

7 Steps to Social Media Success

By Debra Ellis

Viral marketing is tantalizing. The promise of vast coverage with minimal cost is alluring. The problem is bad news travels faster than good. Creating campaigns designed to become the next trending topic on Twitter is risky behavior. When attempts to manipulate the marketplace are discovered, the negative response irreparably damages the brand.

Using social media to engage your customers is a better investment. It improves loyalty, increases sales and reduces costs. The secret to successful engagement is having conversations that are interesting to the participants. And this requires talking with your customers one at a time. If you do it well, there is a chance your message will go viral. But that isn't the objective. It is a bonus feature.

The lead attraction is improved customer relations and brand awareness. Publishers Clearing House Online Network of Port Washington, N.Y., is seeing good results from its strategy. According to Alex Betancur, vice president and general manager, "For everyone that follows us on a social perspective, we get about three to nine times interaction on our network of sites. For us, this is helping to retain our existing customers by keeping them informed of our daily winning opportunities."

The PCH social media team is active on Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. In addition to its outgoing messages, it monitors and responds to every mention. When consumers question if anyone really wins the PCH sweepstakes, members of the social media team provide external links that show pictures and winning responses.

Understand that good results begin with a good strategy. PCH chose to dedicate two full-time team members to its social effort. It began as a stand-alone project with plans to integrate it with PCH's traditional marketing campaigns and add staff as the development requires. PCH's strategy is effective because it fits the organization.

Social media is configurable and scalable for every business. The best strategy is the one that matches your corporate culture and customer base. To get started:

- **Define your objectives.** The primary one is positive customer engagement. This is when people participate in conversations with you and about your brand. Your community becomes an extension of your corporate family. Secondary objectives like increased sales and reduced costs follow naturally.
- **Find your customers online.** The most popular social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) may not be the gathering place for your customers. Invest in finding the right venues before participating.
- **Be a good leader.** Encourage your customers to join your community by giving them good reasons to follow you. Talk about benefits and lifestyle improvements instead of products and sales. For example, if you sell pet products, talk about keeping pets healthy and training them.
- **Measure everything.** Establish marketing and service benchmarks before implementing your social media program. Improved communication affects all areas of your company.
- **Include structured flexibility in every plan.** Social media is a dynamic channel in an evolutionary stage. Don't implement a strategy dependant on specific platforms and tools. Watch for emerging technology that affects how you communicate with your community.
- **Focus on the quality of the conversations instead of the quantity of followers.** One hundred people interested in your company are infinitely more valuable than thousands playing the numbers game.

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- **Integrate social media with traditional marketing and service.** Everything working together creates an exceptional customer experience.

Most of the social media platforms and tools are free to use, but there is an extensive investment of time. If you jump in without a strategy, there is a high risk of customer alienation. Start small, and grow one person at a time. You'll know that your community is becoming engaged when customers start having conversations about your company without you.

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