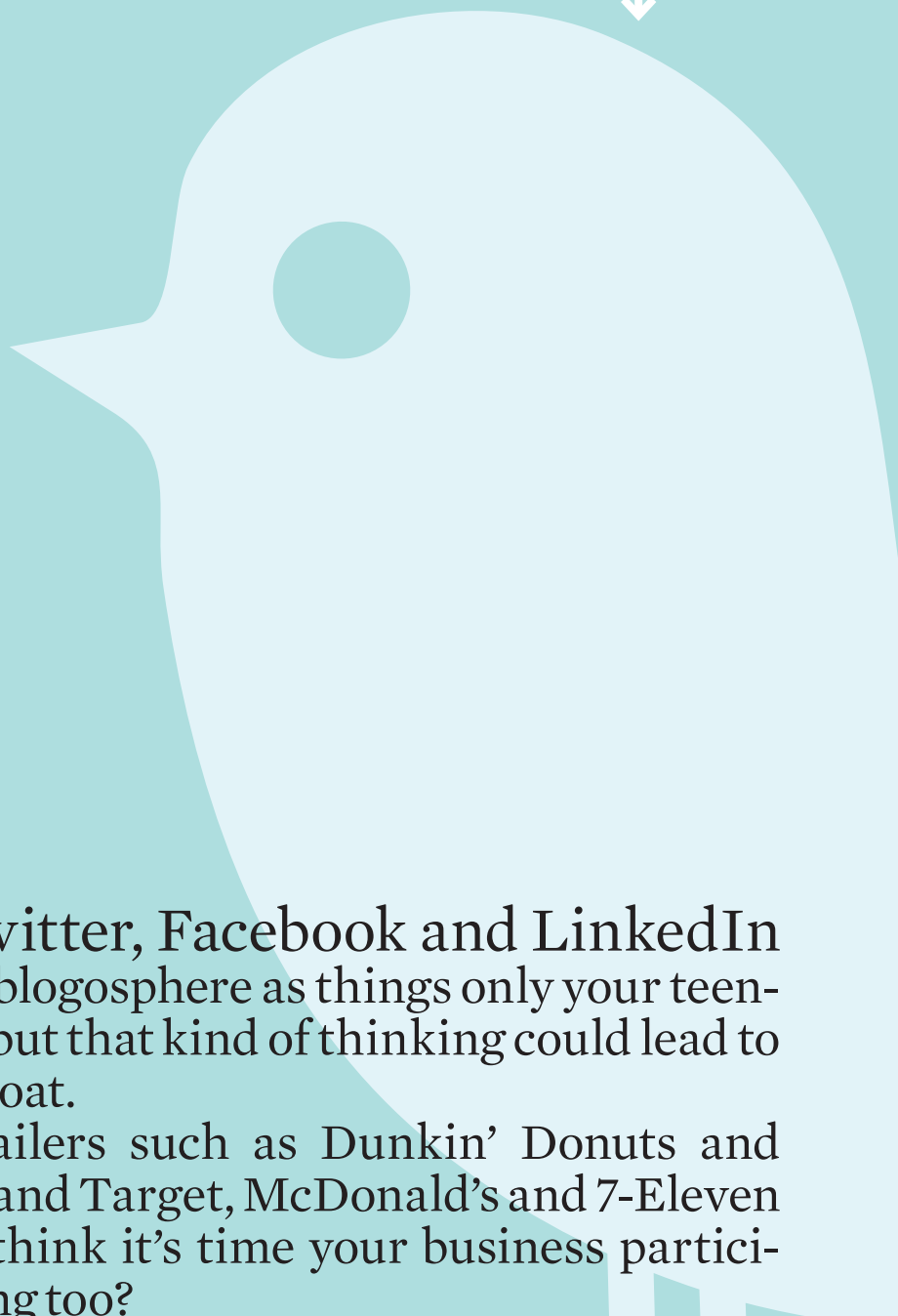
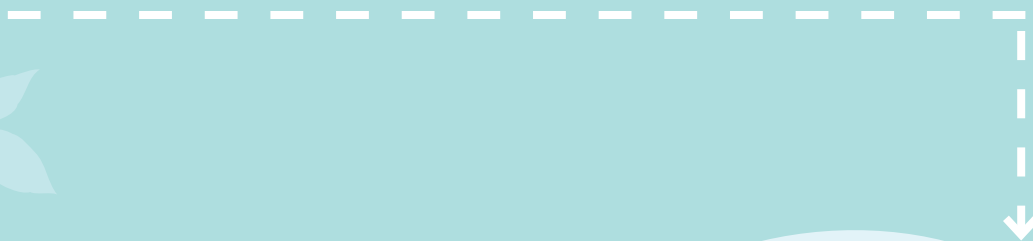


