

Managing expectations for B2B social media

For business communicators, Twitter followers and Facebook friends will never match consumer audience heights. But don't ignore the opportunity.

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Last update: September 5, 2010 - 3:27 PM

The massive popularity of social networking requires marketers and communicators to deploy new creative strategies to help clients find and rally their friends, followers and advocates.

And consumers are responding enthusiastically, whether the product is a wide-screen TV, fast food, running shoes or the latest box office champion. Consider the body wash promoter whose online videos amassed views more quickly than President Obama's election victory speech. Or consider the happy flock of Welsh sheep adorned with LED lights that boasts a viewership of more than 12.5 million. Talk about counting sheep.

Consumers now identify personally and passionately with their favorite brands enough to follow their news on Facebook and Twitter and to view and share their YouTube videos. The most engaged brand advocates end up drawing others into their conversations and making that passion contagious.

But for those of us who focus on social media in the more prosaic "business-to-business" (B2B) market, the popularity that's powering business-to-consumer (B2C) brands tends to leave us with a bit of a social complex. Underneath all those impressive numbers is the implication that social media is a consumer thing -- like a catchy pop song best sung by the wickedly attractive, clever or infectious.

The reason B2B social media is so comparatively invisible is because it falls outside the circumference of the spotlight: no heart-stent manufacturer or enterprise software developer or architectural firm is going to attract 1.7 million fans on Facebook. B2B companies are often so far out of the spotlight that the general public may not even be aware they exist, much less be willing to engage with them on Facebook.

Indeed, these lofty numbers attract all the attention and make a lonely Styrofoam manufacturer despondent about its 1,145 followers on Facebook. But it's all too easy to dismiss social media in the B2B context when comparing these apples to those oranges.

More accurately, it's akin to dismissing all music because most artists don't have the following of Justin Bieber.

B2B social media campaigns are most successful when they swim with a smaller school: thought leadership over brand advocacy, and targeted niche buyers rather than anyone thinking about what's for dinner. For example, the buying cycle of an enterprise software implementation for a company of 15,000 employees is considerably more complex than the decision one person makes about how they scent themselves.

B2B social media must take all of this into consideration. But, so long as a company does not get hung up on looking for a million views or a quick hit, but uses social media to educate its potential customers over time, then it's a win.

Smaller, smarter audience

B2B companies for years have been publishing and distributing studies and white papers online to illustrate their industry savvy. However, in today's online environment, a PDF on a corporate website is about as useful as a VHS tape stored in a linen closet -- if that's the only place it's stored. Better to digitize the video and share a link instantly online with 100 people, who in turn can share with others who share with others.

Agile companies are doing something similar not only with intellectual capital via video and shareable white papers, but are taking it a step further: engaging niche audiences in a discussion about their products and services to improve their offerings and develop loyalty from customers.

B2B companies are rich in intellectual property, valuable information that others in their industry will willingly share with their colleagues. However, some companies struggle to understand how activities as sophomoric sounding as tweeting could possibly have any meaningful or lasting impact on their balance sheets. Or, they get hung up on the sanctity of their own intellectual property, holding it so closely rather than sharing.

The answer's quite simple. B2B social campaigns are not destined to become the next big thing in the mind of the public, nor are they meant to. Their audiences are far smaller and considerably more targeted and, therefore, so are their viewership numbers. B2B social media campaigns are long-term and meant to drive thought leadership, not fervent (and often fickle) enthusiasm. They develop leads over time to help the months-long and sometime years-long purchasing decision process, rather than entertaining us for 39 seconds.

B2C social media will always get the attention. And, as I tell my daughter -- who loathes current popular music -- there will always be a Justin Bieber. But that doesn't mean we should throw away our iPod.