



Insite Insights

The power of Dark Social. And why you need to know about it

When you hear the phrase Dark Social, it would be natural to draw associations with the Dark Web, but that would be wrong. Why? because

Every one of your clients and prospects participates in dark social



Dark Social is something you need to know about. It is not about if - it's about how, where and when – and why you need to embrace it.

Dark Social is not lurking in the shadows - it's the social equivalent of word of mouth – the oldest (and most powerful) form of recommendation and endorsement. Myth busted, we can agree it's not the best handle, especially given the likely associations. So let's dive in to the power of dark social.

In this article we look at the difference between open, closed and dark social, why it's matters, why you need to embrace it ... with 5 tips to help you on your way with the "how".

Let's start with a brief explainer.

Open Social

Brands are active on social platforms. They create official profiles and build followers, posting content about products, services and the things they care about. They use paid advertising to target and influence their audience.

Users will see and (sometimes) engage – like, share and comment. The content is visible to everyone, and engagement is public – or open.

Marketing teams track a range of performance metrics on the reach (impressions) and engagement (likes and shares) to demonstrate the value.

These stats help guide and refine the content that performs best for their brand and proposition.

Closed Social

Closed social refers to private or semi-private platforms where groups or communities interact – this could include Closed Social Groups (eg LinkedIn and Facebook), WhatsApp Groups, Private Subreddits and Slack Channels – this is where content is only available to members of a community.

Some Marketing teams engage in closed social - either by joining and participating in groups or creating them to reward loyal customers with exclusive content, dedicated support and offers. Within these groups, engagement is encouraged and can be measured.

Dark Social

Dark social, as we've discussed, is not a shady sub-culture or underworld. It simply involves sharing content or mentioning brands through private channels that aren't easily tracked by analytics tools.

Think about it – we've all copied a link, sent a text, email or whatsapp to a friend or colleague. Or mentioned something by word of mouth – the small talk at the beginning of a conference call, or when travelling with a colleague.

What's more, there are dozens of convenient ways to do this – chat on Teams or Slack, WhatsApp, Email, Messenger, Text, In person, Telephone, Video call.

Marketing can't see it or accurately measure it – but there is a huge volume of it going on.

Dark Matters

I had a sales director once ask why we bothered with LinkedIn. *"Our posts only ever get a handful of likes and shares, and most of them are colleagues"*

If I said that up to 95% of your web traffic comes from dark social, it might just stop you in your tracks.

That's the stat, according to Hootsuite (link below). It means your current social stats don't reflect what's really happening. They only show part of a bigger picture. If you create good content – there's a huge amount of unseen activity going on. It's one thing knowing this, but another to know what you can do about it.

Dark social is authentic, and it's compelling – trusted colleagues, peers and friends noticing something good or interesting and sharing it. There's often added context or conversation. They use whatever channel is most convenient to them at the time – and often deliberately avoid the official share channels to by-pass the dreaded follow up call from an enthusiastic sales rep who thinks they're on to a hot lead.

Harder to Measure

When you create social content you only see your official stats – so where is dark social hiding? Start by looking at google analytics. You might think visitors have found your site because they typed `www(your brand).com` into a browser. Unlikely, unless you're a household name. A longer, more specific URL is also a giveaway. Reality is that most of your dark social stats sit here. It's because google can't accurately attribute the source, so puts it in this pot.

Embrace the Dark Side - 5 steps

As a start point we need to understand, and accept the power and influence of dark social. Your social media measurement doesn't give the full view – so take heart if you only get a handful of immediate likes and shares – there's much more that you can't see, contributing to long term success. It's worth considering this in the context of your strategy mix - our knowledge hub article [Lead Gen v Demand Gen](#) is a useful reference point.

It also helps if the contribution of dark social is understood at Exec level.

5 Steps to help you on your way!

Colleague Advocacy – actively encourage colleagues to share and like (LinkedIn has a recommended post functionality that makes this easy). That way your reach extends to your colleague networks as well as your own followers. Colleagues can also be encouraged to share privately.

Make Sharing Easy – make your content easily shareable. Sounds obvious, but resource is often focussed on content and less on the prominence and range of the share buttons (can your content be shared in whatsapp for example?). This helps reduce the amount of dark social activity by encouraging more traceable shares).

Explore the use of closed social groups – this is not just about setting up groups, it's about joining them so you can participate in what's being discussed – and it isn't just marketing. Subject matter experts in the organisation can be encouraged – this links to the point on colleague advocacy above!

Measuring Techniques – Measuring what is effectively word of mouth is difficult – there are some ways though (even if you start with an experiment).

- You can add a dark social segment category in your google analytics dashboard
- Use URL shorteners and UTMs (google offer free tools in campaign builder)
- There's also software like Getsocial and ShareThis available.
- Incorporate dark social metrics as part of your social dashboard
- Social listening - a must for consumer facing brands but increasingly used in B2B

Create compelling content - With improved dark social tracking, encouraging colleague advocacy and a different outlook on analytics, you can create compelling content with an eye on dark social sharing - links to checklists, templates and guides for example - but have faith. Even though you can't always measure it, you can be sure it's going on.

Next Steps

Get in touch if you need help or consultation on Marketing strategy, structure, operating model or communication approach. You can also use the free templates.

[Insitemarketing.co.uk](http://insitemarketing.co.uk)

Useful link - <https://blog.hootsuite.com/dark-social/>