



Fear-Free B2B Social Media Marketing

Now sizzling in your backyard!

By Jean Van Rensselar

If your company is B2B – and you haven't yet - it's finally time to dip your toe in the social media waters. Not that long ago many people, including me, were advising B2Bs to avoid social media for many reasons, most notably expense, time, and legal exposure. Things are different now. It's more streamlined, user-friendly, and safer – and we've all had the benefit of learning from predecessors' mistakes

We've learned that:

- No one cares what your CEO is eating for lunch – nor does anyone care to see your CEO lounging on a sailboat in a short bathrobe.
- Unless you're the U.S. Weather Service and there is an approaching tornado, more than one Tweet a day is a bad idea.
- If your V.P. of Engineering is hosting a forum – it better actually *be* your V.P. of Engineering hosting the forum.
- You can't erase negative posts unless they're offensive to someone other than people in your marketing department.

Handling Negative Comments

One of the main reasons I hear from clients for not adopting social media is that they don't know what to do with negative comments. By now, we all know how unacceptable it is to delete comments that are unfavorable to the brand, but we don't want everyone else to see them either.

The answer is simple: respond immediately.

By the time someone feels compelled to make a negative comment; their frustration level is already sky high. So handle the situation the same as if it was an irate customer who called or came into your place of business.

1. Your first response should be to clarify the issue.
2. Your second response should be to ask how you can rectify the situation – or offer a solution – always try to offer more than the person complaining expects.
3. Your third response should be follow-up – ask if the situation has been resolved.

Sure, there are some people who won't be happy no matter what you do. But if the other people reading your comments can see that you're making a sincere effort to resolve the situation, case closed.

Differences between B2B and B2C Marketing

Most of us know the difference between B2B and B2C marketing, but keep these points in mind when you're planning your social media campaign.

1. B2B markets are much smaller.
2. The B2B sales cycle is longer.
3. The B2B selling process is more complex.
4. The cost of a B2B sale is much higher.
5. The value of a B2B customer is much greater.
6. B2B visibility is created through relationships, not message repetition.
7. The B2B buying decision is rational, not emotional.

It's easy to see why the basic differences between B2B and B2C marketing create divergent online marketing paths. Relationship-focused B2B social media tools need to support the long complex B2B sales process.

Laying the Groundwork

There are four basic steps to laying a solid social media foundation. Each one is critical for success. This shouldn't take you much time or effort when you consider that your social media objectives will probably align closely with existing marketing objectives and you probably already know your target market.

1. Determine Your Objectives

You need to set objectives in order to choose the best channels and measure success. Choose quantifiable objectives so that you can easily see what's working and what's not. Here are some suggestions:

- To connect with your existing clients
- To research and find new clients
- To find out what your competitors and their clients are saying and doing
- To uncover market trends
- To drive traffic to your website or boost SEO
- To find great employees
- To promote brand recognition

While your social media objectives will probably align with your existing marketing objectives and corporate goals, this won't always be the case. For example, you may want to create a new goal that takes advantage of the unique aspects of social media – a certain number of followers.

2. Determine Your Target Market

Most likely, your target social media market is the same as your target market for other activities, but – again - not necessarily. There may be a market that you'd like to reach, but haven't been able to with more traditional marketing tools. For example, since relationship-building is so important in B2B, LinkedIn can be a very valuable way for salespeople to reconnect with high school and college friends – to rekindle relationships that could be valuable and enjoyable for both parties.

3. Research Your Target Market's Social Media Habits

Don't assume that social media has a greater reach than traditional media. It really depends on the information-gathering habits of your clients and prospects. For example, C-suite executives are avid print publication readers. Moms and engineers both gravitate to blogs. You can cut corners in other areas, but knowing who your clients and prospects are and where they get their information are two areas that are critical to social media success. There's plenty of research on market segments and social media habits, but if you know your market well, you already have a good idea what they're using.

