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He Said, She Said:

The conversation is on, and why B2B companies should join.

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So you “get it” when it comes to social media for your personal life—you have a Facebook page and a profile on LinkedIn. You may not Tweet or blog, but you might follow a few people. However, you’re not sure social media is right—or even really applies—to your B2B company. After all, your customers are other businesses. Would anyone seriously become a fan of (or “like”) your company or its brands? You might be surprised.

First of all, B2B social media marketing follows the same general principles as B2C. B2B companies are run by people and, while customers are technically other companies, the decision-makers and users of B2B products and services are people. B2B social media marketing really differs from B2C only in terms of tactics and implementation. Your customers may not yet embrace social networks, but they might participate in discussion boards, which are social media. The point is that conversations are happening, whether you’re aware or involved or not. You need to know what’s being said about your brand across the social spectrum and be aware of how your employees, competitors, and other influencers are using social media in order to develop an effective social media strategy for your company.

In this article, I’ll explain how to listen to and join the conversations taking place in social media, and how to use that information to develop your strategy. I’ll give you at least one tool or idea you can implement today that will help you get your feet wet so you can begin building an actionable and measurable social media strategy.

Listen

Listening is a critical first step. You can’t develop a successful social media strategy without first understanding what and where things are already being said online about your company, products, and/or services. There is a variety of listening and monitoring tools available, both free and fee-based. A few of my favorite free tools include:

Technorati—a blog search engine; simply enter a company or brand name and see where the conversation is happening.

Social Mention—an aggregator of information from more than 100 social networks. You can even sign up to receive e-mail alerts for your search terms so the conversation comes to you as it happens. Another cool feature is the quick stats on the left side of the results page. For example, the Sentiment rating lets you see at a glance if conversations are positive or negative.

Digg—a social bookmarking site. Users post, comment, and rate content from all over the Web, including news, video, blog posts, and myriad other content.

Google Alerts—an e-mail alert system based on search terms. You can sign up to receive updates from Google daily, weekly, or as content is posted. You enter the search terms, specify the type of content and the frequency, and Google does the rest.

The conversations aren't always positive—and you need to be aware of the negative ones so, for example, you can respond, adjust service policies, and learn about product shortcomings. An easy technique for monitoring online conversations for negative perceptions is to enter the word “sucks” after the company or brand name when searching with keywords. It sounds silly, but social media is about the conversation. People use everyday words to describe how they feel about a brand. Try it, or any other negative words you can think of to describe a brand.

Don't limit listening just to your own brand. Listen to what's being said by and about your competitors, your industry, and your customers' companies and brands. By listening to conversations, you might uncover unmet needs, issues with a product or service, employee dissatisfaction, potential niche markets, and more. The information from online conversations may very well impact your customer service, product development, and marketing strategies. By listening, you'll also begin to understand the social media that your customers and prospects consume, contribute to, and engage with regularly.

Join

Now that you know where your customers hang out, join them there. For example, if they participate in professional communities, online forums, or discussion boards, listen to what's being said and find the right opportunity to join the conversation. Tread lightly, though. People join communities to learn from others in the community, share their own advice, or just to be entertained. Make sure your comments are nonpromotional and that you provide useful or actionable information. The minute you start “selling,” the community will respond negatively. You might even be asked to leave. And they might not ask nicely. Just be genuine. Share knowledge and gain knowledge. Learn from and show gratitude to community members who share information relevant to your business.

Plan

While social media planning and strategy development are worthy article topics on their own, for now I want to hit the high points—objective, strategy, and tactics.

As you become more familiar and comfortable with the social media your audience frequents, you can devise your plan. Social media marketing is no different in principle from other marketing initiatives. Like e-mail, mobile, or any other marketing tactic, social media efforts should tie to your overall marketing objectives, complement other efforts, and be measurable.

Using a particular social media tactic is not an objective. “I want to develop a Facebook page for my brand” is not an objective. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and numerous others are just tactical tools that may help you achieve an objective, but are not the objectives themselves.

Next, outline your strategy. Are you trying to gain awareness? Do you want to improve perceptions about your company? Are you hoping to get input for new product ideas? How will you measure success? Your marketing partners are a great resource for developing ongoing strategies.

Last, and very last, determine the tactics. Your tactics have to align with your audience's social behavior. This is when your listening and monitoring pay off.

As you consider tactics, outline the internal and external resources you'll need to support each tactic. Creating content for social media sites takes time and commitment. Before launching efforts that require ongoing attention and activity, such as a company blog, make sure you map out who will develop, monitor, and measure it. Your marketing partners can help you evaluate and select tactics, while internal stakeholders are critical to good content since they know your products and services better than anyone else.

Listening, monitoring, and joining the conversation may be the major components of your social media strategy for now. There are literally hundreds of sites where conversations take place. New ones emerge constantly, and others drop out of sight. (Remember when Second Life was going to be the next big thing?) By developing a solid understanding of your audiences' social behaviors, you'll be better equipped to leverage social media when the opportunities are ripe.

Evaluate, Learn, and Repeat

Start small, evaluate your efforts, and make adjustments along the way as you continue to listen and monitor conversations. As your social media program grows and you establish dialogue with your customers, you'll benefit from deeper relationships, new insight into your customers' "real" experiences with your company/brand, and opportunities to share humanizing thoughts and ideas that only a conversation can convey.

About the author

Ashley Livingston is a Senior Business Advisor at Oden where she works with clients to plan, execute, and measure marketing campaigns. Her current area of interest is using Web 2.0 technologies to listen to, engage, and energize B2B audience segments. For comments on this article, contact Ashley at alivingston@oden.com. For more information about Oden's digital, print, or marketing consulting services, contact John Strawn at jstrawn@oden.com.