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Questions For...

Mark Kingdon

Using Social Sites as Dialogue To Engage Consumers, Brands

Company: *Organic, Inc., a digital marketing agency owned by Omnicom Group, Inc.*

Title: *Chief Executive Officer*

By **EMILY STEEL**

WITHIN TWO WEEKS of the first four minutes of the Fox release "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" appearing on YouTube, the video had scored more than a million views. Orchestrated by digital-marketing agency Organic and 20th Century Fox movie studio, the posting was part of a broader marketing campaign, which helped "Borat" open with \$26.38 million in ticket sales last weekend.

Posting online videos on so-called social media—video-sharing sites such as YouTube and social-networking sites like MySpace—is rapidly taking off as the hottest new trend in digital marketing. Marketers of all kinds have discovered that entertaining videos can generate enormous word of mouth. Just ask Diageo's Smirnoff, which generated huge amounts of attention for its new iced-tea malt beverage with a spoof rap video posted on YouTube over the summer.

One of the ad executives most aggressively taking advantage of social media is Mark Kingdon, chief executive of Organic Inc., a digital-marketing agency owned by Omnicom Group Inc. with clients like DaimlerChrysler. Mr. Kingdon speaks below about the impact of social media and the building of the interactive marketing industry.

The Wall Street Journal: *How are social media—sites like MySpace and YouTube—affecting the role of marketers?*

Mr. Kingdon: I think the major social media properties that really came of age this year have challenged marketers to think in new ways. First, they had to get comfortable quickly with the lack of control that they have over where their content appears. You know in the old days, which aren't so long ago, you could buy a media placement and be fairly sure where your ad would be appearing. But today in the social media world, where



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Mr. Kingdon says.

consumers are often times in control of the brand message, it is not always possible to control where your brand appears, so getting comfortable with that is the first thing marketers have to do. The second thing that they have to do is they have to allow for and anticipate dialogue, because consumers very much want to engage with brands and not all brands are set up for engagement. A lot of brands are simply set up to broadcast their message to an audience but not to engage with and have a conversation with that audience.

What many brands find in this case, the dialogue that they have with consumers is surprisingly constructive. Brands

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immediately fear that people are going to say bad things about them. But I think most online users have been to review sites, have seen opinions posted and are thoughtful enough to form their own opinions, and they probably wouldn't believe a brand if there weren't at least some

negative comments posted about it, because that actually adds to the authenticity of the dialogue.

The industry that is most advanced in this, I think, is the technology industry, which for a long time has had user boards or developer communities that post questions and answers about the technology and have allowed for there to be very rich dialogue online. They have turned themselves inside out by necessity, and I think more traditional brands are going in a similar direction, albeit more slowly. We are entering the period of the open-source brand, where in order for people to feel like it is relevant to them, they have to have a part in creating it.

WSJ: *Are ad agencies overdoing the use of YouTube to generate viral buzz? How can marketers avoid neglecting other new marketing innovations?*

Mr. Kingdon: Marketers can sometimes be guilty of following fads, and social media certainly captured marketers' attention. They're an exciting and innovative way to generate a dialogue with consumers. As marketers think about their campaign budgets and their spending, they should always allocate a part of their budget to new and innovative platforms in media, and that is the category that social media falls in today and should fall into for marketers.

WSJ: *As the digital space matures, some suggest that interactive work will drive all marketing communications—both online and off. Do you agree?*

Mr. Kingdon: I think that particularly for considered purchases, where people think and learn before they make a decision, the Internet is going to be central to their decision-making process, and increasingly other media will drive much more explicitly to the Web, and that the Web will be core or central in those marketing campaigns. Not the only medium, but certainly central or core, because a lot of the decision-making activity will be happening online.

We've been seeing that to some degree in the automotive sector and certain parts of financial services, but I think we are going to see that increase very, very significantly. The reason we don't see more of it is just because it takes a while for behaviors and budgets to change.

WSJ: *Some have said that a lack of strong digital-marketing talent pool is restricting ad spending to the medium.*

Can you give an example of how this demand for digital-marketing professionals in the industry has affected your business?

Mr. Kingdon: If you go to the Web sites of most interactive agencies, you will see that they have dozens of positions open that they are trying to fill, and that is certainly the case at Organic. It is forcing all agencies to be very selective about the kind of work that they bring on so that they don't overpromise to their clients. The second thing it is forcing agencies to do is think about more aggressive investments in the talent at their agency and in more innovative recruiting practices.

WSJ: *Why doesn't buzz always drive sales?*

Mr. Kingdon: With any campaign you can do a lot of different things to raise awareness and to get a conversation going with consumers, but if the proposition doesn't live up to the buzz, then the word of mouth withers away, and the sales don't materialize.