

MOBILE

Will WhatsApp become a primary conduit between businesses, consumers?

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WhatsApp delivers the message

By CHANTAL TODE

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The news that WhatsApp will soon start allowing business to communicate directly with users reflects how popular messaging applications are reimagining traditional marketing and unlocking one-to-one engagement opportunities for brands.

WhatsApp said in a recent blog post that the platform, which is close to reaching 1 billion active users, will soon be a free service as it begins testing tools enabling business to communicate directly with users while avoiding introducing third-party ads. With Facebook Messenger and WeChat also focused on serving as a go-between for businesses and consumers, marketers will need to closely watch this space develops so they can take advantage of what is shaping up to be a significant new marketing opportunity on mobile.

"It is significant in messaging space that now the three largest messaging apps WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat will be focused on a very useful business case messaging apps as primary conduits between businesses and consumers," said Mark Beccue, principal analyst at [Mark Beccue Consulting Inc.](#)

"These messaging apps are in the case of WeChat or will become platforms from which third-party apps will hang off of," he said. "The chat interface allows for easy consumer interaction and very personalized, contextualized product and service delivery.

"For marketers, this is another sign of the times as we move away from advertising as we know it towards personalized and contextualized products and services. It marks the beginning of the true marketing one-to-one era."

Global reach

WhatsApp envisions businesses being able to take advantage of the platform to stay in contact with customers.

For example, a consumer could communicate with a bank about a recent transaction or with an airline about a delayed flight.

The move is the latest example of how messaging apps are evolving into platforms where businesses and consumers can stay in contact.

For example, brands such as Hyatt are leveraging Businesses on Messenger to bring conversations to social media, including real-time chat and transaction receipts ([see story](#)).

The benefit that WhatsApp promises compared to other messaging apps is its broad global reach and strong presence in big markets such as India and Brazil.

WhatsApp also boasts strong user communities, presenting an important opportunity for marketers who are respectful of users.

"WhatsApp has really figured out how to create communities and groups of interests among trusted friends that open up communication and influence," said Lara Mehanna, general manager of U.S. and vice president of sales and business development at [Sonata](#). "For marketers, they can now create groups of communities for their business, brands, or service and/or build that one to one relationship with customers in an environment they are already spending a lot of time in.

"Especially as marketers think about the global markets or the Hispanic community, where messaging applications are a primary method of communication or the only method," she said. "This opens the doors for more direct interaction with communities that may have been harder to penetrate so closely through other marketing efforts."

Recognizing texting's significance

Marketers will face several challenges on WhatsApp, including recognizing text as an important real-time conduit to consumers.

Also, marketers will need to figure out the proper cadence and type of messaging that works with WhatsApp's users.

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"This is really big news for the messaging space and how messaging applications can be an effective tool for marketers," Ms. Mehanna said. "People still seem to think of texting as secondary to social, browsing and email, but it has to be seen as immediate, direct, and effective way for marketers to build the conversation with their customers and their close communities.

"I do also think marketers need to be a bit cautious in how they use WhatsApp," she said. "It isn't a news feed application and consumers will not take too kindly to over-communication that isn't pertinent and relevant.

"There will need to be a lot of finesse applied to understand how this can be most effective."

Figuring out chatbots

While WhatsApp will not be enabling third-party ads, marketers will need to figure out how to effectively leverage advertising to integrate with their messaging app strategies. Otherwise, these programs could be too limited in scope to be meaningful for brands.

"The advertising side is key to drive the message into the messaging application," Ms. Mehanna said. "It isn't about in-messaging application advertising but about alerting customers that brands have new services and support that can be activated via WhatsApp and through this actively open up the sharing with other interested circles of friends.

"I have seen the challenge of only launching in-messaging application program being limited to only those that are actively exploring the app and paying attention to it," she said. "By giving broader reach for the capability, you not only drive a larger audience but you allow the guerilla-style marketing of referrals work its magic via shares within WhatsApp communities.

"This turns the challenge into their biggest opportunity. Get those that participate in your marketing program be the advocates to gain more customers into the fold."

It is clear that messaging platforms are optimistic they will have a significant role for consumers and marketers going forward. The contenders in the United States include Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, Kik as well as Slack and Uber.

Not only will marketers need to familiarize themselves with the different platforms out there but also learn about some of their unique capabilities, such as chatbots, which simulate conversation with human users.

"Twenty sixteen will be a year of gambles and risks for marketers in messaging app strategies, there will be a few home runs, but more strikeouts than any kind of hit," Mr. Beccue said. "The reason is several messaging apps are

ving for market share and platform relevance.

"Snapchat and Kik, focused on a younger audience, are more new media pioneers, with new kinds of ad units, including chatbots," he said. "These platforms are more traditional-marketing unit-friendly.

"Others, like Facebook Messenger and Slack, will offer new business models for businesses to engage with customers outside of traditional advertising, focusing on customer engagement. This is the year we will all be introduced to chatbots."

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