

You don't have to be on Twitter to get the word out

Remember MySpace? Second Life? They were once hot topics in marketing discussions.

Now? Not so much. MySpace still registers huge traffic but is on the decline. I haven't been asked about Second Life in at least a year, though I know it still exists. But the extent to which your brand must have a presence on these sites has gone from "gotta have it," to "who cares" in an Internet minute.

Which brings us to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Throw in blogs and you have the new rat pack of social media, the sites and platforms everyone wants to understand and conquer by next week's status meeting.

Well, I'm hear to tell you that it's OK if your CEO doesn't compete with Ashton and Demi for followers on Twitter or if your company hasn't built a sticky widget for Facebook.

At the moment, Twitter is the hottest thing going, but on a scale of 1 to 10, how shocked would you be if it were gone in a year? I'm at about a 6, maybe a 7, which is to say I'd be surprised, but not shocked. That perspective alone should be enough to let yourself off the hook if you haven't yet shared with the world your latest eureka moment in 140 characters or less ... five times before lunch.

When it comes to social media, you need to be more strategic and less reactive.

Let's start with the basics. No matter the size of your company, don't sit around brainstorming what to say on Twitter, or anywhere else for that matter, unless you've already answered fundamental questions like:

- Who are we and how do we want to be perceived?
- Who is our target audience?
- What messages resonate with our audience?
- Where does our audience spend time?

Don't get me wrong. I am not anti social media. I'm just anti "knee-jerk branding," which is a trap some companies fall into when they dive in headfirst before thinking about what they want to accomplish.

The undeniably great aspect of social media is that the technology allows small companies to appear much larger than they are because the costs are so low. If they create interesting content and disseminate it effectively, more people will take notice and share with friends, thus building a large fan base.

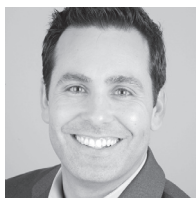
Using social media, big impersonal companies can act a lot smaller and more personally by providing faces and voices for people to interact with through informal channels.

If you are wondering where to start with social media, start by listening. Use keywords to search on Twitter and see if there is any conversation or mood about your brand or your competitors.

To help you think about social media tactics, I'll share some stories of what's working.

A friend of mine runs a Web site called Three Potato Four, an e-commerce site that sells offbeat home goods. The site and the company have a distinctive, lighthearted personality conveyed directly by its husband and wife founders who built their customer base starting with family and friends.

Therefore, it makes a lot of sense for Stu and Janet to share stories about the business, blurring that line between personal and business communication. Three Potato Four has an active blog and nearly 1,000



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fans on Facebook. Social media sites are perfect for them because their business is a community by its nature. It has actual "fans" and sells products people enjoying talking about.

Try doing the same thing for a company that sells padlocks or storage spaces and you might have a harder time.

Here are a couple of examples of smart, innovative campaigns large brands have rolled out in social media.

Earlier this year Burger King Corp. ran a promotion where consumers could win a free Whopper by un-friending 10 Facebook

friends, the theory being that most active Facebook users have a surplus of "friends" in name only. Burger King tapped into a way to connect with its target of 18- to 35-year-olds. Besides creating store traffic, the stunt generated buzz in the media, both online and in the traditional press.

Nike Inc. created Ballers Network, a site and Facebook application where weekend warriors can use a free application to schedule pickup basketball games and manage teams or leagues. Ingenious. Nike didn't say, "Check out our latest ad." It simply said, "Here's a tool you can use to do what you love."

If your customers are engaged in social media, you have an obligation to explore it.

But you must remain authentic. Never try to fake your brand by, for example, hiring someone to write a blog for you. You risk getting exposed, and social media can become your worst enemy quickly.

Remember that technologies come and go. It's not about making sure you are on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and whatever comes up next. Brand building starts with identifying who you are and what you're about. The next steps are to understand where your audience is and connect with compelling messages, no matter the medium.

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