



Relating to Your Public: Social Media Marketing and Public Relations

Say the words public relations, and your first thought is probably about press releases, TV news interviews, and newspaper stories. PR flacks—a slang term for PR pros—are paid professionals whose job it is to get your company or your product into the mainstream media. They have relationships with journalists and can call them up to get a story placed. Or they have an email list of journalists a mile long they send press releases to on an alarming basis, hoping one of them will stick.

But public relations is no longer just a matter of dealing with the mainstream media. The mainstream media is still important, but it's not the only game in town anymore. In fact, the mainstream media has suffered a serious blow in viewership, readership, and listenership thanks to social media. Today, public relations professionals must be aware that easy-access online publishing platforms like blogs and social networking tools make everyone a publisher. Thus everyone is the media.

According to the Pew Internet & American Life's 2011 State of the Media Report, more people got their news online in 2010 than they did from a physical newspaper. This is the first time in the Internet's history that this has ever happened. The only media source that beat the Internet was television news, and the Pew Center says this gap is closing.¹ In fact, according to the report, the audience dropped for every form of news media, except for online (see Figure 7.1). The online audience grew by 17.1%, while newspapers dropped 5%, and network and cable news dropped 3.4% and 13.7%, respectively. This last figure is especially surprising, given the fact that cable TV was once considered a major growth sector in mainstream media.

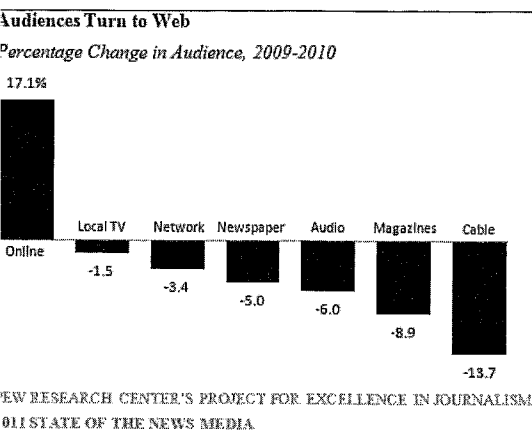


Figure 7.1 American news gathering habits have all shifted in favor of online news sources. Cable TV news—once a major growth sector—had the biggest drop in viewership.

This has spelled trouble for the mainstream media, which is losing its revenue to online ad revenue. This causes the media outlets to lay off staff, which affects the quality of their news coverage, which means people desert their favorite media outlets to get their news elsewhere, which reduces readership and viewership, which causes the media outlets to lose revenue, and the whole thing becomes a vicious cycle. No one is sure where this cycle will end, but it has caused a spike in

popularity of online alternative news outlets and programs, citizen journalism, blogs, and even video news programs.

Remember in Chapter 2, “It’s Not Them; It’s You!,” when we talked about how Target had a policy of not dealing with nontraditional media sources? What happens if your company has a similar policy and you ignore blogs because you think they’re written by angry people sitting in their underwear in their parents’ basements? What will happen to your public relations efforts if the mainstream media in a city drops off so much that the city’s newspaper shifts its content online or shuts down completely?

It happened to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which was the first major metropolitan newspaper to go online-only in March 2009, followed by the *INDenverTimes* in April 2009, which replaced the shuttered *Rocky Mountain News*. Because several newspapers and even more trade publications around the U.S. have folded, gone online, or significantly cut back, traditional mainstream media is being stretched thin. There are fewer local news stories, fewer opportunities for businesses to make a major announcement, and fewer reporters to cover these stories. The Pew Center estimated that 1,000 to 1,500 newsrooms were lost in 2010, making newsrooms 30% smaller than they were in 2000.

That doesn’t mean local news gathering is lost, it’s just moving online. In 2010, Yahoo! hired several dozen reporters to cover news, sports, and finance for their Yahoo! Local News coverage. AOL hired 900 journalists, 500 of who are working in their local Patch news outlet. But it’s not just the big online companies that are covering local news. Ordinary citizens are taking matters into their own hands as well.

The Southeast Indianapolis Communities (SIC) blog (see Figure 7.2) focuses strictly on news around the southeast quadrant of Indianapolis. It is able to provide more in-depth information than the city’s newspaper, the *Indianapolis Star*, publishing hyperlocal news stories about upcoming events, high school sports, and issues of concern to Southeast Indianapolis residents, such as bike lane development plans, local trash schedules, and new businesses in area neighborhoods.

Because most of these events won’t appeal directly to all of the *Indianapolis Star* readers, the blog is able to reach exactly the audience its editors want to reach: people who live in that section of Indianapolis. As a result, readers may turn to the SIC blog, rather than the *Star*, which could cut into readership and ad revenues. And as papers like the *Star* turn more and more to national news and wire reports in an attempt to save money, these local blogs become more important to local readers.

This means they are going to become important to you as they replace the traditional media. Companies like Target and their PR professionals will be forced to either deal with the nontraditional media on a continuing basis or fight harder for smaller spaces in fewer media outlets.

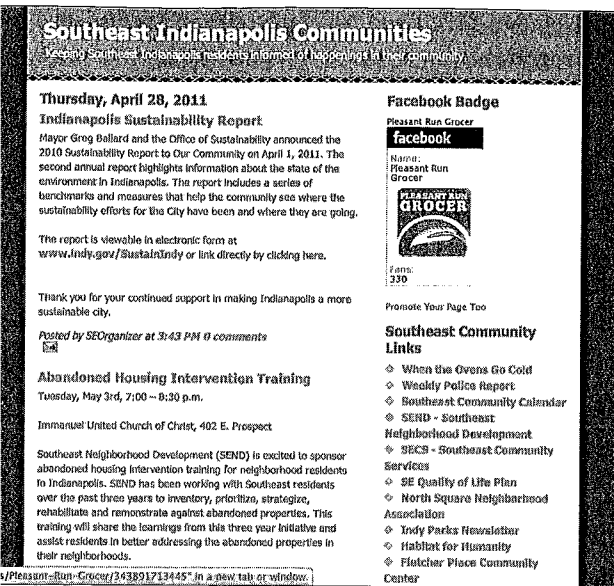


Figure 7.2 Local news blogs and websites are filling in the gaping holes left by decreasing coverage by local newspapers, which are relying more on wire services and national news, and less on local news, for their news coverage.

So although we're not telling you to ignore mainstream media, we do want to get you thinking more positively about online media, whether it's the large Internet companies like Yahoo! and AOL providing local news coverage or the local bloggers covering their own little corner of the world that the mainstream media won't even talk about unless someone got shot or a house burned down.

Public Relations Is Not Only About the Mainstream Media Anymore

This massive change in the media landscape also means that PR professionals have to change their tactics as well. Gone are the days of press releases, publicity stunts, and fabricated events that trick an unsuspecting public. It's no longer acceptable to blanket a city's local media or an industry's trade media with press releases. This strategy might have been the standard practice years ago—and still is, for many PR pros—but it is almost completely frowned upon by online journalists and bloggers these days.

However, social media is making it much easier for PR professionals to continue to provide media relations services to their clients. As we discussed in Chapter 5, "Make Some Noise: Social Media Marketing Aids in Branding and Awareness," (and discuss in greater detail in Chapter 11, "It's All About the Benjamins: Social Media

Marketing Drives Sales"), sales and marketing are now about relationships and trust. If your customers trust you and feel like they have a relationship with your employees and your company, they're more likely to buy from you. The same is true for PR professionals. Social media allows them to have relationships with journalists, both citizen and professional, and to earn their trust. If their "customers" trust them, they're more likely to buy from them, paying them with the currency of air-time, column inches, and blog posts. So although PR professionals still have to pay attention to traditional media, they need to recognize it's not the only game in town. Now they also have to play nice with the social media, industry media, and even the general public.

In fact, it's this last group that requires PR professionals to pay attention to what the general public is saying about their clients and employers. That's because with free blogging platforms and cell phones with video and still cameras, every citizen is a journalist. It means that anyone is a publisher, and can report or break news before the mainstream media ever catches hold of a story.

While we were writing this chapter, we heard news that Osama bin Laden was killed. Only we read about it on Twitter, where it had been announced before it ever reached the airwaves. Keith Urbahn, the chief of staff for the former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, tweeted out the news (see Figure 7.3). It was immediately picked up by the people in his Twitter network, who retweeted it to their own Twitter networks. The news reached thousands of people in mere minutes.

