



EMBRACING SOCIAL MEDIA NOW

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Social media can cause some serious anxiety. You sense that everyone's doing it (or at least talking about it), but it seems time intensive and you're busy just keeping your head above water. So, can social media really help your club? You bet!

As the world continues to change at a rapid rate, one of the core values of human beings remains the same...the desire to feel like they're being listened to, are part of something bigger, and have a voice within that space. In other words, they're looking for a sense of community. Modern lifestyles tend not to permit that sense of community in traditional terms and so what we're seeing is that desire to be part of something bigger manifest in 'electronic terms' through various mediums and none more prevalent than social media.

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So, for those of you asking yourselves: "Why social media?" Well, the answer is simple – it's a medium that regardless of whether you like it or not is here to stay as it goes a long way towards satisfying "our" base desire to be involved in something more than just ourselves. And whilst the tools (such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Foursquare*, and *LinkedIn*) will continue to change and evolve, the bare facts are that social media is here and now.

Make no bones about it: As a business, if you're not connecting to your current/future customers/members through this medium,

then you're truly missing out on business both now and in the future. CEOs and boards alike have a responsibility to ensure a sustainable business. One of the challenges met by most clubs, like any business, is how they will reach the next generation of customers. Social media is the perfect forum for not only achieving this but also developing those on-going relationships.

There's really little point in trying to debate the prevalence of social media. Turn on the television and look at not only the content of a lot of advertisements but listen to the news or the morning chat shows as well. Alternatively, read a newspaper or jump online and surf around. What you find is that every medium is talking about social media in some form or another. What's important is that clubs recognise this fact and rather than deny it or worse still ignore it, club leaders need to understand that this electronic format in many respects is just an evolution of word-of-mouth. However, this

time around, it's a far larger 'beast' and is more like word-of-mouth multiplied to the power of a million (and then some).

Accepting the facts highlighted earlier means that whether or not you're listening to social media channels (you may be in denial or simply wish to debate their relevance), the simple fact is that the conversation is happening about your club regardless of whether or not you're listening. However, the good news is there's an opportunity for clubs to track those conversations and be involved in on-going discussions with their customers/members. Your customers/members are spending time in these forums talking about their experiences, so it's important your club is in this same space, building trust and developing relationships.

So, now that the reality of social media has been covered, what are some of the more practical aspects to making it a part of your daily business based on feedback from boards and management?

Q: How much time is required to run a successful social media strategy?

Like most exercises, you get back what you put in. In its nuts and bolts form, social media requires daily monitoring and ideally, daily posting. But the reality of social media if you wish to do it properly is that for a reasonable sized club keen to engage with its customers and share its corporate personality online, it can quite quickly become a full time job that doesn't span the traditional working week.

The purpose of having a social media strategy is to engage and interact with your customers on behalf of your business and by so-doing, build a rapport that instils trust in the brand and by default, the products, facilities, and services you have on offer. →

People relate to people, or more specifically, people relate to human traits so by giving your club values and positive characteristics, your customers will naturally relate to you more and so will often choose you over your competition which they don't have the same level of respect/rapport with.

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Most importantly, a successful social media presence is built on a sound strategy, meaning not jumping in feet-first, only to discover that you got it all wrong. First impressions in any relationship count and social media provides you with the opportunity to form long-lasting relationships, so take the time to plan what it is you want to say, how you want to say it, and what you're looking to achieve from it. After that, commit the time and resources to making it happen and then let the relationships form organically. What does this mean exactly? Remember that you're dealing with people at the other end of the media channel that you need to listen to and respect. Focus on leading a conversation so the exchange of information goes both ways - don't just concentrate on broadcasting your point of view (message/advertising) as this becomes boring very quickly and ultimately people won't listen to what you have to say.

Q: What should I do when someone comments about my club, particularly if it's negative?

Celebrate the moment and relish the fact that you've been provided with uncensored information directly relating to your business – be it good or bad. For positive feedback, a public and private thank you is required and perhaps some information on any action you may have taken, such as letting the customer know that you took the time to go and thank the staff member they mentioned and gave them a couple of movie tickets to enjoy.

If the feedback is negative, the first thing you need to do is fight the urge to remove it from the public forum. It may need to be removed, but try not to take it down simply

because there's something that's been said which you don't like. Research shows by having the integrity to leave the information there for everyone to see and then providing an unemotional, honest, and timely response, you'll gain far more respect in the long run than by simply sweeping it under the carpet.

In a real life example, at Social Media Now we recently had a fan make a demeaning comment about the person that wrote our posts on *Facebook*, suggesting they were an idiot and that the posts were rubbish (this has been cleaned up for publication purposes). Our knee-jerk reaction was that we needed to take it down. Fortunately though, our staff member who wrote our posts insisted we didn't remove it and instead they penned a well thought out response, without any sarcasm or anger (which was very tempting under the circumstances). The response thanked the person for their feedback and suggested that the information contained in the posts had engaged them to the point where they were motivated to (a) become a fan/follower of our page and (b) to actually take the time to contribute to the discussion. It went on to say that the information within our posts were designed to invoke conversation in a respectful and courteous manner and that the negative person might gain some value by learning how to communicate in a less aggressive and more positive way.

