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## HOW CONNECTED ARE YOU? Social networking can be an effective tool for business

By Mark Crawford  
July 22, 2009

Ready or not, it's here, and it's here to stay.

The more involved you become with social networking, the more effective you become at capturing the interest and involvement of customers, vendors and potential recruits — especially those in the increasingly important Gen X and Gen Y demographics. Drag your feet too much longer and chances are you'll be viewed by those same groups as a relic who doesn't know how to respond to change.

There are some great reasons for social media: growing a loyal community of current and future clients, enhancing your company or personal brand, reaching out to people you might otherwise never meet, and creating evangelists among your most loyal users/customers.

"Another key reason for social media is that the education and sales process has changed with the growth in the Internet," said Wendy Soucie, a social media/marketing strategy consultant in Madison.

"Consumers and clients are doing research online, looking at product reviews, asking questions in communities, watching videos, listening to news. They are doing this long before they ever call a company or view an advertisement or engage a manufacturer. They make the final decision on who to call before 'traditional sales' finds them. Social media provides the resource for them to do this."

"Social media is also needed to protect and monitor a company's reputation, products and branding," added Steven Stearns, a social networking consultant in Janesville. "And it's just as important to listen to what your clients and consumers are saying about their expectations. Doing either of these will improve any business."

"Engaging customer social groups online is not simple because they inherently don't trust business marketing in their groups, but once engaged, those same groups can become your most loyal customers and your resource for real-time feedback and research," added Jiri Marousek, interactive director at Lindsay, Stone & Briggs. "Businesses using Twitter, for instance, are finding it can be a great customer service tool because they engage customers directly, in real time, and without software license fees."

### Tools of the trade

Many of the names are familiar: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube. Nielsen's five fastest-growing community sites in the U.S. are Twitter, Zimbio, Facebook, Multiply and Wikia. "Twitter, Tagged.com, LinkedIn, Facebook and Myyearbook.com had greater than 100 percent growth over last year," Soucie said.

"Shoutlet is an enterprise-level social media marketing applications that allows companies to manage all of their social media efforts in one Web-based application," said Jason Weaver, CEO for Sway, a Middleton company that specializes in social media marketing. "Your YouTube,

Facebook and Twitter communication can all be managed with Shoutlet." Social media monitoring tools like Radian 6 and Buzz Metrics are also helping businesses monitor online conversations about their businesses and brands, Marousek indicated. "The micro-blogging trend started by Twitter is also one to watch," he added. "As Twitter becomes too wide, narrower or niche-interest micro-blog platforms will gain ground."

### **It's how you use it**

Some companies use these platforms only in a superficial way without digging deeper to understand their broader applications. "They jumped on the bandwagon to build their profiles without thought to building a business strategy around how they would use any of the tools," Soucie said. "It's necessary to take the time to assess where your customers are and what they are talking about. If you plan to use these tools for a business purpose and not just to find your next job, listening to the conversation and contributing knowledge to the community in multiple forms is of key importance."

Social media can work for every business, especially when you understand how to reach your audience in a non-disruptive way. "Social media can be highly successful for B2B and B2C audiences," Weaver said. "For customer service, for example, VisualCV.com uses Twitter for client service by responding to customer inquiries publicly through Twitter. JetBlue does the same thing. Other companies use social platforms like Second Life to help develop new products through customer participation."

First Weber Group recently launched Front Runner, which provides homebuyers and sellers with an interactive multimedia marketing package that can interface with social networks, YouTube and Web-enabled smart phones. "Smart" yard signs send multimedia presentations to Web-enabled phones and allow potential buyers to text agents instantly. The technology can even customize presentations to fit the specific capabilities of the buyer's cell phone.

UW-Madison's Athletic Department has moved quickly to connect with students, fans, and alumni through social media. The Badgers Web site (uwbadgers.com) has gradually become a portal for a host of digital tools, including BuckyText, a service that sends fans text messages regarding ticket offers, promotions and breaking news. Facebook is another channel the department is using to share sports information. "Our numbers on Facebook and Twitter continue to grow, which is a good sign," said Justin Doherty, director of athletic communications for UW-Madison. "We simply want to use whatever methods we can to connect with our alumni, fans, ticket-holders and donors. Our football daily e-mail has about 4,000 subscribers and we expect that to continue to grow as well."

### **Parting advice**

"In order to benefit from social networking, you need a clear objective, a strategy, and the right technology to do it," Marousek said. "And the most important rule applies here: If these new tools don't connect with the other tools you are using in your integrated marketing program, your effectiveness will be diminished."

Do your listening first. "Research your current contacts and customers and find out where they are — blogs, social sites, communities, etc.," advised Soucie. "Listen to what people are talking and asking questions about. Then pick your tools and create complete profiles so the community knows who you are. Decide if you are representing yourself (brand you) or your company. Answer truthfully, but also be aware that anything you say online can be indexed and found and may come back to haunt you."

Adoption rates for social networking will probably remain uneven

because of the traditional demand of business to see tangible ROI. "However," said Stearns, "before any business has a return on investment, it must have a return on interest. If clients and consumers have a hard time getting interested in your enterprise, there will be little or no chance to do business with them. Social media takes some time to develop, but providing great content, real information, and genuine transparency will bring social networking success."

Here are some popular social media sites that also can be used as tools for marketing and business promotion:

### **Facebook**

[www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) • Create and update personal pages that can be used to send messages and interact with other people's pages.

### **Twitter**

[www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) • This form of microblogging allows users to communicate via tweets—text-based messages that cannot exceed 140 characters. Messages are called "tweets."

### **LinkedIn**

[www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) • A business-oriented community that allows users to maintain and share contact details for trusted business associates. You create a profile, then invite others to join your network.

### **YouTube**

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) • This video-sharing website is being increasingly used by businesses to post video messages or commercials that target certain groups.

### **Zimbio**

[www.zimbio.com](http://www.zimbio.com) • Contributors build wikizines—interactive magazines that anyone can create or edit that pertain to a particular area of interest.

### **Multiply**

[www.multiply.com](http://www.multiply.com) • Similar to Facebook, users create Web sites and post blogs, photos, reviews, videos, music and personal information.

### **Wikia**

[www.wikia.com](http://www.wikia.com) • A platform for thousands of wikis (collections of material on particular topics) that can be edited by anyone; for example, Wookieepedia is a wiki with 67,000 pages on every Star Wars character, planet and creature.

### **Tagged.com**

[www.tagged.com](http://www.tagged.com) • Users create and post their own profile pages, videos, photos, and games. Users also chat with other users.

### **Myyearbook.com**

[www.myyearbook.com](http://www.myyearbook.com) • Users create their own personal pages in order to meet people, play games, flirt and online date.

### **Shoutlet**

[www.shoutlet.com](http://www.shoutlet.com) • Enables companies to use online marketing campaigns to reach targeted groups through social media.

### **Radian 6**

[www.radian6.com](http://www.radian6.com) • Provides tools for marketing/advertising agencies to monitor the effectiveness of advertising on social media sites.

### **My Buzz Metrics**

[www.nielsen-online.com](http://www.nielsen-online.com) • Allows brand managers to monitor and analyze what's being said online about their brand or organization from a wide range of sources.

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