

Facebook

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Should your company have a Facebook page?

Do you have a choice? Facebook started as a way for college friends to get to know each other, but it departed academia a while ago. Many well known and not so popular brands have Facebook pages -- whether they know it or not. Friends and fans have put up pages using brand names and logos.

Consider company D (purposely left nameless). Dealers of this company's branded goods have Facebook pages dedicated to company D with as many as 80,000 fans. Hundreds of individuals also have put up Facebook sites using Company D's name.

Or, consider Company X. Company X has an active Facebook page with a wall filled with press releases and information that are probably posted on its web site as well. X claims 779 fans. How many are employees, how many clients and how many people looking for jobs?

Company Y claimed 297 fans at the time of writing. However, beyond links to the firm's web site and a brief statement about the company, there is little of interest for friends and fans. There were only two items on its wall, one a photo posted five months before. The company apparently has little idea of what to do with its site and is making no effort to keep it up.

On the other hand, Company Z, a major auto manufacturer, had 39,600 friends of one its autos at the time of writing. This active site has fans, employees, critics and potential purchasers posting on the company's wall. However, the firm makes and sells more than two million vehicles a year. Its Facebook presence represents less than two percent of its total market. How much energy and effort should the company spend to interact with less than two percent?

Facebook basics

Using Facebook is no different than using any other medium. A practitioner should follow a disciplined approach that starts with monitoring and testing then moves to engagement, if appropriate. Facebook like other online media can be interactive. Conversing with Facebook users, however, is a major step.

Of the businesses above, some could do without a presence on Facebook: Others are there because friends and fans have put them there. If friends and fans have established a presence and are using a company's trademarks and

logos, should a company manage its brand? Thus far, there have been two answers:

- **Answer 1:** Laissez faire. Several companies are following this path on Facebook today and are making no effort to rein in friends and fans. It doesn't appear to have harmed their brand image – not yet, anyway. A practitioner's worry is what might happen if friends and fans for some reason become critics or enemies.
- **Answer 2:** Manage. Give people information that reflects the company's brand image and targeted perception. Encourage conversation and engagement under the company's banner.

Brand and perception management in a social medium like Facebook channels user energies rather than restricts them. One could police trademark and brand violations, but why? Doing that won't stop discussion and posting, but it might make enemies out of a brand's biggest supporters and friends.

Facebook brand and perception management is a continuum from passive to active:

- A **passive approach** gives fans something to engage with – pictures, videos, press releases, discussion forums, etc., but the company does not interact with them. Most of the company's examined for this essay appear to do this.
- A **slightly less passive approach** encourages friends and fans to post their own pictures, videos and comments, but the company still does not interact with them. Several companies do this.
- A **partially active approach** corrects errors but otherwise allows discussion to proceed. This includes active monitoring of friends and fans but minimal engagement and only in cases where there is clearly erroneous information posted on the "wall" or in a discussion forum. I could not find any company doing this.
- A **fully active and engaged approach** has designated company employees conversing with fans and actively posting materials on the Facebook pages. None of the companies I reviewed were doing this.

Facebook and micro-segmentation

The decline of mass media has coincided with the rise of micro-segmentation. Companies no longer look for groups in hundreds of thousands but in hundreds or dozens because it is cost-effective to do on the internet. The future of brand marketing and of PR may be more micro-segmentation than mass, especially for large brand marketers. On Facebook, companies are reaching micro-segments

cost effectively through repurposing marketing and PR content. The companies post press releases, product photos, lists of events, videos and other archival media to their Facebook pages for fans to view and use. While this appears to be successful, there are limits to micro-segmentation, however.

- Individuals in micro-segments are not necessarily average customers or clients, and they might not reflect the interests and opinions of average customers or clients. They are a minority who choose to be vocal as friends, fans or critics. While one should monitor a Facebook micro-segment, a practitioner also should be careful to check its views against that of a larger company populace.
- Because micro-segments are vocal, they can exercise power over a brand out of proportion to their size. The perception of their presence is larger than reality but it is still hard for companies not to take notice.
- The cost of interacting with micro-segments might be larger than what it appears to be. Interaction is time-consuming and not something that can be done occasionally.

