



The Social Standards

As a child I was a geek who desperately wanted to be popular. In my quest to be cool, I wanted to copy the popular kids' rebellious behaviors like dying my hair and going coatless in the dead of winter. When I expressed these aspirations to my mother, she admonished me by saying, "Just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean you should, too."

As I survey the marketing landscape today, I'm reminded of my mother's caution. I know business leaders who want to get into social media because they see so many other companies doing it and they don't want to be left behind. But just because other quick serves are jumping on the social media bandwagon doesn't mean it's a good idea for everyone. In fact, there are several instances when you shouldn't engage in social media.

1. When you only want to promote your company.

Social media is a highly effective promotional tool—but it can't be all about you. You're more likely to get people's attention and build a loyal following on social media if you're also using it to talk about your customers and the things they care about—their communities, friends, causes, or hot topics.

Plus, by using social media only to post outbound promotional communication, you miss one of the biggest benefits of these new tools: insight. Thanks to the two-way nature of social media, you can glean insights about your customers, your competitors, and the broader cultural trends that impact your business by using it.

2. When you don't have a system for following up to complaints and requests in real time.

Using social media isn't simply a matter of setting up a Facebook page and starting a Twitter account. You need to be prepared to use social media for two-way dialogues with customers in real time.

Providing immediate answers to questions and requests helps boost your brand image; it's a form of customer service. These days, customers use social media to determine whether or not you really care about them, and then they spread the word. Complaints posted on Twitter can spread like wildfire if they're not addressed quickly. But a timely, well-placed response to a bad review on Yelp can make a world of difference.

Consumers' expectations and usage of these tools have grown so high that you could be setting yourself up for failure if you don't develop a complete social media communications system and use it consistently.

3. When you expect a clear financial ROI.

You're right to expect a return on investment on social media. Even though the hard costs may be lower than traditional media, social net-

working requires investments of human and systems resources and may involve changes in company operations and culture. In this economic climate, you can't afford to undertake such efforts without a clear understanding of the expected ROI.

But financial ROI of social media efforts remains difficult to measure. Sales during specific time periods or offer redemptions can provide a view of revenue impact sometimes. And some organizations have developed quite sophisticated systems for linking social media participation to sales. But it's likely the clearest ROI figures are not financial. Instead, the effectiveness of social media is best calculated by measures of traffic, page views, or the size and quality of social communities.

4. When you use it as your only marketing effort.

Social media isn't a silver bullet. It's just like all other marketing tactics—it works best when it's used and integrated with other efforts.

For most companies, the portion of customers who actively use social media to learn about and engage with the brand is quite small. Although these people are an influential and growing group, you'd miss the vast majority of your customers if you relied on social media as your sole marketing vehicle.

Advertising, point-of-purchase materials, direct mail, e-mail, local marketing, and community relations are still important tools. A mix of these efforts and social media optimizes marketing reach, frequency, and engagement. And the best programs integrate various tools in your marketing toolbox; for example, use an e-mail campaign to increase your Facebook "likes" or tweet about an event you sponsor.

If none of these scenarios apply to your brand, then the exciting world of social media awaits. As you take the plunge, I'm reminded of another one of my mother's sayings: "Prepare to succeed, and you will."

I do, however, have some recommendations that can help prepare your brand for the social media plunge. First off, be sure to designate someone in your organization for whom social media is his priority, and ensure they are trained how to represent and interpret the brand in every interaction. Put into place monitoring systems that enable you to listen to relevant input, and create clear processes for analyzing and acting on comments and complaints. Be sure to develop a media crisis plan to prescribe how your organization will respond to serious threats.

Also, create a social media content and promotions plan and align it with your other marketing efforts. Then publish a social media policy and rules of engagement for use by employees. Finally, establish clear, measurable, and realistic goals for social media efforts. These suggestions should lead you to social media success. 