



Joining The Mass Conversation – Engagement In Social Media

By: George Di Falco & Tyson Fenech

In many ways, the soaring popularity of social media, the way it's transforming the very basis of communication between friends, family, and professionals, isn't exactly a shocking, or new, concept.

For Stuart MacDonald, president and CEO of the Web's first community site for cruise vacations, Tripharbour.ca, and the man who launched the Canadian business plan for Expedia in his house back in 1995, social media is simply a "natural migration of personal connections from the offline world to the online world."

To try to express what's behind the ever-growing appeal of services such as LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter, MacDonald points to the travel industry as one of the firsts to truly make use of the technology.

Offline conversations about where to vacation made a natural crossover to the Web years ago because people greatly wanted to share reviews of hotels, post pictures, and make comments on where they stayed, he says. The union between social media and the travel industry has grown into a global phenomenon and is, in essence, a microcosm of what's happening today. It's simply providing a new means for what human beings have always loved to do – share and interact.

And as technology advances even further, it's moving across all industries, all topics, and is accessible to any type of user – through ways we couldn't imagine years ago. So, "don't ignore it, don't fear it, use it," proclaims MacDonald.

Although it has shaped MacDonald's

professional life for some time now, it does, however, present a vastly different form of communication to many of today's business leaders.

A MASS CONVERSATION

For those wishing to take the first step towards promoting themselves or their business through social media, it's important to "relinquish the idea that you control your message," says Leona Hobbs, of the Social Media Group (SMG). Her Canada-based agency helps businesses around the world navigate the "new socially engaged Web" and explores appropriate ways for them to get involved.

Rather than targeted messages, social media is about having a mass conversation, allowing you "to truly connect with people"



and “to listen to them.” To define it further, social media refers to sources of information that rely on interactions by people, through technology, to build shared-meaning or dialogue. But it can be broken down into many forms including social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace; internet forums; wikis; video sharing such as YouTube; podcasts; blogging; and micro-blogging through services such as Twitter or Yammer.

Hobbs admits that relinquishing control of that targeted message still leaves a few uncomfortable. Some businesses remain resistant to allowing uncontrolled messages about themselves, their business, or the inner workings of a workplace to spread. And credibility issues abound since social networkers have virtually free reign to write whatever they want about a business or product. Plus, there are privacy issues regarding how some social media services treat personal information.

Recently, for example, Facebook, the mega-popular social networking site, has come under increasing fire for how the personal information of its 250 million users worldwide is used. In fact, Canada – with its 12 million users of the site – became the first country in the world to try to put some legal boundaries on the matter. In August 2009, Canada’s privacy commissioner, Jennifer Stoddard, issued a complaint regarding Facebook’s collection of users’ personal information for advertising purposes, its disclosure of personal information to third-party application develop-

ers, and its storage of personal information even after an account is deactivated. Currently, discussions between Facebook and the privacy commissioner are moving along.

REASONS TO TAKE PART

Despite the reasons to be concerned, there are greater reasons to take part, Hobbs says. These conversations are happening and will not stop happening, inside and outside a company, so it’s beneficial to at least listen and respond rather than do nothing. And as more of younger generations – highly in-tune with this technology – enter the workforce, the relevance of social media will inevitably grow, so better to get involved now than be left behind, Hobbs says.

“Executives and business leaders need to participate in a way that makes sense to them. To not participate means alienating clients, having a disengaged workforce, and losing out on many opportunities.”

To Hobbs, the main benefits of having a social media presence are three-fold:

- ◆ On a personal level, social media can elevate your profile within a particular fan group or industry, and can establish you further as an expert.
- ◆ Internally within a business, and applied strategically, social media can engage a workforce by connecting employees and breaking down geographical barriers.
- ◆ Externally for a business, it gives you the power to have a dialogue with your most important constituents – your clients, allowing you to instantly respond

to feedback or concerns, thereby improving brand loyalty.

Also among the list of advantages, social networking connects like-minded professionals and helps companies uncover talent, which is of considerable importance to Krista Canfield, LinkedIn spokesperson and career expert. LinkedIn, she says, tries to cater specifically to professionals, representing an average age of 41 years old and with a household income of about US\$110,000.

