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Use tools to build an interactive community around brand, but don't lose sight of integrity

Social media: Beauty or beast?

People first

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Social media has caused a catastrophic shift in our thinking. It has gathered the muscle to take the word “friend” from a long-held (important to quality of life) concept to a verb (click). Seismic shifts run wide and deep in their effect and only time will determine both the damage and the opportunity it allows us.

Understanding the beast

One of the reasons social media has drawn such immense power is that it appeals to a significant aspect of our human nature that demands we be noticed. Our instincts are in place to aid us in our quest for both emotional and physical survival. Social media has become an amazing tool to build a community around our personal identity/brand. On the flip side, it can become a drug of sorts that is constantly available and certainly could challenge the development of our most important relationship skill: face-to-face communication. But like every tool, its form is defined by its function. A screwdriver is a great tool — but it's not a hammer. Building a personal identity takes a tool box.

The ways and means of social media are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Yelp, Wikipedia, MySpace pages, blogs or comments on online media stories. Protocols are in place; we all get along better if there's a known goal (know me, like me, trust me) and there are rules (no selling).

How you get to your goal is simply to be generous: informational, educational and, of course, entertaining. Andrew Dobbs, search marketing executive at Webmarketing123, says, “There is a conversation happening online, and social media allows you to join in, providing a peek into your personal life while constructing a perceived authority. That said, it's very easy to get carried away and end up places that you never intend to be.” The hugely popular television show “Cheers” — where everybody knows your name — taught us more about the characters from their conversations than their names. Consider social media as the real-world equivalent of “Cheers.”

Taming the beast

There are few things in life that you control. How you are known is one of them.

Set a standard: Determine who and what will entertain you. Remember, though, what we think is funny is one of the most revealing flags we can send up the “notice me” pole. Lee Thurburn, president of NetOffer, has made some startling observations of people tweeting: “An executive having lunch with his grade school child tweeting throughout in a comical fashion about the lunchroom Nazi. Where were his priorities?” Lee muses. “Or the new mother that reached for her phone instead of her baby. These are not the type of people I want around me.” A loss of your reputation can happen that fast.

Webmarketing123 offers these essential guidelines:

- Be transparent — Your honesty will be noted.
- Be judicious — Make sure that you never represent yourself in a false or misleading way.
- Use common sense and courtesy.

- When disagreeing with others' opinions, keep it appropriate and polite.
- When you screw up, be upfront and quick to make the correction.

Beast to business beauty

Lee Thurnburn is an interesting guy. He says he gave Al Gore the idea for the Internet, then Gore took all the credit. Lee founded FlashNet in 1995 as the CEO and chairman. By March 1999, FlashNet had nearly 400 employees and more than 250,000 customers. FlashNet went public in March 1999 and was later sold to Prodigy. In 2005, Lee started NetOffer as a social media business marketing and community building system.

"The NetOffer system is like Facebook + Twitter + Youtube + Craigslist + YellowPages + ConstantContact + Wordpress," Lee says. Clients range from sole proprietors to substantial corporations. "Using social media tools to build business communities is the next step in social media," he says. "A business community is a place where customers, vendors and staff interact directly. Imagine how you could improve client loyalty by increasing the level of interaction and the frequency of communication."

Both Webmarketing123 and NetOffer are onto something important. They are offering structure to something seemingly out of control that has affected the general population.

We need to know more to make this business beauty work for all of us.

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