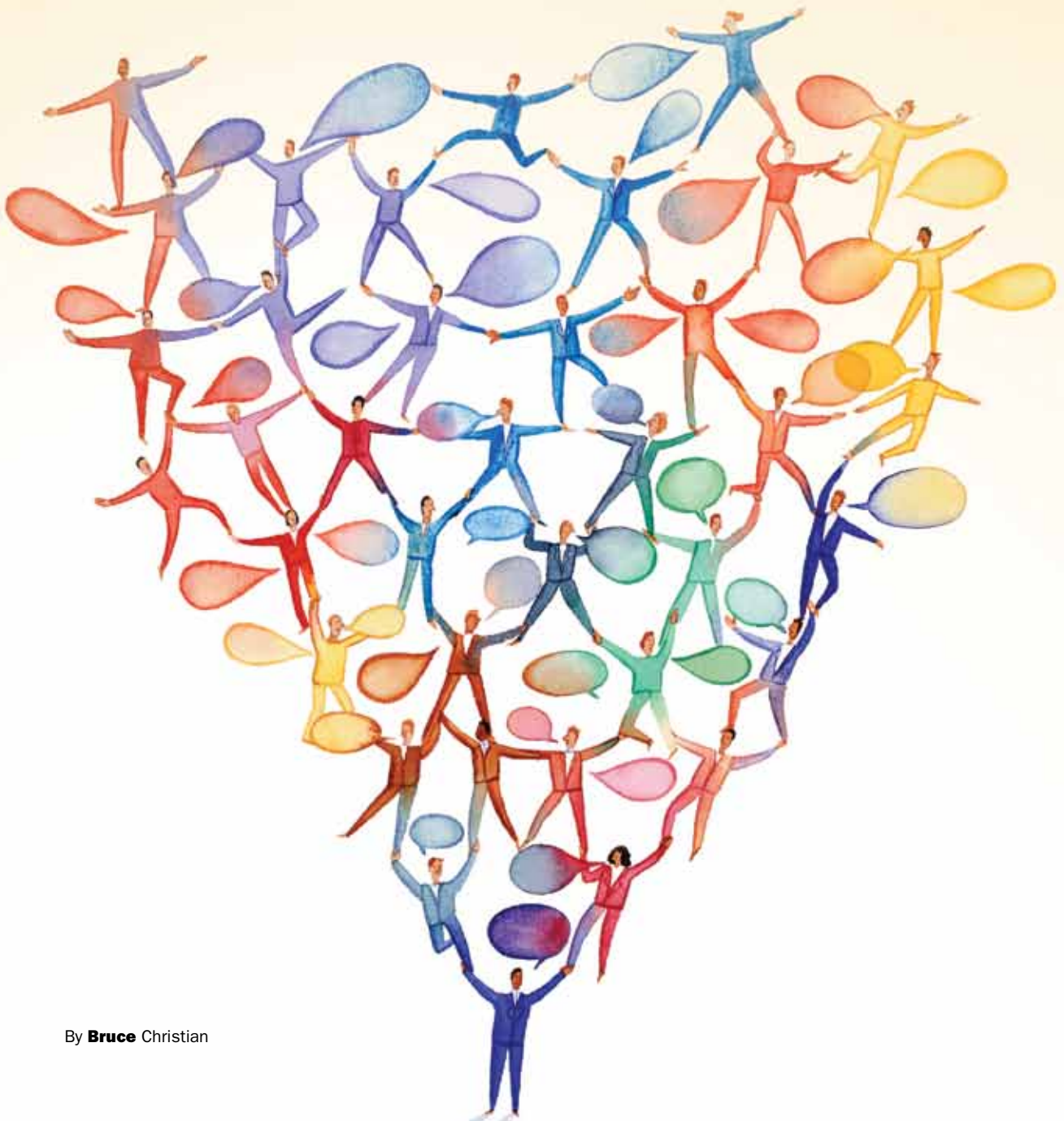


GETTING SOCIAL



By **Bruce** Christian

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING MIX A NETWORK PRIORITY

As the telecom industry changes with new technologies invented and championed by younger people, the ways businesses in the sector market must evolve too. After all, IT decision makers often are part of that younger generation, forcing marketers to take their messages where Millennials and Gen Yers prefer to reside and communicate.

So, is your company blogging yet? Are you tweeting? Have you joined the “conversation”?

These are question all agencies should be asking because social media are here to stay and often represent the perfect avenue for business-to-business marketing.

Not even governments can stop social network conversations, as we’ve learned from events in Egypt, Iran and

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Libya. So if you're not using social media for marketing your company, you're falling behind. The only real remaining questions are which tools are best; how much time and resources will it take; what's the return on my investment?