PROFESSIONALS CONNECTING

Within the past year especially, Canfield says the appeal of LinkedIn for those trying to advance their professional lives has broken new ground. Prior to August/September 2008, it was growing by a million new members every month. After that, when talks of recession and economic downturn began, it took on “tremendous” growth, Canfield says, with a rate of approximately one new member every second or about a million new members every two weeks – double the growth since the economic turmoil took route. Since its inception only six years ago, LinkedIn membership has grown to 45 million users worldwide including 1.5 million users in Canada.

“The current economic conditions certainly made people realize how important it is to have a professional identity online. The recession also helped many realize that you should build a professional network before you need it.”

Among its users, senior business executives and upper management are an “extremely” important component to LinkedIn’s member base, says Canfield. All Fortune 500 companies are LinkedIn members. In Canada, Bell, IBM, Telus, and CGI are the companies with the most employees as users. As well, company profiles are growing on LinkedIn with 12,000 new ones added every week. They now total more than 365,000.

FOCUSING EFFORTS

Because LinkedIn deals with a network of more or less like-minded professionals and companies, it’s definitely a great place for business leaders to focus their efforts or break into the social media scene, Hobbs says. The numerous mainstream sites out there that are open to more general audiences, such as Facebook or Twitter, may not be appropriate for some.

“There’s no need to go big or go home right away ... so rushing out and getting the most expensive presence on Twitter before truly understanding it isn’t recommended,” Hobbs says.

However, when it comes to ‘hot commodities’ such as Twitter – a microblog-

ging service that allows a user to send brief text or multimedia updates to any group of followers or a restricted group – it's important to at least be aware of the conversations going on, Hobbs says. Start by running searches for your company, clients, or competition on Twitter to see if your product or brand is, indeed, relevant. If it is, your response and presence may, in fact, be needed on such tools.

And if you're wary about engaging in something so new and unknown, such as



Twitter, put that fear aside, MacDonald says, and give it a chance – in the best interests of your business. When first encountering these vastly new forms of communication, he finds that you should just take it as it comes and be aware of some pretty basic steps: “Step one is to try it. Step two is to be prepared to think it's foolish. Step three is to realize that maybe it isn't after all!”

If the concept of microblogging appeals to you, but Twitter still seems like a bit of a leap, then there are deeper, more defined ways of applying it. Yammer, for example, is a microblogging service, but, unlike Twitter, it caters to businesses and allows only individuals with the same email domain to join a given network. “Where some of these platforms can be unproductive vacuums, Yammer gives social networking and communication a business purpose,” says Rahul Agarwal, of Yammer.

For senior executives, in particular, Agarwal says social networking tools like his are breaking down communication barriers within an enterprise environment as email “is quickly becoming outdated and clunky.” It's driven by self-joining employees who can interact and follow business leaders instantly through mobile and desktop applications, and can aid executives in areas such as crowd-sourcing for ideas, keeping tabs on agents in the field, or connecting multi-national companies.

Moreover, it's also helping leaders build a corporate culture, Agarwal says. By instantly connecting differing levels of business in these internal conversations, executives get the chance to share their vision – facilitating greater engagement throughout. “Executives who join the discussion give it more weight and can learn and share a great deal about everything that is going on at their company,” he says.

MINIMIZING RISK

Whether you are allowing employees to engage in microblogging internally or externally, or if employees are representing the company on other types of services, it's a good idea to outline participation guidelines to minimize risk, Hobbs says. Most businesses likely have privacy or disclosure policies for employees to follow, but “it's about progressing beyond policy and making sure you get an internal structure aligned to ensure participation is appropriate across an enterprise.” Guidelines should clearly outline the boundaries around what is suitable when employees talk about the company on a social network, and the con-

sequences of exceeding those boundaries.

There is also training you can conduct and educational material to distribute on the topic. You can put systems in place to monitor and respond to these conversations online, and perhaps deputize employees to police or observe these conversations. There are many ways to ensure your business and professional reputation is protected online by simply making sure everyone knows what is expected and by making an effort to make everyone feel more comfortable.

Before embarking on a social media strategy for your business, it's imperative as well to ensure you have a handle on what your clients or shareholders think of having information – perhaps sensitive information – available on an open forum. Every business' priorities are different so participation can vary greatly between each, Hobbs says. An insurance company or investment firm, for example, may not want the same exposure or approach to social media as a restaurant chain.

So explore your own customer or stakeholder engagement in social media first, understand what their expectations are, and then choose what social media tools and strategies seem appropriate. Remember, you cannot control much of what is said in a social network, but you can control where you choose to participate and what types of individuals you are open to. **□**

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