

Marcel LeBrun

CEO of Radian6 Podcast Transcript



Steven Groves Good morning everyone this is Steve Groves with the SocialMediaBible.com

Groves This interview is part of the series on the ROI of social media with Guy Powell and myself.

Today on the phone we've got Marcel LeBrun who is the CEO of Radian6. Radian6 is a company that provides social media listening platforms being used by over a thousand customers and agencies including highly visible brands such as Dell, Comcast and Pepsi to help them listen and engage with their customers online.

Marcel, thanks so much for joining us today.

Marcel LeBrun Great to be here

SG Marcel, Radian6 is really one of the predominant tools that we've seen in the industry and we're very interested in being able to talk with you about the ROI question. As we get going, won't you talk to us just a moment about the background of Radian6 and how you came to the position of CEO there.

MLB Well, really, I've done a number of tech startups and love technology and software and software as a service and really I connected with the founder of the company who is Chris Newton, our CTO and Chris is a guy whose background is in analyzing data and previously built a network security company analyzing network traffic and things like that.

Chris really started to notice how his own media consumption habits were changing and how the source of where he got information and where he got information that he relied upon in order to make decisions came from. [He] started to notice how that really shifted away from more traditional forms of mass media communication more to social media places like blogs or social networks and things like that. So really Chris started looking at how can we take all of those conversations and help brands, listen and engage in them and so we connected and started to talk to companies and agencies about what they were looking to do there and off we went and really built the product based on working very closely with the key brands and key agency partners to help us deliver what they needed.

SG So that's a really great background in terms of how you came to the opportunity there at Radian6 and talks a little bit about what you do for the industry.

How do you see organizations applying your technology? And if you could talk a little bit deeper about how the technology works for them, I'd appreciate it.

MLB Well I think there's been a really significant evolution over the last year when we started. I mean really we started in 2007 and even if I look back a year ago, the big focus was, Ok you've got this new medium now, that is no longer under institutional control such as the mass media were, and therefore anyone has the ability to influence the message around your brand. And so we were going around with this kind of recognition that companies were coming to that your brand is now the sum of conversations about it.

So the days are over where you sit inside your kind of marketing room and sit there and kind of personify your brand and say 'what do we want our brand messages to mean'. And then you go out and do a media buy and push those brand messages. And that became the brand that you promoted.

Now, really the brand is really what people are saying it is. So you might like your brand to mean a certain thing but its customers are saying it's different. Then really you are just one participant. And so, the early focus of social media was listen and understand what your brand means and then how can you start to from a PR sense develop relationships with influencers who are carrying a significant influence around your brand.

Now what's happened is, social media is really expanded and has pushed its way into every business process in the company. And now we're starting to see companies recognize it as a very important vehicle not just to reach out to influencers, but to hear what your brand actually means, which is a great feedback mechanism, but also to build personal more transparent relationships with customers to provide great customer support. So it's almost like reversing the lineup. So instead of forcing customers to line up for you, you line up for your customers and show you can provide remarkable support. It's useful in sales processes. It's useful in marketing and lead generation. So really, we're starting to see it move into every area of the enterprise.

SG You know you bring up a great point. Because I'm sitting here thinking about how social media has evolved and certainly from my experience and with my background in corporate computing, that, and I've got the question for you. Is social media the next enterprise application?

MLB I don't think it's AN application.

I think that it is going to be integrated into many applications. And so when you look at, for example, and this is a great segue into what we do because, when we started with Radian6 we said, let's build a vertical application which is social media monitoring and analysis and then we added engagement.

Which was really initially targeted at communications professionals, who were saying: 'ok this is what people are saying about our brand', 'this is who influencers are', 'here's how we reach out' and things like that. And we've quickly moved to really a platform strategy where we now are providing social media capabilities into a variety of business processes.

For example: we've integrated our platform with Salesforce.com service cloud. And so you have customers who are doing customer support and they are supporting customers on the phone and on email and the social web is just another customer communication channel that you need to provide support for. So, when somebody complains you need to see their case history, you need to understand this is their third complaint; you need to understand you tried to resolve this before and you did or you didn't and you need to be able to respond with that context and you need to maintain that conversation history for example.

So it is a very different application of how you use the social web in customer support than how you use it in sales or how you use it in community management. So I really think that rather than it being the new enterprise thing, I like to compare it to like the phones in your corporation. Everybody has a phone and everybody uses it, but they use it for a whole variety of things. And so really, that's what we are seeing happen. And that is why we are moving to really this platform strategy where we are helping brands use it for the various business processes that now need to incorporate social media into what they do.

