WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7, 2010

Recap of Social Fresh Portland: Social Media for Small Business - A Fresh Conversation

The third session of the day for me was "Social Media for Small Business - A Fresh Conversation" moderated by Ryan Lewis of Bonfire Social Media. He took an informal poll of the room, which was made up of mostly small businesses, with some agencies. Since the format of the session was a roundtable, we went right into questions from the room. An audience member asked, for a small business strapped for time, how do you find a balance between hiring an outside consultant to handle social media versus doing it in-house. Another audience member responded with a success story of how doing social media in-house has really worked for them, with their preferred medium being Twitter. There has been a lot of debate recently about this very issue, and I also fall on the side of doing social media in-house - when people engage with someone on Twitter, Facebook or other social media channels, even when they are engaging with a brand, they want to be talking to someone who represents the voice of that company, and knows the company well. There's an implied sense of trust that comes along with following or becoming a "fan" of something, and if those

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clients/customers find out that they're dealing with a consultant and not someone from the company, that trust can be broken with serious consequences. I talked about this issue in a little more depth with respect to ghostblogging.

Another audience member asked about who is using Facebook applications, adding that there's huge success there for those who are. Someone commented that Facebook adds a layer of demographic targeting that can be extremely useful, though it's sometimes necessary to test different advertisements to find success. Another audience member wanted to know if there was an average price point for the products that are selling, using tools like Facebook. He's found that social media tools are better for branding, because he sells an expensive product. He wanted to know if a company would be throwing money away if their product is expensive and so they're only using social media for branding. The room seemed to agree that the answer was no - even if the sales process is not happening through these tools, developing a reputation for a certain expertise is useful in leading to an offline sales process. (*Applicable to law firms)

The group then talked a bit about whether Facebook or Twitter was a more useful tool for companies. Someone commented that Twitter is a great tool for communications, but for indexing and critical mass, Facebook will become a much bigger player. It was suggested that companies incentivize their fans to join their Facebook pages, which we'd heard in the previous panel. Incentivizing them to become a "fan" of your company and product is one step, but leveraging this group to build a database is what's really important. HubSpot was mentioned again as a company who does this very well. To get "fans" to sign up their email addresses and information with a company, an audience member suggested reserving some content for release when they give you this data. Another audience member cautioned that some small businesses think you go right from getting someone to become a "fan" to getting a sale, and said that it's important to remember to build the relationships further first. (*Great lesson for law firms)

Another audience member commented that his company wants their employees to develop personal blogs that will be used to express the corporate voice. He was concerned about blurring the line between a personal and professional voice. I voiced my thoughts that I think the line is already pretty blurred and that there's utility in giving your brand a personality. As we hear so often, people want to buy from other people, not companies.

The group then moved on to discussing LinkedIn and everyone agreed that you can do a lot more with groups on LinkedIn than through individual profiles, including emailing members of a group directly. An audience member suggested that companies start with their email list of clients and then find out where their critical mass is - is it on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, maybe even mySpace? Another audience member also mentioned meetup.com as a great social networking site, though they pointed out there is a cost to form groups on there.

Lewis commented that traditional media isn't bad, it's just overpriced, which led to an audience member to wonder if companies think that because social media is "free" that it can't be good. Someone else countered that social media isn't free, because it involves an investment of time and creativity. The group also agreed that social media is not a replacement for other tools, but is just another set of tools. Marketing is an "evolution," not a "revolution" so companies should take pieces of what they're already doing and amplify these with these new social media tools.

An audience member asked how to deal with people in a company who are afraid of social media and have objections to using it. I suggested using case studies and another audience member recommended showing the results of Google searches after 60-90 days. Somebody else commented that they thought the real issue is that people want to keep their jobs, so they don't want to be pioneers. I feel that the opposite is true - in this current economy, showing yourself to be a leader by understanding and adopting these tools and leveraging them for the good of your company can make you indispensable.

The final thought from the roundtable was that there needs to be a cultural change in companies for social media to work - they shouldn't just hire a college intern to handle their social media.