

One day, your television, newsprint, press release and community outreach programs are cooking right along... the next, *blamo!* New terms like Web 2.0, social media marketing (SMS), conversational marketing and return on relationship (ROR) spring up. Suddenly, your e-mail pings while the phone rings simultaneously. It's the CEO, wondering what you've got planned for this "social media thing." You start to sweat. "We're on it," you reply. "No problem," you think. "I'll just Google: social media."

Time for some social media clarification. A large segment of the population is still of the opinion that social media is a fad. It's not. Maybe you think social media is just for kids. Nope. Think blogging is going away? It's not.

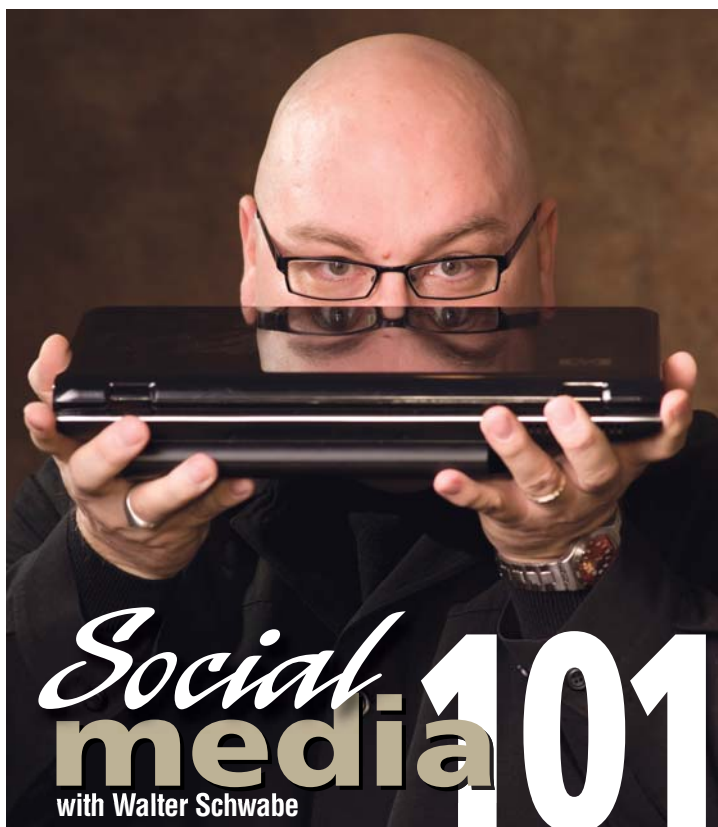
How do I know? Well, for starters, Google didn't buy YouTube for US\$1.3 billion just to kill a slow afternoon. Acquisitions of that magnitude demonstrate a certain level of market maturity. Further, social media isn't late-1990's search engine optimization (SEO) or pay-per-click advertising campaigns masquerading as "Web 2.0 technologies" as I overheard at a local event.

Social media is far more than participating in a form of online advertising. It is really a collective online representation of the "heart, soul, voice and power of the people." Corporations are having a tough time coming to terms with this.

"What's great about the blogosphere is that we can find our own stories and make things happen." — Sarah Lacy, Blogger, Gnomedex 2008

This is the kind of user-generated comment that, I dare say, makes the editor of this publication and all others from the Gutenbergian era furl their brows. Social media is permeating corporate thought in many ways today regarding its uses; everyone is looking for a competitive advantage. "How can social media improve our brand recognition online?" "How can this improve our internal communications and efficiencies?" And the dreaded, "What about the negative responses?"

My personal response to my clients regarding that last question is simple: The negative exists online today anyway and, currently, you're powerless to "manage" what you don't even know exists. In standard management consulting terminology, "You can't manage what you don't document." An effective social media strategy equips you with methodologies to first recognize then engage in those situations effectively so that you can take positive action. In reality, opportunities for competitive advantage are everywhere.



