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## Social media rewriting the rules of marketing

Posted on December 12th, 2011 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I attended IBEX for the first time and was pleasantly surprised and impressed. Since it is geared more to the techie side, I had no reason to attend in the past. But as a speaker this year in the new sales and marketing track, I participated in an extremely well-orchestrated event that demonstrated solid industry horsepower.

The exhibit hall was brimming with displays and populated by lots of industry movers and shakers. I've never seen better advance speaker coordination than that managed by Barbara Jean Walsh, who had her finger on the pulse of more than 90 seminars.

Other than an on-site audio glitch, the show execution was flawless.

I served on a Soundings Trade Only-sponsored panel moderated by Beth Rosenberg, who is always on top of her game. Our topic, "Grassroots Marketing Strategies," was meant to help marine businesses better understand the world of social media and Web marketing in an era of tight budgets. Joining me was Web guru Courtney Chalmers, marketing director of Dominion Media. Our topic drew an impressive crowd that included association executives, boatbuilders, yacht restorers, dealers, sailing club representatives and electronics and engine manufacturers, among others.

Half of our audience was made up of people already engaged in Facebook. About a third are in LinkedIn and maybe a quarter use YouTube. A random few are Twitter activists. We reviewed the latest social media stats, all of which define the skyrocketing growth of these platforms. The facts and figures are compelling: Social media is no passing fad.

A few mind-blowing facts: There are 500 million Facebook users, and half of them log in every day, spending 700 billion minutes collectively online each month. The average Joe has 130 friends. Calculate this number by your friend base, and you quickly understand why Facebook is a powerful new "word-of-mouth" advertising gorilla. One favorable post endorsing your business can have real impact at no cost to your business. Another major trend emerging at Facebook is access via mobile devices (250 million users now do it). And here's a revealing finding: The fastest-growing segment is the 45-and-older demographic — right up our industry's alley.

There are nearly 106 million Twitter aficionados tweeting in the universe, with 300,000 signing up daily. YouTube sees the upload of 24 hours of video content every minute, with 2 billion videos viewed daily. And LinkedIn, the original professional business network, has 80 million members from 80 countries, with

a new member joining every second. Impressed? You should be. Intimidated? Don't be.

I'd like to challenge you to create a social media strategy vs. simply shooting from the virtual hip. Get to understand the unique aspect of each platform — the pros and cons. Ask what your current customers are using and, after analyzing that and the various options, choose the platform(s) best suited to your business. Focus on one or two for starters and become proficient before tackling the full deal.

If you don't have a staffer who can waltz into the social media dance, consider tapping a street-smart college student or intern, or ask other business owners who are successful for recommendations. Your local college or adult education center — maybe even the chamber of commerce — can be a font of valuable information. One Web search will uncover hundreds of white papers and articles on any aspect of social media that interests you. Your local book store is also shelved with hot new titles, including those expressly for “dummies.”

What do you want to communicate? At what frequency? Careful. Over-posting can turn people off, just as boring content that fails to engage can lose friends and followers fast. Hard-core selling guarantees blockage. Twice-a-day Facebook posts are the max, but I personally think once a day, or even three to four times a week is sufficient, as long as your content is relevant. Keep your tone personal — warm, friendly and casual.

Content makes or breaks it in this game. What type of content will appeal to your audience? Should you educate them? Excite them? Get their insight and opinion? Position yourself as an authority? Create community? Promote special events and calendar activities, i.e., a lead-in to a boat show or open house? Welcome new customers with their picture post (and, of course, tag them so you show up in their feed)? Casually showcase new and used inventory?

My advice: Get strategic. Get creative. Test different tactics. Have fun!

To maximize ROI (return on investment), monitor and measure what works and what doesn't. Is your list of “likes” and friends on the rise? Are your customers and prospects engaging with you ... with one another? If the conversation is solely one-sided, readjust your strategy. Today it's all about connecting with the customer and creating two-way relationships while building community.

Host contests. Ask for ideas. Respond to each and every post that customers, friends and prospects make. And be sure to cross-market your social media platforms in all of your marketing activities. If you use e-mail to communicate, include the social media logos in your signature box. Include icons in your print ads, on your website and in newsletters, e-blasts, banner ads, blogs, etc.

On the Twitter front, your limit is 140 characters, so the message has to be really tight. Twitter serves as today's virtual water cooler and answers the question, “What are you doing?” It's one milestone to establish followers, but even more of a challenge to keep them.

I believe Twitter is the hardest to successfully maintain for most marine businesses. It's great for a restaurant or a retailer with daily specials and discounts, but content has to be such that it commands attention — not an easy proposition. (I'd love to hear from anyone who has experienced quantifiable success through Twitter in marine marketing).

For the cost of an inexpensive camera, you can shoot and produce your own videos and host them on your own YouTube channel. The more homespun and real the content and delivery, the more it sticks. Gone is the commercialism of slick, costly corporate videos. Be authentic. Include humor. What can you show and demonstrate? I bet your team could have lots of fun brainstorming and taking ownership.

For ideas, and to get the creative juices cranking, visit YouTube and search anything you want to learn about or benchmark the competition. Insert keywords into the content, post replies and link to your other social media platforms. For example, if you are uploading a new YouTube video, post a summary and link on Facebook and LinkedIn and send out a tweet.

Tried LinkedIn? This is my favorite social media venue for biz networking. Post a free profile or pay a small fee for an upgrade that allows you to InMail and message. Build your company and professional profile, and include recommendations and referrals from customers to establish immediate credibility. Participate in LinkedIn polls, post questions, comments and links. Become the expert in your area. This is a great mechanism to leverage introductions and to connect with key industry and local market influencers and prospects. Reference this column and join me on LinkedIn.

Chalmers, the Web guru, tackled a variety of cutting-edge Web strategies, but space precludes me from expounding. In short, never underestimate the value and importance of your website. It is the first impression of your business and your most important marketing tool. Make it count.

We both agreed that marine businesses often fail to keep their content dynamic and fresh. Is your site optimized? Does someone on your staff have ownership? Think like a publisher/editor and consider the wants and needs of your site visitors. Organize accordingly. Update regularly. Your website shouldn't read like a manufacturer's brochures. Have you developed a palpable online brand personality that reflects your unique culture? Are you providing solutions to your audience's problems with an easy way to find answers? Program in place for managing leads? Using your site to effectively harvest valuable opt-in contacts?

Yes, the rules of marketing are changing at warp speed, so if you expect your business to grow and thrive you absolutely must get strategic and plan for your future. We're living in real time, baby, and it's here and now.

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