



Social Media and Online Impact What's RIGHT for B-to-B Marketers

by Joel Goldstein, President

Marketers are all a-twitter with social media today. Every conference and webcast covers it, even Businessweek writes about how CEOs use it:

http://images.businessweek.com/ss/09/05/0508_ceos_who_twitter/index.htm

What's got everyone excited, however, is that true business applications and marketing advantages are starting to emerge. The race is on to apply it and harness it, and companies are in fact finding real value in social media applications for lead generation, customer retention, employee communications, even crisis communications.

If GE, a symbol of conservative corporate America, has turned to social media in its corporate communications department, creating a dedicated microsite for social interaction with its customer and prospects (www.GEreports.com), it must be acceptable for the rest of us to use, right?

That doesn't mean that all social media are equally effective, and marketers still need to apply a critical eye to ensure they receive a payoff on what to do first, and what to emphasize. However, social media has in fact come of age for business-to-business users to accomplish several key objectives:

- Provide true two-way communications. The web was always envisioned as a two-way medium, but corporate web sites never really achieved that level of connection with their customers. Now, via these new connection tools, companies can build meaningful two-way dialogue with their customers and communities. Magazines and media, particularly b-to-b trade journals, are under stress and under siege, as cash-strapped advertisers move even more of their budgets from print to online.
- Magazines seem to be melting away today, producing thinner issues with fewer quality editors, leading to the question of how well they're engaging their audiences. In fact, even response rates for magazine email news letters are diminishing. What to do? While magazines used to be the primary method for reaching an audience, now social media tools allow us to create our OWN audiences and conversations. Print will remain and is still an important part of the branding mix; however, now social media allows us to supplement that and, where there are few strong publications able to deliver an engaged audience, we can begin to create our own.
- Deliver more traffic to our web sites. B-to-b marketing has two outcomes: get people to call the 800 number, and/or get them to the website. All of this activity pushes more visitors of better quality to the site.

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- Build our reputations as experts. PR and social media are converging. Articles and releases can now be published to dozens and hundreds of relevant groups and sites under our control. We've always wanted to speak directly to our customers, without going through the filter of the media; social media now allows us to do just that.
- Interacting vs. Shouting. We've all been used to shouting our marketing message to markets via one-way communication, but now we need to change our strategy and realize the potential of sharing a discussion about resources as a respected peer in the industry. Social media communications are based on peer-level discussions that are two-way, educational and resourceful. Traditional, promotional marketing is not welcome here.
- The lead generation "chain" is now different. The traditional model of lead generation used to be a straight, uninterrupted line:

tradeshow ⇒ lead ⇒ sale or webcast ⇒ lead ⇒ sale

No longer, of course. Now, that conversation we have with a prospect in a webcast or on a sales call is supplemented by easy access to peers, via social media. The number of peer-to-peer conversations that will take place before someone buys a product will begin to explode. Already seen in most surveys as a dominant source of buying information, peer conversations made easy through social networking will irrevocably change and sometimes break the lead generation chain. We must be diligent in participating in, managing and channeling these conversations, to the extent that we can, to our benefit.

Social media, in truth, is an extension of a company's overall online marketing program. It's not possible to separate one from the other. So how do you integrate what you're doing now with social media? How do you get started, and what's most important to do first? Here's a beginning primer on the steps to take.

- 1. Search Engine Optimization.** Everything begins and ends with getting people to your site. SEO rankings, both organic and pay-per-click, continue to be the first step for any online marketing program. Common mistake: assuming an optimized site today remains optimized tomorrow. There are few arenas more competitive and fast-changing than SEO, with competitors working to assume your high rankings, and new tools such as Microsoft's Bing search engine coming to the scene. Keep it current.
- 2. Google Analytics.** Finally, we can begin to use metrics and analytics to drive the web experience, rather than anecdotes and assumptions. Don't drive traffic, drive the RIGHT traffic to your site. Google Analytics allows us to pinpoint the search terms, content and designs that convert visitors into qualified leads.
- 3. Wikipedia.** It's common during marketing meetings for a question to come up, with someone firing up a laptop to get the answer on Wikipedia to settle the question. Particularly for technical content, Wikipedia has become a trusted resource for customers. When we create pages on Wikipedia, it very quickly surges to the top of the list of sites that drive traffic to a client's site. It's tricky, and there are rules to follow to avoid being blackballed by Wikipedia's army of "content police." Begin by creating a company page (if your company is "of note"), posting to existing pages and creating new pages that relate to your product category.

