

Firms quickly realize PR possibilities of social media

May 5 2010, By Scott Canon

Richard Pesce loved his Clif Bars. Then the company sent him an expired box of the energy snacks. He e-mailed complaints. He phoned. No luck.

So he announced on [Twitter](#) -- the microblogging service then in its infancy in 2008 -- that his Clif Bars love affair was toast.

Meanwhile, an information technology worker at Clif Bars was listening, or more precisely, trolling Twitter for buzz about the product.

Suddenly, Pesce, a [Sprint Nextel](#) public relations specialist, had an apology and double his original order of energy bars.

Aha, he recalls thinking. The interactive bedlam of the Internet's [social networking](#) might be a way to polish Sprint's image.

We'll find customers with gripes -- surveys show Sprint improving but still trailing the competition in customer service -- and make them happy. We'll fix their problems. The world will see. And tweet by tweet, one Facebook post after the next, the ether of the Web will begin to reform the company image.

"We very quickly found out that as we started reaching out to people on Twitter, things started to change," said Pesce, who now leads the Overland Park, Kan., telecommunications company's five-person social media team and trains others in the company as "social media ninjas."

Maybe the explosion of social networking isn't just a giant time drain. Perhaps, companies are concluding, interactive media can be good for business.

The potential varies by product and by customer. It turns on finding the best way to bond corporation to opinion leader, and hinges on nimble strategy and an investment of money and manpower that keeps pace with the tell-me-now tempo of the Internet.

A world where a static come-see-us website sufficed for online outreach is fading like the battery in a 2-year-old iPhone. Increasingly, companies wander beyond their own sites into the wilds of other virtual venues, greeting strangers on strange turf.

For consumers, the rush of businesses into social networking could mean shortcuts to discounts and could offer better tips on how to use and where to find products. It also might mean sales pitches where they expect personal conversation, and trading privacy for ties to their favorite brands.

The key, say professionals using social networks to promote their businesses, is not simply to pitch product but to strike up relationships. Red Bull sponsors adventurers and invites people to follow exploits online. A dental office might post pictures of funny faces as a way of convivially engaging customers on the power of a smile.

"You can't just sit back and hope you get a bunch of Twitter followers," said Dan Melton of NPT Labs in Kansas City, Kan.

He helps nonprofit groups set up their social media -- connecting a clinic with its patients online as a more efficient way of dealing with simple questions about things such as drug interactions -- and gives boot camps on social media.

Some outfits start reluctantly, fearing that social networking is just another passing gimmick. Others have unrealistic expectations. Melton and others who have dabbled in social networking stress it requires real people staying engaged with the public.

Kansas City, Mo.-based Handmark got plenty of user love for its TweetCaster application -- an easier way to play in the Twitter world from your handset -- that it gave away free with advertising.

"They told us they liked it but that they'd be willing to pay for it to get it without the advertising," Conway said.

So now Handmark offers TweetCaster free with ads or ad-free for \$4.99.

Handmark makes a plethora of applications for the [iPhone](#), BlackBerry and other smart phones. Beyond promoting its latest virtual widget, it aims to be a source of tips about a range of things its technophile customers are likely to be interested in. The firm also uses its Twitter accounts, newsletters and Facebook page to scavenge for ideas and feedback.

As the power of social networks grows, they might also become more invasive. [Facebook](#), for instance, is rolling out features that would have people taking their online identities with them to every website they visit to better share their likes and dislikes with friends.

Some worry that the increased sharing not only will alert companies to potential customers but ultimately could give sellers insight to the maximum prices they could set for individual buyers.

Still, people share a lot. Including their locations. Foursquare awards virtual badges to users for going places and crowns the most frequent

visitor to a spot as its mayor. Gowalla works much the same way. Some merchants use the networks to offer specials.

Those geo-location here-I-am services could push the limits of just how much people want to share.

Blippy, backed by Twitter co-founder Philip Kaplan, entices people to share news of online purchases. Blippy reasons that the system goes beyond written recommendations to show how acquaintances are voting with their Visas. Users also can hide purchases -- say some Imodium or a Danielle Steel novel -- from public view or reveal to them to just a select lists of friends.

"Social media can be the intersection of voyeurism and narcissism. Narcissists want everyone to know what they're wearing and that they're checking into Foursquare. Other people just want to know what their friends are up to," said John Kreicbergs, an account supervisor at the Bernstein-Rein advertising firm in Kansas City, Mo.

Consider Kreicbergs' recent trip east. As he crossed the northern border of New York he tweeted: "Vermont: the green mountain state." It was a fanciful way to let his wife know his whereabouts. But within three minutes he got an e-mail telling him that "VermontTourism" was following his Twitter feed -- a sign somebody in Montpelier was watching Twitter. Soon after, they tweeted to him, "Welcome!"

Kreicbergs found the whole thing a little creepy, but he also liked the warm greeting and the sense that an actual person was at the ready to help this tourist.

In counseling clients, he reminds them that social networking is not free media, it's earned.

"It's labor-intensive," he said. "You've got to reach out to people."

Indeed, that's the game plan being tested by Sprint. Pesce said his squad spends much of its time converting the disgruntled into pleased, and in a very public way.

"Ultimately," Pesce said, "we're trying to improve that personal dialogue in real time."

Not everyone will want to chat with companies they buy from, said Kirk Kirkpatrick, a professor of marketing at the Henry W. Bloch School of Business and Public Administration at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

"They don't want an onslaught of self-serving messages. It can really be just PR," said Kirkpatrick, who is also creative director at Tonic Inc. advertising in Kansas City, Mo. "The key is giving people something they want, not just what you're pushing."

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