

Social media for business: an aid not a hindrance

With more and more people Facebooking and tweeting from work, traditional businesses are desperate to understand how these platforms impact on the way people work.

 By Wayne Levine 22 Jul 2013

Will they affect productivity? Should they be controlled? Or are they tools that should be embraced to enhance business communication to external and internal stakeholder audiences?

There are 850m active users on Facebook every month, while Twitter boasts over 465m accounts. According to a press release distributed by LinkedIn earlier this year, this business social network has over 150m members - with two more joining every second.

It shouldn't be a case of 'young vs old'

What businesses need to understand is that the majority of younger-generation employees are accustomed to connecting with friends and family via platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, they expect to be able to do so during working hours. Prohibiting these employees from having a job and socialising at the same time could result in a lost employee.

On the other hand, there are the older generations who did not grow up with Facebook and other digital real-time communication tools. For them, the idea of simultaneously working and socialising is hard to accept. How do companies successfully address the expectations of both parties in a way that will maximise both employee productivity and retention?

It shouldn't be a case of 'young vs old'. Life is about mindset and not about into which generation you fit. Social media has introduced several new channels and dimensions to communication and interaction, which can only be a good thing - provided the tools are used sensibly.

It's a communication tool

It wasn't too long ago that businesses and organisations faced tough challenges in inter- and intra-company communications - a result of the complexity and cost of information sharing. Then along came the World Wide Web, enabling the adaptation of Internet technology within an intra-organisational space. Soon, intranet technology was introduced, opening up a wealth of communication possibilities. Today, as an extension of what intranets have to offer, social media supports and even enhances inter- and intra-company communication.

The benefits of social media within an office:

- Increased channels of communication. In business, there is a handful of communication channels, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls and e-mails. But points from meetings and phone calls often get forgotten, and looking for information in a sea of emails can be challenging. By using social media tool channels of communication are increased, allowing colleagues to send a tweet or instant message and get response right away, resulting in increased efficiency.

- Increased collaboration. It's been said that two heads are better than one. So three heads would be even better, right? When a team is encouraged to collaborate on projects and share workloads, the outcome will be greater than an employee could achieve alone. Social media provides an easily accessible platform for collaboration, supporting immediate responses from team-mates based in different offices.
- Staying in touch with thought leaders. If social media enhances the overall effectiveness of communication and collaboration amongst colleagues, these platforms can surely increase the reach of professional communication and collaboration to increase the overall effectiveness of a business. If colleagues already have connections built within their social profiles, allow them to leverage their networks for the professional gain of the business. Encouraging employees to communicate and collaborate with thought leaders in the industry, staying up to date on the latest news and connecting with knowledgeable people, will benefit any business.
- Recruitment. HR can leverage off social media by tapping into potential recruits. This type of headhunting is about engaging with social media users and using social media tools to learn about candidates. LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter have over 500m combined users. That equals a lot of potential talent. These 'job-centric' social media platforms dramatically reduce the search time for potential candidates.

Social media is here to stay and to grow. Organisations that do not embrace these platforms will find themselves excluded from a world that is rapidly evolving due to constant technological innovation. It's crucial for businesses, and companies who provide services to businesses, to take advantage of the opportunities that these platforms present.

Integrating social media into the workplace

An important benefit of social media for businesses is that it lets customers and potential clients know about the company on a personal level. Clients expect a relationship with their supplier. Being accessible on social media sites helps clients and customers feel connected.

Sites like Facebook help bring people to company websites. When searching for a new supplier or service provider, potential clients and customers will look for a company presence on the Internet first. Facebook is another way customers can find the service they're looking for. Most corporate Facebook pages lead viewers to the official company website, where more information and contact can be sourced.

Social media platforms are effective networking tools. They give potential clients and customers an opportunity to get to know the business and its people before coming to the office for a new customer experience. Several companies have gained new clients simply because of their Facebook page.

Develop a clear strategy - and commit to social media

If a company is going to deploy social media platforms like a Facebook fan page for example, the business needs to be committed to it and understand that the page needs constant attention. When a member of the public interacts with a company Facebook page, they expect a response.

Companies need to embrace technology as an enabler in the business. They need to develop a clear strategy as to what the objects are. Companies rarely develop a clear social media and online strategy, which requires a change in thought, action and deeds right across the company. This is why the implementation of social media so often falls short in its purpose or fails outright.

Companies should employ a good content manager for their social media platforms.

A key challenge that business owners will need to navigate, is striking a balance between traditional business management and the integration of social media. The correct management of these platforms lies in the ability to draw a line between professional and personal use of social media. If business owners are concerned about employees abusing the inclusion of social media in the workplace then poor business management is to blame.

ABOUT WAYNE LEVINE

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