Pay attention to posting links on the dictionary portion of Wikipedia as well, at wiktionary.org, that drive people to your content.

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- 4. LinkedIn Groups.** While this used to be limited to job hunters, and still carries a tremendous amount of content related to that, the number of business-related groups and discussions has exploded during the past few months. LI allows you to build your own community and connect to the thousands of people you're trying to reach. In most cases, they're all there, organized into groups you've been searching for.

Companies should participate in existing groups, and should create and host their own branded groups as well. In addition, companies should actively foster their salespeople to participate and build contact lists. (Company policies and procedures should make clear that, just as any sales contact list, these audiences are company property and remain with the company even after employees leave.) Sample posts would include articles, releases, videos, application notes, polls, webcasts, trade show invitations and notices, queries for interviews and stories. Within LinkedIn, you're able to post recommendations and testimonials about your product/service. Fill this section with relevant testimonials from your customers.

- 5. YouTube.** Posting video content on YouTube (and Flickr) help drive traffic to the site as well. Pay attention to titles and search tags, as they have a lot to do with how many people will find and watch your video content. How-to and tutorial videos always draw more than those titled with a company or product name, of course. Also, since YouTube videos do not "click" over to your site, ensure that your web address and phone number appear throughout the video. Video content is very popular today, and companies are working diligently to create as much video content as possible on their web sites. Integrate YouTube into that strategy by posting testimonials, demos, marketing videos, executive interviews, "what's new at the trade show," etc.

You may also want to organize all your video content into your own branded "channel," once you have enough.

Consider YouTube as a testimonial center for video content, a powerful sales tool for building credibility and demand through testimonials from your customers. Consider two examples by visiting www.youtube.com and searching on "I am a Phoenix" for University of Phoenix, and "Thomasnet," for the Thomas online directory.

- 6. Blog.** Blogs have two applications for b-to-b companies: they improve the company's organic search engine rankings, and they build credibility as experts. They also foster that two-way dialog that's so important to marketers, yet hasn't really found a home on corporate websites. Ning.com is a particularly good platform for blog hosting in an environment that includes two-way tools.
- 7. PR.** PR, online marketing and social media are beginning to converge as print magazines continue to migrate to online environments. Having an article, white paper or news release published now carries more significance in its online forms than seeing it published in a single print issue.

News releases should all be posted online, distributed via news release distribution services that automatically feed the blogs and news aggregator sites. You're even starting to see these release postings in Twitter. Releases should be written and optimized for search engines, using the tools that suggest relevant phrases and links to embed in your releases.

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It's important to increase the frequency of news release flow for most companies, since the more releases that exist, the more traffic that is pushed to your site. In fact, if you review your web server logs, you'll find PR has become the #2 driver of traffic to web sites, after search engines.

In fact, many are beginning to look at PR as an extension of search engine marketing, called "content marketing." The creation of releases and articles for the sole purpose of ranking highly on search engines is beginning to take center stage in many respects, as a further blending of PR and online branding. There is a caution: the online discussion taking place is one where credibility and depth are important; it's important that whatever is written be seen as contributing to the dialogue, rather than superficial, so write as always for the end-user in mind, not just for a quick ranking on a search engine. The end result must be to build credibility and expertise, not just good rankings that do nothing to further the brand..

Also, begin to create and include videos in the releases just as you include links to still photography. Photos were included in releases when we lived in a print-only world; we have to re-examine every promotional tool we deploy in an online context, so it makes sense to extend visuals from photography to video in order to generate online attention. Post videos not only to your site, but to YouTube and Flickr as well for added exposure.

