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## Connecting to the Social Media Conversation

by Teresa Todd

Just a few years ago, Facebook was little more than a novel way for college students to connect with one another and Twitter referred to the sound of chirping birds. Today, company reputations are built and destroyed almost instantaneously – in 140 characters or less – as millions of conversations take place online.

Social media continues to gain ground in the marketing mix and has a growing influence in business. Whether it's blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook or any other social media networking or video sharing site, business owners should realize that conversations about their products, services, brands and companies are happening with or without them.

Here's some interesting stats: More than 300 million users on Facebook at the time of this writing; the fastest growing demographic is 35-54 year olds; and the number one user of social media today are mothers.

The digital space is a crowded field filled with multivariate platforms. Google searches are event-driven and rely on search engine optimization for performance metrics, whereas social media offers a human connection and is more difficult to quantify and direct.

Social media engages users and builds communities giving the old adage "any friend of yours is a friend of mine" new context. Interactions are relationship-based and operate with the same third-party credibility that has long been the hallmark of public relations. It's PR to a higher power dwarfing traditional media in its ability to engage audiences and pull them into the conversation.

So how do you make social media work for your business? First, understand social media's fundamental principal: It's a commitment. If you are going to go through the trouble of setting up a Fan page or Twitter feed for your business, users are going to expect more than a mere presence. Content must be relevant and style must be engaging. Give users a reason to connect with your brand and care about it enough to engage in the conversation.

Engaging and monitoring social media conversations is paramount to an online strategy. It not only enables companies to combat negative setbacks, but also identifies and develops opportunities, and solidifies relationships.

-- **Create relevant content and gauge impact.** Not all online buzz is noteworthy nor does it require attention. However, social media has turned everyone even remotely associated with your brand into a potential ambassador, for better or worse. Listening and responding appropriately are key to managing your company's reputation and fostering a relationship with current and potential customers. Understand where users are in the awareness/interest/desire/action continuum and align your strategies to drive users to take a particular action.

-- **Integrate content across platforms and build a following.** The prevalence of relevant links is important to cross-pollinating online content to rank higher in search results, and capture and keep audience attention. Social media is about cultivating relationships and building a loyal fan base of individuals interested in what you have to say and offer.

-- **Analyze the competition and develop a strategic advantage.** Just as a business monitors conversations occurring with their own customers, social media offers a way to examine conversations involving competitors. What are the advantages and disadvantages of competitive product offerings as compared to your own? Where does your company fall within the industry as compared to your competition? What insight can be gleaned as to how customers make decisions regarding products or services?

-- **Spot emerging trends and react quickly.** Taking an industry-wide approach, social media provides the means to identify trends and changes as they occur. Shift happens and being among the first to spot trend changes allows a company to react quickly and maintain a competitive advantage.

-- **Personalize messaging and develop a segmentation strategy.** Marketers have always tried to put the right message in front of the right people, but with mixed outcomes. Social media allows companies to customize their messages to reach specific target audiences through the communication channels users prefer most.

Think of your online presence much like a storefront window. While the overall impact of a store window may draw customers into the store, it will be the product or service offering and relationship created that earns a customer's business. The same principles apply online, whether it's through a website, blog, tweet or post.

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