeting Cards to Pinterest: Activity Streams and Marketing



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The business card started out as a way to leave a message, but evolved into a very elaborate ... [+] GETTY

Social media has become such an integral part of marketing that it's easy to forget about how different a paradigm it really is. Because of that, a great number of people who focus on marketing often fail to understand how it differs from other forms of online content.

and as such develop strategies that are a waste of energy, time and money. Ultimately, it all comes down to cards ... specifically data cards.

The data card goes back to well before the computer age. By the mid-19th century, the price of printing had gone down enough that the reasonably well-to-do could commission a run of cards, usually upon very high quality paper stock, that identified them, provided a one or two line description of their qualifications, and typically included an address. The most expensive of these might also include a monogram or crest for their family or business.

These cards, often with a hand-lettered message - would typically be left with the doorman or butler, and served to initiate a conversation such as a business proposal, an invitation to a party, or (as all too many romance novels have taken advantage of) a proposal to walk out with a young, unwed (and presumably marriageable) woman.

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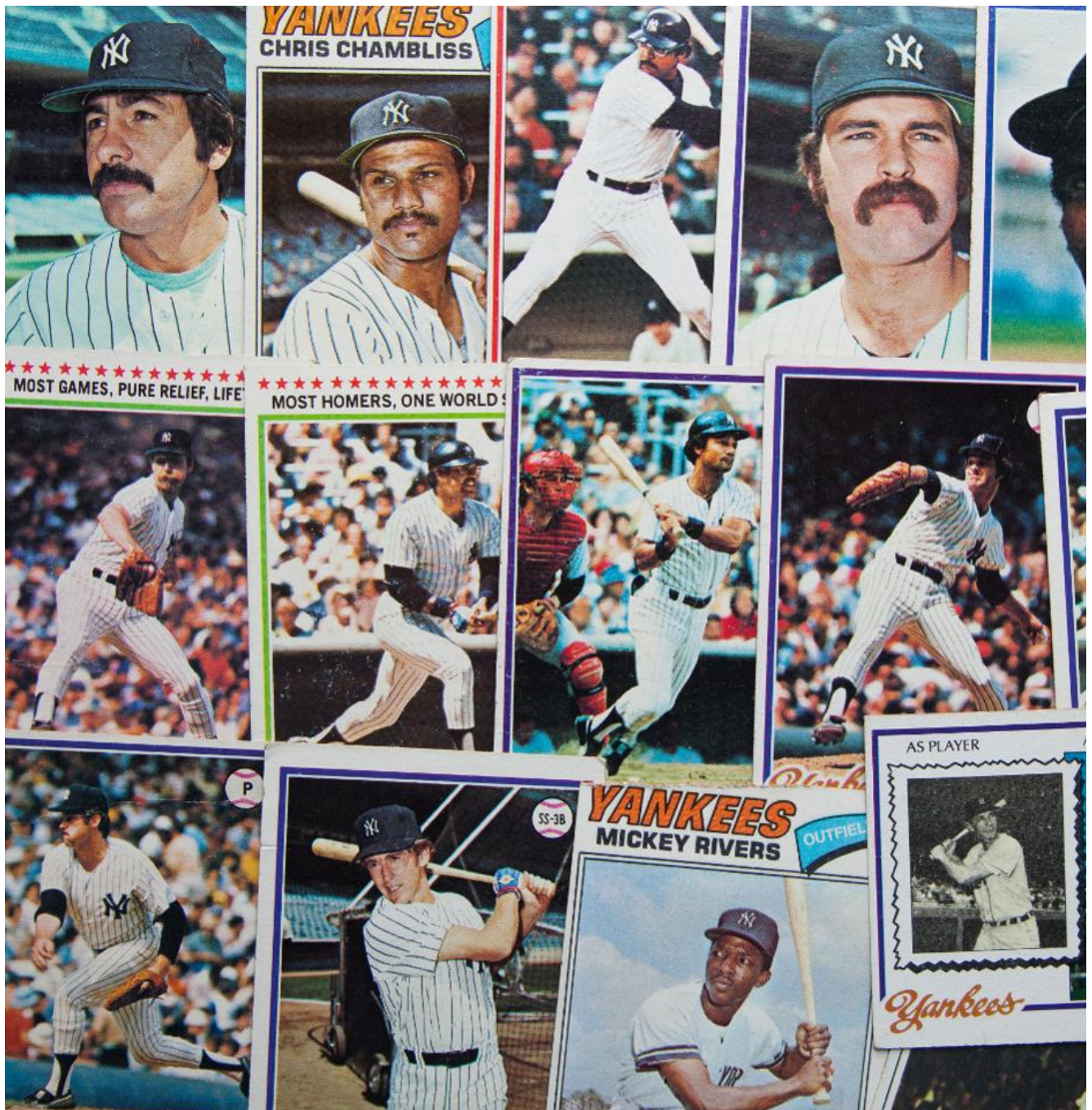


