

# How to Earn Respect in Social Media

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By Liana Evans, Search Engine Watch, Oct 26, 2009

Both of my grandmothers always told me, “God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.” I never understood why until later in life. This saying becomes more poignant when dealing with social media communities, although our ears in this case are our eyes because of the mode of communication that drives social media communities.

When delving into social communities, be humble, don’t shoot off your mouth, and don’t announce your arrival with ticker tape parades and bullhorns. No one likes a showoff or know-it-all.

In the offline world, you may be an industry giant who controls a budget that is more than the GDP of a small third world country and think this makes you important. However, in the online world of social media communities, you’re less important than the mom who’s taken the time to share her experience of dealing with juvenile diabetes with her child with a community. She listens and understands what other people in the community need and shares her experiences around that.

Just because you sell a product or a service that is the top selling or highest rated in the industry doesn’t mean people will listen to you when you arrive. Announcing your arrival doesn’t gain you immediate respect. You won’t suddenly have a band of followers once you strike up a conversation or answer a question or two on a topic.

It takes a lot of listening and understanding the difference between what people really say they want as opposed to what they really say they need to satisfy a pain point.

## People Want to be Acknowledged for Their Joys and Pains

Dale Carnegie said the most beautiful thing a person can hear is their name. The same is true in online communities. People want to be heard and acknowledged.

That’s why listening is so important. It’s also why dropping your own ego is of top importance when engaging and interacting within social media communities. If you’re too busy talking about yourself, how your company knows everything about the products you produce, and announcing your new venture into social media, you’ll never hear what the audience is saying and you’ll never understand what they really need from you.

Whether something brings them joy or pain, when people share and engage in communities, they form bonds and relationships with others who acknowledge their situation and say, “Hey, I’ve been there, too.” It’s about listening to what’s causing your audience happiness or pain, and acknowledging it. To do that, you have to observe the interaction and engage the community to know what’s really driving them.

## Learning the Lingo Is Just Like Learning to Dance

You may call your products one thing and refer to what they do or how they perform in a specific way. Your audience has no clue about what jargon your company or industry uses. They refer to it in a way that is most comfortable to them. It works by word of mouth from person to person first, then it travels to the Internet.

If your customer uses a nickname or shortens your brand name, or gives products or services acronyms, it’s because they feel comfortable with it, like it, and want to share it with others in their audience. Coca-Cola became Coke, McDonald’s became MickyD’s, the Philadelphia Phillies are the Phightin’ Phils, and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” became BtVS in forums and blogs. Unless you actively listen to your communities, you’ll never know how comfortable they are with you and if they use specific lingo to talk about you.

Lingo is a comfortable way for audiences to converse with likeminded people. The only way you learn what lingo your audience is using is by taking the time to listen to conversations in social media communities. The jargon that you or your industry colleagues use can be foreign and uncomfortable to your audience.

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## **To Understand You Have to Listen, Not Just Hear**

There's a difference between hearing and listening. Listening involves comprehension and understanding what the other person is saying. Listening gets you beyond the surface of "hearing"; you can get to the audience's pain point and what's most important to them.

It's a lot like when someone says to you, "Did you hear that new Carrie Underwood song?" Sure, you likely heard it on the radio a few times and you can immediately say "yes." However, what happens when your friend then asks, "Did you listen to the lyrics? Weren't they so cool?"

Now you have a totally different scenario because listening to the lyrics means that you had to actually understand them and comprehend them, rather than just humming along to the catchy melody or tapping your toes to the beat. These listening and hearing scenarios are just like those you'll find in social media communities.

### **A Different Vested Interest**

Your customers have an entirely different vested interest than your C-level executive team, your marketing team, or any other employee in your company. While you have employees who are committed to your company's success and are proud of the products and services they're responsible for, their vested interest is entirely different than your audience or your customers. Their view of what's important to customers, what the customer's pain points are, what brings your audience joy, or what are the truly valuable aspects of what you produce are to your customer base, are likely to be totally different than what the actual customer views as valuable if they haven't been active in these social media spheres.

There's no better place to find this out than in a social media community. The people in these communities share without expectation. They might have agendas, but they aren't the same kind of agendas you deal with within your own company, which are influenced by internal politics.

The members of the communities you want to get involved with have a vested interest that's totally free of the internal politics of budgets and resources. They won't tell you something they think you want to hear just to score brownie points. Their vested interest is their free time or the money they earn to purchase your product or service.

Remember, your audience doesn't have to share their experiences with your company with other people in their free time, but they do. They don't have to buy your product when money is a bit hard to come by, but they do.

If you don't take the time to listen and comprehend what's going on in the conversations on these social media sites, you won't have any idea how or what is valuable about your product is to your audience. You won't understand what exactly is their vested interest.

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