

The Rise of Social Media

We make it a point to stay abreast of emerging media and its potential value to our clients. In a nutshell, social media is a group of new online technologies which allow users to create, share and discuss information -- and to connect with each other over common interests. At the core of social media is the idea that people learn from each other by engaging in online conversations.

Social Media Platforms

Social media is rapidly increasing in importance as a marketing vehicle – and is not only for consumer product companies. In fact, a recent survey published in B-to-B Magazine by the Association of National Advertisers found that 57% of b2b marketers surveyed said they are now using social media channels, up from just 15% in 2007. The top social media platforms used by b2b marketers are the professional networking site LinkedIn (81%), the micro-blogging service Twitter (70%), the social networking site Facebook (60%) and the video sharing service YouTube (49%). Duke University also reports in their 2010 CMO Survey that within a year, social media is expected to comprise about 10% of US marketing dollars and 18% in the next 5 years.

“Inexpensive social media tools can quickly get marketing messages out through interactive discussion and rapid word of mouth, and properly managed, can deliver measurable results” says Forrester Research. Although companies cannot control the online conversations that take place, they can guide the narrative to benefit their organization by carefully listening and steering the viral dialogue.

Social media can do more than just ensure that your company is part of various online conversations. It can help build credibility for your company through the communications of its executives and help reach a broader range of target audiences who may utilize your product or service in the future.

Global Spec, Inc., offers several examples of how social media can be used in the industrial sector:

- **A blog about interesting applications for your product line or industry – news, trends and technologies in a specific industry.**
- **A product expert at your company creating a LinkedIn group and networking with users of those products.**
- **A Facebook page or link that informs people about your company’s involvement in community projects or organizations.**
- **A YouTube video that demonstrates a cool new technology, shows how to repair a product, or offers an interview with a top executive.**
- **A customer-only online discussion forum where your customers can interact with each other and internal product managers.**
- **A Twitter account or link you can use to post articles, events, industry news, coupons, promotions ... or ExecTweets.com to help find and follow top business executives**

According to Global Spec, the primary ways industrial companies participate in social media today are through community/discussion sites – 40% provide an online discussion community for customers, and another 33% provide one internally for employees, 26% use video and 24% now have a company blog.

However, like any new technology, there is an adoption curve: early adopters, mainstream adopters and laggards. And, every business has its own position on the adoption curve, which is often determined by available resources, skills, and most importantly -- your target audience's behavior. Some b2b marketers dismiss social media because they think it's just a teen thing, but that's not the case. According to The Pew Internet and the American Life Project, the average Twitter user is 31 and comScore estimates that only 11% of teens are tweeting. Meanwhile, LinkedIn, the social network for grownups, claims that the demo of their 50+ million members is similar to those reading the Wall Street Journal.

If your customers and prospects are enthusiastic about using social media for work-related purposes, then you will be motivated to move faster. However, the more established online resources – search engines, online catalogs and your web site – are still the key places your audience to look for suppliers, products and work-related information. Therefore, you should not radically shift your budgets toward social media. Your tried-and-true traditional and online marketing tactics are still your best bet for building awareness and generating qualified sales leads.

Social media use varies a great deal, depending on your target audience's media consumption. However, keep in mind, social media is not something to be used "instead of" traditional or online marketing methods. Savvy marketers are using it "in addition to" other marketing efforts – integrating it within their overall marketing strategy to support and complement other tactics. In fact, according to Annual Outsell's Advertising & Marketing Study 2010, 72.5% of b2b marketers are big believers in the effectiveness of integrated marketing. So, keep mixing it up!