



Social networking Gives PR pros direct access to customers, prospects.

Not too long ago, the most important business tool required for the practice of public relations was a well-stocked Rolodex. PR professionals simply picked up the phone or e-mailed reporters and editors, pitched a story and, with a little luck, an article or broadcast segment followed. However, like it has with nearly every profession, the Internet has changed the game.

Certainly media relations has remained a critical aspect of public relations campaigns – you can't very well get a story in a publication without pitching the reporter or the editor – but the Internet, and specifically social networking, has created a whole new avenue in which to reach potential customers.

A social network is an online community where people share interests and exchange ideas. Some of the most common social networks include MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. And, while you may regard social networks as places where high school and

college kids go to trade gossip and post photos of themselves in various states of sobriety, in fact, according to a June 2008 Conference Board report, online social networking now engages millions of consumers, and one out of every four people online visits social networking sites. A study released by online measurement firm, Comscore, last year reported that the fastest growing segment of Facebook was the 25-34 age demographic.

For PR practitioners, social networking sites have opened up an entire new avenue to reach consumers directly without the filter of the news media and without spending a single dollar. Social networking can provide you with a captured audience of like-minded people – a demographic dream come true.

That's all well and fine you say, but how does it work? Say, for example, you run a backpacking tour business. First, you set up a free profile about your business on Facebook, MySpace

and other social networking sites. Next, locate your existing customers who have profiles on these sites and invite them to "friend" you or become a fan of your business (Facebook even allows you to upload the e-mail addresses of your friends and/or customers, and it will tell you if they have an existing profile). Each time someone "friends" you, his or her friends will be notified. Additionally, you'll be able to see all of their friends and you can invite them to visit your profile, and each time one of them adds you as a friend, all of their friends will be notified. Your friend list will grow exponentially, and anytime you want you can reach out to your contacts with a note or post that might interest them. Perhaps you've just added new backpacking tours to the Grand Canyon or are running a special to hike the Superstitions. Or maybe you found a great article on the Internet about the best new hiking gear and want to share.

The next step requires some outside-the-box thinking. On social networking

sites, people with like interests gather in groups. A search of groups on Facebook for “backpacking” returned more than 500 groups, many of which have thousands of members. Simply pick the groups that seem most appropriate to you and join them – then introduce yourself to the other members and include a link back to your business profile. Essentially what you have uncovered are qualified leads. That being said, being overtly commercial will turn people off, so be nice, offer advice, and soft-sell your business.

Beyond Facebook, MySpace and the other major social networking sites, there are also hundreds of social networks catered to people with similar interests or backgrounds. Wiki-

pedia has a great list of mainstream social networking sites, and a Google search will bring up sites for people with all sorts of interests. Ning (www.ning.com), for example, allows users to create their own social networks. A search on Ning for “backpacking” returned hundreds of user-generated social networks for people interested in backpacking.

The lesson for PR practitioners and business owners is that you can reach customers directly through social networking. With a little effort, and some smart surfing, you can even grow a huge base of raving fans for your business – and we all know the best way to generate new business is through personal referrals. ■

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SHRINK RAPPERS

By Glenn Zimmer