SG I like your analogy, your use of the phrase 'social phone'. And I get a sense of the way you're talking about it. It's a ubiquitous component in the organization. How else would you suggest the phrase 'social phone' is being used? What do you guys really mean by that when you visit with clients?

MLB So, we use it to first of all try to make a point that it isn't a single purpose medium. A lot of people talk about social media as a single thing. And I think that the mindset that often kind of gives birth to that idea comes from maybe thinking of social media to much like another traditional mass medium that a marketer would use to push a message on. And so they might think well, how do we use social media and they're thinking about how do we harvest or leverage this new thing to get our message out there. But that's not the right approach.

The social web is more like a phone than it is like a television commercial. You know? So a television commercial is interruption based. Phone is well...people do interrupt people on the phone but...that tends not to work either...its more invitation based and more conversational. And so, what we're seeing is the social web, because of what it's pushing, and the change in business culture that it's driving, is causing businesses to shift from interruption based marketing to invitation based marketing, where they're needing to really listen more, talk less and add value more and push their agenda less. And so it's really quite transformative. So when we say social phone, we're saying that customers are talking and it's kind of like this. If someone called your place of business and had a complaint or had a question, you wouldn't kind of quietly put that receiver down and let them talk and not respond and just hope they go away. It's kind of silly, right? However, there are still many brands who feel completely comfortable doing that when a customer says that on the social phone.

So someone might say the very same thing, but they are saying it on their blog or they're saying it on twitter. And yet the brand isn't ready to respond to that.

SG ...and if we just ignore it, it will go away, right?

MLB That's right. And when you compare it to a social phone analogy, people go of course I'd never hang up on that customer or I'd never just completely ignore them, yet how is that different in terms of what you are doing online? And then they start to realize, wow, this is a real mainstream communication channel that I need to be responding to and not only that it's one that is more like a party line.

Everybody's listening. So how you respond and engage has an impact beyond just that interaction with that customer. It has an impact around how your brand is perceived by others who see you responding to issues and can kind of learn a little bit more about your brand's behavior and whether they like that or not. So it's a huge impact.

SG So how are companies really starting to think about social media?

I hear us talking about the impact that we perceive. How do you see companies starting to think about social media? We can come up with all the analysis on our side but in the trenches, you're spending time with other organizations, with other professionals, with other executives and their companies.

How are they starting to think about social media? What's the shift you see?

MLB Well, what I'm seeing is, so there's a whole spectrum as there always will be of what I would call, kind of different maturity levels of brands that are just kind of getting started and moving along to more advanced uses of social media.

The first level is just listening. And I think we've moved beyond even, 12 or 18 months ago where people were trying to figure out is this important to invest in. Is this medium here to stay, and all that? It's so clear now that the social web is pervasive, it's growing, it has huge impact with stories like the United Airlines musician who broke his guitar and wrote a song and it just completely took over their brand messaging for weeks. And how brands get these ah-ha moments where not listening hits them hard. And so what we're seeing is a growing table stakes mind-set that says ok yes we definitely have to listen.

What we're seeing now though is more and more brands recognizing that listening is not a passive thing. You know if you and I are having a conversation and you're telling me a story but I don't say anything, I just sit there quiet, I may be listening, but you don't know that I'm listening. And really, in a relationship you listen to send a message too. You listen to say I care about you. You listen to say you're worth my time. You listen to say tell me more about that. And so brands are realizing that you can't just kind of sit behind a research report and say oh, people like this about us and they don't like that about us.

Brands now are saying we need to engage and respond directly when customers are saying things. So when they say 'hey I love this product', you come back and say thank you. You know they took the time to be an advocate. The very thing that brands prize the most are having people advocating your brand or your product. And so take the time to say thank you for example. It's hugely powerful and it propagates and encourages the behavior.

When someone complains, addressing the issue. So what we are seeing are really brands really starting to adopt a lot more transparent approach, a lot more unmasked approach (instead of hiding behind a logo or a message). They are personifying their brand they're allowing, you know, people to get to know people versus the cold kind of call center where you don't even know the person's name and if you ask them they might give you a first name and that's it, we're seeing that change. And really it's moving things more to a more human to human kind of conversation. So, you look at brands like, even large companies like Dell and Comcast that you look at.

With thousands of customers are investing heavily in listening, engaging and responding to you know whether they're customer support issues, or whether they are product ideas or product questions. And it's working very well for them.

