

what's the
payoff
with
**social
media?**



*Maximize the potential
of your marketing plan
by integrating these
powerful channels of
communication*

by Carol Gustafson

Unless you're just back from a very long trek to the remote reaches of Siberia, you've most certainly heard of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, YouTube, assorted blogs, RSS feeds, and by extension, the umbrella phenomenon of social media. On second thought, cancel that. Even if you were huddled under a bearskin in the frozen tundra, you can't possibly have missed what is perhaps the greatest communication innovation of our generation.

Basic, simple conversations that used to happen between friends around the water cooler, over the telephone lines or in the pages of a letter are now multiplied, happening everywhere, all at once and all the time. These changes are a result of the Internet and web-based technologies collectively referred to as social media.

Network Solutions and the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business report that social media adoption by small businesses has doubled from 12 percent to 24 percent in the last year alone. The trick for businesses today is to figure out how to be a part of the conversations in ways that are authentic, meaningful, unique, exclusive, and yes, we'll say it, profitable. Owners must ask, "What's the payoff for all the time, effort and money I'm thinking about putting into social media?" The answer rests in a process of planning, learning, listening, participating, contributing and evaluating.



Industry Best Practices

Here's a sample of the Facebook posts from Olson's Tack Shop in Belluvue, Wash. Each post emphasizes a sense of immediacy and fosters connection.

"Our mobile unit will be attending Dressage at Devonwood. We are debuting our new Konig Favorite dressage boot as well as a new collection from Pikeur. If you need any last minute items call by Wednesday and we will deliver on Thursday!"

"Saturday is National Helmet Awareness Day. Come in and be fitted for a safety approved helmet and enjoy 15 percent off."

There's nothing cuter than a puppy! Justin Boots recently had a contest to name company president Randy Watson's adorable yellow Lab. They posted videos of the puppy romping around their office, accepted Facebook entries and let fans vote on the ultimate winner, Gypsy Rose.

Saddlers Row routinely features "Staff Faves and Raves" on their website and Facebook page. It's a varied listing of new and favorite products for horse and rider from their resident riding enthusiasts.

National Ropers Supply posted a short YouTube video on Facebook for the ESP wool Top Pad, then invited their Facebook fans to watch the video to find out how many colors the pads comes in. Fans emailed their answer to the retailer and a random winner was drawn.

Will Wyatt's Cowboy Couture routinely posts pictures of new merchandise and often sells items, including Lucchese boots right off their Facebook page! Facebook fans must feel they're getting the latest news when owners Bryden and Jennifer Becker post photos from buying trips to markets.

Kerrits fans can follow "Kerrits Ambassadors" far and wide on Facebook and the Kerrits website. These devoted Kerrits enthusiasts check in and post about their latest adventures and competitions, their favorite Kerrits products and their love of horses and riding.

Planning

Social media is merely a buzzword until businesses develop a plan to use it effectively. Setting goals and creating a strategy will go a long way in helping you maximize your results. First, determine how social media will fit in with your existing marketing plans. Even with all its potential, social media still represents just one piece of a well-rounded communications and marketing plan.

"Social media is becoming more and more embedded in our overall marketing plan," says Mary Cobey of Kerrits. "It supplements our other advertising and marketing campaigns. We work on a calendar internally, highlighting products, topics, events and specials that we want to touch base on. We make sure we time Facebook content to relate to any press release or product release. Since FB is very much a moving target and changes daily, our plan often changes to go in whatever direction necessary; but overall we try to have a balanced mix of product, community and competitions."

The next step is to create a one-stop online hub for all your social marketing activities, so that when you connect with customers, you point them to your own site. This allows visitors to dive deeper for more content. Many businesses use their brand or company website in this role, although now because Facebook fan pages can be viewed by non-Facebook users, some businesses use Facebook for their hub.

"Setting up accounts [on Facebook and Twitter] and linking them to our website and blog have been surprisingly simple," says Mike Akers, president of Olson's Tack Shop in Belluvue, Wash. "This has allowed us to streamline our methods of communication to become that much closer to our customers."

Likewise, be sure to integrate social media with all your other marketing efforts. Post your Facebook and Twitter profiles on advertisements, catalogs and business cards and repurpose traditional media content, like print ads, as posts on social media.

Finally, be sure that your business' online personality matches your real life one. Although social media allows you to humanize your business, treat online relationships with the same respect and sincerity as you do in person.

Learning

At its core, social media is a conversation not a monologue. It is active, two-way communication that engages others, creates relationships, and builds interest. It also "lets our customers know that there are real people behind our brands," says Lisa Lankes, vice president of communications, licensing and social media for Justin.



Social media is instantaneous. "It allows us to be immediately accessible," says Mike Akers of Olson's Tack Shop. "Many people are keeping Facebook and Twitter running at all times, so to have the ability to present information to them instantly is huge."

The first step if you haven't already done so, is to familiarize yourself with social media and all its accompanying tools. Use social media yourself. Open a Facebook account, invest in a smartphone and get that Twitter feed. Search out your favorite brands on the Internet, visit their websites and see how they're engaging in social media. Thanks to many early adapters, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. There are many good examples of how to use social media, even within our own industry. For inspiration, a number of examples are included at the end of this article.

