

Making Social Media Work for Your Business



Social media provides new marketing and communications tools that allow you to build your brand in ways that previously weren't possible – or imagined. Now's the time to put them to work for your business.

Undeniably, social media ushers in a host of new and exciting opportunities for marketing and communications professionals. Businesses can get their messages out immediately at negligible cost to a broad audience for whom access to social media channels is fast and simple. Social media also holds potential for organisations to 'humanise' their brands in ways that traditional marketing tools cannot, by engaging with individuals and groups in a more personal, intimate manner.

Changing the game

Despite its compelling benefits, businesses seeking to capitalise on this 'social revolution' should proceed with care. Social media disrupts the longstanding rules of business in many ways, not least of which the marketing and communications engines. Social media is different to traditional marketing and communications tools in that it's multidirectional. Organisations no longer have firm control over how and what is communicated about their brands. Gone are the days when clients and prospects passively consumed marketing and communications messages; today they actively participate in them by sharing, but also by reacting and responding. Monologue has given way to dialogue.

Jackie Funk, Dimension Data's Vice President for Marketing in the Americas, believes that for many businesses, this requires a large-scale shift in their traditional way of thinking about marketing, communications and reputation management.

"The ever-growing connectedness of people via the Internet has enabled information about brands – both positive and negative – to spread virally. Businesses need an actionable plan to manage their online reputations. Just one or two adverse incidents, such as a service outage, can affect your business significantly. And unless you have an actionable plan in place to address and mitigate the fallout, negative sentiment will 'live on' in cyberspace, its impact compounding over time."

Building bridges

With social media, users have the power to select the information they wish to receive and filter out what's irrelevant, in line with their particular personal and professional interests. So you have to be 'out there', networking in the same spaces as your clients and prospects and interacting with them in the manner they prefer.

"Focus your attention and efforts where your clients are, scan the social media landscape to identify the most relevant channels and forums, monitor what's being said about you and be prepared to thoughtfully and immediately respond to both positive and negative commentary," advises Funk.

"You have to participate in order to build bridges that connect people and your organisation."

Funk adds that the key in online participation in these vehicles is to be authentic, transparent and accessible.

"When negative comments about your brand appear, don't be tempted to remove them. But do make sure you have a plan in place to swiftly and effectively respond to such commentary. Proactivity and planning are essential to wringing maximum benefit from a social media presence, while mitigating its risks."

Which leads to the question of metrics and measurement. Some lack of clarity still exists regarding how social media is influencing the buying cycle. Translating 'x' hundred 'likes' on your Facebook page into 'y' dollars in sales is hard to document and prove. Industry analysts agree that we're still some way off. For this reason, organisations need to concentrate on leveraging social media as a complementary tool, one that enhances and enriches traditional marketing outreach efforts. Think of social media as an add-on to already established objectives. Social media delivers most value when it's used delicately. Businesses need to be conscious of not 'over-engineering' their efforts. To many organisations, this is no mean feat, given the plethora of possible channels. The key is to find ways to harness this ecosystem of real-time collaboration to build and strengthen your brand. Focus initially on small but impactful executions to spark and grow interest. Sign up for a Twitter account or to start a blog

about your organisation. Add 'Tweet this' tags at the end of your web pages, articles, or blogs or submit videos to YouTube profiling your organisation and its services.

Social workplaces

Social media as an enterprise tool – for enhancing internal communications and teamwork – is an area of growing interest. Neil van der Merwe, General Manager for Operations within Dimension Data's Group Information Services, explains that these tools offer a highly collaborative experience, whereas e-mail is very much a 'point-to-point' channel. He cautions however that these tools need to replicate the 'look and feel' of traditional social media channels if employees are to adopt them. He also believes that close attention needs to be paid to their impact on bandwidth, storage and compliance. Organisations need to be mindful that in certain geographies, there are strict regulatory requirements relating to the way corporate data – including social media 'conversations' – need to be retained and stored.

Management teams also have an important role to play in making social media work for your business. This includes retaining and/or assigning appropriate resources to champion and manage the business' social media profile. Assigning an employee – whose time is fully committed to other projects – the responsibility of sending out a couple of tweets every week is simply not going to cut the mustard. Remember, social media is all about content; content that needs to be fresh, concise, relevant and penned by professionals with the requisite skills and training.

"Failure to think through, structure and continuously monitor your efforts can be potentially more damaging than not doing anything at all,"

notes Van Der Merwe.

Given its myriad of touchpoints within an organisation, the question inevitably arises as to whose shoulders the overarching responsibility for 'owning' the social media strategy rests upon. Oftentimes, the responsibility as a shared one, with each department assuming control and accountability for the areas where there is a natural 'fit'. For example, marketing will typically drive the social media outreach activities to clients and prospects; the human resources team will own and co-ordinate social media recruitment efforts; should

a social media-related crisis arise, the PR and legal team will step in; IT will play a facilitation role in by ensuring the business' technology resources enable social media's rich collaboration requirements.

Game on

While there's a general consensus that social media is still in the early-adopter stage in most businesses, there's no better time to set the stage for success. Social media is not a game played from the sidelines. Those businesses that participate will succeed – those that don't will either have to work hard to catch up – or miss the game altogether.

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Dimension Data gets social

A global brand refresh offered Dimension Data a unique opportunity to boost its social media presence, while at the same time driving awareness and excitement regarding the new corporate brand identity – among its own employees, and partners and clients.

In 2010, Dimension Data formally stepped into the social media domain, electing to adopt a 'hub-and-spoke' model. This approach enables the organisation to afford individual regions and business divisions the freedom to initiate and grow their own social media presence and profile, while retaining a degree of governance and control at the core.

In May 2011, Dimension Data officially relaunched its brand. Creative use of social media channels went a long way towards ensuring the news of the new brand reached the eyes and ears of clients, prospects and partners alike, as well as enabling Dimension Data's own employees to collaborate and share details of the various launch celebration activities taking place at different offices around the world by sharing photos, comments and videos. The social media drive around the brand refresh adopted a 'follow-the-sun' model, beginning in New Zealand

and concluding 19 hours later in the United States. The volume of Tweets and Facebook 'likes' and comments generated bears testimony to the value inherent in social media channels to communicate and build excitement and rapport with a variety of stakeholders.

Lessons learned

Today, Dimension Data's social media presence continues to go from strength to strength. Limiting the number of channels has been key to the success of the strategy: too many channels can potentially result in low levels of contribution and the impact of the overall effort will be diluted. The organisation also applies a sharp focus on training. If an internal group wishes to create a new social media channel, the relevant users must complete a comprehensive training programme upfront. The establishment of a social marketing council – which assumes responsibility for overseeing, measuring and reporting on the progress of the strategy – has also been critical to sustaining the momentum of Dimension Data's social media drive. The council comprises representatives from different areas of the business across different geographies, and meets regularly to share their respective successes and lessons learned.

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