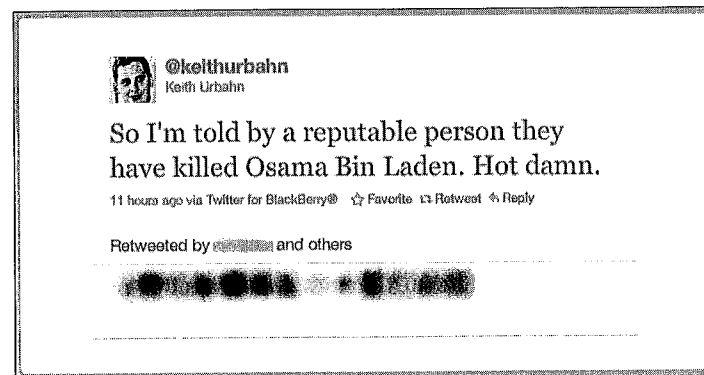


Figure 7.3 It turns out Urbahn's source was a TV news producer, which means Urbahn didn't really break the news, although he scooped traditional media. Almost.

Urbahn's tweet might have been the catalyst that told the country, and even the world, about the dramatic news. But he said in interviews that he did not break it

because he actually heard it from a TV news producer. But someone sure did break it.

Sohaib Athar, a computer programmer in Abbottabad inadvertently live-tweeted the attack on bin Laden's compound as it happened (see Figure 7.4), making him the first person to give any kind of public update about what was happening in the compound. He said it was completely unintentional because he didn't know bin Laden was there.



Figure 7.4 Sohaib Athar's series of tweets unwittingly reported the bin Laden mission as it happened. "Something nasty" indeed.

The point of this story is to demonstrate the idea that it's not always the mainstream media that makes or breaks the news. In some cases, it's not even the citizen journalists and news bloggers who do it. Occasionally, it's someone who gets a little tidbit of news from a friend and passes it on or happens to be in his apartment when a helicopter convoy attacks a nearby fortified mansion.

This means public relations professionals can't ignore social media. They can't limit their focus to the mainstream media or even the new media bloggers and video bloggers. It means they need to consider everyone as a possible news maker and monitor social media as a whole to see who is talking about their clients and employers. Finally, they need to reach out to the professionals, the semiprofessionals, and the accidental amateurs equally

Journalists Are Using Social Media, Too

But social media isn't just limited to the enthusiastic amateur who is looking to become the next Woodward and Bernstein. Journalists are jumping on the social media bandwagon as well, using Twitter, LinkedIn, and even Facebook both to engage their audiences and to gather information and get story ideas.

According to a Spring 2011 report by Brunswick Research, 90% of journalists they surveyed have been at least influenced by social media, whether by a story that originated on social media or by investigating or even writing a story.² We have both been contacted by journalists to give expert comments about social media through quotes in newspaper articles and appearances on TV news programs.

According to this same report, 43% of journalists around the world said blogs and microblogs (namely Twitter) have become important sources of information, and 32% of them said social networking sites are important. Looking to the future, 72% of business journalists said social media would have a positive impact on the quality of their reporting.

What this means for PR professionals and the PR department is that business journalists are increasingly more open to being contacted via social media, finding their stories on blogs, and using social media to research their stories. PR professionals should be using the corporate blog as their newsroom, posting press releases to the blog, keeping in contact with industry journalists via Twitter and LinkedIn, and even pitching the occasional story idea to journalists they have become friendly with on social media sites.

The PR department should keep regular contact with journalists through as many social media outlets as possible. This means that the IT department shouldn't block access to all the social networks (see Chapter 2 for our thoughts on why IT shouldn't be making any calls about who gets on social media and who doesn't).

Journalists are becoming a lot like your customers, thanks to social media. They no longer want to be yelled at, receiving the same press release that every other schmoo on the media list received. Just like consumers want to be heard by their favorite brands, journalists want to think they're being treated respectfully by their sources.

PR flacks need to stop carpet bombing journalists with generic press releases, hoping one or two of them will stick. Instead, they need to tailor individual emails to journalists, reach out to them via Twitter, or make a phone call, pitching a story and explaining why they think it would be a good fit for that journalist.

Some journalists have become so disgusted with the laziness of PR pros who still insist on using the old-school press release carpet bomb method that some of them have taken to publicly posting a list of the offending flacks, including their emails, so they will be picked up by spammers. In 2007, Chris Anderson, the editor-in-chief

of *Wired* magazine, grew so disgusted by the generic emails he was receiving from PR practitioners, he took a stand. Because none of the practitioners would even do a modicum of research to find out the appropriate magazine staffer to receive the pitch, he compiled a blacklist and published it on his website, causing a huge storm of controversy in the PR industry.

This attitude has carried over, and many journalists have begun creating their own blacklists, lumping in entire agencies and companies who spam journalists. There is even a growing idea that unsolicited press releases may violate the CAN-SPAM Act, which makes it easier to prosecute spammers who send unsolicited, unwanted emails. This means your PR people have to treat journalists like you want your marketing and customer service people to treat your customers.

Social Media Lets PR Skip the Gatekeepers and Editors

One of the things that has surprised us about public relations in the Internet age is that journalism has changed but a lot of PR people still use the same old tactics. This is where social media can be a boon to a company's public relations efforts.

In the "old" days, press releases were faxed to an editor, who looked through the day's releases, assigned a story, and swept the rest into a trash can at the end of the day. Nowadays, releases are emailed to editors, which are either assigned and forwarded to a particular journalist, or they're deleted, and the janitor doesn't even have to bother with them.

The Internet has made most of this unnecessary, yet it's surprising how many PR professionals still use these old methods to reach journalists. For one thing, PR professionals are now expected to call or email and individually pitch a particular journalist. It's easy enough to find out who that is—PR professionals can pick up past copies of the magazine or newspaper, watch the program they're trying to pitch, or just look it up on the website. Every media outlet has a phone number, and most of them have a website. Just some basic research will reveal the journalist they need to contact.

What's more important is that social media lets PR professionals skip the gatekeepers and editors completely. There's no need to send an editor anything. Instead, a PR professional send it directly to the journalist with the customized pitch and create the relationship at that level.

Why more PR pros aren't embracing social media as an effective way to do media relations is beyond us. Social media has made media relations one of the easiest tasks they'll do all day. The use of blogs and Twitter conversations means that PR professionals can more easily converse with journalists and get their story placed.

Quit Waiting for Traditional Media to Catch Up

In Chapter 6, "It's Your House: Social Media Marketing Protects Your Reputation," we talked about how social media has grown to the point where it's sometimes breaking the news before the mainstream media does. The Osama bin Laden story is just the latest example of social media's instantaneous transmission of information. Before that, it was the US Airways flight that landed in the Hudson River in New York in 2009 or the first images to come out of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, after the 2010 earthquake.

Despite the 24/7 fountain of information on cable news, traditional media is often behind the news cycle. TV news, radio news, newspapers, and magazines are not reporting new information as it happens, but rather on their own publishing schedule. The problem is that you're dealing with tradition, publication schedules, and an entire city filled with other people who think their news stories are equally as important. This is where social media can make a huge difference.

Let's say your company wants to announce a new government contract that will lead to a facility expansion and 75 new jobs in the next nine months. You organize a press conference, and the mayor will be there to help announce the new jobs initiative. Rather than waiting for the TV news to carry your news announcement at 5:00 (when everyone is driving home), 6:00 (when everyone is eating dinner), and 11:00 (when people are getting ready for bed), you can use social media to make your own announcement. Rather than waiting for the newspaper to carry your story the next day, you can use a blog to run your own story. And rather than waiting for your industry's trade journals to run your story in a month or two, and only if you buy a half-page ad in their magazine, you can use your Twitter feed and email newsletter to notify your customers about your big news.

This is where social media tools like a blog, video stream, and Twitter are going to make a big difference.

For example, when the mainstream media shows up to the press conference, have an intern with a digital video camera stand with the reporters and record the CEO making the big announcement. Later, interview the CEO and the mayor to get exclusive footage that the news channels didn't get. Upload the videos to the company blog and have a full-length video that visitors can watch, rather than the 10-second clip the news channels showed. (As an added bonus, track the number of people who watched the video and how long they watched it. The news stations can't even do that.)

Publish the press release—complete with statements from the CEO and mayor—the text of the CEO's and mayor's speeches, and a description and timeline of the expansion to the company blog. Next, promote them to the media outlets that could not make it.

Send all of this information to the citizen journalists and industry bloggers who would be interested in this sort of news. You will reach a bigger audience of people who (1) didn't watch the TV news that night, (2) don't read the newspaper, (3) don't live in your local community, and (4) are in your industry, but won't read the story until the next time the trade magazine comes out. By using social media to promote your news, you're not only able to stay ahead of the mainstream media, but you can also avoid their filters and time constraints.

