

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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More businesses use 'social media' to engage clients



The phrase “social media,” also referred to as new media, can elicit a wide range of reactions, from “What is it?” to “How do I use it?” or, worse, “How do I avoid it?” While businesses have relied on traditional media outlets such as print, television and radio to send their message, social media is the new “black gold” of communications that, perhaps because of its overwhelming potential, tends to send some companies running for the hills. In this article, I will share some tips on making new media work for your business.

Social media can be broken down into two components: First is the decision to engage in a relationship with users or consumers. Second is the actual technology – blogs, podcasts, vlogs, etc. – that allows for this interaction to happen.

The key component to all of this is the idea of sharing. Businesses are used to “giving” to consumers, who are supposed to “take” that good or service. Today, both parties must give and take, which means companies must be prepared to not only provide

a product or service to consumers, but work with them in new ways. Social media is a growing means of establishing this dialogue.

These new outlets cannot be ignored: There are 70 million blogs, and more than 16,000 web news sources. While these figures represent a powerful set of new tools, the quantity and variety of social media can be daunting. Diving into social media too quickly, however, can be tricky if you are still applying the old rules.

The first step is to know your brand identity – be honest about who you are and what you have to offer. Technology won’t make your company or product “cool,” but you can use it as a means to increase awareness while utilizing your company or product’s key messages.

Second, listen and respond to your customers; you’ll be surprised at how much they have to offer. Be prepared to engage with users, as well as respond to criticism.

Take computer company Dell, which, after suffering from a tarnished customer service reputation, launched a blog to reach out to consumers. The blog, while applauding everything that was great about Dell, failed to respond to specific demands from

consumers about the company’s customer service, and was ridiculed by the online community.

After admitting its mistake, Dell took a more proactive approach and began utilizing its online forum to not just talk, but listen to its customers. Dell now offers the “Dell Idea Storm” Web site where visitors can offer suggestions to help Dell “become the greenest technology company on the planet,” post new ideas, view upcoming products and vote on whether the company should “promote” or “demote” products and services.

Even those of us who are eager to join the new-media fray need to be aware that, while the online sphere is ripe with potential, some of our old behaviors must change in order for these opportunities to work to our full advantage.

The third step is to position yourself – through blogs, regular podcasts or even just your Web site – as an informational resource online. Offering meaningful content will not only benefit your credibility, but also invite opportunities to increase related traffic to your site.

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Lastly, integrate your marketing. Utilize both new and traditional media to develop consistent messaging and build a relationship with consumers. Traditional media is not a thing of the past; quite the contrary. Revenues in direct mail, newspaper and TV advertising were more than eight times greater than internet-based ad sales in 2006 – totaling a whopping \$147 billion.

While television, radio and newspaper continue to be vital avenues in reaching audiences, they too have jumped on the highway to social media. Recent major television shows have made the internet an essential extension of their show, offering exclusive online content, forums where fans can meet to generate “buzz” after each show and other resources for viewers that garner fan loyalty and help generate awareness of the programs – which means increased advertising sponsorships for the network.

Newspapers, too, are finding ways to innovate in an online world. Our own Tallahassee Democrat, for example, features several blogs on its Web site, where pundits are providing up-to-date and lively discussions on current Capital issues and events.

Social media is an asset to today’s businesses. Now, more than ever, companies must work to establish relationships and have an open

dialogue that allows for increased touches with their consumers.

In my previous article, I introduced the importance of shaping your company’s “total brand experience” to build a bridge to your customers and create loyalty. Web sites, podcasts, blogs and other social media offer businesses a powerful means of creating that relationship with a larger audience than ever before.

New media means new methods – but for businesses, the goal is the same as always: to generate new sales and to attract and retain customers. Traditional media continue to go a long way toward accomplishing this, and companies who are brave enough to take the first steps into new media are still figuring out what works best. Just make sure your company is not the one that holds off on utilizing new media tools for so long that the future leaves you behind. 



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*New Media Lexicon**

Social media: Describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives

Blog: An online diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page which frequently allows readers to post comments on individual blog entries

Podcast: A Web-based audio broadcast

Wiki: A Web site that allows visitors to add, remove, and edit content

Video blog (vlog): A blog that comprises video

RSS: “Really Simple Syndication.” Allows subscribers to receive notices when Web sites have added new content

**Sources: Wikipedia and Webster’s New Millenium Dictionary of English*