What resulted from the reply was an overwhelming show of support from other friends/fans on our page. Conversation was rife about how pleasantly we had responded and how the person in question was out of line. Our friends shared the dialogue with their friends and our page numbers grew (not massively, but certainly as a direct result of how the process was managed).

Q: How do I get a return on investment from social media?

The answer is very simple: By spotting the opportunities when they present themselves. This is no different from how you would normally do business – for example, if you

were wandering through your club and overheard someone talking about holding a function whilst they looked at your function rooms, chances are you would approach them and engage in conversation.

The same can and should be said for your social media channels. Listen to what people are saying and engage them so you're able to draw further information from them. And remember, Australian culture dictates that we don't like a "hard sell," so when you're communicating electronically, be careful not to come across as insincere and just looking to peddle your wares. Rather, provide information that's valuable to those involved and look for solutions to their needs/concerns.

Q: Our members get all our information from our monthly magazines and the local paper. They're not on computers, let alone *Facebook* or *Twitter*. So, why should we invest in social media?

Anecdotal evidence is one of the greatest enemies of running a successful business of any kind. The danger lies in making the assumption that just because "you" do/don't like something that everyone does/doesn't as well. Comments like, "Our members get all our information from our monthly magazines and the local paper. They're not on computers, let alone *Facebook* or *Twitter*," is one comment that appears regularly and yet the facts are quite the reverse of the perception.

For example, *Facebook* boasts over 569 million users worldwide (9.2 million users in Australia), with an average age of 30.2 years, while the fastest growing age demographic (worldwide) is the over 55s market. Meanwhile, *Twitter* boasts 190 million visitors per month, generating 65 million tweets a day. In Australia, there are 2.5 million *Twitter* accounts, with 35% of accounts held by people aged between 25-55 years. Interestingly, nearly a quarter of online Australians (23%) have read 'tweets' in the past year; 14% 'follow' businesses; and, the majority of accounts are held in New South Wales (over 35%), seconded by Victoria (27%).

Australians in general are very savvy and quick to take up technology in its various forms. Grandparents the world over are

recognising that to remain in touch with their grandchildren, they need to be 'online,' and as the world shrinks due to air-travel and the world economy, Australians are taking up jobs in countries everywhere – so mums and dads are having to learn how to use a computer to remain in contact with their families. This includes using the likes of *Facebook* to find out what their loved ones are up to, as well as look at pictures, and send messages.

Q: Isn't social media something only young people use?

As already demonstrated, nothing could be further from the truth. Whilst it would be unfair to suggest that the over 55s demographic is using social media like *Facebook*, day in, day out – it would be reasonable to conclude that many are embracing the technology and as computers and the like become easier and more intuitive to use (not to mention, cheaper), more people will be exposed to the opportunity of being able to get online to communicate. With this comes future benefits to any club that recognises the signs now and establish a strategy to capture this market.

Social Media Faux Pas

There are two things that need to be remembered about social media. Firstly, it needs to be done right the first time. So, take the time to develop a plan and commit the necessary resources to provide a quality social media offering and don't feel like you need to be on every channel, all at once. You're much better off getting one or two right than getting them all wrong.

Secondly, you need to monitor your social media channels daily. Clubs that set up their presence and then lose interest or neglect their site(s) can end up with content that's detrimental to the business. As such, someone needs to take responsibility for overseeing all social media channels and if they're not being used, they should be shut down or blocked from others being able to post on them.

In another real life example, when researching an organisation's social media presence, we discovered pages where the administrator had posted video of friends becoming intoxicated and talking about the organisation. This had not been

monitored or addressed and so other friends and followers became involved in the discussions. What made the matter worse was the post had been live on their page for three months, therefore having been viewed by all their fans/followers, not to mention future fans/followers. Complicating the situation further, the organisation hadn't put any policies or procedures in place which left them open to legal proceedings and meant they had nothing to manage their staff or the situation against.

Getting Social Media Right

Finally, there's an easy equation for getting your social media right. It consists of engaging with your audience; asking questions; building relationships; acting promptly; and, rewarding your staff and customers/members. Achieve all this and the result will be raving fans and followers of your club.

To demonstrate this formula in action, an RSL club was recently set to launch a new children's play area, so to engage with the club's fans we asked them to share their ideas on how to make it more family friendly.

What resulted was a meeting between the club's management team and mums from one of the mother's groups that meet once a month at the club. Together these mums put forward over 50 ideas on how to make the premises more family friendly. The CEO thanked them with a coffee and cake at their meeting and provided each of them with a "goodies" bag. These mums now meet more than weekly in the club and have introduced three more mother's groups who are now using the venue as a meeting place. What's more, they've told dozens of people both online and via word-of-mouth about their experience and are now raving fans and members for life. Now, you can't ask for more from your social media than that!

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