

Social engagement

How to use new media to get closer to your customers **Interviewed by Sue Ostrowski**

As more and more companies begin jumping into social media, Tom Dennis has a warning: Social media is nothing more than another tool — one whose use requires careful planning and consistent management. In other words, you can't just have random people at your company posting their thoughts on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other sites.

"That's as bad as doing nothing at all," says Dennis, vice president of Business Development at BrandExtract.

Dennis says that everyone at your company using social media should have the same description of your company on their profiles. And no one customer wants to get 10 Tweets at night directing them to information about your company.

"You have to have a strategy of how often you're going to communicate and what you're going to say," he says.

Smart Business spoke with Dennis about how to use new media to engage your customers and potential customers and how to use it to improve your products and services.

How can a business leader get started using social media?

One of the easiest things to do is write a blog. Focus on topics about your business, but be careful not to be too commercial or people will stop coming back. Pick the hot topics, the big, burning issues within your industry and share your thoughts on those. The idea is to get people coming to your Web site to read your thoughts on a subject and while there seek out other areas of your site for information about your product or service. It's all about positioning yourself as a thought leader in your industry.

How often should you post information about your company?

It varies. It's something you can do to stay in front of your clients. For example, you can update your status on LinkedIn or Facebook every day with a short description of what you've got planned for the day, such as going to a conference or going to hear someone speak. What you don't want to do is post that you're 'going to lunch.' One of the biggest mistakes people make with social media networks, including Twitter, is that they think they



Tom Dennis

Vice president of Business Development
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have to describe everything they do during the course of the day.

As with a company's brand, the most important thing is to be consistent with the message. Once you make the commitment to having a presence on the Web or to start a blog, you have to stick with it. There is nothing worse than going to a company's Web site and looking for 'the latest news,' and finding there hasn't been anything posted in months or years. Many companies make the mistake of starting something, then the person who is responsible for managing the online activities leaves the company or changes positions and things flounder. When news isn't kept current that's almost worse than doing nothing at all, because it looks as if there's nothing happening with your business. Once you make that commitment, it is critical that you keep it up and maintain it.

Most importantly, once you get involved in social media, have a strategy for it and be committed to it. Once people get used to seeing your brand out there and your company being visible through social media communities, they'll keep coming back to see what you have to say and contribute their own ideas and thoughts to the dialogue.

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How can you use social media to improve your products and services?

By listening to what people are saying. Leaders hate to hear bad news, but that's really how you can improve your product, your service and your company, because you are getting instantaneous feedback.

If you have a blog, allow for comments and feedback, which is a great way to start a dialogue about your brand. If a blog doesn't allow feedback, people start to wonder if you're worried about the feedback you're going to get. It's all about being as transparent as possible and allowing for a really good conversation to take place. Current research shows that people can be less trusting of brands these days, so looking as if you are trying to hide something doesn't help strengthen that desired bond with customers.

In addition, you need to monitor what is being said about your company. This allows you to get immediate feedback on your business and, if it's negative, address it head-on. For example, a friend recently Tweeted about how bad his cell phone company was, and the company actually called him to say, 'We saw you mentioned us online and that you weren't satisfied with our service — and we want to make you happy.' He went from someone who was complaining about the brand to someone who became an evangelist for the brand, which is ultimately what we're all after with our consumers.

What is the biggest mistake companies make with social media?

One of the biggest mistakes a company can make is hiring someone to handle its social media strategy based solely on his or her understanding of the technology. For example, someone right out of school may seem like an obvious choice to head up your social media efforts, but while that person may understand the technology, they may not have a clear understanding of the company's brand position and brand message — and what information is best to distribute. You really have to be careful about who you put in charge of your social media activities. <<

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