

SOCIAL MEDIA: **Extending & Growing Your Brand**

F R E E M A N

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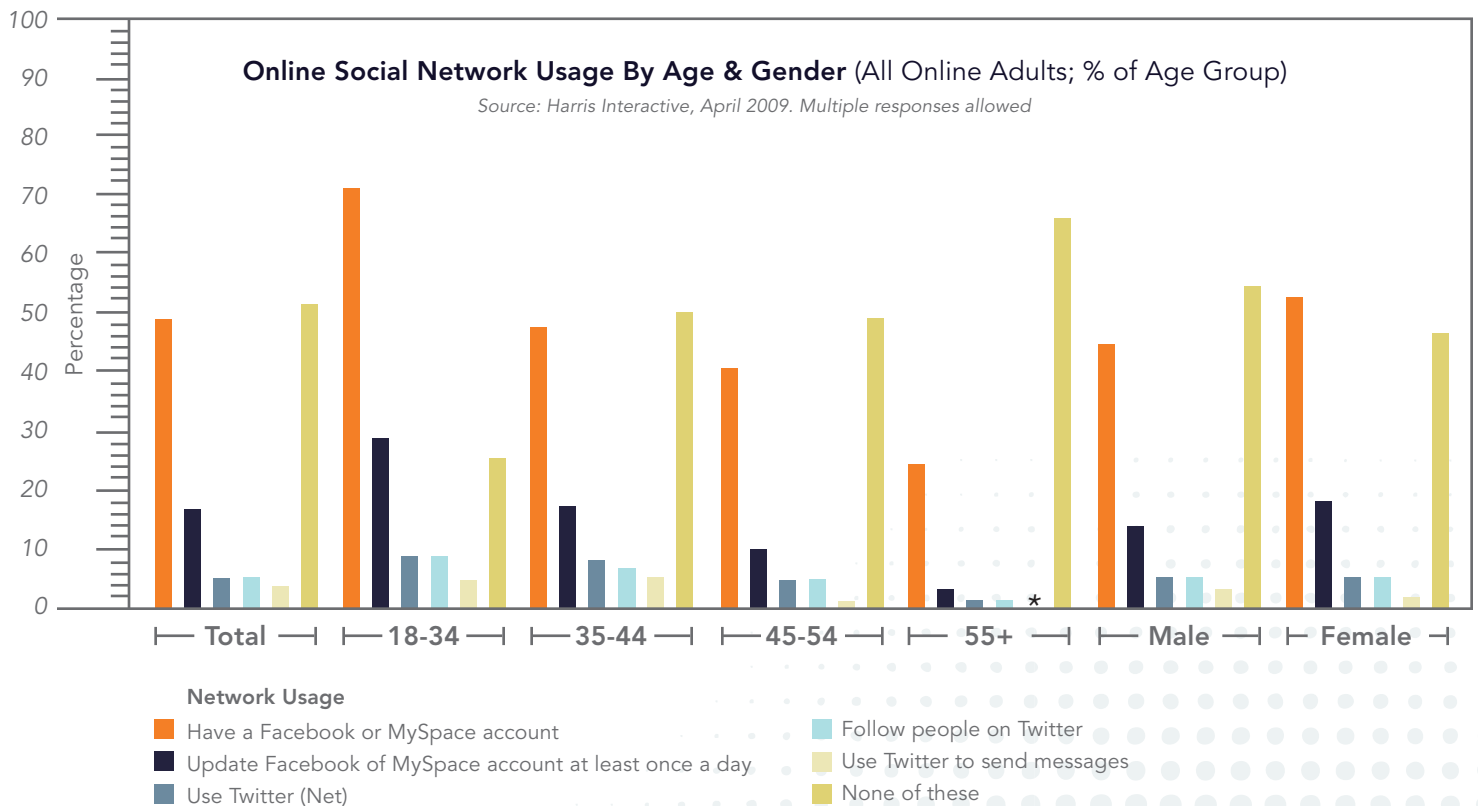
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Introduction

Social media communities enable companies to connect to their customers in an impactful way. They are a global phenomenon happening in all markets and almost all industries. Show and event planners should keep in mind that by allowing exhibitors and attendees to interact with your brand, the opportunity for growth and engagement is tremendous.

In the event industry, social media initiates organizations to build relationships, favorably position their brand and allow for the possibility of an engaged, exciting experience with their customers. These include social networks, micro-blogs, blogs, podcasts, forums, social review sites, photo/video sharing, widgets and RSS feeds. Forty-eight percent of adults have a MySpace or Facebook account page and over the past few months, approximately five million people joined Twitter each month. The number of adult Twitter users is projected to grow from 12.1 million in 2009 to 18.1 million in 2010. Additionally, women 55+ is the fastest growing demographic for Facebook, reinforcing that it is not just Generations X and Y benefiting from social media usage.



