

## Achieving Less Din, More Dialog in Your Social Media Presence

There's not merely a buzz, but a virtual din surrounding social media and how "everyone's" using it to win hearts and minds, and maybe even help grow the business. It's reaching the stage where a false sense of urgency has been created: Act now or be choking on everyone else's dust.

The time is right to make your move. But take pause to reframe your thinking about social media away from the tactical ("How do I use Facebook and Twitter?") toward the strategic ("What role can/should social media play in my business?"). Doing so will ensure that instead of adding to the noise, you're instead positioning your organization to win.

Tactical decisions on specific social media channels only scratch the surface when it comes to the entire realm's impact on brands, marketing, and ultimately your business. Instead, forward-thinking marketers should be considering questions like: "How does social media affect our brand?"; "What is its influence on business goals?"; and "How do we create an appropriate social media strategy?"

Addressing these questions first requires marketers to develop their understanding of the context for social media as means to guide their strategies and, ultimately, their supporting tactics.

Social media is more than just a community like Facebook or a platform like a blog. It's emblematic of broad behavioral and cultural changes in the way we engage each other. It's less about creating marketing opportunities and more about engaging people. It's less about "buying" a presence through a new advertising channel and more about "earning" consideration as your brand and customers (and influencers) interact. And it's less about a short-term campaign and more about a sustained capability that's only going to grow in importance.

We've gone from talking at customers with traditional advertising to Internet-enabled, one-on-one customer interactions to what we at Prophet call the Network Era. In it, everyone stands to be connected, which amplifies the power of the individual's voice.

This new, connected environment has created an explosion in stakeholders and influencers, with the dialog

among them the connecting fiber. It puts the impetus on smart marketers to focus on social media strategies that will increase the number of network relationships in the marketplace and, ultimately, the number of people who are talking about your brand.

It's the dialog that's more important here than what's conducted on your "owned" social media properties like your Facebook page or Twitter account. It's the dialog you earn—the community's Facebook and blog posts, Tweets, Yelp—that wields unprecedented influence and credibility over your brand and marketing.

And therein lies the challenge to marketers in devising effective social media strategies. It can't be controlled. Only influenced.

That's what Dell discovered the hard way in the mid-2000s, when the brand underwent immense public scrutiny via social media channels, and fully 50 percent of the conversations were negative. Bloggers and other social media pundits—not Dell—were controlling perceptions and the standing of its brand.

It led Dell to a social media strategy where it developed its own channels like blogs and Twitter as a means of participating in the dialog and having some influence over its direction. Crowdsourcing initiatives, as well, provided a platform for engaging audiences in product and service improvements and encouraging positive conversations. By 2007, the negative dialog was halved, and today Dell is one of the best at participating in social media in a way that has allowed it to even develop direct business impact through Twitter.

To be an effective participant, you must first gain an understanding of how your internal and external audiences and their influencers utilize social media. Then, you need to set a goal on what you hope to achieve through social media in the context of your overall customer engagement strategy. From there, your challenge is crafting a presence that's authentic, engaging, and serves your business goals.

The goal might be to acquire new customers or do a better job of retaining existing ones, or both. Or to cut costs. Or to build a brand. Here are three businesses that

we feel devised effective social media strategies to tackle specific business objectives.

In building a “persuasion engine,” Intuit sought to engage current customers and use their influence to sway prospective ones to utilize its popular TurboTax program. It created its own community of users, a forum where they shared tips, could give thumbs up or down on the ensuing conversations, and encouraged them to share and connect via popular channels like Facebook and Twitter. Among the results: The top user answered 50,000 questions viewed by 5 million people. Intuit also found that encouraging users to post to Facebook when they’d finished their taxes generated a four times higher engagement rate than traditional banner ads.

Lenovo used a similar idea in creating a community to foster peer-to-peer computer support. But its end game was less one of customer acquisition and retention and more one of lowering costs. The discussion groups, which staff and technology partners also joined as active participants, did the trick: Lenovo saw a 20 percent decline in call center volume in the year after its institution.

For Ford, the challenge was building a brand—that of the Ford Fiesta—and overcoming perceptions among the younger generation that “Ford” is synonymous with “old folks.” Understanding the importance of personal referrals to the target audience, the automaker enlisted a cadre of influencers, loaning them new Fiestas to try out and encouraging them to share their experiences via a Ford-owned online community and through Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other non-owned platforms. The viral spread was tremendous and positive, with over 10,000 reservations for the car and a 10 percent conversion rate as millions of social media impressions were racked up.

All three of these businesses designed social media initiatives to meet specific business objectives. They also grounded those initiatives in appropriate metrics to help gauge their success—a critical component of any marketing effort, but especially so in an arena that’s evolving and still largely unfamiliar territory to many marketers.

Success metrics can be social media-oriented (impressions and referring links, for example), business-based (new customers or revenue generated), or brand-based

### Five Steps To Begin

1. **Don’t feel overwhelmed**—you’re not late to the game.
2. **Listen to your brand’s buzz:** Who is talking about your brand, and what are they saying?
3. **Assemble a cross-functional task force**—engage employees who are passionate about social media.
4. **Think about your business objectives** and outline an initial social media strategy.
5. **Identify success metrics** and “test and learn.”

(awareness or consideration). It is critical to integrate metrics to understand the full impact. This is because lower-level metrics, like impressions, can and do influence higher-level metrics, like revenues or brand awareness which is better explained to the rest of the organization.

In addition, marketers are well-advised to test their social media initiatives on a small scale. It is one of the easiest mediums to test and learn, given the quick changes that can be made and reactions it can get. Then, you need to rely on metrics to inform the direction of strategy adjustments and wider rollouts.

For all the hoopla, the social media train has not yet left the station. This world is fast changing, and opens myriad exciting opportunities to connect with customers and build your business and brand.

The trick is to be smart about it: Understand the new paradigm and be prepared to step away from tradition to leverage its potential. Listen to who’s talking about your brand and the tenor of the conversation. Understand that social media has implications across silos—it’s not just a marketing or PR thing. A cross-functional taskforce that draws on the passions of your employees and understands your business needs will be essential to an effective strategy. And don’t be worried about taking baby steps as you test and learn the waters for larger initiatives.

And that’s how you go from adding to the din to actually leading the dialog. ☺

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