

Becoming Friendly with Social Media

Discover ways social networking can help drive customers to your business.

By Angela Kliever

There are many who shake their heads at the mention of social media. Thoughts of teenaged children come to mind, exhibiting panic attacks at the thought of using their voices to communicate rather than text messaging, Twitter®, using My Space®, Face Book®, or their favorite Blog. However, the topic of social media appears in all types of conversations these days, not just in youth circles. Even presidential candidates used social media outlets such as Twitter during their election campaigns. The White House even has a blog with numerous feeds available for subscription. What does this mean to small to mid-sized business owners? It means being uninformed of on-line media opportunities will do your business more harm than good. Social media can help your business thrive by promoting communication and directing dialogue in a positive direction—in the direction *you* want them going—by educating your customers and clients with direct feedback about your products.

It's important to remember this; social media is a marketing tool and should be just *one* component in your overall marketing mix used to promote and improve your brand/product positioning. Specifically, social media is an excellent way to build on your company's brand, create a stronger local presence, and enhance customer interaction with your business. According to eMarketing.com, the largest increase in users of social media occurred in the 35 and up age group. Within this age group having trust in the tradesmen allowed into their homes is very important. This perceived trust can mean the difference between a sale for you or for your competition.

Benefits of Social Media

These are a few of the benefits of social media and how it is leveraged today:

1. *Press releases*: Free and relatively simple to write, press releases on social sites offer instant communication with thousands, sometimes millions, of viewers.
2. *Enhanced customer support*: In order to create and maintain a positive brand image, customer support/service is critical. Our economy is consumer driven. Using social media outlets to reinforce good service is important.

3. *Marketing research opportunity*: Social media can be used to gauge public opinion quickly and honestly.
4. *Brand marketing*: Social media can help your consumers create a relationship with your brand.
5. *Promotion*: This should be an obvious one. Word of mouth on social networks can be staggering.
6. *Consumer education*: A great way to excite, motivate and convert customers to your brand.
7. *Sales*: Excellent promotional venue with little cost.
8. *Customer relationship management (CRM)*: This phrase appears more and more and rightly so, as there are more ways to communicate with customers than ever before. CRM suggests an organized approach to communicating *with* customers. It's about communication and knowledge both in-house and for the customers. Social media and CRM are excellent tie-ins.

Make a Focused Plan

Like most marketing initiatives, it is important to first make a plan. Don't be intimidated by the idea of making a marketing plan. If you do your own marketing, it's really about getting your ideas on paper and creating a path you'd like to follow. To start the process, look at your company's mission statement. Don't have one? Now is an excellent time to formulate one. To build a strong building you need a solid foundation, and your mission statement is the foundation upon which your company is built and is the essence of what drives a company.

With the mission statement in mind, use the essence of your statement to introduce social media in order to better plan the direction this marketing tool will take. Cutting edge, progressive, traditional, customer service oriented—whatever you stand for is what should be projected on your company's social face. But remember, just because you say that your company's brand is about quality products, exceptional craftsmanship or superior customer service doesn't mean it's true. Your employees and customers are really the ones who will let you know if your branding is successful or not.

Ready to Socialize?

Regardless of which social media venues are selected, it's time to build the framework. Meaningful content is important, but do not limit it to just product information. It's pointless to replicate material already in use on a company website or brochure and simply add it to Face Book or My Space. Rather it should be viewed as an opportunity to communicate immediate events and ideas that may not have a place on your company's website. Most importantly—keep the communication momentum going. Create content that is compelling and grabs their attention. The latest news on product care and

maintenance, new products or color selections, frequently asked questions, or a simple thank you when comments are posted about their experience goes a long way.

Create in-house venues to build a social setting which can continue on to your on-line social media presence. Here are a few simple ideas:

- Have an open house in your show room during the evening. Team up with a local food store to see if they will help with food and/or beverages while promoting their products in your setting. This adds to your atmosphere and creates third party support.
- Get media interactive in your showroom. Customers don't always want a sales person following them as they look at products. Highlight different products by featuring a video which tells your customer about your products and the different colors available. Talk to your suppliers as they might already have something available* to get you started; PowerPoint® is the simplest software to use for this application.
- Is there a local charter school, church, or other non-profit organization in need of something as simple as a new vanity top? Make it and install it at no charge, then use this as a marketing opportunity. Let the community know—via social networking—of your good will and dedication to helping the community you live in.
- Think locally in your advertising. Being made in the United States is an important selling feature that shouldn't be ignored. Remember that LEED gives builders credit for materials sourced within a 500 mile radius. Local advertising should be targeted to these areas—especially designers and architects. Create a blog or join a local media group which targets these potential customers.
- Host special receptions for interior designers and architects. It's a different audience than an end-user retail open house. Such events take more planning and all designers like to take a palette of samples with them. ACS is working on a designer palette binder that allows distribution of your in-house samples in an attractive, functional package. Provide them with samples, literature and an on-line computer to blog directly to your social media outlet from your showroom. Ask them to blog what they liked, what they saw, etc.

These events can be advertised (for little money) before and after the fact using social media as your marketing tool. Remember this; social media equals word of mouth. If a surfer sees something they like, links are passed around to several of their friends which equates to free advertising. Get creative and

brain storm with people outside of your business. Sometimes a fresh perspective can generate new ideas.

Once you've selected which social media venues to use, don't forget to advertise! If using existing literature, add fancy stickers telling them to find you on Face Book, a company blog, or whatever venue you choose. Create new window signs, add counter signs, mail post cards and put reminders on business cards. These are all easy ways to let customers know that you'd like to continue hearing from them.

The explosive growth in social media presents an opportunity for the small business owner to advertise and generate word of mouth traffic for little or no cost. By using any of the popular social media outlets you will generate additional revenue by giving your potential customers a new way of looking at your business and a way to talk about and interact with your products. Successful companies like Coca Cola, Microsoft, Harley Davidson and others have all successfully harnessed the exponential strength in numbers social media outlets provide. Using these relatively inexpensive venues should be part of your overall marketing strategy and provides another opportunity for your audience to see your company's name and products.

*ACS has presentations on all product lines and can easily adapt them to meet showroom needs.