

ONLINE SOCIAL GRACES

By Spencer Fleury

Last month, direct mail was discussed, one of the most tried-and-true methods for generating leads and driving sales. This month's article is about the rapidly emerging—and often confusing—world of social media marketing.

Lately, the hot topic in marketing has been the use of social media and how businesses are leveraging the interactive power and inherent trust built into social media platforms to maximize their profit potentials.

“Social media marketing really is the next big thing in marketing,” says Matthew Anderson, president and founder of Sarasota, Florida-based Milestone Marketing Associates. “However, it’s easy to overstate its impact—the tools are still evolving, and people are still getting comfortable with social media and still trying to determine how it really fits into their lives. Businesses and marketers have to understand and respect that, or they’ll be wasting their time.”

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE BASICS

First things first: What is social media?

“My own idea of what social media means is based on the idea of sharing information with people you know and trust,” says Anderson. “People use these Web sites to share information that is interesting and important to them with people they know and trust. If the content is relevant and compelling enough, those people share it with their own personal or professional social networks.”

This might sound frivolous at first, especially to people used to working in the very tangible world of construction. But it’s not, for this reason: “If content is created that is interesting and relevant to a contractor’s clients, they are more likely to pass it along to people who know and trust them. The message goes out to people who may never have heard of you before, but nonetheless have a reason to trust the information—their friends trust you. Your message comes directly from someone they already know,” says Anderson.

The Big Four

At the moment, there are four major players in the social media landscape. This could change, of course—the Internet in general is constantly changing and evolving, and it’s impossible to predict where or when the next trend will come.



Myspace (myspace.com). The granddaddy of social media, Myspace was founded in 2003 and was, for a while, the most popular social networking site on the Internet. But times and tastes have passed it by, and while it still exists as a viable social networking tool, it’s not the best platform for a business.

Facebook (facebook.com). The current king of social media, with over 400 million users worldwide, Facebook overtook Myspace in 2008 and hasn’t looked back. Both sites are based on the concept of adding friends to one’s personal network; these people then have access to other’s online profile and to the content that is posted. Obviously, people with larger networks of friends (the Facebook average is around 140) have greater reach, but at the same time, it’s likely that fewer trust-based bonds are formed in those larger networks. And those trust-based connections are the links a business wants to expand their reach and lead others to their Web site.

Twitter (twitter.com). Twitter is in the ascendancy for two major reasons: Facebook’s recent privacy-related missteps, and the simplicity of the Twitter service itself. Twitter allows a user to send out short and simple updates to a list of users who subscribes to (or “follows,” in Twitter lingo) a person’s feed. Updates (known as

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“tweets”) are limited to just 140 characters. This may seem like too little space to work with, but some businesses are finding that Twitter is a more effective platform for business-related social marketing than Facebook, simply because it requires much less effort on the part of information recipients. Followers don’t have to get permission to read tweets, for example. The vast majority of Twitter users are actually in the 18-49 age range.

LinkedIn (LinkedIn.com). While the other three are more often used for making and reinforcing personal connections and relationships, LinkedIn is specifically designed for professional networking. It’s not as widely used as the other three, and it can take quite a bit longer to build a network as a result. But it can be far more useful in making contacts and building relationships with other professionals in a specific industry—and even more important, it can provide access to their professional networks as well, which can be a quick and effective way to build a company’s reputation within an industry.

But don’t think social media is limited to these four outlets, cautions Anderson. “There’s far more to social media and social networking than Facebook and Twitter,” he says. “Look at YouTube, for example. We’ve all heard stories about so-called viral videos that get millions of views in a very short time. Some are funny, some are shocking, but they all have one thing in common: people find them compelling enough to share those videos with their own networks. While there isn’t a strong network-building component to YouTube, it is very easy to share YouTube links via Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter. So it’s possible to leverage other people’s social networks on those sites without even having a Facebook page at all.”

A FEW WORDS ABOUT SHARING

So what do you share with the company’s network? That depends, on both the specific needs of the company and what interests people in that specific network. But generally speaking, there are a couple of approaches that many businesses find effective.

“Many businesses push content about themselves and the work they are doing,” Anderson says. “This is a good way to show people that business is good, that your company is prospering and growing. And while that can be a useful image to project, the truth of it is that other people in your network are less likely to find it as interesting as you do. So they will be less likely to pass it on.”

“The other approach—the approach that I find to be far more effective—is to establish yourself as an industry expert,” Anderson continues. “Read up on what’s going on in your industry. Post links to interesting articles about emerging trends and add a few words of your own commentary. Your network will be far more likely to pass this information on to their own connections, and you will be able to more effectively make these indirect inroads with new people.”

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Understanding the complexity and nuances of social media can, at times, be difficult. Once businesses realize what they’re getting into, many of them shy away from this potentially very effective marketing technique.

“It would be a mistake to withdraw from social media marketing just because it seems so complicated,” says Anderson. “As with any marketing discipline, like copywriting and Web design, there are specialists who excel in servicing that particular niche.” ■