

# Businesses leverage social media use

By Britt Johnsen • bljohnsen@stcloudtimes.com • October 17, 2009

---

A trend is buzzing in the second floor of a Sartell office building.

That's where W3i, a desktop and browser marketing business, has been drafting its social media strategy. So far, so good, they say. YouTube videos have lessons on applications. Blog entries discuss industry trends. Twitter feeds announce news and new blog posts.

"I don't think you can not not participate now," said Debby Manthei, director of marketing communications at W3i.



Rob Weber, vice president of development, and Debby Manthei, director of marketing for W3i in Sartell, talk Wednesday about company's strategy for using social media to help market their brand. Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com

Although using social media isn't new, leveraging social media as a marketing tool is new to local businesses. St. Cloud-area companies such as scrapbook maker Creative Memories, HealthPartners Central Minnesota Clinics and W3i have all recently launched Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, YouTube videos, blogs or all four.

On its face, the purpose is marketing. But businesses say social media outlets give them an avenue for meaningful dialogue with customers about their products and services. It's not just about broadcasting the brand.

While social media presents an opportunity, sites such as Facebook and Twitter also present challenges. Several local companies have gotten on board with blogs, YouTube and the like, but many more have not engaged at all. Marketing experts say it takes time to concoct a social media strategy that is meaningful, sustainable and that doesn't drain resources.

Cris Alves, vice president of marketing and communications for the Minnesota chapter of the American Marketing Association, said businesses are also starting to believe social media is not just a fad. Facebook boasts more than 300 million users, MySpace has about 125 million users worldwide, and the professional networking site LinkedIn says more than 48 million people connect with the site, including executives from all Fortune 500 companies.

“I think now that these social media entities have become more established and they’re not going away, marketers are realizing they need to somehow integrate that into the total mix of their marketing (and) communications plans,” she said.

### **Integrating the brand**

For some businesses, Flickr and Facebook accounts came naturally.

Take ING Direct. About 85 percent of the banking company’s sales happen online, said Brian Myres, head of sales for the company.

He said social media is “the modern-day water cooler.” Among shop talk and other chat, people talk about the brand.

“It all has an impact on brand. If you have a strong brand, you need to be reinforcing it,” he said.

ING’s vision is “leading America back to savings,” Myres said.

That tight focus led it to create a number of online profiles promoting both vision and brand, including a personal finance blog called “We, the Savers.”

He said the reason ING got into social networking was because of the uncertainty in the financial sector.

“People were looking for answers, and we were out there to provide answers a year ago in the economy and the banking industry,” Myres said. “It’s really evolved into a way to promote that whole agenda.”

While it could be good for revenues, these new online tools have to be used in a way that creates conversation — not in a way that shouts a company’s sales pitch to consumers.

“It’s a conversation, but it’s one where we really find out what’s on consumers’ minds,” Myres said. “The world is a fast-moving place, and here’s a personal way to understand what people are thinking.”

## **Listening**

That's the way Marnie Beltz sees it, too. Beltz is the senior manager of Internet marketing at Creative Memories. She's one in a team of people working on online communication and social networking.

Creative Memories last month launched eight blogs, exploring video blogging about behind-the-scenes happenings at the St. Cloud-based scrapbook maker, as well as other topics such as using scrapbook software.

Beltz says it's important to go where people are talking and become part of that conversation.

Social networking outlets give businesses a chance to hear customers' comments and concerns.

"Companies don't decide what their brand is, consumers do," she said. "People are having conversations about businesses whether you're involved or not. As a corporate entity, you can either be part of that conversation and be engaged with your customers ... or you can sit on the sidelines and be passive, and they will shape your brand for you."

She said entering Internet communities is like entering a friend's house for a social gathering.

"You don't just walk in and yell, 'I have a product to sell! Would anyone like to buy it?' "

For the past 18 months, Beltz and a team of people have read articles, talked to experts and formulated a social media plan. But it's not perfect. It hasn't yet articulated its return on investment.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a potential for ROI. Some companies, such as Dell, can count \$2 million in sales just from Twitter offers, Beltz said.

"We have our approach developed, but like anything, we will adjust and course correct as we go," she said. "We're still learning."

## **Obstacles**

Not all companies have successfully integrated social media into their businesses.

One of the difficulties can be negative feedback publicly displayed on Twitter feeds or Facebook pages.

But Beltz pointed out that responding in a transparent way to complaints and problems builds credibility.

Larissa Rodriguez is the director of care delivery marketing for HealthPartners, the parent company that oversees HealthPartners Central Minnesota Clinics, which recently launched a Facebook page. She says a good social media plan needs to include meaningful content for consumers.

“It takes a lot more effort and strategy to figure out how to provide content that’s interesting for consumers,” she said.

Beltz says the positives far outweigh the negatives, but businesses have to fully commit once they decide to do it.

“Really, once you’re in, I think you’re in. You can change your level of engagement, but to just walk away from (a) community that you’ve built, it seems very unlikely,” Beltz said.

Dominic Fong is associate vice president of marketing and communications for the Minnesota chapter of the American Marketing Association.

He said the association works to help Minnesota companies learn more about social media and how it can help them.

But Alves said these tools can be overwhelming for people to figure out how to use and find resources to incorporate them into their business model.

“It is going to take some time for business to test how that’s going to work within their company and how they sell their products and services,” she said.