

# Clarke says the social media explosion is coming to SA

By [Albert Buhr](#)

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Lynne Clarke, who heads up the EMEA Marketing Propositions team at Microsoft Advertising, was clearly excited about the potential inherent in social media when she addressed delegates at the recent Habari Media Digital Symposium.



Clarke started at EMAP Advertising in 2000, working in research before being appointed Marketing Executive, working on all B2B marketing for men's magazine *FHM*, and women's magazines like *New Woman* and *Heat*, among others. This was followed by a stint as PR manager for ITV's cinema division, and then time in the UK government's communication department - the Central Office of Information - raising awareness of many critical campaigns including blood and organ donation for the NHS and green campaigns for the Energy Saving Trust. She currently heads up the EMEA Marketing Propositions team at Microsoft Advertising, developing new digital advertising solutions across Microsoft's varied Media Brand portfolio, including everything from Xbox to Hotmail and Facebook to MSN. She has been responsible for developing brand strategies that have included the launch of Microsoft Media Network and Windows Live.

"Here's a really good piece of early advice on what's going to happen. Here in South Africa, as your broadband penetration increases towards the end of this year and that speed goes up, what you used to think of a compulsive behaviour is going to go through the roof and become something you've never really seen before."

This compulsive behaviour will centre around social media. "Social media is really, really huge," says Clarke. "If this is not where your customers are now, they certainly are going to be within the next 12 months."

As an indication of online presence, Clarke points out that more than 100 million videos are being watched every day on YouTube. What's more, if Facebook were a country, it would be the sixth biggest country in the world. Add Hotmail and Messenger into the equation, and you end up with the third biggest country in the world.

She further indicated that with greater broadband penetration you get the phenomenon of connections that are always on, and that online behaviour becomes cyclical as users obsessively interact with their social network, constantly updating their profiles for example. "Nowhere is this obsessive tendency more apparent than with Twitter, with many people updating their status every 30 minutes."

Clarke made reference to a recent study done by Microsoft to understand how understanding online behaviour can contribute to ad planning. Broadly speaking, it found that although the internet started out as a tool for information searching, it has overwhelmingly become a tool for social interaction and self-expression - blogging, creating and maintaining personal profiles, uploading photos. "It's this access to self-expression that makes social media so compulsive," says Clarke. "We've always been a social species, but we've always been restricted by geographic boundaries. Now there's almost no restriction whatsoever."

But this breaking of boundaries that the internet has facilitated now presents its own problems for both advertisers and consumers. "With so many sites and the internet evolving at such a rapid pace, there's always something new and better, and with this comes a confusion and fragmentation." In short, people are moving around online at such speed that it becomes a problem when trying to plan advertising communication. Says Clarke: "The trick is accessing your audience at point of influence, where you can get your message across to people at just the right time and in the right place."

This fragmentation is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that online users have, on average, three different email accounts. And it's only through an accurate understanding of average online behaviour that advertisers will be able to better plan how to communicate with consumers. Messaging consumers at the point of influence is key.

"At Microsoft we came to understand that with so many sites and users trying to chase their friends across all the different networks, there was going to be a bit of a problem. We then did some research to find out how to make it easier for advertisers to access consumers on a wider basis. To this end we created Windows Live which makes it easier for users to connect with their different networks. It's basically a hub for all your different networks. With Windows Live we've seen that people are staying online for longer and updating more often, and this all makes it easier for advertisers to connect with consumers and reach them at point of influence, when they're actually making decisions."

Clarke insists that social media is mushrooming to such an extent that it would be foolish for potential advertisers to ignore such a large audience. Another recent Microsoft research study confirmed that 33% of consumers between 18 and 25 are discussing their purchases online, while half of this age group have reviewed a product online before making a purchase decision. "Social media needs to be part of any overall ad plan. Advertisers can't just rely on traditional forms of media anymore, or they will lose out."

Of course, she points out, this doesn't mean you can just stick a banner ad up and hope it will work in the same way as in print. "You need to be a bit cleverer when getting involved in people's personal space. It shouldn't be invasive or interruptive. Social media is about consultation and interaction, and so advertising should have the same philosophy."

Click-through ads are especially unsuitable, concludes Clarke. The idea is to engage with consumers and allow them to interact with ads right there on their social networking pages, not take them away to another site. "It's ultimately about being in the right place at the right time."

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