world wide networking

Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have rapidly gained popularity with your customers. Are you part of the conversation, or have you been left out?

BY AMANDA BALTAZAR





You may dismiss Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and the ever-expanding blogosphere as things only your teenager would understand, but that kind of thinking could lead to you missing the virtual boat.

With mainstream retailers such as Dunkin' Donuts and Trader Joe's on Twitter, and Target, McDonald's and 7-Eleven on Facebook, don't you think it's time your business participated in social networking too?



Enter the Blogosphere

Blogs are gaining credibility with consumers. In fact, a recent survey by BuzzLogic, a San Francisco-based company that tracks blog and social media conversations, shows that monthly blog readership has grown by 300 percent in the past four years. The study also showed that readers are very influenced by blog content for purchasing decisions.

A May 2008 report from eMarketer counted 94.1 million U.S. blog readers in 2007, which accounts for half of all Internet users. And if you're in any doubt as to whether this is catching on, check out the web page for the White House and you'll find the first presidential blog (www.whitehouse.gov/blog).

Media, Pennsylvania-based Wawa — which has a Facebook page with more than 111,000 fans — has two blogs: one for employees and one for customers, run by CEO Howard Stoeckel.

It's never too late to start your own blog, to help control the information that's out there about your company. "Blogs truly are becoming a media tool that influences people to buy," said Valerie Combs, vice president of corporate communications for BuzzLogic. "Convenience store operators should understand the conversations that exist around their brand, their competitors and convenience stores in general."

BuzzLogic's recent survey showed that 39 percent of consumers trust what they read in blogs, so it's important when blogging to ensure that you truly engage people when you blog and not just use it as a corporate or marketing mouthpiece, said Combs. It should also be updated regularly and be written in a casual, approachable way.

Combs advised using a couple of bloggers — one with a marketing background and good communication skills; and a second who's customer-centric and intimately understands the company.

"In order to effectively market," she added, "[bloggers] need to get into the heart and mind of your customers. It's a way to connect and be part of the conversation."

And once you've got a blog, don't let it sit there. Update it at least a couple of times a week and get the word out. Make sure your blog is linked to other influential bloggers to increase your chances of getting your point of view noticed and linked to. This is a great way to get more exposure via search engines, she explained.

You can hear opinions from your customers, communicate and develop relationships with them, and further differentiate your brand — especially now that other convenience retailers are still scratching their heads about social media.

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and MySpace are where people — and companies — post everything from the minutiae of their day ("I'm drinking coffee.") to bigger events ("Joe's Mart is offering free coffee all day Saturday."). The sites also allow friends — or customers — a chance to instantly reply to a post and voice their opinion.

Create a Fan Base

Younger customers, especially those dubbed Generation Y (and consisting of around five million Americans age 13 to 28), likely don't remember a time without technology. According to the report "The Adults of Generation Y in the U.S.," from Rockville, Maryland-based Packaged Facts, Gen Y even considers eating "a deeply wired activity."

The report adds that because of their constant need to be entertained, this age group regularly uses social networking for food-related projects, from downloading menus to finding and ordering food. In fact, they are three times more likely than the general population to visit social networking sites.

And, according to the study "Convenience Teens, Building Loyalty With the Next Generation," conducted for the NACS/Coca-Cola Leadership Council by Clickin Research, teens are valuable because they're your customer of tomorrow and will be worth even more when they have earning power. They also refuel their cars much more frequently than older customers (10 to 20 times per month — about 14 percent more than customers over age 30), giving you more opportunity to draw them into your store.

