



Stepping into the World of Strategic Social Media

At a glance:

Social media represents a new way for companies to meet their audience in a truly interactive environment.

Tapping into an existing community of interest is the easiest way imaginable to find new customers. Try it; don't be afraid to experiment and, most of all, learn.

Statistics December 2009

Twitter (monthly)

Users: 22,808,321

Visits: 133,636,767

LinkedIn (monthly)

Users: 14,879,393

Visits: 51,215,574

Facebook (monthly)

Users: 132,130,132

Visits: 2,712,234,571

Super Bowl (2009)

Viewers: 151,600,000

Ad Cost: \$3,000,000

Think about where your audience spends its time and go there. Meet them in their own way, using their own language and etiquette.

As [business leaders], we have the opportunity to create the future of [our organization] by anticipating where our clients are going, developing innovative responses and then strategically changing the game...

- Larry Wilson, Changing the Game, 1987

If you're thinking the concept of social media is ubiquitous, you're right. A Google™ search on the term yields 159,000,000 results (in 0.29 seconds). Even the 2010 World Economic Forum, normally limited to financial and banking gurus, hosted "a rare encounter of rivals, the chiefs of Twitter™, MySpace™, Facebook™ and LinkedIn® [meeting] with industry experts to plot strategies for the future — and help other businesses ride their success as well," according to the Associated Press.

Like you, we had heard all the hype, read articles and postings, played with personal accounts and wondered who really cared what strangers had for breakfast...

What we hadn't done was begin to test the business communication potential of social media from a strategic perspective — until this month, that is.

What we did

We tried an experiment in a relatively conservative field, and were more successful than we ever imagined: We encouraged one passionately motivated, social media-savvy, young sales executive to establish a Facebook presence for a client that specializes in software solutions. *In just three days*, he built a growing community of interest, opened up a dialogue with 21 new contacts, built relationships to qualify seven new prospects, developed two opportunities and scheduled two demos. The cost? Nothing more than a little time.

What we learned

We certainly have no benchmarks yet. But already we have observed that effective use of social media:

- **extends brand identity and personalizes an organization by connecting individuals to individuals**
- **broadens visibility, reaching increasing numbers of people quickly by networking and effectively mining groups**
- **expands opportunities, providing access to thousands of prospects on a real-time basis**
- **yields self-selected, interested individuals who make an initial investment in the relationship when they take the initiative to respond, connecting on their own terms at their convenience**

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- **enables authentic connections and builds trust through iterative, relational communication**
- **allows multiple relationships to be advanced simultaneously, increasing productivity**
- **utilizes “drip” marketing strategy with “fire hose” velocity and range**
- **makes best use of “economic” communication: short, somewhat informal, “sound bite” messages**
- **enhances communications; messages can be real time chats or archived resources, available for computer and mobile access 24/7**
- **establishes trusted, expert resources who are passionate, transparent and striving to serve**

In short, social media can be an effective channel for business-to-business marketing. And for those willing to embark on the adventure, the rewards can be remarkable.

What it takes – or how to win friends (and fans and followers) and influence people

Like any other outreach, you need to know your audience to communicate with them effectively. So, when you recognize that you and people like you are interested in the potential of social media, plus there's an entire generation of consumers who have used Facebook and MySpace for years (and find it more useful, relevant and intuitive than email), the evidence for experimentation becomes overwhelming.

Your foray into social media will require expert direction from someone with real experience who is willing to invest the time it requires. If you have young team members, chances are you already have a champion. Give him/her encouragement to do what s/he knows how to do;

you'll be up and running faster, and you'll avoid the embarrassment of sticking out like a sore thumb because you don't know the process or etiquette.

Invest in experimentation. While the capital cost of developing an active, online sales and marketing presence is minimal, implementation and analysis will take time and dedicated resources. Effective, ongoing use of social media will also require adaptability. Your customers are changing and the technology is advancing. So, while your core message may remain consistent and authentic, social media will constantly – and rapidly – evolve, yielding even more options to consider.

Of course, any time you put your organization's good name out in the marketplace, there's a chance your message will be delivered or managed inappropriately. The risk is real but minimal. As with any other communication channel, you need to set goals and guidelines then swiftly implement, assess and re-define.

Social media may not be right for your organization, or it could represent one of many strategic opportunities you choose to pursue. Either way, you need to learn enough to understand its potential role in your outreach mix so that you can decide if it can work to your advantage. That will require an open mind and some experimentation. **Do it with purpose. Make it easy for the people with passion to lead the way. Recognize their gifts and enable them to contribute. Give them encouragement to serve your clients in new ways. The results will be mutually beneficial to your customers, your employees and the bottom line.**

