

The Social Media Paradox

Despite all of the hype about social media, less than 20% of all small businesses in the United States are actually using it to enhance their marketing efforts. In contrast, virtually every Fortune 500 corporation has made a commitment to social media marketing, and their motivation for doing so is to penetrate those local markets where small businesses are the strongest. As a small business, you have most likely established a solid local presence. If you would like to make it stronger, that is what social media is ideally suited for.

The reason large companies are jumping on the social media bandwagon is they recognize now is the time to capitalize on a consumer trend for buying locally. What is driving this trend? In a tight economy people rely on those that are closest to them – the friends and businesses they can trust. Given that you have already developed relationships in your marketplace that support your business, you can use social media to help you to enhance and extend them even further.

The social media paradox is that many of us have been conditioned to believe that technology creates a distance between us. Yet, the truth is social media is a technology that makes it possible to more effectively humanize your business. You have the ability to use this multi-media platform to help your customers and prospects get to know more about your business and how you can uniquely serve them. It's a simple matter of sharing what is relevant about your business to earn the trust of those future customers you hope to attract.

Candor is Replacing Commercials

Large corporations have used mass marketing effectively for years to build their brands. Super Bowl commercials are a perfect example of using traditional marketing to create a favorable brand image around a universally available product. Notwithstanding the enormous cost associated with those commercials, I challenge you to recall even a few of the 72 commercials from the most recent super bowl. This is exactly why marketing is shifting from traditional platforms to more sustainable relationship-building methods such as social media marketing.

To be effective with social media marketing is an uncomplicated process of applying the technology to accomplish more of what brought your company this far – relationships and community awareness. You can't do that as well with advertising, direct mail, or other traditional methods. Yet, if you use LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to candidly share how you apply your accumulated years of expertise every day to help the people in your community with their tree care, then you will effectively create an online presence that will likely result in new referrals.

Authenticity Will Win You Fans

You will hear time and again that social media amplifies everything about your business, and for the most part this works to your advantage. Running any business means that there will occasionally be

unavoidable situations that you may not wish to share with your community. However, the nature of the social networks is that news travels well; both good and bad, and you have to deal with it. This is why you should always seek to be authentic in your communications.

A perfect example of how this works is illustrated by a recent incident in Major League Baseball. Umpire Jim Joyce blew a call this season that cost Detroit Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga a perfect game. Fans were outraged and called for the decision to be reversed, as the replay clearly showed he had made a bad call. What did Joyce do? He gave a heartfelt apology to Galarraga, who accepted it in a gentlemanlike fashion. And despite the outcry, the decision was never reversed. But something interesting happened about three weeks later that bears out the merits of being authentic on a big stage, a stage not unlike that of Facebook or Twitter. Joyce was named Umpire of the Year in a vote *by the players*. Coincidence? You decide. He won by a significant margin.

Social Media Humanizes Your Business

To make your company more human is to make your business more personal. The business environment is still challenging, and this is why more consumers are minimizing their risk by doing business with companies where they have a relationship with someone they can depend on. Social media is a practical means for accomplishing this.

Spend more time meeting on site with customers and have a staff member take action photos of you together with them. If you are bold enough, interview your customer about their project and record it with the Flip Mino pocket camcorder. When you post this on your blog, Facebook, or LinkedIn, it personalizes your business and helps prospects see themselves working with you.

You will find there are many paradoxes with social media – and all of them are ultimately good. There have been many concerns recently with respect to privacy issues associated with the social networks, most especially involving Facebook. Those issues are being addressed. Yet, if you are running your business in a professional manner and serving your customers well, this only works to your advantage, because it encourages you to operate at a higher level.

Social media is not about technology, but the people that use it to encourage more interaction and engagement. Those of us that are succeeding with it are continuously studying and making adjustments as we learn more. My recommendation is that you establish a foundation with it and continue to experiment with the technology – while always trusting your gut about what is right for your business.