**Social Media: Why and How it Influences the Relationship**

By now, you can't miss Facebook. It's the most frequented site on the Internet. With more than 500 million active users, if Facebook was a country it would the third largest country in the world.

Hot on Facebook's heels is Twitter. Celebrities, athletes and more than a few businesses use Twitter as a way to update fans and customers on everything from movie shoots and secret appearances to sales and new product releases.

Then there's MySpace. Even though its popularity has waned in recent years, active MySpace users are some of the most devout social media users in the world. More than a few bands have used to MySpace to launch or further their musical careers, building an audience that record labels can't help but notice.

So what does this all mean for your business? In short, if you're not using social media in your professional relationships, you're missing a huge opportunity.

Social Media influences the relationship because it adds legitimacy to your organization. Just ten years ago, you *had* to have a website to be seen as legit. Today, you *have* to have a presence on social media. Facebook and Twitter profiles are essential, and MySpace, Digg, StumbleUpon, YouTube and others may also be a great choice for you, depending on your industry.

**What to Expect**

When using social media for the first time, the biggest issue most professionals have is sharing. Unlike traditional marketing and advertising, social media is built on what you can offer, not what you can sell. If you offer the right things you can acquire devoted fans, which, in turn, builds your brand and leads to better business later -- if you have the patience to let it.

This means that you may need to give up on the idea of directly quantifiable returns from social media, as the focus is really more on long term brand building than it is on immediate conversions or easily measurable return-on-investment (ROI).

It's best to have someone in your organization who you trust to be your mouthpiece on social media. This ensures consistent delivery of updates and a consistent voice. In many cases, this person is YOU!

**Best Practices**

Different social media sites have different ways of interacting, and you should take the time to understand each before wading in. While volumes have been written on social media marketing, most advice can be boiled down to this one dictum: share.

Here are some of the best ways to share on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace

* **Facebook --** People follow you on Facebook because you offer something they're interested in, so it's okay to post promotional material. But a steady stream of advertising gets tiresome quickly, so break it up with quotes, links to interesting articles and updates about life in general. Then be sure to follow up when people comment on your posts so they know you're paying attention.
* **Twitter --** As with Facebook, links to articles and quotes are good. So are everyday Tweets. *Retweeting* (RT) others helps to build relationships, while using hash tags (#) in your Tweets makes you easily searchable on Twitter. And be sure to send a *Direct Message* (DM) "thank you notes" to your new followers, but don't make it promotional. A simple, "Thanks for following me. I look forward to reading more of your Tweets soon" is fine. In fact, if you reference one of their recent Tweets, that's even better.
* **MySpace --** Like Facebook and Twitter, MySpace offers status updates. But it also offers bulletins (messages that go out to everyone) and blogs that your friends can read. ANnother feature unique to MySpace is the vast array of forums. You can get in the mix with others on MySpace regarding your areas of expertise. This allows you to offer your own insights to a crowd that has a chosen interest in the subject.

These are just a few of the ways to get started with social media. Take some time to look around. You'd be surprised how simple it is when you focus less on selling and more on getting to know people.

**Do Your Homework**

Every social media site has its own unique identity. The etiquette, language, and other social mannerisms are indicative of certain demographics. This means that there is an ideal site - maybe two - for you. It also means, however, that you should be sure you are presenting yourself in a manner consistent with others on your chosen site(s).

If you remember to share, give your fans something they can use, and acknowledge them, you will be off to a great start building new relationships with social media.

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