

The Battle over Social Media

Balancing Your Marketing Department's Need with an Employer's Desire to Block Access

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Social media, which includes tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs, can be an essential element to many contemporary marketing campaigns. Their application has contributed great strides in the battle to level the playing field between large and small companies and is breaking down the barriers of geographic remoteness. More and more business leads are coming through social-media marketing strategies, new resources are discovered, partnerships are being forged, and deals are being done.

But how can you balance your marketing department's need to develop strategies that rely on this emerging media with your fear that such applications empower your employees to fool around on your time?

Social media is no longer new, but new applications are constantly being developed. As the economy continues to slump, newspapers fold, and sales departments continue to struggle selling advertising time on traditional electronic media, many businesses are realizing that utilizing the vast majority of social media is free. Why not utilize something at no cost that has such a tremendous potential payoff?

To answer the question, you must balance the allure of using these essentially no-cost marketing tools against the potential risk to your company. When used responsibly, social media can be an effective means of raising awareness, introducing new

products and services, handling customer service, brand recognition, brand monitoring, revamping a brand, and networking. However, when used improperly and without guidelines, social media can be similar to giving someone keys to a car they don't know how to drive.

Employers must be careful

in addition, introductions are made and awareness of skill sets is raised on LinkedIn. Blogs often reveal ideals and personal slants to issues. Connections on social media, though virtual, are very real, and when someone can fulfill a need, that connection often goes to the next level.

Consider also the significance

of progressive companies are empowering employees to monitor social-media channels and jump in to appease dissatisfied customers, minimize their potential damage, and turn them into happy customers that may well share the good news through social-media channels.

According to data reported in February 2008 by *eMarketer.com*, 36.6% of companies polled reported engaging with their customers to be the primary reason they use social media. This is a direct channel to reach the people who buy your products and utilize your services. You can use social media to test ad campaigns, solicit feedback

from your customers, and keep your finger on the pulse of your market. If you ask, people are generally very forthcoming with the information that you need to build stronger marketing campaigns. No longer does a small business necessarily have to spend thousands of dollars on some fancy research firm when a Twitter or Facebook poll or a carefully crafted question on the discussion board of a brand's Facebook fan page may provide a sufficient sampling of data.

One of the greatest advantages of social media is its viral aspect. People naturally share useful information with others, and social media provides a channel to touch friends of friends and so on. A good idea spreads for free through social-media channels as people continue to forward it on.

How about the potential to build buzz or recraft a brand through social media channels?



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when allowing employees access to social media. Most employers restrict Internet and E-mail use to business reasons only. If employers permit employees to engage in social media, then the employer is presented with a new set of potential problems. For example, employees could reveal company secrets, put out the wrong message, portray the company negatively, or just plain waste a lot of time. It is very difficult to recapture information once it has been released on the Internet.

Notwithstanding these potential hazards, the old adage that people do business with people they like is ever-present on social-media networks. Just as referrals are passed over cocktails and relationships are fertilized on the golf course, individuals develop relationships with each other on Facebook and Twitter through consistent communication. In

of using social media as part of your customer service function. As more and more brands recognize the powerful influence of Twitter over both positive and negative customer perception, many are developing a presence there. It's easy to monitor chatter through tools like TweetDeck or Google Alerts by maintaining a watch on keywords relative to your brand. This provides the opportunity to engage in conversations with happy customers, which are in turn read by others, thereby elevating a peripheral perception of your brand.

Never before has it been so easy to connect with your customers on a personal level and hear what they like and dislike about your brand. Remember the old saying that a happy customer tells a friend and an unhappy one tells 10 friends? Well, social media exponentially expands that reach positively and nega-

For example, Coca-Cola has about 3.4 million Facebook fans, and every time Coke posts something on the fan page, every one of those people is notified, and thus reminded about how much they like that soft drink. Bands use it to post information about upcoming performances. Causes use it to educate the public and garner support. You can use it to raise awareness of your company.

Social media may also have a huge impact on your sales department. LinkedIn is a savvy salesperson's dream for developing leads. As increasing numbers of employees build online résumés on the popular network and associate themselves with their employers' group pages, it is becoming easier to see employee structure within companies. Sales people can scour employee lists to determine their target within companies and search for common connections, then tap into those to establish the groundwork that can make the difference between a cold and warm call.

Despite all the positive aspects of social media, employers must be able to tackle the issue of balancing the use of social media by employees. Most prohibit personal E-mail and Internet use by employees in their employee handbooks, and employers are now faced with the prospect of softening their policies in order to take advantage of social media. In so doing, employers must be prepared to monitor their employees' use and make an employment decision based upon unauthorized conduct.

It is wise for employers to address new policies that include revised Internet, E-mail, and social media, and distribute such policies to employees prior to use. Employers should also consider conducting company-wide meetings to distribute the policies and review permissible and impermissible conduct. Such policies should also be accessible on the employer's intranet.

Private employers can still rely on the at-will doctrine in the

event of employee misconduct. Under the at-will doctrine, the employer can terminate the employee with or without cause for any reason so long as such termination doesn't violate public policy. Public employers are in a slightly different situation, which includes First Amendment considerations.

Social media is in its infancy. It would have been near-impossible to imagine a tool such as Twitter just three years ago, yet this communication platform becomes more and more mainstream every day now. There is no predicting what the next hot thing will be, but one thing is certain: social media diminishes geographic boundaries, opens doors, facilitates introductions, raises awareness, and provides valuable resources.

Just as companies in the past largely failed when they didn't embrace technology, many companies that refuse to utilize social media will be dwarfed by their more progressive competitors.

The key is to establish a policy for the use of social media — and trust your employees.❖

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