

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith
July 2011

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

Social media cultural shift

Organisations that are not looking out for and listening to online conversations about their brand are missing a major opportunity. If someone attacks a brand there is an opportunity to address any criticisms and rectify the issues before rumours spread out of control. Conversations cannot be controlled like advertising messages, but organisations can feed accurate information as well as being seen to listen and care.

In addition to collecting crucial feedback, ideas and public comments from the marketplace, marketers are provided with a welcome platform to get their message across if it is relevant. This also grows a brand's presence wherever the market congregates online.

Ignoring these conversations leaves an organisation on the outside and soon to be replaced by another brand that wants to be a part of the conversation.

Social media provides a platform to:

- reach out to increasingly difficult-to-contact customers
- help customers by sharing expertise (and therefore branding) with audiences, rather than trying to use it for direct sales
- listen to the vocal elements within a market.

This requires a cultural and organisational shift which requires more of a listening and sharing culture than a selling culture. It requires a real customer orientation, which means a real customer-driven business. After the listening and sharing, relationships can blossom.

After this awareness and engagement, all things being equal, sales will eventually follow when the customer is ready (as opposed to when the organisation is ready to sell).

Before exploring the ten steps to social media success, it is worth emphasising two critical steps that require a cultural shift:

- developing a listening system, and
- developing knowledge assets/content.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

How to develop a listening system

There are several questions you need to address in order to develop a listening team and a system to use the information:

- Who monitors what?
- Who compiles the analysis and the reports?
- Who responds to comments on blogs and in group discussions on LinkedIn?
- Who analyses the comments, complaints, suggestions, worries, issues and opportunities?
- What happens to all this highly useful information?
- What systems channel which information to whom?

If you are embarking on the highest level of customer engagement, collaborative co-creation:

- Who manages the channelling of new ideas into new product development processes?
- Who handles the responses back to the original contributor?

More and more organisations are using third-party organisations or their software to scan for any online comments, discussions or tweets regarding their brand, their company, their customers or their competitors.

How to develop knowledge assets/content

Knowledge assets can be used to lure traffic. The more useful your content, the more valuable you become, and the more your engaged network will grow.

Most organisations have a lot of assets already, assuming colleagues speak at conferences, do interviews, write white papers, commission market research, or even answer customer emails and develop answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). Even writing a book review is a knowledge asset, if it is written by an expert or perhaps the CEO.

These are knowledge assets that can be repackaged and offered to customers. Record all the organisation's speeches on video. Knowledge assets include videos, PowerPoint presentations, slide decks, articles, blog posts, commissioned research, white papers, e-books, expert insights and helpful customer tips.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

Sometimes these knowledge assets are buried in customer email responses, which can be categorised and used to generate FAQs for your website. They can also be used as the “ten most popular questions”, “ten questions you’ve got to answer”, “ten reasons why” or “ten things you’ve got to know”. These can be converted into quizzes with multiple answers, or self-assessment widgets.

These knowledge assets can be used as “link bait” or as a lure to entice an audience of Twitter followers or members of a discussion on a blog or on LinkedIn to visit your website.

The social media process – ten steps

1. Start monitoring and listening

A social media audit establishes an organisation’s reputation (and your competitors’ reputations). Develop a comprehensive monitoring strategy to discover:

- the issues: what can have an impact on your brand
- the influencers in your marketplace
- the platforms or places where your customers (and influencers) congregate (the influential networks, including blogs, discussion groups and other social networks)
- the opinions customers have about your product, your company and the competition.

If your brand or industry discussions are focused on one or two platforms, this makes it easier to concentrate your efforts.

2. Set priorities and goals, and don’t try to cover all outlets

It is not possible to engage in all conversations everywhere. Pick the more important ones initially. Not all online conversations have the same impact. Identify the more important ones. Learn when and when not to engage.

Have clearly defined objectives and know exactly what you are trying to achieve with social media, e.g. reposition the company, develop relationships, establish the brand as credible, or grow awareness.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

3. Agree key messages

Have crystal-clear messages. Be ready to engage with the target audience in a meaningful way (give them what's relevant and important to them). What topics and key phrases does the organisation want to be associated with?

Prepare canned messages for a range of issues or situations so that they can be tailored easily. Show the team how to create links, back-links and retweets. Share guidelines for what is and is not appropriate.

4. Develop good content – help and share

Your content has to be valuable; otherwise you're just shouting or "making noise". You have to be prepared to help and share good content.