Monitor

Before making any decision about Facebook, monitor what is being said on Facebook already. It might be surprising. But, do more than scanning for what fans and friends might be posting. Look at competitors as well to see what is posted about them. A competitor of Company D, for example, had already established a Facebook page that claimed more than 2,000 fans.

Monitoring provides a good indication of what friends and fans are thinking and their interests. In some cases, there is a penchant for posting photos, in others, discussions about products or a combination of personal and company-focused conversation. The number of friends and fans and the extent of their involvement provide a gauge of activity that is likely to occur if a company has an official presence on Facebook.

Clarify

A practitioner should clarify the value of being on Facebook before jumping in. For example:

- Does the company's target audience go to Facebook to find information? In the case of Company D and its competitor, purchasers of their heavy machinery products would not go to Facebook to find out about them. In the case of Company Z, posters were owners of its autos and active purchasers who traded information on the Facebook page.

- How important is it to relate to Facebook friends and fans? If fans and friends are essential audiences, as in the case of Company Z, there is a strong justification for cultivating them. If Facebook posters are non-essential audiences, there is less reason to do so, but one might still pay them attention for ancillary benefits they provide. For example, Major League Baseball has little to do with collectors of baseball memorabilia but collecting is a huge market that depends on the major leagues and their players. Major League Baseball might find a presence on Facebook useful. Railroad enthusiasts photograph trains but will never buy an engine or railroad car, but they help maintain a positive perception of the rail business.
- What kind of credibility do friends and fans place in Facebook? Is it a place to chat or a place to learn? Scanning postings is a quick way to answer this question.
- Do other media reach the Facebook audience just as well or are the friends and fans only there?
- Are you willing to expend the time and effort to make a Facebook presence successful? It makes little sense to use a medium that you do not plan to support actively. A Facebook page quickly becomes a dead spot, as was the case for Company Y. A company's lack of interest is communicated quickly and a page is of no value to fans and friends. A company should ask what social media, if any, it wants to use – blogging, Twittering, discussion boards, etc. and have good reason for its choices.
- What is success on Facebook? Measures for success might not be defined numerically but they should be known. For example, Company Z's success is maintaining enthusiasm for its auto that will eventually lead to sales. One might not be able to correlate sales with Facebook fans and friends but the positive word-of-mouth on the site is a support to the company's marketing efforts. Company D and its competitor may have little need for the positive word-of-mouth from friends and fans who will do little more than take and post photos of their products. On the other hand, by establishing a Facebook page, they might provide a central forum for fans to talk about them. Measures for success also should provide for failure. If a Facebook page is not successful in attracting friends and fans, one should have little reluctance to take it down.

Without clear answers to these questions, chances are high that you will create a Facebook page of low interest and few communications possibilities.

What to do

Focus on media that you know you will support and develop over time. If Facebook is one of those media, develop and execute a plan to use it well.

Understand that frequency of communications is important to keep a Facebook page fresh just as it is important to keep a blog alive and vital. A plan then should define the content that will go on to a Facebook page and the mechanics of how that will be done on a regular basis. This is where communicators often fall down. They are working in too many media to service them all equally well, so they end by serving them all poorly. A Facebook plan should stipulate who exactly will be responsible for the page and what he or she will do to keep a page current and growing in fans and friends. The plan also should stipulate the evolution of a Facebook page over time from a passive stance to one that becomes semi- or fully active. It should consider engaging in active conversation because social media are best when interactive. On the other hand, the plan should have a clear idea of the cost of such interactivity in terms of time. A communicator can rarely keep up conversation with friends and fans as a second or third activity in the portfolio of duties.

If your company's interest heart is not in Facebook, don't feel you are forced to go into it, or into any social medium, for that matter. Chances are you won't harm your communication strategy by stepping back. Some companies will find Facebook of immediate use. Others will determined that Facebook achieves little from an effective communications point of view.

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