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SURVIVING THE SOCIAL EXPLOSION

Social media has the potential to deliver untold benefits to well-prepared businesses, but there are pitfalls for those who don't plan carefully.





THINK OF SOCIAL media like a game system — Xbox, Nintendo or PlayStation — that has been around since the early '80s. The games change, and the systems become more sophisticated, but the premise remains strong and increasingly popular. Like game systems that may have been a young person's game once, social media is expanding its reach rapidly.

It might seem easy to dismiss the trend as a time-wasting nuisance that will soon sit unused and forgotten as quickly as this year's must-have holiday toy. But social media isn't simply a new tool for business, although it certainly can and should be used to enhance your marketing efforts. Social media is the way an entire generation communicates. Few technological advances have been adopted so widely and quickly as the tools of social media.

How big is it? Twitter is the top word in 2009, surpassing Obama, H1N1 and stimulus, according to the Global Language Monitor.

Whether you're seeking customers or employees who'll serve them, Green Industry businesses need to update their statuses, blog their opinions, tweet their whereabouts and post their videos for clients, suppliers, employees and the community around them. Ignoring the social media explosion will limit growth opportunities and could erode operations. What makes social media compelling is that it's inexpensive, easy, real-time communication.

Many businesses are taking a cautious approach to social media, dipping their toes into the Internet pool to see if they want to swim.

"It was exploding all around us, and we

thought we might as well get one foot in this and see what it's all about before everyone is in it and we're behind the times," says Maria Candler, president of James River Grounds Management in Richmond, VA.

The basics

There's no one tool that encompasses all social media. The most well known tools are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and blogs. Each has its unique role in the social media spectrum.

Knowing how your customers use social media is the key to taking advantage of what it has to offer. Like any business plan, you need to know the demographics. Knowing where your customers congregate is a good start.

Each social network — Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. — has different demographics. You have to understand where your qualified audience interacts socially, says Judith Guido, owner of Guido & Associates in Moorpark, CA.

That's been a challenge for James River Grounds Management.

"We're having a difficult time thinking about how we could get our Facebook content in the hands of our customers regularly," Candler says. "Maybe that's the end result, but we're trying to figure out how that would make sense. What do they care about that would make them go to the page? They don't even read the e-newsletter."

Getting started in social media isn't difficult. It's as simple as signing up at one of the various sites to begin expressing yourself. While there are dozens of sites to choose from, if you're going to start with just one, you probably want to create a Facebook account, Guido suggests. Facebook has the status-update element that has made Twitter so popular. It also allows you to create a community and post photos. No matter where you go virtually, having a strategy in place is key.

Lack of planning is a significant problem, Guido says. Fully leveraging social media is no different than marketing or sales. Proper execution requires planning.

"You need to craft a strategy for social media," she says. "I can't emphasize that enough."

Creating interest

Scott Parker, owner of Parker Homescape in Fanwood, NJ, created his Facebook page in

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GUIDO & ASSOCIATES



early 2008. Currently, the company has 306 friends, all of whom can view photos of the company's completed work and read about recent awards Parker Homescape has received.

"It allows you to have a forum where you gather all your friends, and you can let all your friends know what you do for a living," Parker says. "It allows you to get your name out there, have people know exactly what you do, and keep in touch with people."

Parker likens the friendly nature of social networking to highly desirable word-of-mouth advertising.

"It's a soft sell," he says. "These are people who know you. If someone doesn't know you, they have a friend who knows you. It's automatic trust."

That sense of community is important.

"We're trying to build awareness around something," says Dennis Dougherty, president and CEO of Cagwin and Dorward in Novato, CA. "How else would you build awareness? We'd send out letters and brochures. We'd spend a lot of time creating that. As a consumer, I read the first two or three sentences, and if it doesn't captivate me, it goes right into the recycling bin."



Parker Homescape's Facebook page allows people to view photos of the company's completed work.

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IT'S AUTOMATIC TRUST.

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PARKER HOMESCAPE



Social networks can provide interest because it's multifaceted with different points of view.

"If you don't capture somebody's imagination with information that's posted by the company, another person can post something, and it captivates everybody, and they talk about it," Dougherty says.

Double-edged sword

Despite all of the benefits of social media, it's not ideal. Like all tools, social media can sidetrack people. Besides providing an extraordinary tug away from job responsibilities, there's the concern social networking could replace the all-important, face-to-face element of conducting business.

