

SNEWS-socialmedia

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Social media grows beyond tweets and friends

By Stuart Glascock

Master one social media trend -- message boards, forums, podcasts, wikis or blogs -- and along comes another wave. Think Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter.

But don't rest too long on your friends and your tweets. You bet there's more to come to optimize your brand's use of social media. Web marketing-savvy specialty retailers and manufacturers are finding new ways to attract online customers and keep them around. Think broader ways to build community and interact more vitally with like-minded folks.

Interacting socially

One strategy for winning customers is giving them the ability to review products and interact with others on the site, David Wilson, a social media blogger, told SNEWS®. Wilson manages social media marketing campaigns and pens the Social Media Optimization blog (<http://social-media-optimization.com>).

"Buying something is a social activity," Wilson said. "A lot of people buy things with their friends. If you can add some interactive features to a site, it gives the visitors the ability to share the experience."

Brick-and-mortar and online outfitter Colorado Kayak Supply, for example, gives its online community multiple ways to share. Its social website contains photos, videos, sales and events information, member profiles, retail store staff bios and enthusiasts' blogs.

The kayaking outfitter embraced online marketing with its e-commerce site (<http://www.coloradokayak.com>) several years ago and jumped into social networking (<http://coloradokayaksupply.ning.com>) about two years ago, said co-owner Earl Richmond.

"We know social networking works because we do a lot of outreach with it," Richmond told SNEWS.

"We do promotions and sales that are only available on the Ning website. There is a great return on our investments. We don't track it scientifically, but we see a positive increase in sales and classes that we offer. People say that's how they found out about certain promotions."

Its community site resides on the Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>) social networking platform, which boasts some 1.6 million user-created networks.

Its social media site complements its online retail site, which focuses on product and serves as the primary e-commerce engine.

The feature that paddling enthusiasts like the most is the CKS Squad Blog, Richmond said. Avid paddlers who want to promote whitewater kayaking contribute to the blog (<http://coloradokayak.blogspot.com/>). It carries first-person stories, photos and helmet cam video from various kayaking adventures. The bloggers focus on sharing experiences and their passion for the sport, not on selling products.

"We put a lot of energy into blogging," Richmond said. "The blog is more about true-life experiences. The store site is more about products and sales."

Listen and invest

Richmond recommended experimenting with different forms of social media and listening to customers.

"Try out all the possibilities and find out what your customers respond to best," he said. "There isn't one equation that is right for everyone. Not everyone is going to use Twitter or search Facebook. You have to try it all, and it's changing all the time."

It takes time and resources, he said, but it pays off. "We've had good return-on-investment so far."

Social media allows the Western Colorado specialty outfitter to stay in touch with, keep a dialogue going and build loyalty with a national community of kayaking fans.

Ski Dazzle -- the company behind those giant ski and snowboard expos -- has achieved another kind of success with its community site, also hosted on the Ning platform. Ski Dazzle has registered nearly 10,000 fans (<http://skidazzlesocial.ning.com>). It wrapped up its 46th annual Los Angeles Ski and Snowboard Expo in late October, then launched into a Chicago expo Nov. 6-8. Some 90,000 skiers and riders trekked in to the Los Angeles Convention Center for what is billed as the largest consumer ski show.

Outside the shows, Ski Dazzle aggressively manages its web presence. In addition to being on Facebook and Twitter, it has photos, slide shows, skier and boarder forums and videos on Ning.

Ski Dazzle co-owner Judy Gray said it's all about keeping the content fresh, which she calls "seeding the beast." Ski Dazzle's community site was launched a year ago, after a five-month planning period. Gray strongly urges making a commitment to Web marketing and getting professional help. Three full-time and three part-time staff tend to its Web marketing efforts.

The company grew its audience through content and contests, Grey told SNEWS. "Once you have your group, you talk to them, make them interactive, survey them," she said. "It's a lot of work."

Mingle, mingle, mingle

Mountain Hardwear has created an award-winning social site that brings together climbers, explorers and other adventurers. Its "Expedition Republic" (<http://mountainhardwear.ning.com>) offers blog content, active discussions, interest groups and videos, and generally lets visitors and members mix, mingle and share their enthusiasm.

The company has been building the site for about two years, constantly adding and renewing components, said Paige Boucher, Mountain Hardwear's spokeswoman.

"We send out a monthly email about season/activity appropriate product, athlete accomplishments and drive people to our blogs that way," Boucher said. Contests and non-profit awareness campaigns have also engaged the network. "We've had photo contests, nominate an active woman contest... We keep it changing all the time."

In June, Marketing Sherpa, a marketing research firm, praised Mountain Hardwear's site in a case study titled: "When a blog isn't enough: Expanding customer interaction with a branded social network." It credited Mountain Hardwear with devoting resources to promote the network, developing content and using email effectively.

Social media efforts also carry some risk. "It's not like running a 60-day media campaign: launch it and two months later turn it off," said Wilson. "If you launch a community-based activity today, you can't just shut it down or you'll risk alienating customers."

Wilson suggested engaging customers in one area of social media, rather than trying to do it all and getting spread too thin.