Tim Basa, vice president of sales and marketing at Nitel and an authority on Web 2.0 marketing, says he doesn't consider a blog a social network, but he says it's the best way to start because once the blog is up, it "feeds" the others.

"Once you've got the blog and it is established, you can multipurpose it in many ways," says Basa, "such as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn."

And a promising following on each of these social networks, "is the most efficient and effective way to get the word out," agrees, Jim Ulrich, vice president of sales and marketing for OSSTelco and a strong proponent for social media marketing.

"With the click of a button you can send that one blog post across all your social media networks, as opposed to doing that for each one individually" Ulrich says. "Plus, you could litter this blog post with links back to your site, which will help your Google rankings and hopefully generate some business as this blog post is shared."

What's more, Ulrich says blogging "is a great way to establish your authority in the field in which you do business. People now see that you know what you are talking about, and are more prone to trust you and your brand."

Such credibility is vital in social networking, because a key component to success in the social media is creating a persona as an authority or an expert in the field.

"Once you have it, you can build credibility with different content and reach out to your customers," Basa says.

And once the reputation of being a thought-leader is established, anyone who wants to stay "in tuned" will feel your Web site and your blog are as necessary as reading the newspaper every morning.

CLEAR PURPOSE

One of the nation's leading proponents of blogging is Shel Holtz founder of Holtz Communications + Technology. He has been advocating use of blogs since 2002, through his own blog, communications seminars and books. Holtz asserts, "There are no hard and fast rules with blogging. The only thing you have to talk about is what you want to talk about."

Therein lies the conundrum. On one hand, an anything-goes definition may be fine if a blog is a personal journal, but if it is going to be used for business, chances are more thought and discretion is going to be needed.

"To suggest that a blog is whatever you want it to be is like saying a Web site is whatever you want it to be,"

argues Holtz.

In turn, as more companies enter the blogosphere, they are doing so with a direction in mind, Holtz observes.

"Their purpose is clear. They're leveraging the technology to do a better job of communicating specific content to a targeted audience for well-thought-out reasons."

On the other hand, to limit the definition of a blog is "incredibly narrow thinking," says Holtz, because the potential for using the blog as a tool for clients is great. For

Positive, Tangible Benefits From Being Active On Social Media (% Saying "Yes, Frequently" Or "Yes, On Occasion")

Benefit	Total	Generation			
		Echo Boomers (18-33)	Gen X (34-45)	Baby Boomers (46-64)	Matures (65+)
Received a good suggestion for something to try	40%	59%	44%	34%	19%
Made a connection regarding a job opportunity	15%	24%	19%	11%	4%
Found a new apartment or house	9%	17%	9%	5%	2%

Source: Harris Poll, January 2011

example, agencies have a unique opportunity to physically show potential customers comparisons by actually posting bills showing what a customer can save by hooking up with the agency, Basa explains. Indeed, Basa and Holtz agree a blog can be used for customer support, which is as good a reason as there is for companies to get on board.

Holtz adds that because blog sites invite readers to join the conversation, they become a great place for customers to ask questions and exchange information with the official blogger. It's an intelligent way to use a blog in a B-2-B manner, rather than making the blog into a "personal" journal.

Major Obstacles in Using Social Media to Reach Local Market Customers (% of Brand Managers)

Obstacle	% of Respondents Agreeing
Tracking or measuring success or ROI	48%
Managing information	45%
Engaging audience	42%
Identifying influencers to carry brand message	39%
Keeping specific content fresh	32%
Posting multimedia content	28%
Tracking real time metrics	24%
Finding creative for online social marketing	23%
Tools to customize content anywhere	22%

Source: Buddy Media / Harris Interactive, August 2010

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Still, Holtz says many businesses refuse to blog, and the No. 1 reason is because management doesn't believe it has the time. The No. 2 reason is company management doesn't know what to write about.

That's where Basa suggests a blogger needs to be a "good aggregator" of content. "Find good information; make it partly your own, and make sure you give credit where credit is due," he says.

Not all the material on the blog has to be the blogger's, says Basa. Companies can get permission to use others' materials, or hire writers to create the communications.

"In life, people either have time or money. If they have neither, they will be in trouble," Basa says. "If they don't have money, they need to carve out the time."

Checking some of Holtz blog posts, for example, many of his entries are short: a sentence or two.

"People can be overwhelmed at the prospect of blogging, but they don't have to write a lot of stuff," Basa says. "But you do have to post things, and then when you do, use the social networking tools, Tweet or use Ping.fm, to indicate that you've done so."