In the late 19th century, photogravura printing made it possible to more easily print photographs by using a thin film lattice that would convert continuous tones into dots of black and white. Later, primarily due to the work of people like the painter Georges Seurat, a similar approach was used to reproduce color printing, one that is still in use today.

While this was a boon to magazines, the low cost of printing also proved appealing to manufacturers looking to promote their products. Because the sport of baseball was rapidly gaining in popularity at the time, a number of tobacco and confectionary companies started to package their products with promotional baseball cards. Such cards would typically have a name and picture (sometimes from a photograph, more often drawn by an artist then reproduced via photogravura) on one side, and their relevant position and stats information on the back. Due to their limited runs, such cards would eventually become one of the most popular collectible items of all time.

This mania for cards would eventually make its way into other arenas globally. Japan, in particular, has a strong market for collectible game cards of various stripes, such as the

Pokemon card game that introduced packs of unique collectible cards with various game monsters on it (and that would in turn fuel the Pokemon Go craze of a few years back).



Woodbridge, New Jersey USA - February 18, 2014: A pile of vintage baseball cards from the 1970s New ... [+] GETTY

Data Cards, Hypercard and Activity Streams

The Card metaphor was an early one in personal computing circles. Hypercard, release for the Macintosh in 1985 by Bill Atkinson of Apple, combined 3x5 proportioned "index cards" with a flat-file database and a simple GUI interface to create one of the first hypertext interfaces, one that predated the world wide web by several years. A hypercard

deck was arranged in sequential order, but a button click could let you jump to different pages in the deck, and the ability to both drag and drop items and to store metadata within the deck actually made possible early data applications.

Hypercard served as an inspiration not only for the web, but also for Microsoft PowerPoint, Harvard Graphics and other presentation software, which expanded the card and card deck metaphor to slides and slide decks, and was really the launching point for the multimedia revolution of the early 1990s.

When Tim Berners-Lee was working out the foundations for HTML in the late 1980s, his intent was not in fact to create a document-linking system. At the time, most such electronic documents were given in their own (frequently proprietary) languages, or used a variant of the Structured Generalized Markup Language (SGML), which required specialized software to display. Instead, his goal was to create a hypercard like abstract language that would provide just enough information to let someone find the documents themselves. The subsequent HTML explosion, however, took the fairly sparse HTML language (at the time) and turned it into another markup language, in this case for web pages, and linked documents rather than linked cards became the dominant paradigm on the web for the next couple of decades.

However, the card paradigm kept popping up in unexpected places. A card is by its very nature limited in information, somewhat deliberately so. At its core, a card can be thought of as a link with bundled metadata wrapped around it. Altavista, and later Google, used this idea to create the entries in their famous search pages. Each entry contains a title, usually with a link to a resource, a very short abstract, and when possible a visual icon that provides a quick visual check to help establish context and insure the link is relevant.