SG Sure. Boil that down a little bit for me.

What are companies doing right? What are they doing wrong? And you talk about Dell and Comcast. Who are some of the real leaders and models that people should be looking at?

MLB So, one thing is again back to my social phone analogy.

What we'll find is there are leaders and models of different uses of social media for different business processes. So, for example, If you look at customer support, Comcast is a great example.

They are first and foremost; much more focused on finding customers and talking to customers online than they are necessarily to let's say influential bloggers who might talk about their industry. And so they are invested very heavily in having the customer support team led by Frank Eliason at Comcast, who listens all day to customer questions, complaints, issues and responds to them. And so it's this exact model of switching the line around. So instead of saying 'you guys have to find us, you got to find the phone number, you get in the queue, you wait and you know your time may not be as valuable as ours'. They flip it around and say 'you ask the question wherever you like' on your blog on twitter on Facebook, wherever you like to ask your question and we'll find you and we'll respond. And it has had just a tremendous response. And now of course Frank's on the speaking circuit with all kinds of companies, in high demand to help them understand how to do it.

What we do is we provide them with the technology to help scale this workflow. Because obviously you can't have one person listen to every conversation and you can't have every person listen to every conversation. And so you need to be able to understand how to direct certain issues to certain people, who are the best people in the company to hear it and respond. You look at Dell as an example and Dell is another model of a brand that listens. And got into it through some pain.

Frankly through some bloggers that started to have a lot of negative perceptions and talk about the negative experience they had with Dell customer support.

SG ... those darn batteries!

MLB Well the battery and also the famous Dell hell. Where I think it was Jeff Jarvis who coined the term as his brand.

You know we talk about your brand is a sum of conversations well no one decided that's what Dell should mean but all of a sudden, Jeff Jarvis started to influence the perception that Dell hell was an experience that you get when you call Dell.

Well, they changed that, and they changed that by first of all acknowledging the issues, by listening to them, by responding and then by putting a whole bunch of people out there as front line people who listened and engaged and addressed the issues where they were and completely changed that experience for people through their online listening and engagement.

Now Dell gets something like eight thousand conversations a day that mentions their brand online. So there's a lot to look through there but the good news is that there's a lot that is the community building up and helping each other. And you get all kinds of these kinds of economy of skill that happen when you have it in an open community.

SG How would you answer the questions for companies that would be listening to this discussion or are looking at social media as something that they're exploring, something that they're thinking about adding to their mix in terms of reaching out and connecting with people?

Is there a starting point for listening, participation and measurement? Are there best practices that a company should really pay attention to when it comes to using social media?

MLB Yes. Now, I don't have the corner on all of the best answers so I would say that I have a very good/some ideas around that. As I know you mentioned your favorite term the social media expert.

You know, who is an expert really? In the industry that is really months old.

You know it really hit me actually when I was at a panel, I think this was a year ago, talking about how social media was so central to the recent presidential campaign and how president Obama used the social web effectively. The person made a comment and said, do you realize that the last election we had YouTube didn't exist. And you're like woe. That's true.

SG That puts it in perspective doesn't it?

MLB It certainly does. Yet, how foundational it was to communication strategy in this campaign. So things have completely changed very quickly.

What I recommend is, it's kind of like this. If you show up at a new country or new place you're going to first start by listening and understanding the culture and meeting people and observing before you start to take over the place and start with your message.

I think the same principal applies in social media. And often times these "social media experts" what they do is they say we'll come in and help you quote get on this platform, get on that platform.

So we'll help you make use of twitter, make use of Facebook. How do you set up your YouTube channel, how do you get a blog going. The problem with that advice is that those are the mechanics and the mechanics are, sure there are some things you need to do and know about that, but there's something much more important than mechanics which is how you approach the medium. And if you for example, get on all these platforms, but a brand approaches it with the same mind set of their current one-way broadcast type messaging they're going to fail and they're going to wonder why this isn't working.

So they're going to go to a blog and they're going to say gee we're putting all our news up there and all our product benefits and all those kinds of things but no one's engaging, no one's commenting. Why is that? Well, because they didn't start with the foundation of listening, they started with broadcasting their messages and the social web is not about that. So step one is listen. And by listen, it's not just listen to your brand, it's also listen to the conversation associated with things your brand cares about.

