

B-to-B Social Media: Seeking the Community of Practice

The explosive growth in the popularity of social media is one of the key reasons why the media landscape has changed so much in such a short time. The term *social media* is applied to a host of communication and information sharing sites, networks and tools, from blogs and Wikis to YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and more. The variety and rate of new entries can be overwhelming, as are the statistics for participation.

What really matters, at least to business-to-business marketers, is not how many people are out there, but how many messaging opportunities are out there. B-to-B marketers must focus on the productive islands of opportunity amid the sea of social media networks. The key difference is whether participants represent a *community of interest* (topics like food, sports, movies, etc.) or a *community of practice* (professions with specialized needs, goals, capabilities and services provided). For B-to-B marketers, the difference helps define a social media opportunity in a way that's meaningful.

Definitions and Caveats

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) defines a social network site as an online destination that gives users a chance to connect with one or more groups of friends, facilitating sharing of content, news and information among them. Examples of social networks include Facebook and LinkedIn.

For B-to-B marketing purposes, however, a social network site (or service) should be defined more narrowly and specifically. It is an online destination that gives business people the opportunity to connect with one or more individuals or groups with similar professional needs, objectives, interests and values. For example, packaging engineer Keith Campbell's "On the Edge" blog attracts comments and discussions by other industrial engineers who want to learn more about creating better machine automation. That's a different conversation than you are likely to find on purely social network sites like Facebook or MySpace.

For marketers, participation in B-to-B-specific social networks is about joining relevant interactions and providing useful information—on technology, practices, and, sometimes, products and services. The ultimate goal is to create affinity and preference, driving to sales. There's more focus on bottom-line results and seeking a competitive edge.

By definition, social networking is participatory and voluntary. People join voluntarily and share information. It's a great opportunity to interact with people who are reaching out and saying, "Tell me more about your product!" (Or at least, "Go ahead and talk about your product.") But participants also have information they want to share. That's how B-to-B marketers can gain important insights about what people are most interested in and, hopefully, what impresses them most about a product or service. By keeping abreast of social media that are relevant to them, B-to-B marketers have the opportunity to learn more than ever before about how users see their product or service.

Social Media: The Nature of the Beast

A defining feature of social networks is their uncontrollable, viral nature. The community is in control of the conversation, making it difficult for the marketer to predict where discussions will lead and impossible to control them (in the sense that one can control the content of a web page or print ad, for example). This can be intimidating to some marketers. On YouTube, for example,

there are numerous videos showing home geothermal heat pump installations, some involving manufacturers or contractors. But heat pump manufacturers or contractors may find it unsettling that participants get into message-board arguments about prices, the installation's impact on one's back yard and even global warming.

Smart B-to-B marketers realize this. They also know that understanding both parts of the term social media is crucial to success. If a medium isn't social, it's essentially just another traditional medium and, while important to consider, doesn't compete in the world of true social networks.

If participants aren't focused on community-of-practice issues, it has less B-to-B value. If an aerodynamic engineer is Twittering about wings, is the subject aircraft wings or chicken wings? The former can represent an opportunity for, say, makers of aircraft-quality machine tools or aerospace magazines. The latter is socializing—although a smart restaurant owner or marketer of barbecue sauce could theoretically capitalize on the interaction.

Traditional versus Social Media: All of the above

It's important to remember that while traditional and social media are different, particularly in terms of reaching a narrowly defined audience, neither is "better" than the other. They both can contribute to B-to-B marketing objectives, and messaging should be integrated to ensure that key messages reach all audiences. Social media ideally should be part of the mix, not an either/or alternative to traditional marketing outlets. And getting the most value from social media—and maintaining a B-to-B focus—means seeking out sites and networks with characteristics that attract the prospects, participants and contributors you want.

FINDING B-TO-B-FRIENDLY SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SITES

- How does the site generate traffic? Industry, professional or specific topic-focused vertical social networks (for example, HVAC Talk for heating and air conditioning specialists) may not generate a great deal of traffic immediately. What is the site doing to drive traffic to it?
- How *sticky* is the site—what value or content keeps participants coming back for more?
- Is the site user-friendly? Part of Facebook's phenomenal early growth was due to its easy-to-use interface. Less user-friendly sites, even with good content, may see traffic drop off as users search for hassle-free sources of information.
- How do members interact on the site? Is there a lot of interaction between members, or frequent one-time postings with not much feedback?
- How diverse is the network? Networks that are dominated by a small number of active members may not bring sufficient return on time/effort investment due to sheer lack of numbers—unless, of course, the few active members are key customers or prospects.

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