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TALKING POINTS

Sometimes, Social Media Is Right For Your Business

By Andrea Obston

If you're feeling guilty, outdated or downright dowdy because your business is not using social media, consider this column your safe island in the storm. "Just do it" may work for Nike, but it has no place in your marketing efforts.

The mere size and speed of social networking has made everyone sit up and take notice. The mantra, "If Facebook were a country it would be the world's third largest" is enough to make any business person's heart go pitty-pat. Or consider this: a recent Consumer Reports' "State of the Net" survey said that "two out of three online U.S. households use social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, nearly twice as many as a year ago."



Andrea Obston

Feeling the old guilt about missing the boat creeping into your brain? Stop it! I promise this will be a guilt-free read. So continue on without fear.

If you get nothing else from this column, take this one thought: Just because a marketing tactic exists, it doesn't mean it's right for your business. Social media is one of many ways to reach your customers. Some have been around since the 1920s, when young Allen Odell convinced his father to allow him to put up small wooden roadside signs to pitch their product, Burma Shave. And some were invented within the last few years like blogs, Facebook business pages and YouTube channels.

They all work in some form or another. But they won't necessarily drive the right customers to your bottom line if they don't suit your marketing objectives and their needs.



ILLUSTRATION/MARIA PAZOS

The real bottom line here is that any marketing effort starts with the answers to a few key questions:

- Who are your most profitable customers?
- What do they want from your business?
- How do you deliver it?
- Why would they come to you instead of your competitors?
- Where do they go for information

before they buy?

- How can you make them into loyal customers who come back and send in their friends?

Essentially I am asking you to decide who you are, who you want to be in the eyes of your customers and how you can deliver what they want. Once you know that, you can

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Social Media Fit Is Key

be a more intelligent marketer on all fronts.

OK, enough of Marketing 101.

What about this crazy idea of social media?

Let's start with a definition: Social media is web-based communications which seek to set up a conversation; a relationship. They are interactive, personal and something that people invite into their lives. Contrast that with advertising which essentially intrudes into your customers' lives.

Think about it — people turn to their Facebook page as an activity. Ads interrupt an activity (say reading the newspaper) to deliver their message. So, if you're interested in really maintaining or creating a dialogue with customers and prospects, then social media — be it a Facebook fan page; a YouTube Channel, or a blog — may be for you. Use them to offer practical advice that your customers will want to read and pass along, such as tips on dealing with some of the problems your product solves.

Businesses that use social media to talk about themselves (“We had 50 people here for a terrific sale on Wednesday”) offer nothing that anyone would want to pass along. Before you post that blog or tweet that tweet, ask yourself, “Is this something

someone would want to share with a friend?” If the answer's yes, tweet away. If it's no, tell your mother.

As with any marketing effort it's not about what YOU want to say it's about what YOUR CUSTOMERS want to hear.

Think of the social media world as one giant cocktail party. When you go to such functions, who do you end up spending your time with? The person who offers you an interesting conversation or the one who assaults you with diatribes about themselves?

So, here are a few tips on whether or not social media is for you:

Do you or someone on your staff have the time to devote at least five hours a week (throughout the week) to updating and monitoring social media?

Do you currently participate in social media AND ENJOY IT?

Do you cater to the kind of customer who can answer yes to the question above?

Do you understand that your picture of the average social media user may be way off?

A few facts here: The average user of social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn or My Space is more affluent and more urban than the average American, according to Nielsenwire.

A profile of users of social media from a site called Royal Pingdom tells us:

Those 35 to 44 dominate users of social media;

The average social network user is 37 years old;

LinkedIn, with its business focus, has a predictably high average user age; 44;

The average Twitter user is 39 years old;

The average Facebook user is 38 years old;

The average MySpace user is 31 years old.

So what do you do next?

Before subscribing to the “Just Do It” principle I suggest you do two things:

Look long and hard at the customers you want and how they use social media and

Get a lot more literate about creative uses of social media.

Start by reading two wonderful blogs: Mashable and FreshNetworks. Get smarter; get more comfortable with your choices and get going in the way that best suits your business.

No guilt; no worries; just bottom-line communications. However that looks. ■

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