



Social Media: Give 'Em Something To Talk About

By John Hellerman, Hellerman Baretz Communications

March 11, 2010

When I ask my clients about using social media as a business development tool, I hear a lot of ambivalence. And, frankly, I can understand. On the one hand, given the breathless press about the marketing benefits of social media, one could be excused for thinking that the mere act of signing up for a Twitter account grants one a mystical power to attract business. At the same time, the sheer novelty of social media sites, coupled with their exaggerated hype, can inspire skepticism: Will I be able to work this thing? How much time is it going to take? And what's an "RT," anyway?

The truth, of course, is that today's social media tools (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.) are neither as magical nor fear-inspiring as they may seem. They are merely new — sometimes better — ways of doing old things. And the real benefit to PR professionals is that they make our traditional work product more valuable than ever.

Twitter Is Not Magic

A headline like "Twitter Marketing Changes the Rules of Business" (OfficialWire, Leon Hill, Feb. 22, 2010), can certainly make a business development professional salivate. But its hyperbolic claim masks the fact that the true value of Twitter and other social media sites lies in a simple — even mundane — function: putting people in touch with each other.

If you or your clients are feeling daunted by these sites, remember that other revolutionary networking tools have swept across the landscape before. They are called the telephone, the telegraph, the Pony Express, the airplane, the cocktail party, the fax machine, electronic mail and instant messaging. Consider the below article from 1987. Back then, much evangelizing was being done about another device that would change the face of networking:

"Don Hasbargen is an avowed gadget freak. ... So when he first bought a car phone a year and a half ago, he thought he was buying another high-tech toy. What he has discovered, however, is that his car phone, actually a mobile cellular telephone, has become an essential business tool for his job as a partner at Hewitt & Associates." (With Car Phones, Business Is Never on Hold, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Nov. 9, 1987.)

The point is not that the "mobile cellular telephone" didn't matter to Mr. Hasbargen's business; undoubtedly it did. The point is that in hindsight, with no awe of the technology, we can see that

the important function of Don's car phone was that it kept him in touch with his contacts. The gizmo itself — fancy then, a relic now — was just a means to an end.

When e-mail arrived on the scene, it had the same effect. A mere seven years ago (that's seven, not 17), the Indianapolis Star raised its eyebrows in noting: "Marty Bird, communications director, considers e-mail a way to build relationships with customers." (Electronic Mail Seeks Role as Valid Business Development Tool, April Marciszewski, Aug. 20, 2003.) I suspect if you went back far enough, you could find excited reports from ancient Egypt on how hieroglyphs could be used to expand merchants' customer bases.

Indeed, whether it's chalk on a wall or something more advanced, the song remains the same: Communication technologies blind us with dazzle in the short term, but it's the human interaction they facilitate that matters for business. And so it is with Twitter, Facebook and the like. They are valuable networking tools because — and only because — they put our contacts in close reach. They do this in powerful, imaginative ways that other forms of communication can't replicate. And the value of having your contacts assembled in a conversational forum, just a convenient keystroke away, should not be underestimated.

But social media sites can only put you in front of your contacts. As with all the networking tools that have gone before, and all that will come in the future, it's what you say that matters. So . . . what do you say?

It's the Conversation, Stupid

The worlds of Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook can all be thought of as never-ending networking receptions with all of your professional contacts in the room. As with a reception, though, you're not going to get noticed if you don't have something to say.

Don't worry. Thankfully, the product of traditional PR efforts — quotes, features, byline articles, speeches, awards, rankings — provide the perfect substance for positive interaction on social media sites. In short, and with apologies to Melissa Etheridge, that content gives 'em something to talk about.

Recently, Rupert Murdoch, speaking in the London Times said as much: "Content is not just king, it is the emperor of all things electronic." (Rupert Murdoch Says Destiny of [News Corp](#) Newspapers Is In Paid-For Content, James Quinn, Daily Telegraph, Feb. 2, 2010.)

Imagine a lawyer watching news of an auto recall on television. Her LinkedIn contacts may include a law school classmate who is in-house at the automaker in Detroit. What kind of message can she send her classmate? Our lawyer won't get very far writing: "Wow, recall = bummer. Need help?"

And this is where materials generated from traditional PR campaigns take on such tremendous value for those, like the lawyer in our example, who want to take advantage of social media tools. PR materials offer an ideal way to open a conversation with her old classmate, and give that classmate a positive impression of her legal abilities.

The lawyer might, for instance, forward an article from a trade magazine touching on recall issues. That act alone puts her on the radar of the in-house attorney as someone knowledgeable about matters relevant to him, and brings substance to their conversation.

If the article is one that the lawyer herself wrote, well, now we're really talking. The fact that the attorney was selected to write the article credentials her as an expert in the field, and the substance of the article shows the quality of her thinking. The article had a certain PR value when it was published in the magazine. But now, shared directly with the in-house attorney, it is reaching its best possible target.

This, of course, is something you could have accomplished with a pair of scissors, a stamp and an envelope in 1950. But social media environments make it tremendously easy to spread articles and other media, and this ease of sharing increases the chances of a final, best possibility for our lawyer: that without her lifting a finger, the in-house attorney will receive her article from a trusted third party in his network.

Social media networks are remarkably efficient at spreading information to those who have an interest in it. And if our lawyer put her article out into the stream — perhaps a simple Twitter message linking to it — the chances of it landing on the desk of an in-house lawyer to whom it's relevant are significant indeed. (She could even help fate along by passing the article directly to a friend of the in-house lawyer.) This result — where the in-house lawyer receives her materials from a third party — is the best not because our lawyer didn't have to expend much effort (thought that's nice), but because the article now comes to him with two separate seals of approval: that of the outlet that published it, and that of the colleague who forwarded it.

In other words, your PR product — in this example, a byline article; in another, perhaps a blog posting — has just earned you a virtual referral.

From a PR perspective, social media isn't interesting because of "re-tweets," "fail whales," "pokes" or other terms that will come and go. It's interesting because of the fresh life it gives to traditional PR product. Social media environments create a huge space for conversation, but they can't put words in your mouth. You have to provide those yourself, and there are few better ways to kick-start a professional conversation than by helpfully pointing out an interesting bit of media on an issue relevant to your contacts.

When you do so, you're giving 'em something to talk about.

John Hellerman is the co-founder of Hellerman Baretz Communications, a strategic communications agency representing many of the world's leading law firms, consulting firms and financial services companies. In 2008 he was named agency executive of the year by PR News.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Portfolio Media, publisher of Law360.

This article was originally published March 11, 2010 on Law360 (www.law360.com).