



Why Social Media is Important to Your Business

Nielsen Online: Member Communities surpass Email in terms of Internet Popularity

A 2008 Nielsen Online report released this past March shows that member communities, aka social networking websites like Facebook, now reach more people globally than email. The report continues by stating that the time spent on member community websites is drastically growing and that the fastest growing segment by age is the 35-49 demographic. These are decision makers with money and your company should engage them!

Social Media websites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and the new Twitter juggernaut are amazing tools for sharing information and companies are beginning to leverage their power to grow their businesses. Common successful uses are to: gain feedback from customers, promote new products/services, and improving brand loyalty by providing valuable free information. H&R Block used a new Facebook page this year to provide free tax advice without ever explicitly asking people to use H&R Block services. In addition to using the popular social media sites some companies, like Starbucks, create their own. MyStarbucksIdea.com uses a custom social media approach to gain feedback and interact with their loyal customer base in a fun and interactive way. Either way, the end result is a powerful pool of newfound relationships with a happier group of people that will naturally tend to purchase more. And that is the key, creating and improving the relationships your business has with its customers.

So how does your company tap into this exploding opportunity? As with anything else you would do for your business, you should carefully plan your approach. Here's a general guideline...

Understand your audience

Consider that some users are Producers who actually create content for you, some are Commenters who will only comment on others' content, and some will only be Viewers who just quietly read content without getting involved. It's best if your social media plan has ways to engage each of these different groups and be sure to somehow reward the groups that are more actively involved.

Defining your goals

Have a clear business goal in mind. Are you trying to grow your brand loyalty? Are you looking to receive feedback from customers? Do you want to provide additional customer service?

There are as many reasons for employing social media as there are ways to do it, be sure that you have a clear goal.

Utilize tools, tactics, websites to plan your approach

Based on your expected audience composition and desired business objectives, consider how to best engage your audience and achieve your goals. Maybe a simple blog to share information makes sense. Or perhaps you would like to share "how-to videos" with customers on a YouTube channel. Should you become part of the big networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, and

Twitter or should you create your own custom social network within your existing website? The ultra-popularity of a site like Facebook means a large potential audience (200+ million users) where users are already interacting and spending large amounts of time (3.5+ billion minutes/day). If you need something custom to satisfy your niche goals, consider using a website like Ning.com that can be a free do-it-yourself platform for creating your own social networking website. Another option is to create a custom application for Facebook, which potentially gives you the best of both worlds by allowing you to do something specific for your business while still tapping into the largest social network ever created.

The web and the new social media aspects that are emerging at an amazing rate are all excellent potential opportunities for your business. Don't get left behind, understand how your business can benefit from these exciting new technologies that encourage relationships with the biggest audiences ever created and, most importantly, seek professional assistance to achieve the full potential for your business online whenever you feel you might be in over your head.

Aaron M. Soto is a partner in the Huntington Beach-based DezTech Consulting LLC (@DeztechConsult on Twitter). Since 1998, DezTech has successfully worked with clients to build custom websites, intranets, extranets, and other custom web-based applications to help our clients achieve their online goals with friendly and professional service. Aaron can be reached at (714) 875.7686 or soto@deztech.com. Post comments, ask questions, and get answers about this article or other web-related topics on Twitter! <http://twitter.com/DeztechConsult>