On the issue of relevance, the sort order of these "cards" is the *raison d'être* for search engine optimization. In general, the order of a given list will also provide a good indicator for the priority of interacting with each item, something most marketers intuited early on. If you're first in the list, then the likelihood your content will be clicked on is high, while if you're tenth on the list (or worse, on the second page) you stand with very little chance of actually being clicked.

To go back to the 19th century greeting card metaphor - young prospective beaux would typically come to a house with a winsome lass as early in the day as possible, because they would have the highest chance of being first to see the young lady in question. Con in too late, and you might as well not even bother.

However, the damned butler complicated things immensely, since he often had a sneak preview of the gentleman in question before anyone else. If the gentleman looked a bit down at the heels, had threadbare cuffs or appeared a bit hung-over, then the card in question might get pushed back in the stack, or even pitched altogether. On the other hand, if the gentleman showed obvious quality, and maybe even slipped a bit of an incentive into the butler's pockets (not too much, mind you, that would be crass) then maybe the butler would be a little more forthcoming in making sure the young lady of the house was made aware of those attentions early.

This, in a nutshell, is what SEO is all about - making sure you present yourself well enough for the butler (the search algorithm) to give you preferential treatment in getting to the young lady (the customer) in a timely manner. A great number of SEO strategies ultimately are thus focused on how to make web pages more attractive to search engine



How Activity Streams Changed The Game

However, various social media upended that particular formula, each in its own ways. Facebook, for instance, innovated the activity stream. Facebook members were also content creators - they created cards. Originally, when you joined in a particular network, you would see everyone's card in that network as it was created, what became known as an activity stream. Sometimes that card would have a link to an external web page, but the card just as likely could have been a picture of someone's cat.

Eventually, a person's network grew large enough that the bandwidth cost of pushing out that card began to become significant to Facebook. So what did they do? They hired a butler. A share or a like are both weighting mechanisms. When you like someone's content on Facebook (or any similar setup) you are signalling that you want more from this person, perhaps at the exclusion of other content elsewhere. This is like the butler keeping only those cards that the decision makers in the household (the wife of the master of the house, the master himself, and the young lady, in varying orders) have liked in the past, or those that are similar to the liked beaus, while the rest end up filed in the ash bin. This weighting process is more subtle, both because there are various factors that weigh on the decision that are not necessarily exposed to the beaus in question, and because what each decision maker likes over time changes.

There are still ways to game the system. Some are approved by the social media in question, with cash on the barrel or the equivalent in gifts in exchange for more likes still being a factor, but in most cases, the young woman (the user or customer) does have at least a little say in the equation. This was not always the case in Victorian England, sad to bear with me, even if the metaphor is a bit leaky here.

Sharing is a bit different in that it moves a card from one network to another. In our romance novel analogy, this is much like the young woman passing on a beau's card to friend of hers, who may be a better match (keep in mind that the young lady too is playing the game, looking to get the best potential match). The friend has her own network that likely overlaps at least a bit with the first. Note that from a marketer's standpoint, shares are valuable because they extend the influence that their card can reach - with the card itself then becoming the proxy to the individual in question. Such

share is also an endorsement - by passing on that card to their network, the sharer is also implicitly saying that the poster is worthy of attention, though its worth putting the caveat up that the attention may not necessarily be positive.

The simple *like* is a fairly unsubtle signal - it means that something is of interest to the reader. More social media are moving towards the idea of *expressive likes* to better provide an indication about intent, especially since comment sentiment analysis, while improving, is still more miss than hit. That signalling is important to the network, because it also provides feedback to the poster in ways that are hard to gauge from comments.

Comments actually represents something of a mixed bag to marketers. People will comment to agree, but often will also comment to disagree with the original poster or some other commentator. While text analytics and machine learning are getting better determining meaning, in most cases, the commentary usually diverges from the original post within a few comments. Comments also represent no-fly zones for marketers and advertisers, as they essentially are treading on the cognitive space of the original poster.

