



Employer Answers IN THE WORKPLACE

Social Media: Engaging your Audience in 140 Characters or Less

Angela Bergerson
Technology & Media Specialist
Cascade Employers Association

As part of SEDCOR's alliance with Cascade Employers Association, this feature appears periodically in the Enterprise. Cascade provides employment knowledge and support in the areas of human resource management, employment law compliance, training, pay information, safety and employee benefits.

Many of the articles recently published on the emerging trend of social media use, such as **Twitter** and **facebook**, for business purposes focus on the monetary aspects. Everyone wants to know, "how can organizations harness these popular trends to increase their revenue?"

Perhaps more important, however, is the question of how social media impacts community engagement. What's in it from the other side – why would someone want to "follow" your organization, spend time participating in online discussions, or promote your online presence to other potential patrons? A Nielsen study published in March, 2009 found that social media had overtaken personal eMail in 2008 to become the world's fourth most popular online sector, behind search, portals, and PC software applications. As that trend continues, so too will the shift in how people make decisions on how and where to invest their time, energy and money; social media is largely an opt-in environment, the opposite of the traditional eMail marketing approach.

Nielsen refers to these social media sites in their report as "member communities," and that's truly what they are – communities of people that share interests, who use this media to stay connected with one another, to track topics they care about, and to get the most value from their affiliated organizations. Therefore, to be successful in using this media, an organization must follow a similar model – adding value through interaction, consultation and co-creation of content, to give consumers a sense of ownership in the ongoing conversations and a reason to continue opting-in to the community.

Even news publishers are joining the social media wave, becoming part of the wider consumer conversation rather than just pushing content and sitting back. The **New York Times** has nearly two million "followers" on Twitter today, and **CNN** more than half a million fans on both Twitter and facebook. Readers who don't have time for an entire newspaper can skim the 140-character headlines, choose specific article links for further reading, and use the @reply and "retweeting" features to comment or quickly pass interesting news to their own "followers" – becoming part of the marketing engine themselves. Readers don't even have to sit at a computer to access these sites; Internet-capable devices like the iPhone now allow participation anytime, anywhere.

Social media is unlikely to completely replace traditional methods of customer service or advertising in the immediate future, but they can and do expand and enhance an organization's "communications toolbox," increasing reach, market share, brand recall, consumer engagement, and customer loyalty, and providing new opportunities for collaboration.

If you're considering developing a social media strategy, and wondering how to engage with your target audience, here are some questions to think about, courtesy of **Jason Falls of Social Media Explorer LLC**:

- What types of people do we want to talk to?
- Where do we find them?
- What are they talking about already?
- Is it appropriate for us to join that conversation and, if so, when?
- How do we inject usefulness into the conversation without being overly promotional?
- What value can we provide in terms of knowledge, opinion or content?
- How can we earn their trust?
- When we do earn their trust, how can we best ask for their input into our product or service?
- Under what circumstances can we point the conversation toward considering our product?
- Can we say or do something that invites someone else to point the conversation toward considering our product?
- How shall we apologize and regroup if we overstep their comfort level or accuse us of violating their trust?

Are you participating in social media? Even if you aren't yet engaged in this emerging trend, these questions are worth considering for the future. Nielsen's statistics suggest that the social media sector already accounts for about 10% of all Internet time, and that number is only going to rise. Don't risk being left behind.

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503.585.4320
4068 Hudson Avenue NE, Salem, OR 97301
www.cascadeemployers.com