- 8. Facebook.** While MySpace really has remained the playground for teens and youths promoting bands and other social activities, Facebook has migrated rapidly to include a variety of corporate applications. Many companies recognize that if their customers are spending time within the Facebook environment, it makes sense to extend their online presence to that community as well.

As with LinkedIn, it may make sense to create your own branded company page and start your own groups, as well as participate in existing groups related to your industry. In addition, since it can get to be a bit of a burden to create separate posts for LI, Twitter and Facebook, there are new tools coming to market that will automatically take your single post and extend it out to all your social media pages.

In terms of what to post, the list for Facebook is similar to what's relevant to LinkedIn: testimonials, demos, marketing videos, executive interviews, "what's new at the trade show."

As with all of these tools, the intent is over time to build your own audiences and interest groups, so that you can reach out to relevant, engaged people who are interested in what you have to say. While the old paradigm of announcing a new product meant, "run an ad," now you can supplement that with the social media/online marketing toolbox of PR, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.

We've "ranked" Facebook in the eight spot while LinkedIn is in the fourth. While it's too early to declare a winner, the trend is toward Facebook as a more social, consumer-oriented environment, while LinkedIn seems to attract more professional, business-related traffic. When comparing a business related group size, for instance, the LinkedIn equivalent will be 3-5 times larger than its Facebook counterpart, if there even is a similar group appearing on Facebook. Time will tell if LinkedIn will further its lead in this regard.

- 9. Twitter.** Twitter, tweets and twitdecks don't sound very corporate. Yet, there are large corporations using Twitter to find others interested in their products, and to build audiences, as you would with Facebook and LinkedIn. Tweets are effective in driving traffic to your site, with posts about webcasts, articles, releases, blogposts, new installations, new videos, etc.

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It's important to post with a business identity, rather than a social/private identity. Use real names, and keep your Twitter account separate from any personal networks you're building.

Use important search engine phrases in your posts. Others who look for those topics will find you and begin following you. In addition, search for others who post to those topics as well, and begin to follow them as a way to grow your audience.

10. Company Web Site Leverage. Make sure you're building an integrated strategy, of course. Separate silos of online presence don't leverage the investments of time and resources you make across the entire online community, so it makes sense to link your posts across all platforms you're engaged with – corporate web, blog, Facebook, YouTube, etc. If you build a corporate page on LinkedIn, ensure people can find it from your site. If you're building an audience with a dedicated Facebook group, add to that group with the names you gather from any RSS feed on your site. If you create a branded YouTube channel with all your videos, ensure that you've created a video section on the corporate site and blog.

It's a lot for marketers to apply and absorb, and whatever's appropriate today will be sure to be different in six months. As we publish this paper, Microsoft has just announced its new Bing search engine, and Google is making "waves" with its Google Wave tool. Both are sure to change SEO and online marketing programs. The task at hand for marketers is not to adopt everything at once, but to "monitor and master." Set up programs to monitor the changes and new tools taking place, and fully and completely master the new tools you choose to integrate so they have impact on your marketing programs.

One last point: most companies, particularly large ones, need to begin thinking about a "social media policy" for employees. Are employees blogging or posting to twitter as a company representative, or in their own identity? What happens when an employee posts something improper, or confidential? Are employees allowed to voice opinions about company announcements or executives? These are issues that need to be thought through in advance, rather than in "scramble-mode" after the fact. While social media is certainly here to stay, and is fast becoming a bedrock foundation for how companies connect to their audiences, employees need clear practices and policies in order to ensure the best outcome for everyone.

Goldstein Group Communications, a technology b-to-b agency, brings an unusual combination of corporate communications management and engineer-level writing capability to its national client roster. With deep experience in electronics and industrial markets, the agency is able to draw on its skills to articulate with impact and clarity the technical advantages its clients bring to their customers. Unlike other agencies, staff members for the most part have built their careers on the corporate side of the desk, rather than as agency executives, a perspective that results in a higher level of accountability and measurability in the agency's programs.

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