

Social strategy

Incorporating social media into your company strategy **Interviewed by Clare DeCapua**

Social media can be a highly strategic tool for businesses, but only if they are prepared to invest in the resources to manage it.

"The shift to mobility and connecting is changing the way we do things, because it's a constant stream of interaction," says Mary M. Rodino, Chief Marketing Officer with CIMCO Communications.

While companies need to be involved in social media, Rodino cautions that there are key items to consider in order to create the most effective strategy.

"It's important to have someone focused on your social media strategy to evolve it over time," she says.

Smart Business spoke with Rodino about how a company can approach social media safely and effectively to further its brand, its products and its customer service.



Mary M. Rodino
Chief Marketing Officer
CIMCO Communications

Why is social media an important component in a company's strategy?

Social media engages consumers and buyers in a whole new way. With so many consumers utilizing these applications, a company cannot afford to be 'logged off' when it comes to social media. While social media may not be a large part of your overall strategy, it can complement your current strategy and provide instant and cost-effective results.

For example, most companies monitor what is being said about them on the Internet. With social media, not only can they monitor what's being said, but they can gain insight into product issues, gaps and vulnerabilities.

Customers may say, 'I love this product, but I wish it could do this.' For a software developer, consumer products company or a manufacturer, those are great ways to receive low-cost customer research instantly.

Social media can also accelerate your public relations strategy. For instance, if a company puts a press release out on the wire, all it takes is for one person to post it on Twitter and your release is instantly seen by the number of followers that person has. It's instant exposure at a low cost.

What are the risks associated with social media?

The major risk associated with social media, or any technology, boils down to

protecting internal systems. Make sure there is a barrier between the systems and the applications that keep your company running and the methods in which people can reach your organization.

Hackers and viruses evolve as social media portals are created, so it is vital that you do not leave your company vulnerable.

In addition, legal departments are concerned with the exposure of confidential company information. Your legal adviser will want to keep a tight rein on the type and the quantity of information being shared, as well as who approves and shares data.

Finally, executives may believe that social media takes away the control over buyer communications. They may think that social media is a portal to voice complaints and criticism that can never be erased.

How can companies protect themselves against these risks?

Work with your technology provider and let it know that you are implementing these strategies and ask about security solutions available to protect your company.

It's also very important for IT, legal, human resources and marketing to work

together to establish corporate policies and guidelines around social media. Each company needs to identify who can review and post comments.

In addition, some companies might consider restricting access to specific sites, such as Facebook or YouTube. There's a risk of declining productivity and network bandwidth if your employees are on these sites all day.

Companies need to be open to negative customer reactions and be able to react when these criticisms are voiced. Look at it as a way to instantly understand issues/concerns and respond in a timely manner. Negative reactions can become high risk if you allow them to go unanswered. Social media can have a viral marketing impact, so make sure you are being proactive and managing your company's responses.

How can a company begin to create an effective social media strategy?

The top priority for a company is to understand how its buyers use social media. For example, if a company's target audience is IT service buyers, chief information officers, or vice presidents of IT, current research states that they use social media in the exploratory process of purchasing. It's important that the vendor information is present on vertical market and industry sites, IT communities and blogs to specifically share what product, service or solution the vendor provides, how the vendor provides its services and what key values differentiate the vendor from its competitors.

The next steps for businesses in developing a social media strategy are to research and determine which social media portal is most appropriate for their buyers. Facebook might provide more visibility if a company is B2C or consumer driven. However, for a B2B company, LinkedIn might be more appropriate.

Businesses should create a social media strategy that uses the applications their customers utilize and then determine the level of activity necessary on those applications to make a positive impact on the company. <<

MARY M. RODINO is the Chief Marketing Officer with CIMCO Communications. Reach her at maryrodino@cimco.net or (630) 691-8080.