

Social Media is Easy – it's the Old-fashioned Stuff that's Hard

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Today's Environment

Social media offers unprecedented opportunities to engage consumers directly. By asking for consumer opinions, companies are making an implicit promise to act upon the insights consumers share. Not all businesses, however, have determined how social media will affect their market research, brand reputation, and product and service development efforts. Before launching social media programs, smart companies are tackling the organizational planning and change management needed to successfully operationalize consumer insights gained through social media.

Our Perspective

The beauty of social media is that it's easy to get involved and glean real-time information from your customers in ways never before possible. However, these opportunities come with risks for the unprepared organization. If you don't invest time in business

planning and educating internal stakeholders about the value of your program, you run the risk of damaging your brand, squandering resources and gathering information that people don't trust or use. Even worse, you may waste insights that could give you the competitive advantage you need.

To avoid that fate, you need to understand the challenges that social media will present—and then get busy on the old-fashioned work of organizational planning and change management.

Have a conversation. At its heart, social media is about creating conversations with your customers to hear their opinions, ideas and observations. By engaging them online, you're actually saying, "I'm listening." Your customers know you're listening for a reason. You're listening to understand their needs so you can improve your products or services for them. By having this conversation, you're essentially making a

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promise to your customers that you will do something with the information they provide.

Listen closely. Social media users have shown time and again that they expect companies to honor that implied promise. If you don't act upon the insights they share, you will build resentment, not raving fans, and that's a brand killer.

Even if you're not directly engaging current or potential customers, you may be listening to the online conversations about your company and its services or products. Those conversations happen whether or not you listen to them, so you may as well get a handle on what people are saying about you. In this fast-evolving space, the current number of social media monitoring solutions available is well north of 100. Additionally, the sheer volume of chatter about your company, services and brands could be pretty intimidating.

But you're only listening. You haven't made any promises to your customers, so they might not notice if you don't take any action on their comments. However, you've probably just spent sizable dollars on social media monitoring solutions and resources (your social media director and community managers, for example) to turn the data gleaned from online chatter into something useful.

Be ready to act. Again, if the rest of your organization isn't set up to accept this information, to believe it or to do anything with it, you've just spent a lot of money on nothing—and potentially wasted some valuable insights that could enhance your competitive position.

The biggest challenge that companies face isn't standing up their social media program. That's easy. The hard part is reaping the benefits of social media, which depends on the good old-fashioned work of people and organizational change management.

Before you jump on the social media bandwagon, make sure you're ready by answering these questions:

- What are your beliefs about marketing? Where does reliable market research come from, and how is it acted upon? How does social media fit in that mix?
- How do you operationalize social media within your organization? Have you structured your program so that information flows quickly and logically from customers to internal stakeholders? Are you organized to act upon the insights your customers share?
- Are you monitoring social media to gather the information you really need? Are you tracking what you do with that information and the positive changes that have resulted from it?
- Does the rest of your organization support your social media program? Have you developed a policy so that everyone is comfortable with their roles and responsibilities and understands the parameters of their online behavior?
- Are you able to put enough resources into your program so you can engage customers in real time and report back how you've used their insights?

The Bottom Line

If you're not sure of the answer to any of these questions, it's time to take a long hard look at your social media strategy and make sure you understand the organizational and operational changes that will be required to make it effective.