Avoiding the Filter of the Traditional Media

Time and space: It's the biggest problem with mainstream media, but it's the same problem that everyone faces. In a 30-minute news broadcast, at least 8 to 10 of those minutes are commercials. Then you have sports and weather, which are another 6 to 8 minutes. That leaves 12 to 14 minutes to cover all the news for the entire city—fires, murders, accidents, politics, disasters, world politics, and world disasters. Oh, and your story, which has been reduced to a 20-second segment about how your company is going to add 75 new jobs in nine months.

Newspapers are a little more forgiving. They have more space—measured in column inches, or how many inches of text appears in a news article—than TV stations have time. Your news article could be more than 1,000 words, but it could end up getting cut down to 650 words to make room for a new ad from that new car dealership on the west side.

Trade magazines may give you more space, but you're limited to their publication schedule, which can be monthly, bimonthly, or even quarterly. And a few trade journals will press you hard to buy ad space in their journal as a *quid pro quo*. Buy the ad, and they'll run your story. Don't buy it, and they'll drop it in if they have the space.

Never mind that you spent three weeks planning the press conference, coordinating the schedule with the mayor's office, writing the speech, writing the press release, rewriting the speech, and making sure all the media outlets were there. Three weeks of work have been boiled down to 20 seconds, 650 words, and a slightly modified version of your press release (with the mayor's name spelled wrong) sitting next to the half-page ad you bought, thus destroying any credibility the journal article was supposed to bring.

From a public relations point of view, this is one of the most inefficient uses of time: three weeks of work for 20 seconds of coverage. Although the 20 seconds is extremely valuable, it still doesn't give a full picture of what the announcement will mean for your company, what the new jobs will mean for your community, and most important, what it is your company actually does and what it will do as part of the new contract.

This is where social media is going to make a difference. All the information you published to the company blog—press releases, written statements, videos of the press conference, video interviews with the CEO and mayor, a description of the contract, and the timeline for expansion—is far more accessible to more people. People can read it, comment on it, find out more information about your company, and learn where they can apply for jobs. Potential customers will find all this information via search engines, see what a great job your company is doing, and contact your business development people so you can do a great job for their company. And the information is potentially there forever. A television commercial is gone in 30 or 60 seconds.

Even though the mainstream media coverage you got won't tell the whole story, you do need to be grateful for getting it. But also know that many people who saw or read the story are also more likely to visit your website to find out more information. If you give them more information than they expected, it gives them a chance to become more interested in your company and the products you offer. Now public relations has become a marketing channel, and PR pros are doing their part to get customers to learn more about you. All of this PR work will also help gain the attention of some of the influencers in your industry, and that's where your PR efforts are really going to pay off.

The New Media Relations Landscape

Robert Scoble (@Scobleizer) is a superblogger (see Figure 7.5 for a screenshot of his blog). He's considered an influencer in the tech community and has the network to prove it. With more than 178,000 followers on Twitter, he has the potential reach of the total audience of CNBC, which gets about 200,000 viewers per day. Author and social media consultant Chris Brogan (@ChrisBrogan) has nearly 182,000 followers. And Heather Armstrong (@Dooce), who we discussed in Chapter 2, has 1.5 million followers.

These individuals are superbloggers, people who wield a lot of power and influence. Companies fall all over themselves to get their products mentioned on their blogs and on the blogs of anyone who reaches tens of thousands of people a month with their pronouncements. Technology companies and publishers will send products and books to Scoble and Brogan in the hopes of getting a positive review. Consumer companies will send Armstrong products asking her for a brief mention in one of her blog posts. Companies know they can reach a targeted audience of people who are likely to be interested in their news, rather than reaching a general audience, most of whom aren't that interested.

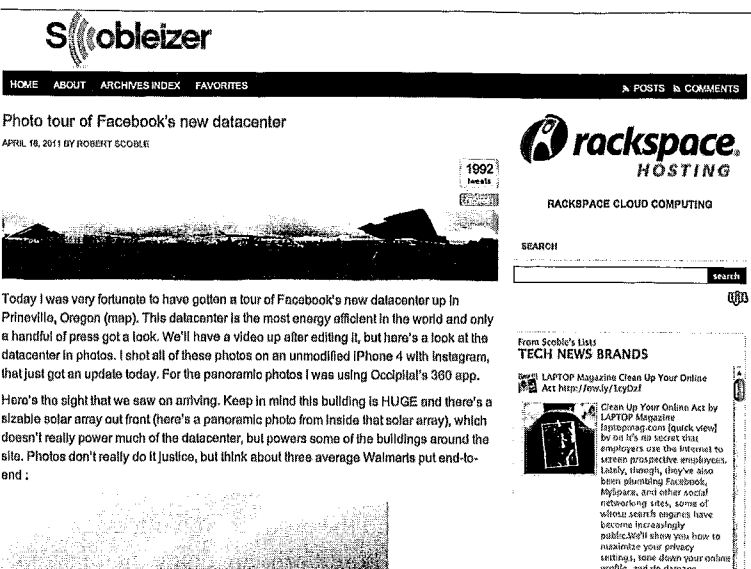


Figure 7.5 Robert Scoble's reach and popularity get him into places most people can't go, like Facebook's data center in Prineville, Oregon. Source: www.scobleizer.com

Of course, you have to have something big and splashy if you want to catch their attention. When we asked Scoble for permission to use his screenshot, this was the automated reply we received. And with his level of reach and influence, he can get away with it.

To PR people, if you want me to cover your product you've got to give me more than one day warning. I do videos and I'm already scheduling out July.

I don't do press-release rewrites like other tech bloggers. It's best to get in touch with me at LEAST A MONTH before you launch (right now my calendar is totally booked until late-June — you can get on that at <http://tungle.me/scobleizer!>). To see a successful pitch, see how Flipboard pitched me (it is my favorite startup of 2010): <http://www.google.com/buzz/scobleizer/EsMhJvooEWv/Its-interesting-because-I-get-dozens-of-pitches> (Flipboard showed me what they were doing THREE MONTHS before they shipped!)

I specifically am looking for world-changing technology and startups, if you have one, please be persistent. I am often out shooting and miss cool stuff once in a while.

A mention from these kinds of superbloggers—and there are hundreds of them, each commanding different niches and industries—can make an entire sales

quarter with a quick video blog or mention. It pays to make this part of your social media PR strategy.

But you'll never reach these people with a canned press release or typical corporate approach. If you think it's hard reaching the daily newspaper in your city, imagine what it's going to be like to reach someone who believes he's an honest-to-God celebrity. It's not enough to just have a compelling story or a really cool idea. You have to show these new media luminaries that you have what it takes to play on their level. Basically, your company has to have a superblogger too—or at least a pretty damn good blogger.

This is where getting your employees involved as bloggers is going to make a difference. Superbloggers love to be in the know; they love to be connected. This is how they've built their reputation and their networks to become these superbloggers: They get all the good stuff first and share it with their networks. The people who read them have come to rely on people like Robert Scoble for the latest news in the technology world, interviews with the thought leaders, and an inside look at what's happening at the companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

There are even superbloggers in your own industry. There is someone who owns your particular industry, in your particular niche, and is widely read by your employees, your competitors, and your customers. If you want to catch his or her attention, you have to be a content-generating machine. You won't get it by just posting your press releases or some legal-approved, marketing jargon-filled sterilized dead fish. You need engaging content that will catch the attention of your superblogger's readers. If your superblogger is going to be the first in your industry, you need to be the second, so your employees, your competitors, and your customers are also reading.

So, you have to think of your company as a publisher and a media outlet, not as a follower and a reader. You're not just putting out press releases that you hope the local or trade media will pick up. Rather, you want to put out stories, videos, and interviews that get your readers excited. And even though this piece of advice is appearing in the public relations chapter of this book, this is not going to be your PR department. It's going to be your internal employees who excel at whatever it is your company does. If you build cars, it's going to be the engineers and designers. If you make baby food, it's going to be the nutritionist. If you run a sports team, it's going to be the players and coaches.

This doesn't mean you or your employees need to stop doing what you're doing and start focusing on blogging. But you need to refresh the company blog at least once a week, whether it's shooting a quick video on a digital video camera, dictating a blog post for the PR or marketing folks to write, or at least outsourcing content to a freelance ghost blogger to make blog-ready.