MAKE THE MOST OUT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

BY JEFF KORHAN

Social media is a platform for interacting and engaging with people to make friends and build relationships that may create opportunities for your business. Unlike traditional marketing and selling, business is a by-product of new media marketing. Here are some tips to help you be more effective.

1 Devote at least one-third of your social media marketing to listening and learning. Use Google Alerts to monitor your company brand, personal reputation and industry specialty.

2 Always use a personal photo for your profile, as opposed to an avatar or business logo. Your personal reputation arguably is more important than your company brand.

3 Standardize your usernames and profiles. Use namechk.com or knowem.com to search dozens of net-

works for availability. Claim your username on these sites for future use.

4 A blog is the cornerstone of your social media presence. Use it to distinguish your unique value for your customers and prospects by helping them solve problems and make better decisions that pertain to your area of specialty.

5 Google indexes most of the messaging on the Web to provide relevant information for Internet searches. If your communications are embedded with the key words your customers are using, they're like bread-crumbs that lead new prospects to you.

6 Multimedia content is essential for making your information consumable by the largest audience. Search YouTube.com for instructional videos about how use video, images, and links to make your communications come alive.

7 Social media amplifies everything about you and your business with amazing accuracy. If you try to spin your reputation or capabilities, you'll more than likely fail.

8 Sharing is the grease that makes social media work. You have to become comfortable with giving, because without it, there's no reason for anyone to link up to you on the social networks.

Jeff Korhan is new media marketer who helps entrepreneurs implement online strategies that maximize Web visibility, reputation, and referrals. He blogs at <http://jeffkorhan.com>.





Cagwin and Dorward are trying build a sense of community and awareness.

James River Grounds Management purchased smart phones for its team to provide access to social

networks. But it wasn't an easy decision.

"It makes it too easy to send e-mails instead of forcing them to get in front of customers and maintain more personal connections, which we, as a relationship company, are all about," Candler says. "We have a lot of heartburn about that decision."

However, as useful as a social network is, it's still a tool that, if not used properly, could lose its effectiveness.

"My only concern there — and I've seen this happen in other social networks — is various people will join, and they're not interested in what's going on," Dougherty says. "They're trying to get people to go someplace else and look at whatever they're selling, which probably isn't landscaping."

On your own

While Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube are the big players in social media, they are, by no means, the only ways to reach your audience.

Dougherty created his own social network using the Ning Network, a service that allows people to join and create their own social platforms. As of early December, there were more than 1.8 million Ning Networks and 37 million registered users.

Dougherty created his network following a World Café (www.worldcafe.com) meeting to talk about resources used in landscapes.

"It's difficult to get people to move to sustainable landscape practices if they don't know the reasons they should do it," Dougherty says. "We were involved in the World Café, which essentially is people conversing all day around small tables. It was powerful. If you were there, you would have walked away on your toes. It was energetic."

But knowing the enthusiasm generated during a one-day event would quickly subside, Dougherty employed the Ning Network (www.ning.com) to encourage ongoing discussion.

"It's important to keep the conversation alive," he says. "Initially, people come out of them, and they're gleeful. They seem to have direction. But as every day ticks on, those memories fade. The neat thing about social media is, if they go back and check in, it rekindles their thinking about why they were there and what they were doing. I'm hoping that will give longer shelf-life to our strategic meetings and direction."

Overcoming skepticism

Dougherty admits he was skeptical before embracing the concept.

"Initially, when people brought this idea of social media up — and it was brought up a couple of times at various meetings — my initial reaction was 'No, it's going to be a time-waster,'" he says. "And I didn't want to have to learn something new. There are so many things you have to accomplish each day."

But once Dougherty gave it a try, he realized how easy and useful it could be.

Dougherty wants people of interest joining.

"The people who are invited in can invite other people to join," he says. "It's open in the sense concerned people can be invited in by any of the members."

Cagwin and Dorward may open the community to anyone, but at that point, it likely would need a full-time administrator.

The question for landscape companies about social media isn't whether to get involved or when, it's to what extent should they get involved and how will that involvement be managed.

"It's one of the most exciting tools in business," Guido says. "I could post something, and in 15 minutes, I can have a group of 15,000 targeted people responding to a bit of information or research.

It creates a competitive advantage at low cost or no cost, almost instantaneously. We thought the Internet was the greatest. This takes the Internet to the nth degree to create a razor-targeted group of qualified people you want to be in front of." **LM**

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— MARIA CANDLER, PRESIDENT, JAMES RIVER GROUNDS MANAGEMENT

