



Social media lessons for business leaders

by John Girard and Tom Seymour

Love it or hate it, social media is here to stay. This is a troubling revelation for many organizational leaders who feel somewhat behind the curve on social media. The whole social media craze has caught many leaders off guard. For them, we recommend a simple three-step process: learn, listen and lead.

As tempting as it might be to jump into the fray and start influencing the social media conversation, we recommend against it. There have been many examples of excited CEOs trying to “correct” or otherwise influence the conversation without appreciating the power and reach of social media groups. An angry consumer group can quickly become a network army with incredible power – witness the Twitter moms who took on a large corporation and won.

To avoid becoming the latest brunt of social media gone wrong via viral video, we recommend you take some time to learn about social media. Dive in and start using some tools. Create personal accounts in Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. If you are not familiar with these tools, ask your kids about them! In the learning stage, the most important outcome is a basic understanding of how everything works, including learning the rather unique vocabulary. Make sure you can tweet, tag and poke people without assistance.

Once you are familiar with the tools, you can start the listening stage. In many ways, this is the most important stage. You will discover how much is being said about your organization. In their book, “Groundswell,” technology experts Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff take up this phenomenon. The book title captures what they call “a social trend in which people use technologies to get things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations.” The idea that your customers are getting information about you from someone other than you is sometimes disturbing.

Here is an example close to home for us, one about university professors. Often, students will learn about professors from third-party sites like www.ratemyprofessor.com, rather than from their university site. On these sites, students can read comments about professors and see what sort of grades they award. Of course, some students select professors based on how “easy” they grade. For some professors, this is

a concern, as they cannot control what is written on these sites in the same way they can on the university website that has their carefully worded biography.

In the listening stage, it is a good idea to establish a series of Google alerts (see www.google.com/alerts). This is a handy tool that allows you to submit search words and then you are alerted when news stories, Web pages or blogs are created using these terms. This stage is also a good time to visit Wikipedia, the so-called people’s encyclopedia, to read what has been written about you, your business or your interests. Remember, you can and should recommend to Wikipedia that errors or omissions be rectified. That said, Wikipedia will not accept marketing hype designed to sell your product or service. Finally, make sure to check what is being said about you on LinkedIn.

Take some time in this stage to see how organizational leaders, even competitors, are using social media to deal with issues. Are they engaging in an all-out war with the network armies or are they gently nudging the conversation in the right direction? Often, we find the latter works much better.

A great example is how Delta Airlines is using social media to solve travelers’ problems. Delta determined that if it can solve a problem while its customer is still traveling rather than waiting until after the fact, the customer will be much happier. At Delta Assist on Facebook and Twitter, a customer can tweet @DeltaAssist and get immediate – often while flying – assistance. This is a great example of how social media can solve a problem in a way simply not possible before.

Once you are comfortable with how social media is being used in your industry, you are ready to start the leading stage. Create a blog that you, as the organizational leader, write yourself. This should not be delegated to the public relations department; this should be your words, your ideas and your connection with your community. Be transparent and deal with the thorny issues. Your customers will appreciate it. ■

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