Ulrich adds that while a blog can be used to promote your business, "it is certainly not all it should do."

"Your blog shouldn't be all about your products and services, but all about teaching and educating your target audience on things related to your products and services," he explains.

The point is to catch people at the top of the buyer funnel, where they are doing research on a particular product or service, says Ulrich. "People will soon lose interest if all you are posting is your products and services, even though you initially might get a few conversions."

Taking what you blog – or the invitation to visit your blog – through a social network site "is the next real step," he continues, and the list of social network sites is long and is growing.

"Your blog overtime will start to get traffic," he says. "You need to be patient and let it build."

CHOICES, CHOICES

Many businesses believe they need to be tweeting and have a Facebook page. Basa has a different point of view.

He explains that because Facebook really got started as a site for personal use, applying it as a B2B may not be the best use for it. He prefers LinkedIn, a business-oriented social networking

site. It is mainly used for professional networking and has more than 60 million registered users, spanning more than 200 countries and territories worldwide.

"There is no doubt that LinkedIn is the premier business-to-business professional network while Facebook is known as the true 'social' site to play games and have fun," says Suzanne Urash, founder of Cre8 Group, a marketing and public relations company.

"I have mixed feelings about Facebook capturing the B2B audience over LinkedIn because it is very difficult, but not impossible, to change brand image once the perception is in place," Urash explains.



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“As business professionals congregate on LinkedIn and supply others with individual business background and experience, they congregate on Facebook as the after work ‘happy hour’ to share non-business personal information,” she says.

“However, professionals do have both Facebook and LinkedIn accounts, and because they typically utilize both networks, I recommend that businesses have a presence on both networks and reach out to the ‘happy hour’ professionals,” Urash continues.

Although it is also seen as predominantly a consumer platform, Ulrich adds YouTube to the conversation by call-

impulse items, so they have to use Twitter, LinkedIn or LinkedIn groups to market their brands,” he explains.

Expectations, however, must be kept in check “People think I’m going to tweet and get some customers,” says Basa. “That is just not going to happen in our channel. No one is going to stock up on SIP trunks because of what moves on Twitter.”

The short messages that are tweeted should go to the email list you already have. And each time someone not on the list visits, capture the email address. Basa says to manage the email list like you would manage your address book or Rolodex.

“What is the lifetime value of a good list?” he asks rhetorically.

And to get your clients and prospective customers to follow you instead of deleting your small message, Basa says use an incentive to get started.

“Bribe them to follow you on Twitter,” he says. “Bribe people to join. You can have a contest, a fan page, a raffle, preferred commission.

“When you do something like that, you may be able to get some industry coverage, it creates word of mouth. You may have to spend a little money to get it going. It’s not free, but it potentially has a big payoff,” he says.

Urash recommends using recognizable social network media logos on all advertising materials to let viewers know you are there and entice followers.

“Invitations sent to customers and prospects to join their social network start to increase the buzz about the company’s social media presence” she explains. “To start generating additional followers, businesses can advertise teaser messages where the target audience will need to visit the social site to discover answers, enter contests, assist in polls, etc.”

GETTING STARTED

If the ever-widening world of social media seems a bit intimidating, you are not alone. The good news is, each individual or organization can get started at their own “comfort level,” says Basa.

“Maybe that means for now, just become part of the conversation, through something like LinkedIn groups or with your own blog,” he says.

Likewise, easy-to-use starter kits for blogs on Web sites can become the foundation for an agent’s success and the “hub of your community” he says.

“Remember, however, not everyone in the channel is national,” Basa continues. “The agent may only be selling within a 50- to 100-mile radius. So he needs to know how to market locally.”

Urash points out that social networks won’t cost agents a penny to join.

“They are free and they allow companies to create

Small Business Social Media Sources and Usage

Social Media Exposure	% of Small Businesses Using
Company page on social networking site	75%
Post status updates and/or articles of interest on social networking sites	69%
Build network through sites like LinkedIn	57%
Monitor positive/negative feedback about own organization on social networks	54%
Have blog on areas of expertise	39%
Tweet about area of expertise	26%
Use Twitter as customer service channel	16%
Other	8%

Source: SBSI/NetSolutions, February 2010

ing it “a very useful part of your social media campaign.”

“It’s not very good for advertising, but it’s great for educational purposes,” he says. “There are some searches in Google that produce video results that give you more Google exposure, which is always good.”

While YouTube hasn’t sent much traffic OSSTelco’s way, “using it to embed videos on our sites was an easy way to keep track of analytics with YouTube Insights,” Ulrich says.

