

Defining Your Company's Social Media Personality

Most have heard the analogy that social media is a lot like attending a dinner party. People representing businesses gather together online. There's a lot of conversation. As in real life, some people are active extroverts, while others observe and listen. There are cliques that break off to have highly engaged discussions. The hurdle for businesses that haven't yet staked out a presence on the social media scene is often which "party" to attend and how to act? Should you visit Facebook, Twitter or YouTube? What's your social personality going to be? How will you make time to participate at these 24/7/365 events?

There have been countless how-to articles written that provide tools and templates. They can be very helpful and should be read. But sometimes it just takes shadowing someone else to figure out how best to jump in. Recently at a Northwest Entrepreneur breakfast meeting, a big brand company and a small bootstrap start-up shared their social media style and approach.

Bill Harding is founder of Bonanzle, which was named "Best Bootstrapped Startup" of 2010 at the Seattle 2.0 awards. Harding's company is actively engaged in social media. Because money is tight, social media is used as a primary marketing channel to build positive brand awareness through word-of-mouth. The marketing philosophy at Bonanzle is simple. The company focuses on providing great service and uses social media as a platform to showcase it. They actively court customers as advocates to spread the word. Social media is the marketing channel that enables communication about Bonanzle to be organically created. Think of it as attending a dinner party, where through many conversations Bonanzle expands

its voice and spreads its message. Some of these social media partygoers have had a Bonanzle conversation or experience and continue the conversation with others, as advocates of the company.

Executive Insights



Cheryl Isen

Big brands are also finding their niche in social media. However, 10-year Starbucks veteran Brad Nelson, who is the company's Social Media Community Manager and official Tweeter, is not using social media to create brand awareness. Starbucks doesn't need it. Instead Starbucks is showing up at the social media party to humanize the brand. They do this by creating sticky or interesting conversations about Starbucks coffee that engage their fans. They also use social media as a major communication channel, offering fans the scoop on deals and news early. For example Twitter was used to launch the Starbucks Gold Card, and the new VIA instant coffee was promoted with Twitter and YouTube. Starbucks also used social media to get the word out about free coffee on Election Day and national free pastry day.

Intrigued enough to dip into social media on behalf of your own company? If you're just starting out make it easy by picking just one platform like Twitter or Facebook. Don't try to master everything at once. After you've perfected the first channel, move to the next. Here are additional ideas for how to create a great social media experience and ignite online conversations about your company:

Release the fear

Many companies are unsure of how to manage social media. They wonder, will someone at the company say or do something regrettable online? Will fans complain publicly? The answer is probably. Negative conversations happen all the time. However, participating in social media is about being transparent, letting go of control, and empowering people. Be responsible and put policies in place that advise employees about confidentiality and privacy, but know that the medium is somewhat uncontrollable. Remember, there's more control gained by participating than letting your online reputation develop without you.

Listen first, then add value

Before jumping on the scene take time to watch and listen to what others are doing so you understand the social environment. Then focus on providing a good experience. Engage and give your fans something to talk about. And always remember, there is a threshold that can be reached where fans stop listening. Staying interesting requires constant vigilance. So be real and avoid too much marketing spin online.

Be responsive

Recognize that social media is a contact sport. It's better to respond quickly to Tweets and Facebook than to be boring and slow. Responding quickly to fans and being available to help others online is part of creating an excellent experience. In this fast-paced environment it's ok if conversations are imperfect. Social media isn't the place for long approval processes. The conversation will be over by the time a statement is approved. Take responsiveness to a new level by using online tools such as co-tweet, stumble

upon and link aggregators like bit.ly to spread your voice around.

Encourage advocates

Fans and advocates can do wonders for your social media experience. They create the positive word-of-mouth community that every company wants. Find advocates by actively connecting with those that are talking about your company, and then reward them. Prominently display their posts on your website. Flatter your fans by announcing useful news and events to them first.

Social media isn't a passing fad. It's a real communication channel and it's important for businesses to join in the party. Just remember that how you act and what you say will all be part of your company personality and story. Use you're online actions to tell the story, and let your interactions carry the message. Be a polite, appropriate and engaging participant that is interesting to be around. Think of social media as your company's opportunity to be the entertaining, helpful and fun "party guest" that everyone will welcome back again.

These "Executive Insights" are based on monthly presentations provided by leading entrepreneurs at the Northwest Entrepreneur Network (NWEN.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping entrepreneurs succeed. The column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps emerging companies increase corporate visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com or on the web at www.IsenandCo.com.