Linked-In and Twitter obviously have similar metrics for their cards. They are also in general adopting the concept of links that Twitter pioneered, with the idea that links basically tie a given post into an informal taxonomy or ontology. As a general of thumb, try to use a minimum of five hash tags for each LinkedIn and Twitter post I create, with one of them being an identifier for my business identity (#theCagleReport) and another being a consistent subject grouping, such as #astronomy for a post on space-related news. In Linked-In, Twitter or Facebook, this can be used to create mini-magazines around both the identifier and the topical header.

For instance, you can use the search dialog in Linked-In to set up a query that will [show all of the CagleReport articles with Astronomy as a hash tag](#). Because this is a query, rather than simply a static post, it makes it possible to pass this link to someone else, and they will get the latest "feed" of content, not just a static page. This can also be used to tie in to more stripped down "card feeds" expressed in JSON or XML that can in turn drive other applications via the appropriate API. You can also do intersectional queries in this way, getting feeds that express the intersection between two or more data feeds

based upon topics. While still a bit crude, such faceting can really come into play when you're trying to tie together your own applications with social media feeds.



Digital video completes the transition from web content to stream content. GETTY

Web TV – YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest

Marshall McLuhan was an early expert on media matters, writing extensively about the subject in the 1960s and 70s. One of his most widely remembered quotes was that "The medium is the message," an observation that it is the medium of communication that sets the framing about any information. Ironically, the opposite is also true with card based communication - *the message is the medium*. What this means in practice is that we are moving past a point where what is being sent is a reference to a web page at all, and instead, is simply a vehicle for the transport of the medium itself.

YouTube and its host of imitators are vehicles for delivering short to intermediate length video content. Ironically, after nearly fifteen years, advertisers are still struggling with the best approach to using YouTube. A video has a web page, but that web page in general is fairly peripheral to the video content itself. Marketers have a fairly strong

ability to create collections of feeds and brand those, and they have the ability to purchase advertising space on other videos, using keyword and tag based approaches to insure that the content is appropriate for the videos being produced. It is also possible to embed links, advertisements and the like within video themselves.

This means that the primary challenges with YouTube (and its nearest real competitor, Vimeo) is the audience and the expectations for creating content. It is cheaper to create video than at any time in the past, but cheaper does not mean cheap. YouTube, for a while, was considered the low rent district, as most of the content creators were themselves amateurs. The problem with amateurs is that over time, they can become sufficiently proficient and practiced to become professionals, and while it is still unlikely that there will be a breakout YouTube production any time soon, it is often a remarkable good place to field test campaigns.

Sleepy little Vimeo is a better bet for marketers, something that can be seen by the number of production houses that use the platform for hosting, especially of advertising and marketing content. It also skews older and more professional demographically, and has become a popular place to host behind the scenes footage and trailers for advertising campaigns.

Instagram is also a card paradigm, but the limited ability to work outside of the Instagram space makes it much more of a walled garden. Live metadata is restricted to hashtags and user @ tags, which means that you are in general limited only to the metadata that's part of user account itself. The APIs are similarly limited, in that you cannot intersect tags, which has caused a massive proliferation of compound words that make searching for content difficult (and often results in a huge discrepancy between some categories and others).

The final difficulty with Instagram is that its activity velocity is very high. For instance, take a tag like #cosplay, which has thirteen million items. When sorted by newest Instagram posts, a single post dropped roughly from the first item in the list to 120th in a minute, or about two cards a second. If you have quality content it may climb up to the most popular posts, though these are too stable in the other direction, moving very slowly over time.

Ironically, for many vendors, one of the best social media sites is also one that uses the metadata aspects of its cards to the fullest: Pinterest. With Pinterest you can use multiple tags, create external links, take advantage of similarity algorithms that can manage both taxonomic classification and visual similarities for related links and take advantage of the share and like nature of content. Increasingly, you're seeing Pinterest replace older digital asset management systems, because of its ease of use, ability to categorize without being a specialist and powerful discovery. It also takes full use of the visual paradigm of cards as a way to quickly identify and order resources, something that can be used to also tie together content with visual leader images.