For example, if your brand is aspirin or Tylenol. You go to Tylenol's website and you'll see that there's four or five different community areas that they focus on. One of them is arthritis. So if you just go out and you say Tylenol's going to be good for this. Do you know if your messages are adding any value to anyone or resonating with anyone's needs? To rather listen to the conversation about arthritis, understand what is the arthritis community talking about, what is important to them? And then, how do you become a trusted insider in that community by adding value.

So step one is listen. Listen to your brand. Listen to what your competitors are doing. And listen to what your customers are most passionate about and their needs. I use a term called listening for the point of need. It's so powerful rather than you know, call you at home, interrupt your dinner and say 'do you want any lawn care services' in which case I probably damage my brand because I'm interrupting you and cold calling you and all of that. If rather I can observe when you would express a need then I have an invitation to respond rather than an interruption, which hurts. So, online, the cool thing is everyone is expressing needs all the time. So if you can listen to needs that

your brand can relate to then you can think about how you can add value. So that's step one.

Step two is respond. So once you've found how the place works, you understand the culture, you understand what's appropriate and inappropriate in terms of how you participate. Then you can start to connect with people. You can start to be part of that conversation. And only then do I advise brands to start telling their own story. Because what they'll do is they'll start telling their own story in the context of what they've heard their community say in the context of relationships that they've built and connected with so that all of a sudden you'll find that people are interested in engaging and commenting because they know who they are and because you added value to what their all about and so then they'll want to help you out, and that kind of thing.

It's really kind of old school relationships and word of mouth but happen in a much larger scale and much faster medium through social media. So that's the kind of crawl walk run is listen first then add responding. Then go tell your story. Then you can start to do your blog and start pushing some stories out there and hoping people will engage in them with you.

SG One of the reasons we wanted to spend some time with you and one of the reasons I started getting involved in social media at all back around 2006, we had an event here in Phoenix Arizona that included Robert Scoble and Chris Heuer was the question of ROI. And that's the return on investment.

I've come at this questions from the perspective of a marketer and a business person and an entrepreneur and I continue to try to look into the ROI question as deeply as I can and I, the answers have kind of shifted over the years.

When someone comes to you Marcel, and says ROI is important to our organization and we can't afford to invest in efforts that don't give us a positive ROI. What are you telling them? What kind of metrics, what kind of measurement, what kind of transitions from effort to revenue are you counseling them on?

MLB Well that's a great question and obviously a hugely important one.

Particularly, in the economic environment that we are in. The first thing that is really important is this; if you think about ROI first of all being able to gather the raw data the metrics that you use to determine ROI is important. And what's interesting is the social web provides you with a far greater capability than anything we've had before.

There's kind of this little oxymoron going on because what's interesting is, I wrote a post a while back. I talked about social media measurements or ROI and I used an analogy with gourmet cooking. And the analogy was if all we have is bread and water then we know what we are going to have for dinner is bread and water. And it's very easy to agree that bread and water is what we are going to have for dinner.

That is the standard and what happens is as soon as you have thousands of ingredients you now open things up to much more creative possibilities. And what's interesting is if I compare it to traditional media. Let's take a print ad. A company says, what's the ROI of this print ad. Or let's take a PR investment. I've been building a relationship with this reporter at this trade magazine trying to encourage them to cover our company. And all of a sudden they do. And we determine

ROI. And what has typically happened there is that the PR person would say, oh well we got an article it was a half page, the ad equivalency value of that half page is thirty thousand dollars, therefore that's worth thirty thousand dollars, I've spent this much time on it, there's your ROI.

The funny part is that you really don't know what that article was worth. That's a kind of a manufactured formula that is really an intermediary number. You don't know who read the article. All you know is circulation. You know it goes to three hundred thousand people. But you don't know who dog-eared it, who forwarded it to their friends, who talked about it, who took action on it. You don't know any of those things. But the industry, because it's had very little to go off of has kind of said 'well we'll use that as a metric' and there you go.

The powerful thing about the social web, is that you can more closely tie your initiatives to your business goals. So you always have to start and say what is my business goal. And as we mentioned, because social media does a variety of things has a variety of business goals. For example: If you are trying to say look at it in a sales sense. You can say "Is social media a useful mechanism to connect with potential customers and identify needs and those needs will become leads that become sales."

How do I measure that? Well you can very clearly measure that by tracking how many expressions of point of need that you identify. For example: We looked at an industry conversation around laptops and said how often do people ask 'My daughter's going to college, what should I get her? An iMac or a dum89 or whatever' and we found over a hundred million dollars a month of potential purchase decisions were being declared online asking for help, asking for advice. And so here you have this opportunity to figure out how can you appropriately add value to those needs.