Talk about the hot-button issues in the industry. Talk about what concerns your customers. Talk about what awesome new projects you're working on (without violating any trade secrets or governmental regulations) or the newest acquisition of the company. Avoid the corporate speak and the legalese (let the lawyers review it, but they shouldn't have a say in the actual writing of the piece). Let a senior executive who is intimately familiar with a particular project do a video interview about what the next three months are going to look like. Have the CEO discuss what the next fiscal year is going to hold for the company. Get the sales team to talk about their time at the latest trade show and who they ran into.

Blogging needs to be a major part of your new media relations, but it can't just be the typical corporate bullshit. Remember, this is the "no bullshit" book, and your approach to blogging and new media has to be no bullshit too.

Crisis Communication Starts Months Before You Have a Crisis

Although we like to joke that crisis communication is just public relations speeded up, it's more than that. Given people's expectations of the quickness of a response during non-crisis times, it's hard to get much faster than that and still be effective.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) mantra to crisis communications is "Be First. Be Right. Be Credible." The best way for you to be credible is by being seen as the authority right now, so people know who to turn to when there really is a crisis. The best way to be first is to start right now. And being right? Just make sure you have the experts in your company talking about their areas so they're the ones the media calls when there's really a crisis, and you can get the right information out immediately.

Crisis communication starts now, while you're still talking about public relations. It means you're laying the groundwork by building relationships with your local and trade media, industry bloggers, and superbloggers. It also means you're building those journalist relationships with your customers who are the ones most likely to alert everyone else to the problems with your company.

In a lot of cases, your fans can leap to your defense and help alleviate the drama of the crisis you're mired in at the moment. If your company is dealing with a serious problem and you've been laying the groundwork for a solid relationship with a lot of your customers, they'll be in the same spaces as your detractors. If someone complains, a lot of times, your customers will respond on your behalf, before you ever even hear about the complaint.

The best way to build this kind of loyalty is to work with your marketing department and determine who your best customers are on social media. Give those

customers additional access and information that your average customers don't get. Include them in announcements before they hit your website, invite them to VIP-only events, give them a sneak peek at a new product rollout or service offering, make them beta testers on your new product, and publicly thank them whenever they sing your praises or recommend you to a friend. By encouraging this loyalty, you'll not only keep them as returning customers (your sales department will thank you for this), but they'll also be on your side when something bad finally does happen.

On a smaller scale, you need to consider who is going to respond to people who are saying something negative or nasty about your company, especially when they're a small fry and won't do much damage. They can't be ignored, but they don't call for a full-scale response either.

Dealing with Detractors

It's the thing a lot of social media naysayers fear most. "What do we do when someone says something negative about us?" It's what keeps most businesspeople off social media in the first place, failing to realize that people are already saying negative stuff about them right now. Believing people aren't talking about you when you're not on social media is like believing people aren't gossiping about you when you're not around.

And if they can get past their initial hesitation, what usually hangs them up is what they should do if it ever happens. Do they put out a press release? Do they delete the comment? Do they send a cease-and-desist letter to the complainer?

(**Note:** Never, ever send a cease-and-desist letter to a complainer. Not only is it going to be met with derision, but you'll immediately blow up the story and become known as the thin-skinned company that couldn't stand one negative complaint from one individual. On the other hand, you'll get more traditional and new media coverage than your PR department could have ever hoped for. It just won't be the kind they wanted.)

Here's the answer: You don't need a policy; you need a commitment: *We will respond to all complaints.* Whether it's a complaint about the product quality (customer service), the pricing (sales or marketing), or a corporate practice (PR), you need to commit to responding to any and all complaints that people have. But it doesn't have to be a full-blown response, complete with strategy meetings and position statements. It just needs to be one response from one person in the company and a promise either to make things right or to investigate and make sure it doesn't happen again.

In July 2010, Jason formulated his Six Steps for Dealing with Detractors. It serves as a step-by-step system for handling disgruntled audience members. The steps are

- Acknowledge their right to complain.
- Apologize for the situation or your mistake, if warranted.
- Assert clarity in your policy or reasons, if warranted.
- Assess what will help them feel better.
- Act accordingly.
- Abdicate if they persist.

By acknowledging their right to complain, even with “I’d be upset if that happened to me,” or “You should be upset about that,” you empower the customer and make him feel as if you’ve elevated his issue to a level of importance and priority. Apologizing for the situation is not an admission of guilt and often makes him feel better. “I’m sorry that happened to you,” is very different than “I’m sorry we messed up.” But be ready to apologize for messing up if you did.

Asserting yourself is tricky, but it has to be done. If a customer is complaining that your store wouldn’t accept a return on an opened package, you have to assert your policy on the matter. You may also want to encourage her to provide feedback to the appropriate channels within your company to change the policy, but diverting the frustrations to a policy statement and not the store manager in question depersonalizes the anger.

Now it’s time to assess what will make the customers feel better. Do they want a refund? Do they just need some acknowledgement of their frustration? They wouldn’t be complaining if they didn’t want some sort of restitution or response. Find out what it is they’re looking for. And, yes, sometimes it *is* as easy as asking. When you know the answer, if it is within reason, do it. If it’s not, then explain why the response isn’t feasible and ask for alternative solutions from the customer.

And if you have done all you can do to accommodate and placate the person in question, but he still insists on being a detractor, then abdicate. The powerful thing about conducting these types of conversations in the social media space is that you aren’t the only people watching the responses. That person’s network and often your network online are watching, too. If you’ve exhausted all reasonable methods of resolution and the person is still being problematic, the audience can see that as well. Apologize that your solutions aren’t satisfying the customer, and state that you’ve offered reasonable approaches to the situation and have exhausted your options. If the customer can find one of your suggestions that satisfies his need for resolution, great. If not, you’ll have to move on.

The truth of the situation online is that sometimes a turd is a turd. There are people who complain just to complain and will never be satisfied. You need to respond to new complaints and address them accordingly, but know that occasional detractors just like being detractors. Walk away as respectfully as you can and leave the offer open for them to accept a resolution you’re comfortable with. Then ignore them unless or until they decide your solutions are acceptable.

What’s magical about doing this is that the audience watching is probably about to jump in and tell the detractor he’s being a jerk, if they haven’t already. They want you to walk away as much as you do. And if the detractor continues his assault, the community will typically come to your defense, making the individual feel less comfortable with venting publicly.

All fires, in the end, sputter out.

Ultimately, having a solid social media PR practice and plan of attack will save you and your company a lot of money, can help increase sales, and can even improve customer service, saving you money there as well. That’s a nice metric to add to the list of what strong social media PR can do for your company.

Putting Metrics Around Public Relations

One difficulty with measuring public relations is that it’s hard to assign a monetary figure to what the media coverage is worth. A common practice is to count the number of column inches in a newspaper or seconds of coverage on a TV station, figure out the equivalent cost of buying an ad for the same size or time, and arrive at the amount. So a story that takes 30 seconds on the evening news would be worth the cost of a TV commercial on that same station. Get it on all four major networks, and you have two minutes worth of “free” advertising.

The problem with this approach is that the measurement does not accurately reflect the value of the media attention you got. For one thing, a short front page story is worth a lot more than a 12-inch story on page D18. For another, the tone and the subject of the story may affect the attention you’re getting. A positive announcement about a new product rollout will trump a management shake-up story in the business section.

Third, and this is the most important, *you don’t know which stories led to the increase in sales*. Although you may get the occasional customer who says she saw your story on TV or in a trade magazine, you’ll have a tough time tracking each and every customer to see if he was influenced by the story.

Still, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.

Social media can also make a big difference in the measurement and effectiveness of your public relations efforts. For example, a story about your new iPad app appears on Robert Scoble's Scobleizer blog and sales for the app increase by 30% for the week afterward. By checking your website's analytics, you can determine that the entire increase came from Scoble's blog post and video interview, as people clicked through the hyperlink to your website in the blog post.

You can also use tools like Radian6, Vocus, and uberVu—tools we mentioned in Chapters 5 and 6—to monitor the sentiment of what people say about your brand. You can see whether people are singing your praises or complaining, and then you can react accordingly. By catching a few complaints early on, you can pinpoint problem areas and fix them before they become a big story.

Boeing had recently just joined social media in June 2010, hoping to learn how to use it properly and interact with customers. The aerospace company got more than it bargained for, learning by having their feet held to the fire.

Harry Winsor, an 8-year-old boy from Boulder, Colorado, loved airplanes. He loved drawing them, talking about them, and reading about them, so he drew a picture about his idea for an airplane that he thought Boeing should create. Boeing responded the same way it responds any time someone sends in a recommendation or idea: They sent a canned letter from the legal department saying the idea had been shredded and no copies had been kept.