Moreover, brand recognition and value in today's social media world are now increasingly defined by the amount of conversations being generated about it, good or bad. Further, your personal influence as a business owner or executive is also now being measured by your social media value bank. Questions such as "Are you on LinkedIn?" are simple initial indications that the marketplace is starting to pay attention to this way of measuring your social media influence and value. Frankly, this entire enchilada has marketing and advertising veterans scrambling to catch up as old methodologies just aren't working and the right answers about social media are not necessarily on the tip of their tongues.

TWO CAMPS

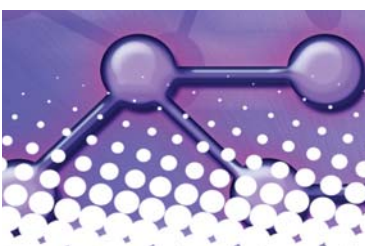
Wondering where to start? Generally, what you need to know is that social media philosophy is broken into two camps. Camp One believes in mantras like "Join the conversation," "Get out there," "We must do something—anything—right now." So people start signing up for every social networking site they can find. Facebook, LinkedIn, Xing—you name it and within 24 hours they're on it. Then they spend countless hours maintaining those profiles and, pretty soon, they wonder why they're doing it at all. No new business has come in and the "real" work is piling up.

The other camp—the one I belong to—is "build the right social media strategy first." Rather than jump right in and join the conversation, seek to understand by learning to "listen" to the Internet (since 2004 in my case). Corporations constantly

tell me that as part of their social media strategies, they want to "manage the conversation;" a dangerous approach if left unchecked. In fact, this is at the core of how different today's Internet and, by extension, the social media eco-system is compared to conventional managerial and marketing thinking.

Here's why Camp One corporations potentially lose millions, not only in cold-hard cash but also in brand-value. They will undoubtedly use standard, best practice marketing to begin to engage their online target audiences with some sort of tactical event, idea or contest. Why? It's what they know. After all, it's what worked in the 1980s and 1990s, right? Fast forward to today. Never before has the consumer been more informed, more savvy and more ready to tune our marketing messages. Applying old rules to a new situation where your audience is armed with on-demand information and has the power to respond effectively about you without your permission and "bingo", the battle has been lost before it has been fought. Regardless of the Art of War-Sun Tzu reference, this is why Camp One is often on the losing end of the results element.

Conversely, Camp Two is better prepared to win. A properly constructed strategy that encompasses a clear understanding of the online culture and how your company will be impacted by it means you're prepared for the tune-out effect. It also means you can communicate in the same language, using appropriate technologies in an appropriate manner. In other words, you'll know precisely why you're on a social network and how to effectively leverage it



to further your business objectives. Now you can "join the conversation" all you want. Knowing why you are engaging in social media at all is the new best practice.

In reality, the central question you should be asking is, "Are you social-media ready?" This is prudent to contemplate because social media isn't for everyone. It requires patience, bravery, transparency and diligence. This is where old school management tendencies clash with the new social media reality. Your organizational DNA may not consist of an open willingness to have meaningful discussions with your customers online about your faults and short-comings.

If that's true, you may find comfort with many others who are participating online today outside of social media. Starting with the simple stuff; a Google Adwords campaign for example, set-up an account at Google, pick keywords with some specificity, set a daily budget of four or five bucks or more and, the next thing you know, you're getting targeted traffic to your site. The same goes for Facebook ads, which in some ways are even easier to start and target, and the interface is very simple. Ensuring your search engine optimization is up to speed may also be a good idea for increased traffic to your corporate site, too. That service has been around a long time and is pretty straightforward. There is no looking behind the green curtain to expose the wizard required.

STRATEGY FIRST

Having said that, if you want to consider social media, then my admittedly self-serving—but correct—recommendation is strategy first:

- Start with the people rather than the technology and the tactics;
- Examine culture rather than software; and
- Analyze organizational impact rather than which ad network to use.

Social media is about dealing with the real issues first and, sooner or later, chances are that someone out there is doing the research on your organization right now—it's not really a secret anyway.

My thought is that you'd much prefer to be in front of that fact rather than be the next organization that kills someone with tainted product and is ill-prepared to deal with the online discussion nightmare that ensues. ✓

Walter Schwabe is the Chief Evolution Officer of fusedlogic inc., a social media strategy firm and Alberta company since 2000. You can learn more at www.fusedlogic.com

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