

# Demystifying Social Media:

## Using Its Power to Connect with Customers



Sukhjit Ghag, Sony Electronics Inc.

**The time has never been more right for businesses to tap into the power of social media to initiate direct conversations with target customers and influence buying decisions. Social media tools facilitate easy, impactful, business-owner-to-customer-interactions, as well as customer-to-customer connections that can help sales.**

"Customers want instant attention, and they want it from real people," says Sukhjit Ghag, social media evangelist for Sony Electronics Inc. Ghag believes that small businesses are uniquely well positioned to use these tools given that customer service is a strong differentiator for small companies. "These direct conversations are occurring on social media sites."

Ghag recommends you use multimedia outlets as much as possible to connect with your online community — tapping blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other interactive tools to publish information about your products and events and to listen and respond to what consumers say about you.

For small businesses still new to social media, she shares these insights:

### **Growth continues to skyrocket.**

By summer 2009, Facebook had more than 87 million users in the United States alone, according to research by The Nielsen Company. Twitter is nipping at its heels, though, and has doubled its user base in a year. "That's a clear indication that people are connecting with each other on a very different level," says Ghag.

### **Crowdsourcing provides answers.**

Crowdsourcing involves tapping into the collective intelligence of the public at large. "Social media has shifted who consumers turn to when choosing a product or service," Ghag says. "For example, instead of conducting in-depth research or reading research guides when they shop for a car, people 'crowdsource' and reach out to their social network for opinions. This opens up new opportunities for businesses looking to influence buying decisions."

### **Popularity of vlogging.**

Vlogging, or blogging with video, has become extremely popular. "In fact, the volume of YouTube video searches are the second-most popular after Google searches," Ghag says. "That's an indication of how many people now trust this form of communication."

### **Social media basics**

Social media enables a business to connect with prospects or customers in their target demographic — sharing information and engaging in conversations. "In this realm, you can quickly gain respect among potential customers. Like buying an ad or issuing a press release, it's another option to reach your key customers," Ghag explains.

Here's a look at four important social media tools:

### **Blogging**

A blog can raise awareness about your business, enable you to announce new products, attract new customers and turn current customers into evangelists for your business.

- Creating a blog requires being able to think creatively about your business. Before you do anything, define your niche and decide what voice you want to use.
- Select your blog name, URL and template. Sign up with a blogging service, such as WordPress or Blogger.
- Build your editorial calendar and make sure you have topics for your first 10-15 posts. Keep replenishing your topic file and write two or three blogs in case you get busy with another project.
- Submit your blog to the major search engines to ensure your pages and posts are indexed as soon as possible. You can also submit your blog to Technorati, and you can submit blog posts to social bookmarking services, such as Digg and Delicious.
- Promote your blog by linking to it in your email signature, on your website and social media profiles and include it on your company stationery.

## LinkedIn

Use LinkedIn to network with colleagues, business associates and people you have worked with.

- Go to LinkedIn.com to create an online profile (similar to a resume) and upload a photo.
- Import contacts from your email address book, search for business contacts you have who are already on LinkedIn and email people directly to invite them to join your network.
- Participate in existing online groups, such as a local Chamber of Commerce or a group related to your industry, to network with other businesses.
- Strengthen your online reputation by inviting customers or industry experts to post recommendations on your profile page. Likewise, write recommendations of others you have worked with.
- Become active in your online community by asking and answering questions in group discussions. This will help you to become an expert in your industry.



## YouTube

Watch videos or upload your own content onto YouTube. Though YouTube videos were initially created by individuals, many businesses have found video to be a dynamic way to spread messages about their companies.

- Go to YouTube.com to create a free account.
- You don't need a professional photographer. If you have a video camera, you can make your own videos. Videos can be up to 2 megabytes in size and 10 minutes in length, but 1-3 minutes is better. Remember your audience's attention span.
- Don't use the video to talk about your entire product line but focus on new items or services. Demonstrate how to do a task that your business is affiliated with. Quirky and humorous videos work better than serious ones.
- Add a title and a one-line description explaining what the video is about.
- Add "tags" about the video's content so others can search and find your video using those keywords.
- Choose whether to make your video public (available to anyone) or private (available to your friends, family and colleagues).

## Facebook

Facebook lets you discuss personal and professional issues with colleagues, customers and friends.

- Go to Facebook.com and sign up for a free account.
- Create your online bio and upload a photo.
- Include a link to your website.
- Invite friends to join your network. In the Facebook world, "friend" is a loose term and can be anyone you wish to share your thoughts with — colleagues, customers, friends or friends of friends.
- Start posting. Add comments and links and share photos, audio and video clips. Your friends can comment on your posts and begin a dialogue. You also will be able to see posts from your friends and have the opportunity to comment on these.
- Create a fan page for your business. Include newsletter sign-ups, events and other content and promote them to your Facebook friends. Then, when someone becomes a fan of your page, your updates will appear on their wall.
- Use the Facebook apps. These let you do everything from hold contests and polls to upload video.

## Why Tweet? How to Use Social Media's Newest Tool

Twitter offers an exciting way to better understand the needs of your community. You can share your expertise by posting your own tweets and discover what your customers and competitors are talking about. You can also use Twitter to locate others who want the type of products or services you provide, says Sukhjit Ghag, social media evangelist for Sony Electronics Inc. If you do nothing else with social media, create a free Twitter account to monitor your brand and learn about issues that affect you and your business.

For example, if you sell cupcakes, you can set up a Twitter account to automatically receive all tweets of consumers talking about cupcakes and even narrow it to include only those within your geographic area tweeting about cupcakes.

To start:

- Create your Twitter "handle" — short, catchy names are best.
- Write a brief description explaining what kind of tweets you will be writing about.
- Add a link to your website.
- Instead of using a company logo, Ghag suggests uploading a picture of yourself. Choose a close-up picture of you smiling and looking directly into the camera.

- Select wallpaper to add personality to your Twitter page.
- Start writing your tweets (a short text message up to 140 characters). Be authentic — let your own voice shine through. For guidance, look at what other successful Twitterers are doing.
- Follow people on Twitter whom you find of interest. This is a great way to build your own community of followers since many will follow you back.
- Include your Twitter handle in your email signature, marketing materials and on your website to encourage your customers and colleagues to follow you.
- Regularly respond to tweets that followers send you.

## Zappos.com — a Twitter success story

Ghag says online shoe retailer Zappos.com has successfully added a personal quality to its brand through social media. Using Twitter, CEO Tony Hsieh shares interesting facts and hears directly from consumers. Through his whimsical posts, Hsieh's 1.4 million followers gain a glimpse into Zappos' corporate culture and form an emotional bond with the company.

"This is something that anyone can do," Ghag says. "It's important for every business to be out there to listen and engage. After all, your company isn't a faceless entity. It's the people behind it who make it a success."