4. Determine Your Campaign Parameters

Plan such aspects as:

- The start date
- The budget
- Who will be involved and their duties
- The amount of time you expect to invest
- Benchmarks
- Criteria for continuing or ending

Too often, the cause of an unsuccessful campaign is the failure to perform one of these steps (most commonly determining what social media tools, if any, the target market is using).

Also, don't forget to have some rules in place. Hopefully, your company already has an Acceptable Use Policy regulating employees' use of social media. If not, you'll need to create at least a bare bones version. Also create a simple policy for posters spelling out what content you consider unacceptable.

Prioritize your objectives and match social media tools to objectives. Start small and keep it simple - look for features that support only what you need. Look at your most important objective and implement a basic form of the appropriate tool. Decide how much time it will take to determine if it's successful.

Baby Steps

Once you have all this in place, start small and safe, abandon what doesn't work and expand what does. Don't think you have to incorporate everything at once. And don't abandon existing marketing efforts while you experiment with social media – this has been a very costly mistake for many companies. Instead continue your existing marketing efforts. Then once you find a social media tool that works, use it as a substitute for a more traditional activity. Following is a roadmap to full engagement

1. Advertise

Start by buying strategically placed online ads. I prefer search engine advertising like Google AdWords – where ads are visible but not intrusive. If you advertise on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, where marketing messages have a less friendly audience, you'll only alienate users – a bad start for your social media campaign.

2. Monitor

Your next step will be to closely monitor existing sites. Watch your competitors' social media sites carefully. Make notes about what you like and don't like. Note the posts and comments, but don't post on competitors' sites.

3. Engage in Existing Sites

Find topical sites and post regularly and transparently on those so that you can establish some thought leadership and develop a following. When you're ready to make the transition to your own social media pages, you'll still post on the topical sites, but then you'll include transitional links to your new pages.

Set up accounts at the 2-3 most beneficial sites – probably LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Take care that every page has the same look and feel. Your primary goal is to provide readers with something valuable – something they *truly* value, not something you want them to value. For example, you may be deluded into believing that Facebook readers are dying to hear about your latest line of digital scanners and cameras, when what they really want to know is what to do when digital scanners lose image quality. We all know by now to avoid any overt (or even covert) marketing messages like the plague.

4. Build Your Own

Most organizations engage in the most heavily trafficked social media sites, but don't create pages on their own sites. Those that do, most often create blogs and forums. While there is definitely value in doing that – you direct visitors to your own website, not Facebook's - hosting social media on your own site – the correct way - is time consuming.

It's not the posting that's time consuming – rather it's the marketing and monitoring. It's very difficult to get a blog, for example, off the ground without a massive amount of marketing for at least the first six months. In addition, once the site does get off the ground, someone needs to be monitoring posts hourly.

What you don't want is an unpopular blog parked on your site for several months. Your IT people should be able to tell you how many people are visiting your blog. This is very valuable information. If the vast majority of people are visiting, but not commenting, the content is not compelling. For the first six months, keep an especially close eye on how many people are actually visiting the blog. This isn't rocket science - if you don't see numbers rising steadily, it's time to recommit your marketing efforts or abandon it altogether.

All You Ultimately Need

The following three tools are all you'll ever need – until something more amazing comes along. You can do as little or as much as you want with any of these:

1. A central hub – most commonly a website
2. A way to keep in touch with clients and prospects– email, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.
3. A way to influence and monitor the online discussion about your industry – article distribution, a forum or blog, registration for RSS feeds, etc.

Social media allows you to listen to your clients and prospects and open a dialogue – something no other marketing tool can match. There is enormous value in this. When you monitor competitors' sites you'll pick this up right away.

Remember that the goal with all B2B social media is to build relationships – social media naturally does this very well. Executed correctly, it allows you to build a relationship much earlier in the sales cycle than you otherwise could. Gratifying social media relationships are just like every other kind of great relationship – when you focus on giving more than you receive, you quickly find that you're receiving more than you give.

About the Author

Jean Van Rensselaar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized technical-oriented companies. You can reach her at Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com or 630-363-8081. Visit the media room at www.SmartPRCommunications.com/Media.