Importance of a Listening Strategy

Utilizing a social medium correctly and effectively offers a significant opportunity for show management organizations to communicate with their exhibitors and attendees where they are and where the greatest opportunities for engagement exist. An impactful social media plan should always include a listening strategy. In the social media world, listening is just as important as speaking. It is critical to know what is being said about your brand and who is saying it to develop a smart way to respond. There are several social media listening tools that aggregate the data you receive and help you make better sense of it. Some include Google alerts, Twendz, Technorati and Lexicon that allow you to observe how much your key word is being discussed on Twitter and Facebook, as well as monitoring rising links and top blogs.

“Companies and associations are increasingly losing control of their brands. If you are providing goods or services, people will be blogging, tweeting, and otherwise commenting about your brand online. Your brand may become what others are saying about you, not what you are saying about yourself. This raw, unvarnished customer feedback may be a threat to some, but to companies and associations confident in their offering, it will be a great opportunity to listen to customers, engage with them and improve their product or service. Like it or not, this is the way that things are going, and forward-thinking companies will plan accordingly,” says Corbin Ball, CSP, CMP of Corbin Ball Associates.

Optimizing Social Media in Face-to-Face Marketing

ENGAGE & EXCITE ATTENDEES

Show management is feeling the pressure to keep their shows relevant and fresh. Most would like to see greater involvement from their members outside the annual show and engage with a younger audience. With the rise in social media usage across several audiences, these organizations have a new opportunity to interact with exhibitors, attendees and prospects.

A scalable, trending social media program will help show management companies serve their current and prospective exhibitors and attendees as never before. Pre, during and post event awareness via social media, such as an on-site Twitter wall, photo sharing, discussion boards through Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as blogging, all allow relevant content and news to be communicated in real-time. This will build an engaged online community and one that will lead to a more stable membership base.

Show marketers should keep in mind that most customers prefer to actively interact with more targeted and intersected groups versus just the larger, overall online community. To fully engage the customer in their community, the show organizer should allow that particular customer to interact with other community members at the level that best meets their individual needs and wants. For instance, a show organizer will develop a global community specific to their particular show, yet will also form smaller micro-communities that align various customer groups such as: exhibitors, new attendees, veteran attendees, media, etc. Recognize what types of online communities will best serve your customers.

Also, it is beneficial to create multiple mechanisms for customers to interact such as surveys, voting, guest posts, comments, etc. Online communities allow the power to be shifted to the customer, making them feel more ownership of the brand.

ATTRACT NEW MEMBERS & DRIVE AWARENESS

There is a constant struggle for show and event managers to grow their membership and interact with the emerging, younger generation who may not be as connected to the industry.

Social media provides many ways to connect with and retain this new audience such as:

- *Various advertising opportunities*
- *Discussion boards allowing open/moderated conversations*
- *Introductions/common interest engines that allow participants to share contact information prior to or throughout the show*
- *Interactive session track pickers that allow attendees to choose the speaker, topic and schedules*
- *Attendee meet-ups or "tweetups" that can foster professional networking*
- *Real time messaging and audience response during the event via mobile, Twitter walls, streaming videos or blogs*
- *Post show follow-ups*

Social Media Tools

Social media tools play a vital role in the success of an event. Tools such as online social communities, blogs, videos and podcasts can further enhance the show's messaging and brand while also delivering promotional information on services.

- **Online Social Communities:** global social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn provide an open forum for users to create group pages, share information and establish new connections.

Benefit: Online social communities offer a quick and, more importantly, free means of promoting meeting planner's events pre, during and post show. Consider setting up discussion boards on Facebook or LinkedIn for attendees to share best practices and relevant content. Also, specific Twitter event pages, set up by a hash tag provides an excellent channel for real-time announcements and event promotions that engage attendees and exhibitors.

- **Video Distribution Channels:** one of the best-known video distribution sites is YouTube (www.youtube.com). This is where one can upload videos at no cost for anyone to see. Additionally, Flickr is another image and video hosting website to share photographs and is also used widely by bloggers as a photo repository.

Benefit: Meeting planners can use these free video distribution channels to promote meetings. Consider having speakers create brief videos before the event discussing their topics.

Interview satisfied attendees at your event to post with a link to and on your website. They can promote the event in exciting and engaging ways all at a fraction of the cost of traditional media. One example of such video distribution is a promotional video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqXdIEMojw>) made by Corbin Ball, prior to the MPI EMEC 2009 Conference.

The classic example of a "viral video," one that grew to millions of views through people sharing it, is *Will It Blend*. BlendTec (www.willitblend.com) sells a very expensive blender that can grind up nearly anything. The company's CEO, in a flash of brilliance, began posting inexpensive videos showing the blender grinding up unlikely objects (golf balls, marbles, 2x4s, and, in the height of the iPhone rollout mania, an iPhone) to YouTube. The original BlendTec iPhone video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qg1ckCkm8YI&feature=channel_page) has generated more than 6.5 million views as people shared this link with friends — all for a production cost of about \$600.

- **Blogs (web logs):** online journals typically written by an individual or a group. Typically, the entries are dated with the most recent on top, and there is usually an opportunity for readers to make comments. There are millions of blogs. Technorati (www.technorati.com) is an Internet search engine for seeking out blogs in multiple industries and allows for your comments to be posted on your favorite blogs.

