

Making the Case for Social Media

Imagine that you're driving down the road and you see a billboard



"Town Meeting. Why <your company name> sucks and why you shouldn't do business with them."

Would you go? Would you ignore it? Would you tell other people in your company?

What if you saw a magazine article titled "10 ways that <your company name> could get me to buy more of their products"? Would that get your attention?

If you were at a party and heard a stranger talking about your company, would you wander over and listen? Would you try to engage in the conversation?

Social Media isn't New

Social media isn't anything new. The term has come to be associated with online tools. But the concepts have existed since the first forager came in from the woods and grunted about where to find berries or the smears of paint on a cave wall showing hunters taking down a deer. The only thing that's evolved are the tools and communications channels. Now, instead of the message reaching a handful of people around the fire and persisting for a few hours or days, an individual's message can reach millions of people and it can live on for years.

Unfortunately, many companies aren't using these new tools and channels, so they're completely oblivious to the conversations. The examples that I opened with aren't far-fetched. They're happening in online spaces and your company is just driving down the wrong roads, reading other magazines and attending different parties.

But this online thing is "new", right? Wrong! These conversations have been occurring online since the early online Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). They've been worldwide in scope since networks like FIDO and USENET started sharing content between systems. We've had 30+ years of this alternate communications landscape. The Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc. just stepped it up a notch and started engaging more people. What's "new" is that there are far more online conversations going on than there are in "the real world". All of a sudden, companies are starting to realize that their customers have moved into cyberspace to talk and the silence in the real world has become deafening.



The Tipping Point

So, this has been going on for 30+ years and it hasn't hurt you so far. Why should you care now?

We've passed the tipping point. An entire generation has been brought up in the online age and they're using these new tools as their primary means of communications. Even the older generations have made the shift. In many developed countries, more than 74% of the overall population use the internet, most have cell phones and about half (~40%) of the cell phone users use their phones to text, email or surf the web. If you ignore the trend, you'll lose contact with your customers. It's that simple.

The Risk of Social Media

But what about the risk? This is a public relations nightmare waiting to happen?

If you believe this, then you're stuck in the old model.

If you put out one press release and it's perceived negatively, that's a 100% failure rate. Your "reputation score" is now 100% negative. If your associates are out there generating 1000 messages and posts and 100 of them are perceived negatively, you still have an overall 90% positive rating. With some exceptions (eg: "official" corporate press releases or postings from your CEO), I've found that positive interactions with associates end up attributed to the company and negative interactions are attributed to the individual.

Similarly, if your customers are out there complaining and there's no response, that negative message spreads. For every hour that negative message is out there with no response, people will be reading it, absorbing it and it will become part of their perception of your company. Just a simple response of "Hi, I'm with XYZ corp and I'd like to talk with you about your complaint" can stop that viral spread. In addition, you might learn something about your own company, the needs of your customer and ways to improve yourself in the process.

Immunizing Customers

British Scientist Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" as a way of explaining the spread of ideas in terms of genetics and natural selection. An idea or "meme" reproduces based on the behavior that it generates in the host. Ideas that are new, exciting, interesting, etc. create a desire to propagate them. A propagated idea will "infect" the next person and spread or will encounter a form of immunity and proceed no further. For example, if someone told you that the earth was flat, your prior education and beliefs would stop the idea from spreading any further. Similarly, if your customers are exposed to your associates responding to complaints and issues and showing a genuine concern for their welfare, then they become somewhat immunized against bad press, misunderstandings and irate customers. Even your own mistakes will be treated with more leniency as you develop a more positive personal reputation with your customers.

Social Media as Risk Mitigation



Social Media is actually a powerful tool for Risk Detection and Mitigation. If your associates are engaged, they can spot problems and issues through the online chatter that may take days, weeks or even months to translate into impacts on your call center trends, market share, stock price, etc. It's like having a 7/24 focus group continually reviewing your performance, products and services. Additionally, when a message gets put out there, if there's a negative response, your associates can see it in near realtime, respond and prevent it from getting out of control. With traditional media, the first sign of a problem can be when the headlines hit the Wall Street Journal or when you show up on the ticker of CNN.

Getting Started

So what now? Should you fire up a web browser and create a Facebook account?

Well...yes and no.

Yes, you should secure your brands and trademarks as quickly as possible. There are services and organizations that can help you to create accounts and secure your brands on literally hundreds of social media sites and services. Try www.usernamecheck.com or knowem.com to see where you stand and then decide what networks you need to focus on. It's not a bad idea to secure your brands wherever possible to prevent unauthorized use. Just don't create an actual page or presence unless you intend to monitor it. Secure the name, but don't set an expectation by publicizing it until you're ready to do something with it.

No, you shouldn't just dive right in without doing your homework. You need to understand the legal ramifications of information that you post (especially if you're subject to specific regulatory concerns). You need to determine what value you're going to bring to your customers by being online and you need to determine how you're going to deal with associates that want to communicate with your customers through Social Media. If you're a global organization, you need to understand how each of these services, tools and channels could expose you in other countries and what your legal, regulatory and statutory responsibilities may be. In many cases, you may just need to clearly identify the scope somewhere. In others, you may end up violating cross-border data rules and personal privacy laws. Don't just assume that since others are doing it, it must be OK.

Start by polling your associates to find out who is already active in Social Media and what they're doing. They may have experience and insight that they'd be happy to share. They might also welcome the opportunity to strengthen their personal brand while leveraging their followers to build your own. Partnerships and sharing are a big part of building a following and you shouldn't ignore the potential that may be right under your nose. These people will also be invaluable in developing and reviewing your future social media policies.

Learn to use the tools and services. You can't develop policy or even recognize the potential without practical experience. Watch what your competition is doing. Pay attention to the companies and individuals that generate the most buzz and traffic. Make note of

what works, what doesn't and what your customers might find valuable to appropriate when dealing with your company. If you can manage it, conducting focus groups are a wonderful way to understand your audience.

Just remember that social media is more about the "social" and less about the "media". It's not about creating a new sales channel, electronic billboards or squeezing value out of your client base. It's about engagement, dialog and providing value to your customers. Don't try to develop your strategy without their input.