Harry's dad, John, just happened to be the owner of an advertising agency and an avid blogger and Twitter user (he's @jtwinsor). He blogged about Boeing's cold response, asking "*Do I show the letter to Harry and kill his dream of being an airplane designer or throw it away and tell him I didn't receive anything so he keeps his artistic passion alive?*"³ Winsor said that as a business owner, he understood the need for companies like Boeing to protect itself from intellectual property threats. But he thought the company representatives should have been a little more personal and caring because they were basically crushing the dreams of an 8-year-old boy.

What was surprising about this is that, despite only having been on social media for a couple of weeks, Boeing actually responded. Todd Blecher, one of Boeing's communications directors, sent out a tweet: "The letter Mr. Winsor posted is, as he said, a required response. For kids, we can do better. We'll work on it." Blecher also posted a comment on Winsor's blog addressing him directly.

I'm a Boeing communications director. I think I can address your comments. As you state, we have to respond to the thousands of unsolicited ideas we receive in a way that protects us against possible infringement claims. Having said that, we can do better when the idea clearly comes from a child as enthusiastic as your son. We will work on this. I hope Harry remains fascinated by airplanes and grows up to be an airplane designer. To help him and others like him we maintain the following

website: <http://www.boeing.com/companyoffices/aboutus/wond...> I hope he enjoys it.

Afterward, Boeing flew Harry, his brother Charlie, and his parents out to the company's Washington facility and showed them around. The story was so intriguing to a lot of people that Boeing's previous slipup turned into a feel-good story, and it showed that the aerospace giant actually does care about people's feelings toward the company. Rather than hide behind the legal department, the communications director made sure that his side of the story was told and that his company wasn't completely presented as heartless automatons.

In this case, social media monitoring and a human PR response helped Boeing avoid a lot of negative feelings directed their way. Although it might not have affected their bottom line, it would not have helped their reputation in a time when large corporations are often viewed with some suspicion and distrust by the general public.

Public relations professionals have to deal with this kind of attitude toward their employers on a regular basis. But social media makes it much easier for them to respond and show the human side of their company, as well as help show the media and general public the cool stuff they're doing as well.

Endnotes

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The Kumbaya Effect: Social Media Marketing Builds Community

So, you've heard that social media marketing can be used to build a community of rabid fans ready to run out and market your product for you, completely free of charge, right? If that scenario is possible at all, it is limited to the handful of products and brands that probably already have it anyway. Apple doesn't need social media. If it added elements of social media marketing, it would be an instant case study, but not because of social media marketing. It would be because Apple makes great products and has rabid fans already.

But participating in social media marketing can help your business cultivate a community of people who like you and are willing to tell others about you. The scale of success might be different than the promised, unreasonable expectation, but it is possible. And it's not a concept that is beyond your grasp.

Think back to the communications and information hubs of the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries, particularly in rural areas. Where did people come together as a community for information other than religion? The general store.

These former icons of small-town life often served up everything from hardware to fresh pie and served as a small community's newspaper, post office, and even bank all in one location. Was there community around those businesses? You bet there was.

You might think that the general store concept would never work in today's world of big-box retailers and chain grocery stores. Add a little flavor and some community building through social media marketing, however, and you'd be wrong. Any business can cultivate and build community around its brand using social media marketing, and community building can be done in a number of ways. The process of building community is also not nearly as rigid and formal as you might think.

One example of a small business that quickly built community around its new, and all but unknown, brand is FAIT ICI. This local-focused, urban general store sits nestled in the not-so-small hamlet of Montreal, Quebec. It opened its doors in the summer of 2010 under the notion that products made in Quebec (the store's name is French for "made here") that promote an environmentally friendly and healthy food lifestyle would excite the local foodie set and beyond. But, like many small businesses, FAIT ICI didn't start with investors, a financial backer, or even a marketing budget.

"We didn't have a budget for paid media," admitted Jackson Wightman, who we interviewed in March 2011. "So given some of the factors we were facing—being new, not having a perfect retail location, etc.—we needed to use some of the digital tools out there to get people to know about us and use our business."

Wightman, who opened the store with his wife Lindsay Davis, used his experiences in marketing and public relations (his day job) to lay out a digital marketing strategy to launch FAIT ICI, well before the doors ever opened.

"I'd say 3 to 4 months out, we started actively listening on Twitter, looking at blogs in our space...ones that were talking about food, the environment, organic products...we were listening to people in those spaces well before our opening. We figured out who those people are. We tried to engage them by commenting on their blogs, retweeting their content, conversing with them on Twitter, giving them Follow Friday shout-outs, and so on. And we did that well in advance of the opening," explained Wightman.

"When we finally did open and do our media event, a lot of these people covered us. And some people thought, 'How is this little, new business getting this coverage from traditional media and bloggers?' Our engagement with them helped us get attention and coverage when it came time to ask for those favors."

Wightman's insight into social media marketing falls squarely in line with the No Bullshit line of thinking. He recognized that one major hang-up small businesses have with digital tools is they mistakenly think they'll pay dividends quickly. By focusing on relationship building and thinking long term, Wightman sidestepped a typical small business bump in the road.

He also approached social media tools realistically and strategically.

"All of our digital activity was a strategy...Absolutely," he said. "We decided before opening the store to ask, 'What are the spaces and tools we would want to be in? Are we going to have a Facebook page, and if we are, then why? What would we use a Twitter account for? What would we use a company blog for?'"

"But we asked how they would fit into an overall digital strategy that would add value to people's lives and build a community that would add value to our bottom line," said Wightman.

So after nurturing relationships to help announce the launch of the business, Wightman used the FAIT ICI blog to enrich and expand the relationships, thus the community. He reached out to five Montreal area bloggers, inviting them to participate in a mini series of posts about food and the foodie culture in Montreal. The bloggers were so delighted to be asked that the sense of community began to evolve, even among a relatively small group of people.

"Then we took that idea a bit farther and thought, 'Instead of doing guest posts two to three times per year, why don't we create a group blog with a fixed life span and an explicit topic...52 posts by 52 people over 52 weeks?' We approached more people—bloggers, journalists, chefs, big dogs in the community, friends, my mother and father—and said, 'Look, write anything you want as long as it has a food and a Montreal angle,'" he said.

The resulting group blog, "ici et here," which mixes the languages to say "here and here" has become a conversation point for the foodie and healthy lifestyle subculture in Montreal and Quebec. The effort is a separate and standalone website from FAIT ICI, but "brought to you by" the general store, which has created such a positive online home for the offline community to gather.

"We love Montreal and it's a great food city," Wightman explained with a passion typically offered by 12-year-olds talking about sports heroes. "We were providing a platform that not only engages influential people in our community, but one that tells the culinary story of our city in 52 weeks. It's a cool thing. We're the curators of the content, but that has generated a lot of earned media and a way to curry favor

with industry and local influencers. But at the end of the day, it has brought us a lot of intrinsic benefit because we're foodies who love Montreal."

But here's where Wightman differs from many hip and trendy digital marketers. Intrinsic benefit isn't enough. This is where he becomes a true, No Bullshit kinda guy.

"PR folks often separate new and old media," Wightman said. "But that belies the power of platforms like Twitter, which is one of the best platforms you can use to get traditional press coverage. It's an unobtrusive way to communicate with many of the reporters who are covering your area or industry. We've had in the neighborhood of 30–40 articles and a couple of pieces of TV on us in the space of 8 months. An inordinate amount of that traditional coverage has come via a relationship we initially built and nurtured on Twitter."

Notice the simplicity of how FAIT ICI launched? You, too, could identify influencers within your industry and reach out. You, too, could leverage a blog in creative ways to drive interest and engagement around your brand, which—at a minimum—produces a community of readers. In your case, it could potentially also bring an inordinate amount of traditional media coverage and foot traffic to your store.

Like Wightman, you can build community around your company with little more investment than your time. There was no complex social networking platform purchased and implemented here. FAIT ICI had no marketing budget. What Wightman and Davis had was an understanding that by being social as a business—by talking to like-minded people, media members, bloggers, and more—in interesting and relevant ways, they were building community around their new company.

One of our favorite bloggers on community, Richard Millington, captured the essence of why a company would want to put time and energy into building community in a blog post in December of 2009.¹ In it, he wrote:

Imagine you own a high-end bicycle. The brand invites you to join a community of people who buy their bicycles. Through that community you make friends, share advice/tips for getting the most from the bike, and meet up several times a year.