Benefit: Blogs can be useful for promoting meetings. Many meeting industry associations such as PCMA, MPI and ASAE have set up blog channels around their events to create interest, to get feedback and to build communities.

- **Podcasts:** on-demand radio/video “talk shows” that can be accessed directly from your computer or downloaded to your iPod or other MP3 player. They are typically inexpensive to make and can be distributed essentially free via iTunes, other podcast distributors and/or your website.

Benefit: Podcasts are also great promotional tools for events. Meetings are content generators. For example, interviewing upcoming speakers about their subject matter to create podcasts is one way to promote meeting attendance. If done properly, podcasts will bring traffic to your website, generate business and attract attendance to meetings.

- **Widgets:** custom widgets can be created for your desktop to develop real-time information, as well as industry and association news. Most widgets can include pop-ups of important dates (registration, move in dates, early order deadlines, etc), as well as a countdown counter for the show date.

Benefit: Widgets reinforce brand recognition, value and top of mind recall.

- **User-generated review sites:** review sites may ultimately have one of the greatest impacts on meetings, events and society. These types of platforms allow users to locate and rate all types or services, including organizations.

Benefit: The reviews from clients, good and bad, aid greatly in making purchase decisions. These review sites are emerging for most goods and services. According to the 2008 North American Technographics Media and Marketing Online Survey, sixty percent of people trust information on consumer product ratings and reviews. Yelp (www.yelp.com) for example, is one of several that is used for restaurant reviews and many other services.

Several user-review sites have recently emerged, designed specifically with the meeting planner in mind. MeetingUniverse (www.meetinguniverse.com), Meetings Intelligence Exchange (www.meetingsintel.com), MeetingsCollaborative (<http://meetingscollaborative.com>) and Elite Meetings (www.elitemeetings.com) are review sites for meeting planners with planner reviews of venues and hotels.

Social Media Best Practices

Content and how effectively social media is used to complement and enhance marketing activities to drive greater results are what sets companies apart. By first developing a process and strategy for your social media program, marketers will in turn be able to establish a brand voice across various mediums while simultaneously understanding to whom their social media efforts are directed and why.

One of the first steps in developing a social media strategy is to establish objectives and determine how your company's social media usage will help to engage buyers, influencers and customers. How will you present your company brand and which social media components will the organization engage? Will you present the brand as one corporate ID, several ID's or as an individual employee? What will be included in your content plan?

Secondly, the risks that may be involved in partaking in social media practices should be considered. Show management organizations should understand that the social media forum can be open for negative comments and complaints to be posted. They should be prepared for such instances and how best to manage and respond. This can be by making an acknowledgement of the issue and repairing the problem or to start a discussion or dialogue around the issue to bring both perspectives to light. Some of these negative comments can provide valuable customer insights.

It is important to incorporate a social media policy to protect your organization and promote business conduct guidelines. This policy should center on listening and establishing a dialogue, and not selling your product or service. "Openness and transparency should be central to the policy as attempts to cover-up, censor or mislead are not only unethical, but they commonly backfire," says Ball of Corbin Ball Associates.

Lastly, determine who needs to be involved with the social media program. Will it be sales, marketing, legal or even customer service maintaining the various preferred mediums? Be sure to include a plan for assigning resources and tasks.

"With social media, you cannot just create a profile and think you are finished. Organizations need to engage the community by actively listening to what people are saying while adding valuable content. One of the worst things a company can do is to use social media as a constant sales pitch. People want to engage with companies that have relevant information and insights specific to them."

Jennifer Chisholm

Marketing Manager at Freeman

Conclusion

Show management organizations have a remarkable opportunity to use social media to extend their show and capture greater share of mind. They can propel their brand to a higher level, where true benefits can be created. By working closely with the right partner and developing a strong strategic approach to social media communications, show management organizations can use this new marketing medium to gain membership and revenue. This market is waiting for a leader to emerge in the social networking space and now is the time to make that move.

White paper contributor, **Corbin Ball, CSP, CMP, MS** is an international speaker, consultant and writer helping clients worldwide use technology to save time and improve productivity. With 20 years of experience, his articles have appeared in hundreds of national and international publications and he has been quoted in the *US and News Report*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Fast Company*, *PC Magazine* and others. Corbin has been named for four consecutive years as one of "The 25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry" by *MeetingNews Magazine*.

About Freeman

Freeman (www.freemanco.com) is the world's leading provider of integrated services for face-to-face marketing events, including expositions, conventions, corporate events and exhibits. Customer driven, Freeman offers a total package of solutions to our customers, with a scope of products and services unmatched by the competition. By empowering our employees to make educated, strategic decisions Freeman delivers reliable, consistent problem solving solutions that our customers have come to rely on. With 40 offices in North America, Freeman produces more than 3,000 expositions annually, including 102 of the largest 200 U.S. trade shows, and more than 10,000 other events worldwide. The company has received numerous awards recognizing outstanding efforts in industry leadership, creative design, community service, innovation and customer-driven partnerships.

Freeman offers social media services including:

Consultation services | Onsite promotion and attendee engagement | Post-show engagement

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