And it's not just the youngsters using these sites. According to comScore MediaMetrix, as of August 2008, Facebook



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— DOROTHY ALLAN

had 41 million unique users in the United States and MySpace had 75.1 million. Even President Obama has a Facebook page, perhaps the biggest indicator that social media is a serious business venture nowadays.

In fact, more than 70 percent of Americans age 15 to 34 actively use online social networks, according to data from Fox Interactive Media, published in a report by Visible Technologies. Indeed, social networks are causing a fundamental shift in the way people interact with each other.

“If you can get people to connect with you [through social networking], they can build you into their daily life because people look at these sites all the time,” said Dorothy Allan, senior vice president of retail strategy for Tracy Locke marketing consultancy in Dallas, Texas.

Build Your Brand

According to Allan, convenience retailers could use social networking sites to post changes about their stores or a fresh foodservice menu, endorse special promotions and elicit customers’ honest feedback. For a business “it’s like a 360-degree review process: You’re going to get the good and the bad [feedback], but the bad is good because you can learn how to change,” she explained.

Allan pointed to how Verizon, for example, is using this concept to its advantage. The cell phone company has employees dedicated to watching its Twitter posts. If there’s a comment from a disgruntled customer, Verizon immediately contacts the poster and tries to fix the problem. “So you can either lead, follow or get out of the way,” said Allan. “People want some intimacy with brands and it’s not just about the sale.”

“The jury is still out, but we recognize the power of the Internet,” said Mike Thornbrugh, manager of public and government affairs for QuikTrip convenience stores, which established a Facebook page a couple of years ago. If the store hadn’t created a place for customers to air their concerns and praise, he

explained, these comments could have been scattered all over the Internet.

“We’re curious about these things and instead of going to several Web sites we can go to one place and find out what people are saying,” said Thornbrugh. “It’s also fun for employees and helps them emotionally connect with our brand.”

Social networking allows retailers to be a fly on the wall, according to Allen Adamson, managing director of brand consulting firm Landor Associates in San Anselmo, California, and author of *BrandDigital*.

Social networks are like a digital backyard fence where people have conversations about things that are on their mind, Adamson said. “So a convenience store should listen and observe because consumers are sharing what’s really important to them.”

One mistake that’s easy to make is not listening properly, said Adamson. Companies often interrupt these virtual discussions to talk about special offers and use the opportunity for some direct marketing, when really they should just listen. “The better you know your customer, the better your business,” he pointed out.

John Paulson, CEO of G2 Communications, a strategic planning and public relations company in Palo Alto, California, agrees. “Social networking allows you to have a more finely tuned ear to your customer base, and it allows you to hone yourself to be relevant to your communities.”

Peer-to-peer advocacy remains critical to any company, he added. “Social networking only amplifies [that] and it’s a tool to make people aware of the good and bad things about your brand. Word of mouth is actually the most powerful marketing tool anybody can hope for. It’s just that now, if someone says something, there are *thousands* of people listening. But thousands of people can also listen to your response.”

It does take a certain degree of comfort to let the world hear everything about your brand, agreed Paulson, but

he's not sure it's possible to prevent people talking. "And at least social networking gives you the chance to respond, too. It's a dialog."

The important thing for users of social networks is to know when to talk and when to listen. These sites offer excellent opportunities for both, and both are too important to disregard.

To Tweet, or Not to Tweet?

The tough question is, what's the best social networking platform to use? Allan suggests Twitter, because people use it most regularly. "From a business perspective, if you can get people to follow you on Twitter, you can influence them and send out specials, for example. It gives you the ability to be top of mind."

Twitter is perhaps the most real-time social networking site. It's been described as a micro-blog, and users typically write short, regular, updates about what they're doing. For a convenience store this could be as simple as "Half price sodas today between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m." Each update is known as a "tweet."

But bear in mind the demographics of your best customers. MySpace attracts a younger audience and provides less control over what content is seen, while Facebook gives you more control over who sees what you post.

The sites go through fads and phases, said Adamson, who expects there to be some consolidation in coming years. "Technology changes every six months or so, so pick your network and stick with it." You should also continually explore other technologies and keep abreast of what's out there and what's new, he added.

And how should you let customers know that you're accessible via social networking? Simply putting up signage in stores directing them to your profile can work, said Adamson. "The trick is connecting your physical world to your virtual world."