Two things have happened. First, you're locked into that brand. To leave the brand would be to leave the group. We don't like leaving our friends behind. Second, your interest in the brand has been intensified. Your interest in a bike has become a passion for cycling.

Building community allows you ... yes, even the boring mortgage broker ... to create something that draws in people and makes them invested so much they can't leave you. It won't be about mortgages, but it might be about your expertise in real estate,

home improvement, financial planning, or tangential topics that a reasonable person might trust a mortgage broker for an opinion about.

For FAIT ICI, it was a genuine interest in connecting with locals interested in locally grown and produced goods. For others, it can be more complex, both from the purpose and construct of the offline community and the technology driving their connecting point online.

Understanding Different Types of Communities

In Chapter 1, "Ignore the Hype. Believe the Facts," we talked about the social media purists—the hippies and tree huggers—and how they do a great job of preaching community. The Kumbaya Factor was probably the only thing you heard coming from social media evangelists spouting from the first inklings of advocacy through most of 2010.

But 10 years after *The Cluetrain Manifesto* and 4 to 5 years into the social media marketing world's life span, business owners started calling B.S. They wanted to see something for their efforts, but the community-for-community's sake approach of early evangelists left that to be desired. But the purists were only half wrong, remember. The "conversation," "engagement," and "community" things were working. They just hadn't yet added a focus on measuring and proving the value of each.

Several companies experienced large market share growth and even resurgence as pop-culture trends, thanks to efforts around building community. In his 2005 book *Brand Hijack*, Alex Wipperfurth chronicled the rise of Red Bull, the reemergence of Pabst Blue Ribbon as an underground cultural phenomenon, and the seemingly inexplicable evolution of Saturn vehicles, among other case studies. He explained how each of these brands earned market share and icon status by having their customers—their communities—hijack the brand.² Also, Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* explained the "epidemic" nature of Hush Puppies' return to chic status in the mid-1990s.³ Whether manufactured or, in Gladwell's terms, "tipped," by a seemingly insignificant event or person, none of these hijacks or epidemics happened without the presence of a community around the brands.

Granted, there are varying degrees of community. Some are formal online community platforms with registrations, logins, and passwords, like Verizon's Thinkfinity, an educational content resource for teachers. Others are just an informal network of people, like Pabst Blue Ribbon fans who dug the PBR. But the brand caught on, and now a fairly active forum community exists at www.pabst.com that features discussions on beer, supporting firefighters, and art.

The formal and informal examples of community building only scratch the surface of the possibilities, however. Maker's Mark Bourbon, a former client of Jason's, has a vibrant online and offline community called the Maker's Mark Ambassadors. Each ambassador is officially registered with the brand as a member of the loyalty club, gets his name on a barrel of bourbon, and receives official, insider brand communiqués. Each spring, the members are invited to a special Ambassador's weekend in Kentucky to visit the distillery, buy special bottles from their barrel's batch when it matures, and mix and mingle with other Ambassadors, distillery staff, and more. And the Ambassadors are such raving fans of Maker's Mark that they serve as brand evangelists for the product, even going so far as to buy drinks for complete strangers who might have considered buying a different drink.

Sea World San Antonio has a very different type of community. It mostly revolves around a 20,000-plus member Facebook Fan page. When fringe animal rights zealots stop by to post complaining messages on the company's wall, its fans spring into action, inviting the person to go play on someone else's Facebook page (see Figure 8.1). There's no login and password or official company connection. These are just people who hit the "Like" button on the Sea World San Antonio Facebook page. (Compare this with what happens on Nestlé's fan page, as we discussed in Chapter 5, "Make Some Noise: Social Media Marketing Aids in Branding and Awareness.")

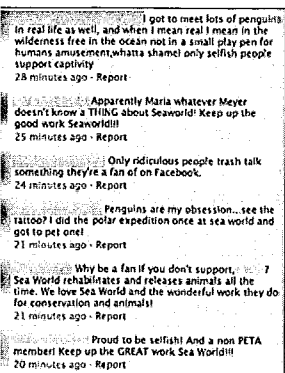


Figure 8.1 Sea World San Antonio's fans leap to the defense of Sea World whenever animal rights activists complain on the park's Facebook page.

The point is that the definition of *community* is fluid. Don't think building community around your brand or company is about signing up for a community network-building platform, like Ning, and having a formalized, online community. In fact, your company already has a community. You just don't know it.

To prove it, answer these questions:

- Do you have employees?
- Do you have current customers?
- Do you have vendors or other businesses you work with?
- Do the people involved in the three preceding items have spouses, children, or friends?

There's your community. All you have to do is give them a reason, and perhaps the tools, to tell other people how cool you are.

There's More to Building Community Than Just Making Friends

Don't worry! We're not lapsing into a raging fit of hugging trees here. It's not enough to just find people who like you and make them tell their friends. Remember: If you add the word *marketing* to the term *social media* it's about business.

To tap into the business side of communities, you need to approach community building strategically. You need to set goals, objectives, and measures for success. This enables you to put metrics around community building that make sense for your business.

The reason you might want to build community around your brand or organization is pretty self-explanatory: The more people you have who like you, the more people you have to (a) talk to and (b) ask to talk to others for you. Building community is basically a social media purist's way of saying "building customers" to distract you from the sales part of the equation.

But in building this community of customers, you have to listen to that first half of the social media equation where the hippies were right. You have to be human. You have to engage in conversations. You have to be customer-centric, not brand-centric.

The fundamental key to being a successful community builder in the social media space is to change your marketing focus, ever so slightly, from focusing on sales to focusing on customers. Think about that for a second. It's not about sales; it's about customers. And no, they're not the same thing.

To focus on the sale is to have all eyes on the dollar. You're worried about the short-term transaction, making budget, hitting your numbers, driving the bottom line, one sale at a time. But to focus on the customer is to step across the line from transactional marketing to relationship marketing. You're not worried about the sale that day, but rather on the lifetime value of that customer to your company. It's okay if

she walks out the door because you're focused on the relationship ... the customer. She'll sense that and come back.

If you're focused on the transaction alone, she won't.

This is the approach that separates Joe, the guy Jason buys his cars from, from other car salesmen.

Measuring Community

Salesmen like Joe can track their relationship marketing success versus their transactional marketing success. Good salesmen can say, "That's Jason. He's bought four cars from me over the course of the last 15 years. With his payments, service visits, and repair work over the years, he's probably meant about \$95,000 to us."

The transactional guy says, "Just made an \$18,000 sale!"

Although we wish it were that simple in the social media space, it's not impossible to measure community building and even to tie some (but not all) of that activity to your bottom line. Looking at our potential strategic goals for community building in Chapter 1, we listed the following:

- Increase your number of fans, followers, friends, or readers.
- Grow your opt-in email marketing list.
- Increase the number of your affinity or loyalty club members.
- Increase fan-generated advocacy and promotion of your brand initiatives.
- Increase fan-generated defense of your brand in negative conversations.

None of these goals points directly to a financial outcome because the purpose is to build community. But you can focus on community building and weave in financial measures that support the justification for your efforts.

CareOne Financial Solutions, a debt consolidation and counseling service, did just that. The social media team there, led by Nichole Kelly, decided to compare its prospective customers who came to its online community from traditional methods (such as a television ad, direct mail piece, and so on) with those their social media marketing team contacted and cultivated as prospects. The team found prospects on the social media side of the aisle had a 179% better chance of signing up for a debt-relief plan than regular customers. They also found the social media prospects made their first payment at a 217% higher average than the traditional customer counterparts.⁴

Taking that analysis a step further, CareOne determined that when the social media team saw customers who had abandoned the sign-up process, then interacted with

the social media team, the customers returned and completed the sign-up process at a conversion rate some 680% higher than those the social media team did not follow up with. Those customers also paid their first payment at a 732% improvement.

So the community here was measured in the value of the customer contact, not the amount of money the customer paid. Customers who were engaged by the brand were simply more valuable customers than the ones the company was typically focused on.

The more informal the community, the further from revenue measuring you'll get. But website analytics packages can even delineate where traffic comes from and whether those specific users buy or convert on your site. Even though you might think it's tough to measure the value of your Facebook page or Twitter following, you can use analytics software to measure how many people came, clicked, and bought from purchase point links you post to Facebook.com, Twitter.com, and other domains. This delivers you a value from your activity there.

You can even go ninja and use social share tracking solutions like Argyle Social (see Figure 8.2). By sharing links on your social networks using Argyle Social (or similar software), you can track clicks and traffic divided by site or source as well as assign dollar values to conversion points to prove a social revenue metric.