Do not sell primarily. Sales may follow good content. Social media is not a direct marketing tool. Share articles, presentations and videos that are relevant – these can be yours or someone else's (as long you credit them and link to them).

Only add comments to other discussions if you are being helpful and relevant.

5. Recruit and train the team of spokespeople

Whether it's a blog or a Twitter account or a YouTube channel, you need to identify who is in the team, i.e. who has permission to write a blog post or a tweet or upload a video.

Who handles responses? Is it certain people for certain issues? Is it one spokesperson or several? Equally, who monitors what? Who reports to whom?

Once you have your team trained, brief the rest of the organisation. Share the strategy with the whole organisation.

6. Commit time and resources

You need a consistent stream of useful content. Don't just dabble. This requires clear briefings, training and motivation, which in turn requires resources. Monitoring requires resources also, whether you use an outside agency or do it in-house. Once you start proving the value of social media, you should find it easier to allocate resources to it.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

7. Constantly promote social media

Just as all organisations now promote their websites in everything they do, so too should they promote their social media sites.

- Announce your Twitter handle (name), Facebook page or LinkedIn profile at every opportunity.
- Add it to all the company's email signatures and collateral.
- Announce it at conferences and news releases.
- Add the details to slides, news releases and the letterhead.
- List it on your website.
- Post all presentations on your social media sites.

In fact, all offline communications should be integrated with social media, e.g. Twitter, blog and Facebook announcements about an upcoming conference. Videos and photos of the event and speeches can be uploaded to YouTube and Flickr respectively.

8. Integrate online and offline events

The online social media team or consultancy needs to work more closely with the offline team, as it needs to know what marketing events are happening in advance.

As the website is a conduit, it can get more bang for its buck if it is integrated, e.g. brief video production companies and photographers as to what formats and style are needed for web use.

A shared schedule of events or an outline plan to allow integration and leverage of various marketing assets (such as ads, promotions and videos) on to social media platforms is essential.

9. Plan for success

Although it may take some time to build up your networks and followers, be prepared for a sudden influx of comments, visitors and enquiries. This is a nice problem to have. However, if the organisation cannot handle the incoming web traffic with its comments and enquiries, it could end up generating a lot of negative PR. Develop credibility before raising visibility.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

10. Measure, measure, measure

Don't play Russian roulette by (up)loading your message, pushing or spinning it out and then closing your eyes and hoping for the best. Watch the analytics. See if traffic has spikes as a result of any particular posting.

What posts generate a buzz? One new discussion on an e-marketing group on LinkedIn generated over 2,000 responses. It was called "Social media is crap", and had a detailed post of why the person felt it didn't work.

Watch what generates visitors, conversions and good comments (as opposed to negative comments).

How do you measure social media?

Of course, not everything comes down to ROI. Some things can't be measured, but are nevertheless important to your business. As Ford's head of social media Scott Monty said, when challenged about the ROI of social media: "What's the ROI of putting your pants on in the morning?"

To measure the return on social media, some companies use a formula (the PR industry has used formulas for years) to generate a score each week on editorial coverage, allowing for brand name mentions, whether they are positive, negative or neutral, and the importance of the outlet to the brand.

Although "sentiment tracking" is in its infancy, marketing professionals need to spend time monitoring (and acting upon) what is being said about their brands, their people, their organisation and their industry across blogs, micro-blogs (Twitter), forums, social networks and online news media.

Building relationships with customers

Social media is not for the purely mercenary business. It is for organisations that are truly customer orientated. Social media, for them, is the best thing that ever happened.

Customers segment themselves into interest groups that generate more inside information in the minds of customers than any focus group ever could, because everyone shares information, tips, suggestions, ideas, examples, and details of what upsets them and what excites them.

Social media helps to build relationships with customers and prospects, rather than shouting and broadcasting messages at them.

Social media – ten steps to success

A Guest Article by Paul R. Smith for TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

Exit strategy

Finally, one odd point, remember to prepare an exit strategy in case, for example, participation rates are too low and therefore do not justify the resources required. How would you stop a blog or a discussion? What reason would you give? Where would you send the group? Some brands transfer their audiences to other relevant sites or groups.

So prepare for a cultural shift and follow the ten social media steps to harness customers' willingness to engage, participate and ultimately grow your business.

Paul R. Smith
Consultant – PR Smith Marketing

If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.