You can very clearly measure there's this much, and therefore we responded to one hundred fifty a day and ten percent of those said yes I'd like to know more and five percent of those bought and now we have an ROI for that particular activity.

That's completely different of course than customer support on social media and any other business process, but there is an example of how you can measure specific effort that says how much does it cost me to listen to the point of need these particular conversations and what's my return on that. And of course you are going to experiment because you might find that this type of thing works and this other one doesn't work. And you move on.

SG Those are great examples. Thanks so much. We're getting ready to wrap up here Marcel. You've been very gracious with your time today. What I'd like to do is give you an opportunity wrap with any thoughts or any ideas that you'd like to share with the audience.

MLB I think the important thing for a brand (and obviously this sounds a little biased because we are a listening platform) but it really is to start to listen and we think that the real kind of ultimate that mature point where brands need to get to is the engagement stage, where they've got a mature engagement on all of the key business processes which are happening with customers online.

What that means is, you need to have your PR team listening to conversations about the brand and identifying influencers and building relationships with them. That's one.

Two, You need to have your customer support team using the social web as a customer support

channel for technical issues, customer support issues, and have that work flow integrated into how you deal with customer care issues, tracking cases, those kinds of things. That's another important step.

Third, You need to have your sales team also listening to what their particular conversations are saying.

You don't want everybody listening to everything because that wastes people time, but if my clients are saying things about my competitor, saying things about my brand or just saying things about what the kids are doing this weekend, it may be helpful in building that relationship. You need to plug those social conversations into the sales opportunity as well.

Those are three key areas, then of course, marketing from a listening for the point of need. And then you kind of wrap all that around with this concept of community management where your brand is highly engaged in the kind of things that your customers care about and you're now adding value to the problems that your customers are having, you're contributing ideas.

Like the ROI of social media for example is one of the things that we like to talk about because it helps our customers think through that. It adds value. We don't charge for it. We put it out there and they go 'Wow thanks that helped me. That was a great article' and we feedback on that.

Those are the areas that a mature, engaged, unmasked, transparent brand will have running across those business processes. We're seeing great examples with folks like Dell and Comcast, UPS and Pepsi at Microsoft. And they are all doing it.

Some more focused on one area like customer support, others more on PR and campaigns. But really all those areas are growing and they all need to be integrated so that there's coordination between all those things. Because now, one individual out there is both an influencer and a customer and a prospect. They are all things.

So it's kind of a dial. They are a little bit of both. Is Michael Arrington a customer of Comcast or a media outlet and influencer? The answer is yes on both cases. So you have to treat them as a customer and as an influencer. And that's PR and customer support for example. It's fun times. This is huge. It's growing in a big way and the powerful thing is that it doesn't actually cost that much for brands to do which is the really good news. So.

SG Right. And that's where I've started seeing really the metrics, the monitoring and the measurement of social media probably being the next big front of activity in the social media sphere. So I'm very excited about what Radian6 tools look like and how people are going to be using tools like them. If somebody was listening to this podcast, if somebody wanted to engage your team at Radian6, what would they do next?

MLB Well you can check out our website at www.Radian6.com and we have a ton of case studies, videos, white papers, blog posts that give you all kinds of ideas about the space. As well you can contact us there. You can follow us on twitter @Radian6 or on our website you can actually get a list of all of our employees. We're all on twitter and on our blogs and our twitter accounts are all listed there. And you can connect with us or you can just mention us anywhere and we'll come responding. So we have a very active and friendly and responsive community management

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community team that will hear you wherever you mention us. And ask any question and we'll be there to respond.

SG Wonderful. Again, thanks so much for your time today Marcel. It's been a real treat. This is Steve Groves with thesocialmediabible.com as part of the series on the ROI of social media with Guy Powell. Thanks everyone and we'll talk to you soon.

About the Podcast and this Transcript – This transcript was developed from an audio podcast interview held October 21 between Marcel LeBrun and Steven Groves.

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About ROI of Social Media Series – The series was conceived and produced by Steven Groves / TheSocialMediaBible.com and Guy Powell / DemandROMI.com as a series to be posted at TheSocialMediaBible.com, StevenGroves.com and DemandROMI.com.

It is part of the ongoing research into the topic of how best to estimate the Return on Investment (ROI) of the time and effort and effective social media presence requires.

More Information –

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We also have groups on LinkedIn and at TheSocialMediaBible.com Ning Community site