Plus videos are a great way to make anyone’s Web experience more personal, he adds.

“I see it being a very useful tool once people readily recognize your brand,” he continues. “If you have a YouTube channel, it’s just another place you can build your reputation as an authority.”

Ulrich adds, “To be relevant to people today you need to accept the fact that we are living in an audio/visual age, and YouTube is the No. 1 resource of that on the Web.”

KEEPING TRACK

Acknowledging that he probably talks about it better than he practices it, Basa suggests developing a system of noting and keeping inventory of what has been posted.

“Develop tweets or little headlines as you send them out as often as you can without stressing people out,” he says. “If you do it too often, you tune people out, so you have to find the right balance.”

“Twitter is a marketing tool for the blog,” Basa says. “People who are interested will subscribe to your Twitter. “Our agents aren’t driving ice cream trucks or selling

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their own business page allowing for widespread brand recognition,” she says. “In addition, banner advertising on these sites are fairly inexpensive while targeting the ideal audience.”

“The world has changed to an on-demand mentality,” she says. “We want information and answers instantaneously, and social networks allow continuous interaction giving the user customer service perception.”

Once you get started, however, Ulrich promotes being aggressive.

“If you just create a social media account with any of the top social media networks — LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter — and do nothing afterward to promote yourself and your business, you won’t get anywhere and fast. There has to be proactive measures that are taken in order to have a successful social media campaign.”

But you also have to be patient, he warns, because being on social networks isn’t going to translate into instant recognition. A comprehensive strategy should be developed to create a following.

“First, invite those you have previously done business with, which is the easy part,” Ulrich says. “After which you will have to do some research. For instance, there is a search option in every social media network. Typing in a keyword here relating to your business will bring up a huge list of those who are at least talking about this keyword, or whose job involves this keyword.

Social Media Users Who Turn to Social Media For Purchase Decision Information

Product/Service Category	Frequency (% of Respondents)	
	“Regularly” turn to social media	“Sometimes” turn to social media
Travel or travel services	4%	24%
Banks or financial services	4%	10%
Clothes or shoes	3%	23%
Eating out or restaurants	3%	21%
Cell/mobile phones and service	2%	21%
Personal care products	3%	15%
Cars or trucks	2%	15%
Groceries or food	2%	13%
Prescription or OTC drugs	1%	10%

Source: KnowledgeNetworks, May 2009

“These are the types of people who you would want to target to be connected with,” he explains.

“For instance, on Twitter, if you follow someone, there is a good chance that they will follow you in return,” Ulrich says. “There are those who are called ‘social media influencers,’ who are the small percentage of those in your field that are more prone to share the information they come across.

“This will lead to more exposure and hopefully more

networking, and as time goes by this exponential process will soon be self-sustaining, but initially it takes a lot of time and effort to accomplish,” Ulrich says.

And social network marketing can have some drawbacks, says Urash.

“First, social network marketing is very time consuming, and it takes dedication and continual update and management of each network,” she says. “Many companies have individuals dedicated to only social media management.”

Secondly is the ability to mitigate negative comments. “Without the correct responses, a company can have a public relations disaster on their hands,” she continues.

Ulrich adds that SPAM could emerge a problem, as well.

“The careful methods each social network uses to protect against SPAM can prevent you from doing anything large scale — even if it is legitimate,” he says. “It’s a big hassle to take your 10,000-name email list that is legitimate and then invite those people to join you on social media networks.”

THERE IS ALSO THE ISSUE OF TIME.

“If a company is going to engage in social media, be prepared for dedication,” Urash cautions. “Social media is viral, and once you open shop, you need to manage the visitors or they will walk out the door. Your social network is connected to your brand and this has further implications then just within the social network realm.”

On the other hand, the upside can be great.

“Businesses can reach audiences that they were unable to reach in the past,” says Urash. “With the correct positioning and messaging, companies can be perceived as thought leaders and experts in their field.”

Of course, sales are the measuring tool to use for effectiveness. But growing an address list also can let you know how your social networking is doing.

Basa suggests that a good way to really measure success of social network marketing is to build in a tracking device, such as setting up a separate 800 number. When it rings, you know it was obtained through the social network.

As a first step, Ulrich says the best place to get advice on getting started is whoever is responsible for the company’s search engine optimization or a Web developer.

“They are most familiar with your site and can make changes,” he explains. “These are professionals you already trust and most likely have knowledge of social media well above the average person.”

It’s also imperative that a physical site be moldable to social media efforts, “and these people have access to your site,” he says.

Finally, he says many great Web sites and books are available to help companies get started. 