Listening

Like your mother always said, "God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason." So here's the good news. If you do nothing more than simply listening, you'll benefit tremendously from social media. You'll learn what your customers are doing, thinking and saying. You'll be smarter about your business and industry and soon be ready to tap into the full range of what's possible with social media. And, as Lisa Lankes of Justin points out, "People are going to talk about your brand whether you're engaged or not. We prefer to be part of the conversation."

Justin utilizes Google Alerts, a content monitoring system which automatically notifies users when new content from news, the Web, blogs, video and/or discussion groups matches designated search terms enabling them to eavesdrop on consumer conversations.

Jennifer Becker of Will Wyatt's Cowboy Couture in Overland, Kan., follows tweets from celebrities both within and outside the industry. "It's a great way to pick up on trends and be a part of popular culture."

Participating

By definition, to participate means to share in an experience. "Forget terms like 'monitor' and 'control,'" says Kerri Kent, president of Kerrits. "Social media is about interaction. We want to learn what our custom-

ers do, we want them to hear about what we're doing," Kent reads what people post on her company's Facebook page every night and often sends a quick personal message to fans.

Social media offers the potential to truly understand your customers' needs and because of this, many use it as an important research tool. "As much as possible, we just try to start the conversation and then have our fans really drive it," says Mary Cobey of Kerrits. "Facebook is a fantastic resource for consumer feedback." Recently the company asked their Facebook fans about a new design detail on a particular pair of breeches. Within an hour, they had more than 100 responses. In the past, company president Kerri Kent points out that type of feedback would have required a considerable investment and taken a whole year—from design to market to sales sell through—to obtain.

On the retail side, Mike Ayers of Olson's Tack Shop has also used social media as an important research tool to gauge what customers are talking about when it comes to new products. He uses the information to influence his buying decisions.

While some businesses may be reluctant to use social marketing due to fears about negative feedback from customers, "Part of opening yourself up to the public is being willing to hear their thoughts and complaints—transparency is extremely important," says Lisa Lankes. "We try to approach comments with an open mind to see if there's something we can learn or improve upon. It happens rarely, but if someone posts misinformation about one of our brands, it has been necessary to step in and post a rebuttal to correct the error. And occasionally you just get people who are angry and need to complain. We've often found that the other members of the community will handle those comments for us."

Contributing

In the context of social media, when businesses begin to contribute to the conversation, they truly add value, which in turn builds customer loyalty. Social media let you tell your story, show videos of your expertise, share your news and products and promote upcoming events and sales. For example, Kerrits has designed a series of YouTube videos called

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Kerrits Pilates for Equestrians and posted them on their Facebook page. These instructional videos establish Kerrits' leadership position, while showing their products in use.

Contributing to the social network may be as easy as shining the light on someone else rather than your own business. "I like posting things that aren't just about us," says Jennifer Becker of Will Wyatt's. Most recently, Becker used her store's Facebook page to promote the American Royal in Kansas City.

Lisa Lankes points out that social media can be a tool to promote common partnerships that retailers and manufacturers have. As an example, Lankes says Justin and Drysdale's are both AQHA sponsors. "In order to further leverage that relationship and to create some additional traffic during the summer months, Drysdale's offered 20 percent off on all Justin AQHA collection boots for one month, and all three of us—Justin, Drysdale's and the AQHA—promoted the offer to our communities through Twitter, Facebook and even email blasts."

Evaluating

Don't expect instant sales (though they can and do happen) but make sure to get real results. Because social media is based on technology, the ability to evaluate its success is always close at hand. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media offer low-cost, often free, ways to track click-throughs, conversion rates, online mentions and direct messages.

Mike Akers of Olson's Tack Shop says, "We evaluate the responses to our Facebook activity by asking people in-store if they've seen our content. This is easy to measure because our point-of-sale software prompts the sales associate to put a reason in each time a product is discounted or promotional item given to the customer."

Because Justin doesn't sell direct, Lisa Lankes says their No. 1 metric to monitor the effectiveness of their social media program is the number of visits to their dealer locator function on the Justin website and on Facebook pages. "That is the closest measurement we have to a traditional conversation. We also use Radian6 to monitor and measure



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the amount of conversation in total occurring about our brand.” Lankes touts an impressive measure of success: Traffic to the company’s dealer locator pages has increased nearly 70 percent since Justin started using social media.

With 20 years of marketing experience at some of the industry’s biggest companies, writer and blogger Carol Grotzson brings a unique perspective of business realities to every story she tells for Western & English Today.

What’s the payoff for social media?

“More than anything else, social media gives people a sense of connection,” says Kerrits’ Mary Cobey. Furthermore, social media helps you make that connection in the time, place and manner that consumers choose. It is about becoming part of your customers’ day-to-day experience, seamlessly integrating yourself into all aspects of their lives. Need more enticement to get involved? A recent eMarketer study found that 74 percent of customers have a more positive impression of a brand after interaction with social media. So go ahead, tweet, post, blog, communicate! Join the conversation and enjoy the long-term rewards.

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