Salzmann: What Facebook Timeline Means for Brands

By Marian Salzman
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It seems fitting that the story broke on Leap Day of Facebook launching its Timeline pages for brands and businesses—since I see the offering as a giant leap forward for how brands can embody their Facebook profiles and interact with their fans on this hugely important social media platform.

Yes, Twitter can be (and often is) vital to brands, and it seems there’s always a new platform on the block that takes center stage for a time (Pinterest, with due respect, I’m talking to you), but Facebook still serves (or should) as a baseline for most brands’ social media activities, with its amazing global reach and the deep level of engagement it inspires.

It’s no accident that major launches that have been touted as potential Facebook killers have mostly fizzled.

So, I was excited to see Facebook continue to innovate in such a major way.

When Timeline was launched for individual pages, I was a fan—even at a basic level, as a very visual person Timeline pages appeal to me.

(Conversely, because of my visual nature I keep thinking I need to call in an art director, just to curate my personal page!) But as a marketer, I recognized early on that this new format would make for far better brand pages. Though the introduction of Timeline for regular users was met with a great deal of antipathy and even anger, I knew that for brands these were primo. I don’t know a brand steward or marketer who hasn’t been anticipating with great delight the day that Timeline would be available to brands.

And now that day is at hand.

If you’re not familiar with the new format, Timeline generates an image-heavy look similar to a scrapbook, spanning users’ history on the social network—and allowing them to back-populate from any starting point. But timeline isn’t all about pretty pictures, it’s also an app-driven interface that allows users to connect with others on what music they’re listening to (on apps like Spotify), movies they are watching (Hulu and others), recipes they’re cooking, workouts they are doing … and more.

So what does Timeline mean for brands?

Brands will be able to relaunch their brand story on Facebook starting from day 1. One high-profile example that comes to mind is: Richard and Maurice McDonald opened the first restaurant in 1940, and then reorganized the company as a burger joint in 1948; the chain as we know it (more or less, about a billion burgers ago) officially launched with the opening of a franchised restaurant in Illinois under corporate head Ray Kroc.

Imagine a McDonald’s brand page with an image of the McDonald brothers the year they opened their first restaurant, then a photo of the first McDonald’s franchise, then an image of the first Big Mac (debuted in 1968), and introducing Ronald McDonald, the Hamburglar and the rest of the gang.

The brand page suddenly has a rich and compelling history, not just a written account (a la Wikipedia), but a visual history (more scrapbook collage). To add to the levels of connection, the brand can interact with consumers through apps, by listening to the same songs, etc. It’s not a great leap from there to think of McDonald’s creating an app that ties in with the company’s various sponsorships. (Hello, 2012 Olympics!)

Suddenly, you have a very different Facebook page. It’s 100 times more personal, 100 times more intimate, amplifying a brand’s personality and allowing it to develop a more personal relationship with consumers—on arguably one of the world’s most personal social networks. That’s valuable.

The brands that win will be the ones that aren’t afraid to tap into personality and show a “human” face (instead of acting like a giant corporation in an incredibly personal space). Consumers will either like brand pages more than ever before, or cut off brands that don’t get it right in this space. We no doubt will experience an adjustment period—the brand Timeline will be a quirky thing for all of us who steward pages as reputation architects and brand marketers. And I don’t think that just because I am sitting here staring at Timeline and
thinking it’s hard enough to make sense of life without a minute-by-minute replay on Facebook.

Facebook designer Sam Lessin made an observation about Timeline for brands that really resonates for me; he said the company will now embrace “the whole concept that organizations have identities, that a nonprofit, a sports team, all have identities that they want to express.” I don’t believe any marketer or brand steward in the world would disagree with that, do you? Because we are in the business of telling our brands’ stories and expressing those identities.

When it comes to campaign finance, I tend to fall on the side that corporations aren’t really people—Supreme Court ruling notwithstanding. But with Facebook’s stance regarding Timeline for brands, I fully cede the point, and quite honestly I think that Timeline has just made our jobs a little easier.