

Humanize YOUR BUSINESS

How social media makes your firm more likeable, trustworthy and attractive to new customers.

While many companies are busy adding social media to their marketing practices, they're not fully understanding the magic that makes it work: its humanizing qualities that make your business more approachable. For the most part, businesses are simply adding a social layer to their marketing, like a fresh coat of paint. What

they should be doing instead is baking the qualities of social into every aspect of the business—from operations to sales, marketing and customer service.

This is especially true for small business, where effective social media use realistically calls for owners and management team members to become directly involved. After all, these are the individuals with the decades of

vital experience for capably processing and responding to the engagement that social media technologies make possible. To delegate those interactions to lower-level employees risks compromising what social media does best: humanizing your business to make it more likeable, trustworthy, and therefore more attractive to the new customers that have yet to learn about it.



BY **JEFF KORAN**



» **WEB EXTRA**

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Social creates expectations

What would you think if you visited your favorite store and found it closed at a time when it's normally open? Customers develop expectations and one of them is that your business is open, ready and willing to serve as they've known it to be.

If you operate a small business, you understand this. You open and close on time and follow a number of other standard business practices.

A new expectation is that your business is friendly. This is a byproduct of our social media-influenced world. It's just one of many new expectations that social media has created of businesses, along with others that are derivatives of it.

Here are five more relevant expectations that are becoming part of the fabric of the business environment—one in which every business will have to adapt to if it expects to enjoy continued relevance and growth:

1 | Visibility. We are living in a period in which a business without an online presence is likely to be considered irrelevant by many consumers, whereas customers will perceive a company with an active social presence to be engaged with the community and openly prepared for more business.

2 | Authenticity. Customers want to have a relationship with your company; they want to know what's going on behind the scenes. They are curious, and you have to feed that curiosity in order for those relationships to flourish.

3 | Accessibility. The web gives everyone more access to people, companies and causes. This ease of attaining information has conditioned consumers to expect to have open access to your business—and especially with you, if you are the owner or one of its leaders.

4 | Community. It's no longer possible to be successful without a meaningful relationship with the communities you serve, as communities are the new markets. They equally serve the needs of businesses and the people within them. This is why locally engaged companies have distinct advantages when all other things are equal.

5 | Relevance. Savvy businesses understand their communities care most about the little things that only an insider would know. When you speak your community's language, you develop a bond that supports your business' ongoing relevance. And that

language often includes the keyword phrases that optimize your online content for search.

This is all going to become even more interesting as a growing number of the members of the "Facebook generation" find their way into the workforce. You can expect business to become profoundly social, because that will be the expectation of your younger employees. Students in high school and college today have much different views of authority figures than their parents do. While they respect the authority of these figures and their positions, they also expect full access to them. This means they will expect to have access to you as a business owner—just as your customers will.

One way to grant this access is to become personally involved with social media implementation. As a result, you'll learn more about your custom-



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SOCIAL MARKETING

ers, while also giving them the opportunity to learn more about you. This is what Tom Peters had in mind when he popularized the term “management by walking around” (MBWA) in 1982 as the co-author of the groundbreaking business book *In Search of Excellence*. Now you have social media to digitally facilitate walking around the communities your business serves, something your competitors already may be doing.

Consumers have a voice

The collective voice of consumers will continue to grow and shape the world of commerce. The challenge for businesses is to leverage its power by first engaging with it, and then facilitating the conversation to help the community do more of what it wants to do.

People want to be heard, and every business needs to provide a forum for that to happen. Many companies are



It's arguably more important to understand the influences of social media than to necessarily be using it.

using their Facebook page to accomplish this; it's smart, but only if the company monitors and manages the conversation.

I happen to be a fan of Southwest Airlines. When it redesigned its awards program, I went over to its Facebook

page to do some research on whether to convert my old reward points or keep the free tickets from the earlier program. There was a string of hundreds of negative comments without a single response from Southwest. It's surprising because Southwest is a well respected company that's known for its friendliness and personal engagement with customers. Unfortunately, the lack of response only served to fan the flames of customers who were looking for answers—and not finding them.

The worst thing a business or brand can do is fail to respond. If you're going to open up a Facebook page or accept comments on your blog, you have a responsibility to respond to your audi-



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ence. That expectation doesn't seem to make sense to the same companies that always will answer the telephone if it rings. Today those calls may not be coming so much by the telephone as they are from the social networks. Is your business answering the call? It's an expectation you must build into your standard business practices.

Customer service is moving online

A growing number of consumers are feeling more and more comfortable openly expressing their true feelings online. While this scares the heck out of most businesses, it's something that we're all going to have to come to grips with. For that to happen, your business has to be willing to join the conversation and be prepared to make strong moves.

Business is no longer the monologue that it used to be—when the message of the company was taken at face value.

Now, it's a dialogue with increasingly vocal consumers. According to most research studies over the past several decades, approximately 70 percent to 80 percent of all consumers do not trust businesses in general, especially large corporations.

Your company can embrace this reality by using the social networks to proactively reach out to your customers. While taking this approach makes the company somewhat vulnerable, it's much less risky than erecting perceived barriers where consumers expect transparency. Times are changing; generally accepted practices are being redefined. Social media is democratizing business in general by giving everyone equal access—as well as supporting the expectation that every customer will receive first-class service.

You can wait for this trend to become more prevalent; or, you can take action now to lead your industry.

The collective voice of consumers is growing more powerful every day—something that forward-thinking businesses know they can no longer ignore. One innovative approach is to give up control of your brand to consumers. Instead of trying to completely manage your brand, focus instead on encouraging community conversations that speak favorably about it. **LM**

Korhan is a former landscape business owner who now helps Green Industry businesses use social media and Internet marketing to create exceptional customer experiences.

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PVB LOCK BOX

PVB LOCK BOX

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CLOCK BOX

The **CLOCKBOX** will come in one size 14x17x10 this will fit most outdoor irrigation controllers, this unit will also be powder coated hunter green and come with a removable front cover for access to the unit the locking mechanism will be (2) security hex pin locking bolts and will come with two unlocking bits one for the owner and one for the irrigation or maintenance tech. This unit wholesales at \$259.99 and the MSRP is \$439.00. Our contractors installed pricing is \$539.00 and this also installs in less than 20 minutes. By installing this product this assures that no unauthorized person or persons are tampering with the irrigation controller and will also protect it from being stolen.



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