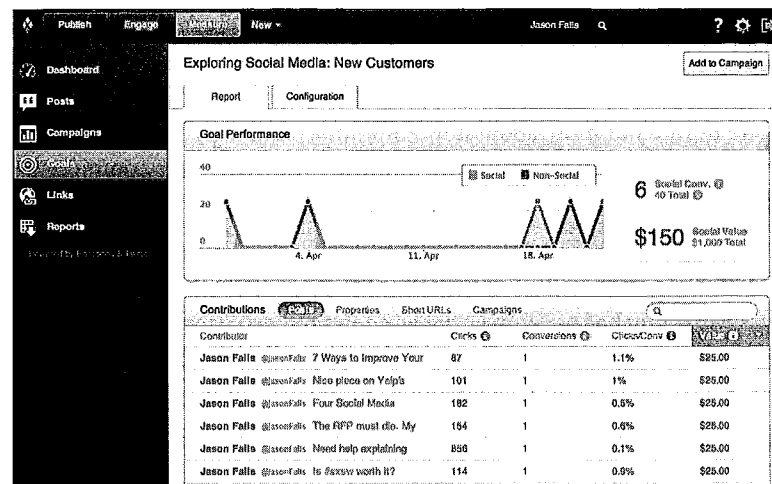


Figure 8.2 Argyle Social tracks the clicks on content you share via social networks and blogs using unique shortened URLs and then measures the number of people converting after clicking through to your website.

If you sell items on your site, place Argyle's embed code on the "thank you" page after purchase, then tell the software how much the customer would spend to get to that purchase point. Then, in your reporting, you can see you made \$10,000, but

\$6,000 came from typical sales, \$2,500 came from sales generated by Facebook.com visitors, and the rest from Twitter.com visitors.

Of course, you have to present your Twitter or Facebook communities with clear calls to action and links to these purchase points for it to work, but as you can see, measuring community can be more than just how many followers you have. You can compare the value of your community members with noncommunity customers, measure purchase behaviors, and even purchase recommendations and referrals. As you will see in the chapters that follow, you can combine two or more of the main areas where social media benefits your brand and measure the cost savings or resulting profits from utilizing your community for research and development.

The key to placing value on what your company gets out of building community is in the planning: Set goals for the community you build and develop activities that persuade the community to deliver on those goals.

You Can Even Build Community Around Scissors!

No brand on the planet has changed more, or perhaps benefited more, thanks to its embracing of community, than Fiskars. The orange-handled scissors are just that: orange-handled scissors. Even Fiskars's own brand managers didn't see much sexiness in scissors in 2005 when the company started working with word-of-mouth marketing agency Brains on Fire.

We talked to Geno Church, who holds the title of word of mouth inspiration officer at Brains on Fire to find out more about how community can happen around scissors. What we discovered was that the scissor company was simply the common thread that tied a certain group of people together.

"They didn't see that what they were doing meant that much to customers," explained Church. "When we first got to their facility where the scissors were developed, there was white butcher paper over the windows to keep people from seeing the company secrets. Now, they give prototypes to members of their online community to use, break, critique, and offer suggestions around. It's pretty amazing."

How did Fiskars make such a stark evolution? Strategically, that's how.

First, Fiskars's marketing team did online market research to find out who, if anyone, was talking about scissors. They didn't find a whole lot of scissor chatter, but they did discover pockets of communities around scrapbooking—people who use scissors. But when the team looked a bit closer, they realized the scrapbooking forums and message boards that existed in the mid-2000s were full of snark and venom.

The insight Brains on Fire turned over to Fiskars was that scrapbookers didn't have a safe haven to create and communicate in a positive environment. There were

already communities around scrapbooking that could prove valuable to a scissor company, somehow. But the social insight into the communities showed Fiskars they needed to actually create a new community with different rules. (See the Fiskars community in Figure 8.3, which shows a user's dashboard view and his connections to other scrapbookers.)

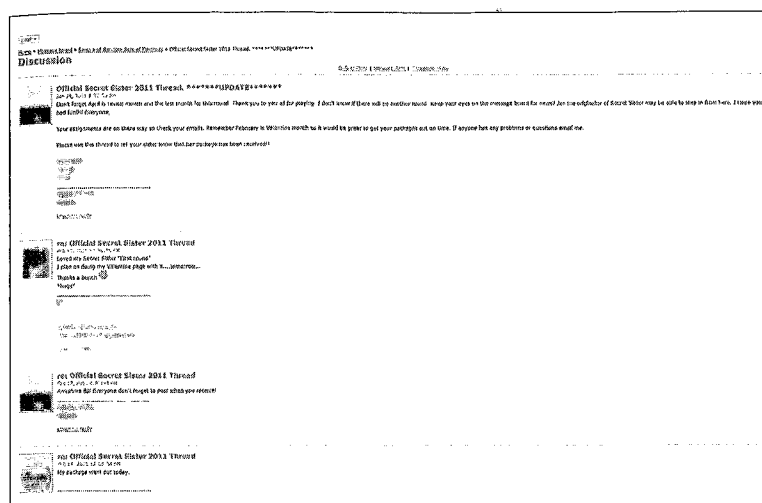


Figure 8.3 Fiskars sponsors a community for scrapbookers to talk about scrapbooking, instead of scissors, and has amassed more than 8,000 community members who connect, engage, and collaborate with one another.

The Fiskateers website launched in 2006 with four scrapbook leaders and brand ambassadors chosen by the company, which had identified influential scrapbookers online and approached them with the idea of helping build a positive collaboration environment. The goal was to drive scrapbookers to the site to enjoy the arts-and-crafts hobby in a friendly environment, establish a relationship with these members as a brand to harvest feedback, help test and launch new products, and build a sense of passion around the brand.

The goal was to attract 200 people in 6 months.

"We met our goal in 24 hours," Church laughed. By the 6-month mark, there were 1,800 members. As of early 2011, the community is 8,000-plus strong.

"We have a 500% value in return on community," Church said. "We have incredibly loyal, passionate Fiskars customers who are not just fans of the brand, but invested in the brand."

(We'll dive a bit deeper in the value of the Fiskars community in Chapter 10, "Get Smarter: Social Media Marketing Drives Research and Development," and illustrate how one strategy can accomplish multiple goals for your business.)

Think about how you can engage your customers and build community. If a scissor company can discover that its customers have a need to be filled in their online experience (a safe haven to discuss scrapbooking), perhaps you can discover a similar need for your audience.

This need is something we refer to as a social insight. Whereas advertising, marketing, and branding agencies conduct market research and surveys hoping to find a consumer insight that informs a marketing effort, social media marketers look through online information hoping to find this social insight: What can we provide our customers online that will make their digital experience better?

If your customers tell you they need a place to gather, whether for safety from negativity, access to information, or just a place to connect with other customers or fans, you have the insight you need to walk down the path of building community.

What If Our Competition Shows Up in Our Community?

When building a community for the first time, it's natural to wonder what could happen if your competition joins in. Honestly? Nothing. If they're spending all their time in your community, they're probably far behind the curve and wouldn't be able to catch up for some time.

But beyond the reality of the scenario, let's back up and remember the ethos of what we're doing in social media. We're trying to be honest, transparent, and customer-centric. What better way to accomplish all three but to openly engage with your competition along with everyone else?

We're not advocating uncivil behavior. Not at all. But if your competition shows up, welcome them, encourage their (civil) discourse in the community, and embrace their input. Customers will translate that behavior into confirmation that you are the market leader and the more trustworthy of the lot.

Don't see it? Meet Rand Fishkin. He was running what he called, "a half-assed web design, development, and user-experience" shop in 2002 when he started learning about search engine optimization, or SEO. He started a blog to share what he was learning about the art and craft of winning search rankings.

The blog was called SEOMoz (see Figure 8.4).

We interviewed Fishkin, who told us the main reason SEOMoz took off was the lack of blogs focused on SEO at the time. In his SEOMoz posts, he would mention new blogs coming on to the scene and comment on the topics the few others were writing about in his SEOMoz posts.