Other options include highlighting your social network on your Web site or on in-store receipts.

Track the Buzz

Social networking online can be as time-consuming as attending events in person and networking, but there are now companies that can be your virtual eyes and ears.

Visible Technologies in Seattle, Washington, automatically tracks all social media conversations about your company, gathering them from across the Internet.

"We've found that a huge amount of conversations — 70 percent to 75 percent — are just mentions, the things people don't care about, and what they need to find are the people who are passionate about their company in a good way or a bad way," said Blake Cahill, the company's senior vice president of marketing.

Visible Technologies filters out basic mentions to get to the meaty comments that consumers are making about a specific company. It then passes these on to the client, which could be anyone from Microsoft to Hormel to your convenience store.

"The point of social media is that people are showing their passions online and the brand is less in control of the message," said Cahill. "Before, the brand controlled it, but the Internet changed that and opened things up. But it poses real opportunities for those brands to listen and have a 24/7 focus group."

So convenience stores that track what is said about them both reap the praise and conduct damage control with unsatisfied shoppers, ensuring the best customer service.

While Visible Technologies can gather the data that's out there on your company, Boulder, Colorado-based Leximancer can analyze that data to give you a snapshot of what customers are saying about your store.

Companies are finding this is easier than focus groups, said Leximancer CEO Neil Hartley. "It's a much more real-time response from social media," he said. "And it's an unbiased, unmediated conversation."

But what should a convenience store do if people are not talking about it? Get the conversation going, advised Hartley. He points to Spud Bros., a French fry restaurant in Boulder. "They use Twitter to start conversations, build local community and give offers," he said.

For example, the company sent the promotional messages to their Twitter subscribers to advise them of new offers: "Text 'FRIES' to 303.847.5995 to receive a special offer from Spuds!" and "Spud Bros. now open at 8am daily AND serving Fair Trade Organic coffee and Mighty Leaf hot tea."

Convenience stores, he said, can use social media as a way of engaging with the community. "If you understand what people are saying about your store, you can interact with those people. The consumer demands it and wants to talk about what's important to him or her."

Posts on social media sites are unprompted so any convenience store not reading what's written about them is missing an opportunity, said Hartley. "It can be a [store's] listening post on the world."

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Make sure your staff can pass on the information, too, said Allan, and put stickers on your products to highlight your social media presence. "But make sure the benefit of being a fan is clear," she advised. "Let [customers] know they'll see updated menus, daily meal deals, mark-downs, etc."

And get everyone involved. Verizon may have employees dedicated to monitoring social networking, but everyone in your company should understand what's on your customers' minds, said Adamson. **NACS**

Amanda Baltazar is a Washington state-based freelance journalist who's getting addicted to Facebook.



DID YOU KNOW?

The NACS Group at LinkedIn has more than 300 members. Join us at: www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=1776505.

Constant Comment

The difference between all these new technologies and the communications of earlier days is that now information is more timely, and often tailored to the recipient.

Mobile Posse, a Washington, D.C.-based firm, offers convenience retailers another way to connect with customers and potential customers, with what it calls "idle screen advertising." The company works with cellular network providers to send offers and information to customers of retailers, restaurants and other service industries. Clients include McDonald's, Taco Bell and Walmart.

The way it works, according to Jolene Wiggins, director of marketing and communications for Mobile Posse, is that when a customer's cell phone screen is not in use, information may pop up on it. This information is tailored to each client by time and their geographic location.

At 8:00 a.m., they might receive the weather forecast, at 11:00 a.m. a coupon for a local restaurant, and at 3:00 p.m. a suggestion of a place to dine that evening, she said.

When these messages arrive, customers can click one button to view, one to ignore or another to view the information later. Including delayed click throughs, close to 40 percent of receivers look at the information and offers sent to them, said Wiggins.

Convenience stores could use this technology to send information to all their customers, customers in specific geographic areas or at certain times of the day. Imagine sending the message, "Hot coffee — just made! — for 69 cents" to the cell phones of customers in a 10-mile radius of your store.

There is no cost to customers to receive these messages, and Mobile Posse works closely with retailers who sign up to develop ideas on how to market and advertise this service.