

HOW-TO

Engage clients with social media

BY JEFF KORHAN

What's the most valuable yet underutilized resource in your business? For most small businesses, it's customers.

One of the web's principles is to serve consumers first and businesses second. So, as customers move online in greater numbers, their collective voice will become stronger, thereby creating disruption in every business sector, including the Green Industry.

This is why it's essential for your business to use social media and design your company around its influences. Customer service is no longer a one-to-one conversation between you and your customer. It's an online public forum, which scares most businesses. Nevertheless, it's reality, and you have to adapt.

If you're using social media primarily to broadcast your business message, you've noticed it being background noise to the increasingly powerful voice of the socially engaged consumers. Your challenge is to leverage that power by engaging it favorably with your business brand.

Unfortunately, research proves most consumers don't trust businesses. However, trust can be earned. A simple formula for earning your customers' trust and building a process for better understanding and serving them is:

1. Provide value—use your experience and expertise to be a valued resource.
2. Engage the community—ask questions that stimulate discussion.
3. Facilitate the conversation—learn and discover new opportunities.

Provide value

Value is relative, which means opportunity for all local businesses that understand the communities they serve. Your business should have a digital relationship with your community because social media is invaluable for extending your influence with it.

In its effort to help consumers, Google regularly refines its search capabilities to deliver the most relevant information to solve problems for consumers searching the web. Help Google by being a free resource, and it will introduce your business to new prospects.

To accomplish this, apply your experience and expertise to solving common problems. Think of your company as being in the answer busi-

ness. People are searching the web for answers, so if you're publishing them regularly, they'll be found and shared on social networks, making them digital testimonials of your business value. Basic rules for creating valuable informational content are: **LEARN FROM THE COMMUNITY.** Regularly engage with it to discover the unsolved problems, most of which never go away. If you blog about a topic and receive a favorable response, you can be sure your solution will still be relevant in the future. **PROVIDE YOUR UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE.** If it's unique, it adds something original to news that's available elsewhere. Your direct experience within your local communities often is enough to provide this perspective. **SHARE ONLY THE BEST CONTENT.** Do your research and learn from other experts. Then personalize that information to make it highly relevant to your community. Being a valued resource can

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be as easy as connecting the dots to bring a proven solution from another industry or community to your own.

Ideally, your value should be published on a stand-alone blog on a domain you own or a subdomain of your primary

website. Make this hub the source for the high-quality, evergreen content you share to the respective social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+, and whenever possible, customize the sharing for the characteristics of each channel.



QUICK TIP

A simple formula for earning your customers' trust and building a process to better understand and serve them is to provide value, engage the community and facilitate the conversation.

Engage the community

The reason for creating and sharing interesting, useful and valuable information is to spark online conversations by giving your audience something to discuss. This engages your business with its customers and the friends they influence.

Social engagement is the result of numerous activities, including listening, asking good questions and offering suggestions and other types of assistance. When these actions are combined with the value your business provides, the natural result is engagement in the form of likes, shares and comments that serve to build your online communities.

As a leading business in the Green Industry, your customers look to you to be current with trends and developments, so it's essential for you to set alerts and notifications to monitor leading publications, blogs and news sources. This can be accomplished through email, but using a news reader such as Google Reader is more efficient.

As you curate and share news, add your perspective to clarify and personalize it for your community. This is invaluable for encouraging engagement. Also, ask good questions—ones that have no right or wrong answer—that respect the community. Here are a few from the Facebook page of Sublime Garden Design, one that attracts a lot of engagement: *Is this a garden or a landscape? Wouldn't you love to have a cozy hideout like this in your backyard? What do you think of this rustic arbor?*

Finally, because social media is virtual and devoid of human qualities, it's vital your content-sharing is accompanied by a photo, video or quotation to connect with people emotionally.



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Facilitate the conversation

The purpose of social media is to create sustained alignment with a specific community, namely your ideal customers and fans. To accomplish this, you have to be worthy of their attention, actively engaged and willing to share the spotlight.

Encourage them to talk and then step into the background. As the facilitator, you're only there to moderate the discussion so the community can interact and share their views. When your customers talk within an online forum centered around your business, they're marketing for you. Here are suggestions about how to make this happen:

- › Create expectations.
- › Publish regularly.
- › Stay on topic.
- › Be brief.
- › Clarify with a relevant perspective.
- › Break things down.
- › Provide practical examples.
- › Point out trends.
- › Build excitement.
- › Be awesome.
- › Inspire.
- › Hint at what's next.

Online marketing works best when it's driven by the customer. What matters most is what your customers say. This is what lubricates the social networks. Smart businesses learn to let go of their brands and focus on how to use social media to better understand and serve their loyal customers, letting them own it. It's a fundamental shift that, when embraced, builds a more engaged, relevant and profitable business. **LM**

Korban is a consultant who helps Green Industry businesses use social media and Internet marketing to create exceptional customer experiences. Contact him at jeffkorban.com.



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