

MANAGEsmarter

Are You Missing the Social Media Marketing Party?

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By Mark Kolier

By now you've heard of a myriad social media Web sites like MySpace and Facebook. And, if you're like many business professionals, you probably have a fair notion that these social networking sites are places where (mostly) teens and 20-somethings share photos and write on "walls." Similarly, LinkedIn and Plaxo are two social networking sites where (mostly) professionals share contacts; pose and get questions answered; and even look for career advice from fellow professionals. But can all these widgets, blogs, profiles and Web technologies really help your business? And, more importantly, if you don't jump on board now, will you be left behind?

If you're not exploring social media networking sites as part of your direct marketing campaigns, don't worry...you're not alone. Most articles tend to describe the gulf between the "tweets" and the "tweet-nots." And for direct marketers, this gulf is quite large. Consider that most direct marketers are focused on strong creative mailers, copywriting that speaks to individuals, postal regulations, clean opt-in mailing lists, bridging the gap between direct and personal URLs to individual Web landing pages.

But as you ponder the idea of how your company might also become involved in new social media networking tools and sites, here are a few questions you should consider:

1. Should direct marketers be trying to reach potential customers via blogs or social media networks?

Answer: Every channel should be explored and then, if promising, tested. To this point, most direct marketers have not had success making social network marketing or advertising on blogs pay off—there is not yet an accepted manner in which a call to action can be incorporated into the content. And that probably won't change. In 2007, Facebook opened itself to corporate participation but as yet—and maybe forever—it is not an environment for serving up response based advertising. On the other hand, it is a terrific way to engage with your customers to find out what they think about your products and services and to give them a heads-up on news and events at your company. But it's a different way of thinking than more traditional call to action approaches.

2. Should my company have a blog?

Answer: Only if you can commit to updating it regularly. Most experts feel that has to be at least weekly. Nothing is worse than reading a blog with three or four posts, the last one being two months ago. It's also not a place to simply promote your company's products. It has to provide a community forum for discussion. If you are faking it, everyone will know and they will resent it. As in the case of social networking, blatant direct marketing call to action items on blogs are taboo and should not be part of the "conversation."

3. How can I get the most value out of my blog?

"Value" is the right word to consider! Creating a conversation around a product category or topic of general interest can afford opportunities for you to highlight the benefits of products like the one you sell. Offering suggestions—and not only your own product highlights—can give your blog credibility and engender organic conversation amongst others who post. Consider headlines for your posts carefully, as these make your blog more search-friendly for specific content.

4. What is a Web widget? And should my company have a Facebook or Myspace widget?

Answer: A widget is a small piece of code that links directly off a MySpace or a Facebook page (or a user's home page or blog) to a page on your site. Most popular widgets offer some type of fun or instant gratification—either a search utility or even a game. They can be somewhat expensive to create and if not used regularly will not be a worthwhile investment. But used properly a widget can be a terrific portal to a specific place on your Web site. Mobile phone users have discovered Web widgets as a great way to shortcut to specific Web pages.

So while social networking and blogging both offer great opportunities to build your brand and create conversations about your products, it is not an area in which your company should consider for making direct sales to prospects and customers. On the Web, we are first and foremost "citizens" since we are not "owned" by any company trying to sell us products.

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