

Ten Do's and Don'ts of Social Media

By Vistage Speaker David Nelsen

Social media and social networking are quickly becoming "de rigueur" for business. A recent study by a Chicago-based firm, Slack Barshinger, showed that small and medium-size businesses are getting "heavily involved with social media, with about half using blogs, wikis, Twitter or other social media channels for business purposes." If your company is not yet engaged, it's time to jump in before your competitors beat you to the punch.

If you're not familiar with social media, check out YouTube, Twitter, TalkShoe, or any blog--these publishing and broadcasting democracies involve hundreds of millions of people. While most of these services were originally conceived for consumers, social media allows businesses to engage in many-to-many conversations with customers, accelerating their learning and building trust. This is not your father's marketing.

DO

1. Do the same up-front planning you would for any important business initiative. Define your target audience. Detail how you intend to create value for them. Map out how you expect them to create value for you. Document your approach and objectives per medium (blog, Twitter, Facebook, etc.).
2. Listen and learn from others for a few weeks before responding. In general, spend twice as much time listening as responding.
3. Display your Personality, and keep the content Interesting and Entertaining (the old radio adage "PIE"). Remember, people buy from people; show your professional self.
4. Be authentic. Never before has a medium and its participants been more skilled at *smelling a rat* and turning against the perpetrator.
5. Remember that social media is about two-way conversation (see "Don't try to control" above). Conversation builds trust; trust leads to more sales.
6. Favor timeless content over time-sensitive content (note: this varies based on the medium and there are exceptions). We live in a time-shifted "Tivo" world and there's wonderful leverage in creating a blog post (for example) that will have value to new readers weeks, months, or even years from now.
7. Remember that "push" is out and "pull" is in. Direct mail, traditional advertising, and unsolicited email are forms of "push" -- the content producer chooses who to target. "Following" on Twitter, "subscribing" to a blog or podcast, or viewing a video your friends "liked" on Facebook are forms of "pull" -- the content consumer decides what to listen to. In today's information-rich world, people want to opt-in, choosing where to spend their valuable time. Give them a reason to choose your content.
8. Keep your eyes open. Use Google Alerts, search.twitter.com, relevant LinkedIn Groups, Ning networks, and other sites to monitor or "listen in" on conversations about your company, your competitors, and the best practices in your industry.
9. Show patience. As the party with more power (a business relative to a customer/prospect), attacking or being critical will frequently backfire and word will propagate quickly.
10. Learn from your audience (as they will learn from you). Be prepared to rapidly evolve your products and services to meet their needs. They'll suggest valuable ideas you never thought of.

In the next few years, social media will become a primary vehicle for interacting with your customers, partners, suppliers, and even employees. By getting started today, your company can adapt to a changing world more quickly than your competitors. What are you waiting for?

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Here are ten basic rules for what to do and not do:

DON'T

1. Don't get started if you have significant product weaknesses or customer support issues. Engaging in social media makes good products more successful, and bad products... dead. But don't delay for long; address the issues and then jump in.
2. Don't use social media to overtly market or sell. Instead educate, enlighten, inform, and entertain your audience. In this way, you'll position yourself and your company as an expert in your field and benefit from the "media halo."
3. Don't "*set it and forget it.*" This makes you look worse than not showing up at all. Once you get started, sustain your participation and interaction.
4. Don't go negative. Emphasize your strengths and advantages rather than making claims about a competitor's weakness.
5. Don't mix personal and business accounts/personas, etc.
6. Don't expect to fully control the conversation. Social media is not an advertisement, product brochure, newsletter, email blast, or one-way monologue; it's a conversation. Conversations are bi-directional and can have rough edges. Even if you don't want to participate, your customers and prospects are already talking. Join them.
7. Don't worry about some negativity for online users. Studies show that a little negativity increases credibility and empathy. Paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln: "You can't please all of the people all of the time." Be responsive to the negative.
8. Don't feel the need to disclose everything. Not everyone who likes sausage wants to see exactly how it's made. Be open and honest *and* use discretion.
9. Don't be a generalist. With literally hundreds of millions of blogs, videos and podcasts to choose from, every individual can precisely tailor their consumption to their interests. Focus on one topic and do it well (the narrower the better).
10. Don't overwhelm your followers with too much information, or too frequently. Everybody's got a busy life and nobody enjoys getting "Twitter-ria". Focus on the highest value information and content.