



## Not Just Idle Chatter

### How to make “social media” actually serve your goals



A decade ago, every marketer scrambled to make sure it wasn't the last to have a website. Today, we see the same “last one in's a rotten egg” viewpoint applied to Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

In the wisdom of hindsight, we now know it's pointless to set up a website just for the sake of having one. Every successful

site fulfills a specific purpose for its owner: a branding tool, a research resource, an online catalog...or all these roles and more. That said, you still have to have one—but a site that doesn't work its hardest for you is an opportunity needlessly missed.

The same principle applies to the much-touted “social media.” They are indeed here to stay. Today, everyone has the tools to share their views with the whole world—and having tasted that power, they're not about to give it back. But now as always, your success in these new outlets depends on having a reasoned approach that's based on meeting your business objectives. Below, the social media experts at Alexander offer up some of our practical do's and don'ts about how to turn today's virtual conversation to your real advantage.

#### **Do recognize that all the chatter really does matter.**

*Why should you care about the social media? That's easy: because your customers are using social media to make buying decisions. Want proof?*

**Fact:** Fully 25% of all search results for the world's Top 20 largest brands are links to user-generated content.

**Fact:** There's nearly one blog for every man, woman and child in America—and over one-third of all those bloggers are posting opinions about products and brands.

**Fact:** Over 40% of all customers now look to those online forums for buying advice—and nearly 80% of customers trust it.

This online “conversation space” puts every customer within easy reach of like-minded people worldwide, to an extent that's simply not possible through face-to-face contact. As a result, it has permanently replaced the water cooler and the backyard fence as the place where the majority of binding product recommendations are made. Ignore it, and you do so at your own peril.

#### **Don't—we repeat, don't—try to stop it.**

If bad things are said about your brand, service or products—and sometimes they will be—don't make any attempt to bully, threaten or censor the negative commentators. It doesn't work, and the blowback can really hurt you. The online culture is deeply suspicious of anything it views as intimidation or censorship of its free discussion, and you can get a lastingly bad name trying.

#### **Don't cheerlead for yourself, either.**

By the same token, while aggressive self-promotion is expected and accepted from your own website content and ads, don't try to get away with planting positive comments about your own brands in neutral blogs or forums. Not only is this arguably unethical, but today's customers are easily sophisticated enough to spot you, and absolutely unembarrassed to call you out. There's still a strongly idealistic sense of community and veneration of free speech in these online venues, and just like censorship, you don't advance your goals by acquiring a reputation as a purveyor of heavy-handed corporate propaganda.

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## **Do listen and learn from the conversation.**

If all this doesn't mean you should make positive posts about yourself in blogs and forums, what does it mean? It means there are proven ways to tap into the knowledge and enthusiasm of your industry's online aficionados for your business benefit. One of those is to actively listen to the conversation. Online as in person, being an attentive listener is not only good manners, but it can also make you smarter. Ways to do this include:

- Getting the pulse of customer opinion by quantitative monitoring of the existing online conversations
- Virtual survey/focus groups with a standing membership
- Starting uncensored blogs or forums on your brand's own website
- Sponsorship of online events tailored to enthusiasts of your industry

## **Do work indirectly to influence the conversation.**

With new gatherings of customers come new marketing opportunities. Inevitably, a handful of innovators are stepping forward with new constructs that go beyond simply making your own posts, reaction and detection to a more potent next stage: collective persuasion.

Knowledge firms like Gravitae Group are doing trailblazing work in this area. Their marketing models are based on behavioral principles proven in the laboratory of the social sciences, but seldom used systematically by marketers. These new approaches are designed to identify the most influential members of your industry's online conversation, then recruit them to your side without ever once urging them to shill for your brand—creating a viral army of advocates who then return to the online fray and do your heavy lifting for you.



Alexander Marketing's own work with Pentair Water Pool and Spa® is one example of a marketer who is successfully putting these leading-edge precepts into practice. Invitation-only groups that represent key Pentair constituencies—one for consumers, one for service professionals, and more—meet online under the guidance of trained “community leaders.”

These groups give Pentair a priceless source of end-customer insights it was denied in the past. Then the benefits to Pentair compound as these elect members circulate among the site's public blogs, becoming de facto ambassadors for the Pentair brand.

Meanwhile, other modern marketers are also finding ways to make the new social media work for them. Like all branding leaders through history, those marketers who take control of their industry's conversation space today will gain a foothold of customer loyalty that their competitors—present and future—will find extremely difficult to dislodge.