

The Future of Social Media for Business

As the sale of smartphones and tablet computers rapidly increases, so does the importance of social media for business. These mobile devices – immediate, interactive and at least for now, controlled by the user -- are critical to how social media is evolving. Users can choose what they see and when, although as we learned from our conversation with March's TECH Talk speaker and social media expert Antony Francis, this will begin to change as technology progresses.

Being social for business

Social media is an online conversation. Think of it as online networking. It is a tool that every business can benefit from and should be utilizing. While not every social network will be right for a company, identifying priority audiences and the social networks they use frequently can help establish where a company should be present. The goal is to connect with decision makers, whether that is a consumer, a referral source or another company.

Social media is different from traditional advertising or marketing. A company can use social media to develop a relationship with its audience, giving them the opportunity to learn about the product or service and, more importantly, maintaining top of mind awareness for those who aren't ready to make a purchase.

Avoid common mistakes

Social media should not be considered a separate part of the company. Marketing, advertising, public relations and even operations should be considered in their relationship to the social media plan. A common mistake companies make is not realizing the importance of social

media, and then hiring someone outside the company to handle their online accounts. The person in charge of posting and interacting with social media audiences should be an effective communicator who is well versed in the company. This person will protect the brand, reputation and overall online presence.

Also, monitoring all social networks, regardless whether there is a company account is critical. Consumers now have the freedom to post whatever they want about a business, good or bad, online. Watching the conversation and interjecting when necessary can help reduce the risk of damage from negative online messages.

Facebook and the future

Like it or not, Facebook is the 900-pound gorilla of the social networking world. It will be hard to unseat. With more than 900 million users worldwide, businesses, television shows, news networks and even celebrities are logging in to connect with their audience. But there could be some big changes in store for Facebook users over the next few years.

In February, Facebook filed papers with the Securities and Exchange Commission to become a publicly traded company. While the initial public offering equals big money for Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg and his employees, it could also create problems for the social network. As a public company, Facebook will be accountable to shareholders and board members -- people who will most likely want to monetize the social network. Users can expect to see more changes to their timelines, additional advertising and apps allowing companies access to their personal Facebook account information. This could force many users to jump ship. In addition, being a publicly traded company brings reporting requirements to ensure

transparency – requirements that will be new and probably uncomfortable for this previously private company.

Enter Google+, one of the newer social networks. It has the potential to become the next big social media craze. Unlike other newcomers, Google+ has a well-established brand behind it. That alone has helped the online community score 25 million unique visitors in just over one month's time – faster than any other technology has been adapted, ever.

Google+ has a user-friendly format that is easy to navigate. It also has some features that make it stand out from other social networks. Their hangout feature offers a faster and cleaner video teleconferencing option, compared with Skype. And the Google+ mobile app automatically uploads photos from the phone to the site, and then allows users to select which photos to share and with whom.

Geo-tracking services like 4Square and SCVNGR also have potential for growth in the future, but it will likely be slow. The process of checking in at a location needs to become more engaging for users. In addition, there will need to be some kind of payoff or special offer to entice them to share their location. This will become critical as the augmented reality technology (the overlaying of digital data on the real world) improves. For example, mobile users can point the phone's camera down a street and augmented reality apps, like Layar, will display events, deals and other insider information for that area.

This is where the future of social media is going. Instead of having the experience controlled by the user; technology will become ubiquitous. It will adapt and alert users to what is happening in their surroundings instantaneously. Social media will be everywhere, from mobile phones and computers to household appliances and televisions. We might even say that the term

“social media” will become irrelevant because it will be so commonplace as to be part of our everyday activities – without needing a name.

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