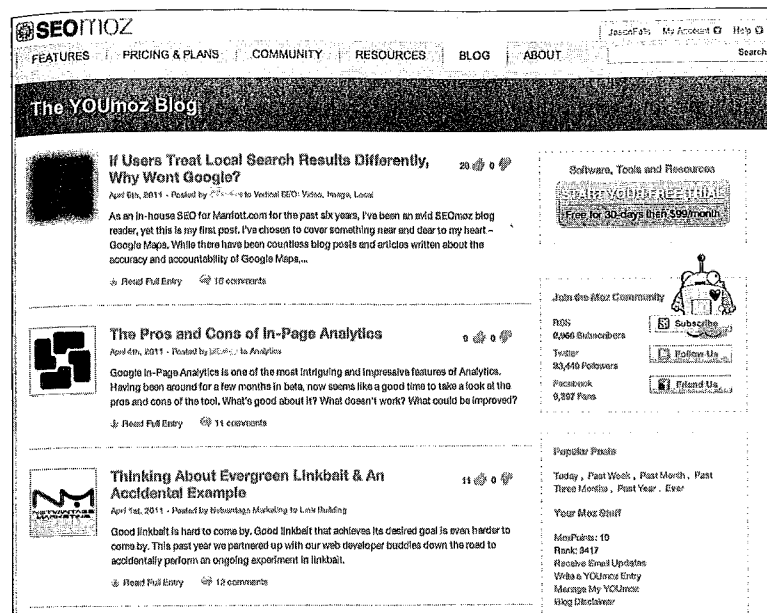


Figure 8.4 SEOMoz started out as an industry blog for search engine optimization specialists. It's now recognized as the leading community of practitioners in the SEO industry. Source: www.seomoz.org.

"I would show off the work of others," Fishkin told us. "Eventually, SEOMoz became a place where people went to see what everyone in the industry was doing or talking about."

That community of blog commenters was a gold mine for Fishkin. In 2006, he wanted to diversify the opinions on his blog and began inviting commenters to guest post. He even intentionally invited the site's biggest critics to show that the blog really was about offering a platform for opinions and insights, not just promoting Fishkin's company, which by that time had evolved into an SEO consulting firm.

Fishkin added thumbs-up and thumbs-down buttons to the site so users could rate and potentially elevate the best content to be more prominently displayed and get more traffic. But Fishkin insisted users behave.

"When they would thumbs down something or leave a negative comment, I would jump in and suggest they reword it or be more positive and empathetic," he said. "Our mantra is to be transparent, authentic, generous, fun, empathetic, and exceptional. If we can't be those things, we're not being the best we can be. We insisted that the community hold itself to a high standard and over time we weeded the less-attractive elements out of SEOMoz." What's really amazing about the evolution of SEOMoz as a community and as a business is twofold. First, the audience Fishkin was first speaking to in 2004 and 2005 was his competition. The only people who

want to talk about SEO all the time are other search engine nerds. True to his nature, Fishkin didn't mind.

"Because of who I am and what I like to do...being transparent and sharing the resources I've learned from...I never hesitated to talk to the competition," he explained. "I've never felt like SEO was a zero-sum game. Building up the SEO industry is going to have positive effects on everyone who plays in that marketplace."

As a result of the Fishkin ethos, SEOMoz gradually emerged as one of, if not *the* leading authority on search engine optimization in the United States. Its site boasts it's the "world's largest SEO community," and seldom does news break in the SEO world that Fishkin isn't either in the middle of it, or at least quoted.

But even more compelling is that the evolution of SEOMoz as a community also drove the evolution of SEOMoz as a company. Beginning in 2007, Fishkin's troops began offering SEO products (tools and resources, plus premium content) to their growing community. By 2009, the company actually ceased direct client consulting.

And to think, it all started out with Fishkin writing a blog that was essentially read by his competition. Think about your industry. Is there a dearth of online content available for people wanting to get smart about it? Is anyone watching the industry as a thought leader, highlighting other people's work, evangelizing best practices, or commenting on the topics of the day you face? Perhaps you can.

Yes, your competition will notice, and yes, they may even join in the discussion. But in most industries and markets, there is not a zero-sum game. Elevating the industry can make you and your business stronger, make you more widely known and respected, and even give you a leg up on the competition. You can, after all, show they come to your site for learning and conversation.

Okay, So How Do You Do This and How Much Will It Cost?

Yes, it would be easy for us to say, "Okay! Go build a community now!" But it's never that simple. You probably won't start a blog that really serves your competition. You might not need to build an actual online community platform like Fiskars did because your customers might not need one. And CareOne turned on the lights and said, "Who needs some help with debt?"—which is like shooting fish in a barrel.

Building a community starts with relationships. Assuming you didn't marry your spouse 6 minutes after meeting him or her, you should understand these things take time.

Because your community is made up of human beings—the most emotionally inconsistent of all mammals—you're going to have to read and react a lot. Humans aren't predictable. What works today will get a resounding "That's it?" next month

And yes, you're going to have to engage in conversations with them. Community is built on the backs of human beings but with the wires of communications. Those wires are now two-way streets. If you're not willing to listen and respond, you'll never get community out of the transaction.

Still, you have to build communities with business in mind. If you don't, you're just playing in the sandbox. So you set goals for your communities:

- Increase online recommendations and referrals for your company.
- Drive higher frequency of purchase from your existing customers.
- Increase the lifetime value of your customer base.
- Drive X amount in revenue from your community membership fees and purchases.
- Reduce product launch costs by growing a community of first-in-line buyers to serve directly.

And then you build strategies and creative concepts to deliver on those goals.

Entrepreneur and author Guy Kawasaki offered up some savory tips on building communities in a February 2006 blog post⁵ in which he listed the following (among others) as "how-to" steps:

- Create something worth building a community around. Sure, it could be your product or service, but don't forget that it could be an activity, a need, or an idea.
- Identify and recruit advocates immediately. They'll stand out when you nail down the focus of your community. In fact, they'll likely be some of the very customers you talked to in order to determine what that community focus is.
- Give people something concrete to chew on. For Fiskars, it was activities around scrapbooking. For your company, it might be tying in a new product, using it in creative ways, or even sharing experiences around the company.
- Welcome criticism. This is where you get valuable feedback from your customers. What they find wrong—or perhaps not so right—about you is helpful information, not complaining.

One of the last things Kawasaki adds is as important as all the rest, though. You have to publicize the existence of your community. Often, companies treat social media and web-based efforts as if they're a virtual *Field of Dreams*. If you build it, they will come, right? Not necessarily, and often, not at all.

Sea World San Antonio told everyone they could to like them on Facebook. CareOne advertises their support community through multiple mediums, including television. Every community takes a bit of critical mass to take on a life of its own. And if you're not telling people it's there, that critical mass is almost impossible to achieve.

Kawasaki's advice is sound. Unfortunately, the classically trained marketers and traditional business folks typically do some disappointing things with those instructions. The typical flaws we see in client approaches to these recommendations include companies that build their focal point around the product or service. They will plant paid employees or advocates and try to hide the fact they've rigged the system. When the community members discover the frauds, and they inevitably will, the company will suffer from mistrust and even an exodus away from the community.

Traditional business owners and marketers typically insist on delivering a steady diet of coupons and product pitches to their community, which most of them won't chew on but choke on. They'll respond to criticism by censoring it, fearful it will breed more criticism rather than responding with empathy, which typically builds a higher degree of trust from the audience.

And, finally, they typically announce the community by purchasing advertising online that few people see, fewer people actually click on, and, if they're lucky, a handful will convert and become members.

The misguided actions of the traditional marketer and business owner quickly remind us to remember the purist point of view in the social media marketing world: Make it about the consumer, not about you.

So, you can start to see the cost: time. If your research and understanding of your customers proves you might need to build a place where the community connects—like Fiskars did with the Fiskateers—there will be more financial commitment. If you feel the need to hire a social media marketing consultant or even an agency to help you develop a website, strategy, or community building campaign, that activity isn't free.

But you can, like Sea World San Antonio, just invest the time to build a Facebook presence, encourage fans to engage with you there, and not invest a lot up front to build something. You can just write really compelling blog posts or even record a weekly 2-minute video with your CEO that is interesting, revealing, or even silly and put it on YouTube and invite your customers and employees to share it with their networks.

Community will be different for different companies, so there's no turnkey answer to how you do this and how much it will cost. But there are some constants you'll need to keep in mind:

- You already have community. You just have to give them a reason to talk about you and invite others into the community.
- What you give them has to be really compelling ... share worthy.
- You'll build that community a lot faster if you and your employees are engaged with it and as part of that community, too.
- Your community will never be worth anything to you if you don't start out by establishing clear goals for building it.

Revisiting a prevailing idea in this book: If you're not doing it for a business reason and not measuring your success, it's just a hobby. Don't "play" with community building. Take the No Bullshit approach: Define goals. Establish measurable objectives. Enact strategies and tactics to accomplish them. Then measure what you've done to show what you've gotten out of it.

Endnotes

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