It is likely that the next stage in the evolution of such social emergence is the rise of public knowledge bases as publishing platforms. I plan on covering this in much more detail in a future post.

Marketing in the Twenty First Century

I will be looking at different aspects of marketing in the twenty-first century on a regular basis. Because of this, one thing I'm going to do, starting with this post, is to highlight people in the marketing and technical fields and providing either an interview or at a minimum an introduction to them.

This first post will focus on leaders in the eCommerce marketing realm.



Jordan Menard JORDAN MENARD

Jordan Menard is the CEO of [Media Buyer Mastery](#), and has gained a reputation as an authority on marketing info-products online, bypassing the need for shipping and fulfillment. He makes the following remark on succeeding in this space.

“Don't take failure so personal. I wish I would've looked at everything as a science experiment instead of taking the failure so personally and thinking "I'm a failure" when things went wrong.”



Jason Portnoy JASON PORTNOY

Jason Portnoy, cofounder and CEO of and **JPORT Media** has gained a significant following for his regular podcast Perfectly Mentored, where he regularly interviews business executives, entrepreneurs and celebrities and how they managed to succeed in their respective fields. He speaks specifically about sales:

“Sales is the most important skill to develop. There's no way to over extend when it comes to promoting and getting attention - obscurity kills business. Developing and working on a winning and positive mindset trumps all.”



Dee Deng DEE DENG

Dee Deng, co-founder & CEO, **Right Hook Digital**, regularly teaches seminars to entrepreneurs on how to succeed at media buying, as well as running Right Hook Digital, an agency partnering with growing brands to harness digital platforms. He discusses the value of focus.

“Maintain deep focus & know your "one thing". As entrepreneurs, we tend to get drawn to shiny new objects. Knowing your "one thing" will help ensure you're driving towards true north rather than working on a distraction.”



Christina Szekeres CHRISTINA SZEKERES

Christina Szekeres, heads up **IM Queen Consulting**, a marketing and media consulting firm with a global reach, and is one of the best known women in the eCommerce domain, echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that much of starting a business comes about in conquering your fears:

“Entrepreneurship comes with a lot of self-doubts, struggle and questions. Believe in yourself because entrepreneurship is a beautiful journey especially when you have more self-confidence.”



Alex Lee Mong Yang ALEX LEE MONG YANG

Alex Lee Mong Yang - Co-founder - **Surge Advertising**, has specialized in the problems of scaling eCommerce companies to better succeed when they finally "catch". He is a frequent keynotespeaker at conferences and workshops in the Marketing and Advertising arena worldwide, and emphasizes the danger of seeking perfection:

“Execution is more important than perfection. Don't waste your time striving for perfection, strive for daily execution instead.”



Carlo Bellati CARLO BELLATI

Carlo Bellati - CEO & Luca Borreani - EVP of Marketing - [uDroppy](#)

uDroppy is an innovative platform that has disrupted the Ecommerce world by automating and optimizing many of the industry's biggest challenges. Founded by Carlo Bellati, Luca Borreani, and several other innovative entrepreneurs, uDroppy delivers on its mission to help make Ecommerce accessible to nearly everyone.

Carlo Bellati, the CEO and Co-Founder says, *“Don't work with a waterfall approach, rather with an agile approach, motivating everybody about what is going to happen in each sprint. Vision is crucial for keeping team members highly motivated.”*



Luca Borreani LUCA BORREANI

Co-Founder Luca Borreani advises, *“Plans never work out as planned, always be ready to adapt to situations and willing to change everything overnight if ever needed.”*

Until next time, keep on graphing!

Follow me on [LinkedIn](#).



Kurt Cagle

Kurt Cagle is a writer, data scientist and futurist focused on the intersection of computer technologies and society. He is the founder of Semantical, LLC, a smart data ... **Read More**