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Are you excited about social media yet? It can be a lot like first-time sex: everyone's eager to try it, but no one's sure how to do it. And when it's over, the general consensus is: "Why wasn't it better?"

If you want to leap into social media while avoiding an unsatisfying outcome, now is the time to address this key issue: will social media keep your brand relevant and resilient in a shaky economy in which marketing budgets are squeezed and all the really cool kids seem to be way ahead of you, Facebooking and Tweeting their way to fame and fortune?

Start answering that question by broadening your perspective on modern branding. Today's successful brands, large and small, market their products or services based on core promises made to, and judged by, employees, customers and external influencers. If those

promises resonate with the target audiences, the result can be greater loyalty to the brand and a greater likelihood that the believers in that brand will stick around. Best of all, this loyalty tends to empower your customers to encourage others to join the brand's community. This is true whether you manage a major packaged-goods company or a barbershop.

What does all this have to do with social media? The Internet is populated by a growing number of social-media platforms that are expanding their community of users. When you see your brand as a community, social-media platforms, given their immediacy and popularity, might enhance your efforts to make and reinforce your brand promise among a growing group of potential brand advocates. Think of it as old-fashioned word-of-mouth marketing—at warp speed. But before you hit the "engage" button, it's essential that you plot your course to avoid flying straight into some nasty black hole.

Here are some fundamentals to follow when navigating your way through any social-media investment:

Know your destination

Social media can be useful for achieving any number of branding objectives, from overall awareness to direct response to a timely offer. But, like any tool, social media can't do everything. Establishing objectives is priority No. 1. If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. So, be clear about the results you want, because it affects the resources that will be required and the time frame that may be involved to get you to your happy place.



Know your brand

The next order of business is to get a solid handle on what your brand stands for and what its essential promises of benefit are. Clarity on this issue is critical, because it brings focus and purpose to the content you want to share online—and creating or linking people to relevant content is a core part of any social-media effort. (More on this below.) Keep your brand promises to one page—or even an eloquent paragraph, if possible—and use simple, easy-to-remember language.

Circulate this “brand vision” to as many people in your organization as is practical, and get some dialogue going.

This exercise will be particularly relevant if you plan to enlist your employees in generating content for your social-media initiative. If they know what the brand is all about, there’s less likelihood they’ll post content on blogs, Facebook or Twitter that is inconsistent with your brand’s core promises (“off-brand”) or, worse, post content that is offensive (“offside”).

Know why your customers are loyal

Understanding why your customers are loyal to your brand also will help direct your social-media effort. First, their loyalty certainly validates the promises you make—and how well you’re keeping them. That can lead to endorsements or testimonials from your customers. Social-media platforms like Facebook are ideally suited to this kind of customer feedback because users can post comments directly to your page. Second, knowing more about your customers’ attitudes will help inform your social-media content. For example, if they feel your product has a host of great features, you can develop and post content that explains how best to use those features.

Third, a goal of social media is to encourage and expand the conversations you’re having with your key audiences, such as customers. Knowing what your clients want to talk about, proactively developing content that responds to their interests and keeping that content fresh is essential to building a larger, more loyal following.

Prepare for a long journey

Even though social media offers a sense of immediacy with respect to posting content, that doesn’t mean the results you’re seeking will happen overnight. Like any branding initiative, using social media requires consistent effort and equally consistent investment over the mid- to long term.

One essential behaviour you’ll need to adopt is diligence with regard to your online community. When you invite conversations, don’t be surprised if people want to talk all of the time. So, be responsive to the comments and feedback you’re receiving through your social-media platforms. This is a management function called moderation. Just don’t be moderate about your effort—it can be a full-time gig.



Can you do the Google?

Search engines such as Google have almost become a default setting for a lot of people's online behaviour these days. It's the first place many of us go to find out just about anything, even before we go to your website. Presumably, you have a website, which means search engines can, in theory, find it if someone types in a search word or phrase associated with your product or service.

A key aspect of successful online media investments, including social media, is search-engine optimization. Essentially, it involves crafting your online content so that search engines can find you easily when people start looking around for products or services like yours. Developing a strategy to

optimize and link all of your content from all of your various online platforms, including social media, can require a significant learning effort and plenty of money. Trying to be a do-it-yourselfer is not wise. Get professional help—which you can find using (wait for it!) a search engine.

Nothing works alone

No single medium ever gets the whole job done. Big, famous interactive websites use TV ads to drive visitors to their URLs. Coordinated use of social media, with other traditional print, broadcast and out-of-home advertising, creates awareness that your brand is active in cyberspace. This is particularly important if you're planning a promotion or sweepstakes that consumers can access and participate in online.

Rinse and repeat

Every investment in brand communication benefits from review, adjustment and improved redeployment. Given that the world is changing all the time, you can't just "set it and forget it" when it comes to social media.

And, remember, sustainable brand-building will always be about making promises you can keep so you can build relationships that last. It may not be as exciting as first-time sex, but when you invest branding dollars wisely, you can reduce the possibility of getting screwed.



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