

## **Social media are easier than you think**

*Mp Mullers*

With so many new technologies and tools, we business owners often feel as if we're playing catch-up — as if we don't even know what we don't know. In just the last few years, there's been a land grab by newly minted social media experts staking claim to social media prowess. Last month, the team over at Thought Lead hosted an online meet-up of 60 social media and online marketing experts titled The Influencer Project. The one-hour seminar gave all of the experts 60 seconds to offer their best advice on how companies could increase their influence online. For anyone with attention-deficit impulses (ahem) this was nirvana.

Marketing and Twitter and Facebook stars like Guy Kawasaki, John Jantsch of Duct Tape Marketing and Gretchen Rubin, who penned The Happiness Project, suited up. I was sold on attending the free gathering when I saw Scott Porad, who created the LOL cat phenomenon I Can Has Cheezburger, would be chiming in, too.

While the conference focused on helping social media companies enhance their influence, the takeaways apply to many small businesses. We listened here at Door Number 3, and we were surprised. As mystifying as social media can seem, the collective advice sounded like a primer for — here's the surprising part — parenting 101 or social skills 101. Basically, all it takes are good communication skills:

Tell great stories. The secret to creating brand allegiance is giving people a story along with every purchase. And what better venue than a social community that is there expressly to interact? Follow smart people like Brian Solis to learn how to hone your company's storytelling skills.

Mr. Solis is a principal at Silicon Valley's new media agency, FutureWorks. Check out his Conversation Prism, which is a visual synopsis that shows how all of the social media sites out there can be leveraged and how they overlap and build on each other. Be multidimensional. Share your passions as well as your expertise. People buy products from companies whose values they align with.

Be consistent. And flex your Twitter finger. Share good content consistently and your audience will keep coming back. Talk about things you know, provide relevant and interesting info. If they like what you're serving, people — not unlike livestock — will come back at the same time every day for their daily diet. Repeat your Twitter posts up to four times in eight hours — you'll get the same amount of click-throughs each time because people don't go back to read what they've missed on Twitter. Make sure the story you tell about your brand is authentic and, yes, be consistent.

The content can't be all about you. My friend Lisa often jokes when we are catching up, "Enough about me talking about me. What do you think about me?" The social media consultant Michelle Greer, who won the 2009 Austin Social Media Award, says social media done right is all about improving customer lives through a better online experience. And that starts with content.

Start a conversation, educate, entertain and create a better user experience. Stop talking about your products and services. Offer free samples and creative thoughts. Social media give you the power to listen to conversations and connect the dots. People want something to talk about and rally around. Social media allow businesses and nonprofits to bring people and passions together. In 2008, Ms. Greer organized the first Blood Drive Tweetup, a crowdsourced fund-raiser that doubled the traffic for the Central Texas Blood and Tissue Center. The project became a national blueprint for other blood banks around the country.

Listen, respond and take it offline. Social media are really just about talking to people, so start that dialogue on Twitter and Facebook. Then listen intently and respond. Identify bloggers who are influencers with your target audience and reach out to them. Freshbooks is an online time-tracking and invoicing company in Toronto that keeps the dialogue running with loyal customers on Facebook. The Freshbooks team members have titles like Chief Handshaker, Chief Cat Herder and Support Rockstar. And they take it offline, hosting suppers with their users to find out what they like and need.

Meanwhile, Pandora Radio holds town hall meetings across the United States where Pandora users can tell Tim Westergren, the chief executive, what kinds of music they want to hear. And then, guess what? Pandora fans blog about it, and upload video of meetings to Flickr and YouTube, further sharing the love for the brand.

Pandora has truly hit a sweet spot with customer service. Proof? The Onion satirized the company's zeal to find the music a listener wanted in a "news" story. And then, of course, Pandora posted the story on Twitter.

Be transparent, be honest. Creating a good relationship requires these things. It's no different online.

Social means not being alone. Use it as one tool of many to reach and motivate your target audiences. The real sweet spot in marketing your company comes from a confluence of different vehicles where the net effect is your brand being seen, heard and reinforced on many levels. Each medium has its strengths: television delivers emotion and impact. Coupons can drive trial and purchase. Search advertising lets people find your company easier. And billboards often direct people to your closest location. Social media, done well, strengthen the bond between the company and the end user. To create enduring brands, a marketing program uses many different touch points.

There. Demystified. Building your company's influence through social media requires simple, straightforward communications skills. The only thing you may not have known about creating influence through social media is that you had the power to do it all along.

**Fonte: New York Times, New York, Sept. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010, Business, online.**