



THE VOICE

THE OFFICIAL BUSINESS MAGAZINE OF THE MARKHAM BOARD OF TRADE

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Advertising inquiries should be directed to **Chris Rogers, Advertising & Marketing Consultant** 905-474-0730 ext. 30

Markham Board of Trade
7271 Warden Avenue
Markham, ON L3R 5X5
T: 905-474-0730 • F: 905-474-0685
info@markhamboard.com
www.markhamboard.com

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SOCIAL MEDIA:

YOUR COMPETITORS, CLIENTS AND EMPLOYEES ARE THERE.
WHERE ARE YOU?

By Alexandra Lopez-Pacheco and Mary Teresa Bitti
Illustration by Nick Craine

“I hate social media,”

says Daniel Plechak, founder of the BusinessPlanStore.ca. “I never ventured anywhere near Twitter. I tried Facebook, added a few friends but pretty much kept myself hidden.” Until recently, this wasn’t a problem. Over a period of 15 years, he had built a successful business consultancy largely based on referrals and word of mouth. But last year when Plechak decided it was time to take his company to the next level, he knew that meant taking it online and leveraging social media. “If you want to keep up with the times, you have no choice.”

The fact is a growing number of your employees, customers and competitors are likely using social media. If you aren’t then you are missing an opportunity to do two significant things: get your message out and see what others are saying about you, says David Phipps, director, research services and the knowledge exchange at York University. “A catalogue without a phone or a storefront where people can place an order is the Internet without social media. Social media is your online storefront. You can now put out information about your company, products and services in a way that engages your customers and potential customers in a dialogue. That’s the why of social media.”

Ten to 15 years ago, many businesses were debating whether or not they needed a website. Today, few businesses don’t have one. “We are at that same point with social media. In five years, social media is just going to be one of the regular enterprise tools we use. We’ll be using it the same way we do email,” says Phipps. “If your competitors are far ahead in the social media sphere, they are going to be attracting the attention of customers and taking it away from you. If you don’t start, you’ll be left behind.”

Consider how far some businesses have already come. “Last week I was going to Ottawa and taking Porter Airlines. I hadn’t been on Porter in about a year and a half and they had expanded their lovely lounge. I took a picture of it and posted it on my Twitter feed saying, ‘Enjoying the peace of Porter on the way to Ottawa.’ Within two minutes Porter responded to my tweet and said ‘Have a nice trip.’ The airline clearly employs someone to monitor social media feeds and engage with their

“DETERMINE WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS AND WHAT YOUR BUSINESS OBJECTIVE IS”

“FIRST IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM AND THEN FIGURE OUT HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CAN SOLVE IT”

customers. That was huge. They were able to post my good experience to all their followers so it became a positive news story for them. If my experience had been a bad one, they could have similarly engaged with me and turned my bad experience into a good one and done damage control to manage a negative tweet. In the future, more companies will be doing this.”

That said, it is important to be strategic choosing which social media platforms you are going to use as well as how and why you are going to use them. “There is no silver bullet. Social media is hot right now but really it is another channel to disseminate your message and have a two-way communication with your audience, whoever that may be,” says Cyrus Mavalwala of Advantis Communications Inc. “These are just channels and more channels are popping up. Although the big ones—Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr—get all the attention, there are thousands of different social media platforms and communities that attract your target market. At the end of the day, you have to fish where the fish are. If you’re a strategic communicator or business leader, look at it and say OK, here are more channels to leverage. But the first step is to determine who your audience is and what your business objective is.”

Figuring out how to apply social media in a way that supports the business goal is critical. “You have to think it out. See a problem or opportunity and then decide if and how you can use social media to address it,” says Wolfgang Franke, Words at Work Marketing and Advertising. “The problem most people have with social media is they try to force fit it over something. My approach is to first identify the problem and then figure out how social media can solve it.”

For example, Franke is working with helping a private golf course with their marketing. He identified that one of the problems the club is facing is that in order to find out the condition of the course—which is of supreme importance to golfers--the members must phone the pro shop but this is cumbersome and time wasting. “Social media is the perfect way to address this,” says Franke. “We are going to set up a Twitter

account that will provide an hour by hour update of the conditions of the course. Now, instead of 500 members having to call the club, they can click on the Twitter account and find out. We have added value to the members. We have taken a huge burden off the pro shop. We have made the member experience better at no cost by using social media."

Many businesses are hesitant to get involved in social media because it is a multi-way conversation—one in which they feel they are losing control of the message. "To be honest, you never had control of the message in the first place. You just were not aware of what was being said," says Mavalwala. "The difference is now you can listen to what is being said and because of this, social media can help you protect your brand."

The reality is that social media in this day and age is a vital tool for brand protection. Additionally, if you're not in social media York University's Phipps offers this advice: "Sign up your company name in social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and WordPress. This way you are reserving your rights for your brand even if you don't intend to use them and it stops someone else from signing up as your company name and posting things that have nothing to do with you or worse could be damaging to your reputation. It is important to secure your branding rights on these social media."

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But if you do want to leverage the power of social media, keep in mind that while the entry cost is often free, social media is like a free puppy, says Mavalwala. "There is no such thing. Sure you get a free puppy and then you realize how much work is involved and you have to feed it." Social media is a similar tradeoff. It demands a significant amount of sweat equity and your time. But the payback can be equally significant, in everything from customer feedback to market research to brand loyalty to identifying opportunities and recruiting. There is no benefit in taking shortcuts. The content has to be relevant and genuine or else it won't resonate with your target audience. And the relationships you are building have to be authentic.

"It's not a numbers game," says Mavalwala. "In the early days, it was sexy to have thousands of people following you on Twitter and we've met CEOs of corporations who were very proud of how many followers they had until we showed them how many of them were porn stars. Are people actually reading what you are saying, is it engaging them, are they responding and re-tweeting?"

As for Daniel Plechak, he is no longer skeptical but is completely immersed in promoting his company via social media. "If you want to be successful, you have no choice but to embrace new technology." ■