Social media marketing may be complex but ignore it at your own peril

10 Social Media for Business Reality Checks

A lasting, frankly stunning shift is taking place that will change the way business is conducted. A major aspect of this shift is in the way businesses communicate with consumers. Despite consumer migration towards different digital socializing, online researching, and virtual purchasing behaviours, far too many companies are essentially ignoring the changes that are taking place.

by **Brian Rotsztein**

Even long time mainstays have been caught up by not keeping up. Video giant Blockbuster ignored the new technology and had Netflix decimate its business. Photography giant Kodak failed to capture profitable market share as it watched the world switch from film-based cameras to digital technology. Both were very foreseeable outcomes.

Companies need to adapt to shifting demographics and rapidly changing consumer behaviour rather than hoping they will simply go away. The most significant shift in recent memory has been the quick adoption of social media platforms, meaning that the way companies do business must also change. With that in mind, here are 10 reality checks that you might not want to hear but must face if you're going to use social media for business.

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1 **Companies not using social media will die off.**

It's no secret that in order to generate new business, marketing should take place where consumers will take note of it. Yet still, over the last 15 years, I've witnessed a surprising number of businesses that absolutely refused to go online. I attribute this to two main reasons. First, they're used to doing things the "old" way and since that's what always worked for them, they haven't felt the need to change. The second reason is more primal: Fear. Not only is the Internet a world unto itself, marketing in this new area (especially the social media realm) can be scary and requires a huge shift in thinking about marketing. That shift is a step that so many businesses won't make in time to save themselves. Companies not using some form of social media, whether a popular platform like Facebook or a location-based gaming app like Foursquare will die off. Companies should embrace new media and the nuances that come with it, not fear it. Mistaking this trend for a fad would be a false start.

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2 **Quantity Vs. Quality.**

Experientially and anecdotally, I can attest to a trend in the use of Facebook business pages. I hear how a company started the page, got a few dozen "Likes" from friends, relatives, and some of their clients, and then they hit a brick wall because they don't know how to get more people to "Like" their page. One common request is to buy "Likes" and "let's get those numbers up!" First, this is against Facebook's terms of service, but is possible, though risky because your page can be shut down. In any event, the essential problem here is not logistical, it's realistic. You can buy a thousand followers but do they really care about your business? Are they going to interact with you? Will they comment on Facebook to generate a buzz and more interest in your business? Not likely, and the reason is simple. There's a major divide between quality and quantity in the social media world. More is not necessarily better. Thirty consumers who are passionate about your product are better for your business than a hundred who couldn't care less. Passion is what causes momentum in social media.

3 **Social Media does not exist for your company to increase sales.**

It's not about the platform, it's about the interactions, the feedback, and the fun people have on those platforms. Most of all, it's about behaviour. Individuals use social media as an extension of the physical world. More specifically, they use these platforms like a playground where they can socialize, collaborate and share whatever is meaningful to them. Social media is not about the social, mobile, digital or virtual technology itself. Those are just the structures that allow the playing (behaviours) to take place. Businesses that approach people who are playing must understand the nuances of what they are doing. Social media platforms were not created for businesses to sell things. They exist as properties where people come to spend time, that businesses just happen to be taking advantage of because that is where their customers are. So when businesses interact with consumers in the social media world, they must understand what is expected and acceptable. These are real world interactions and
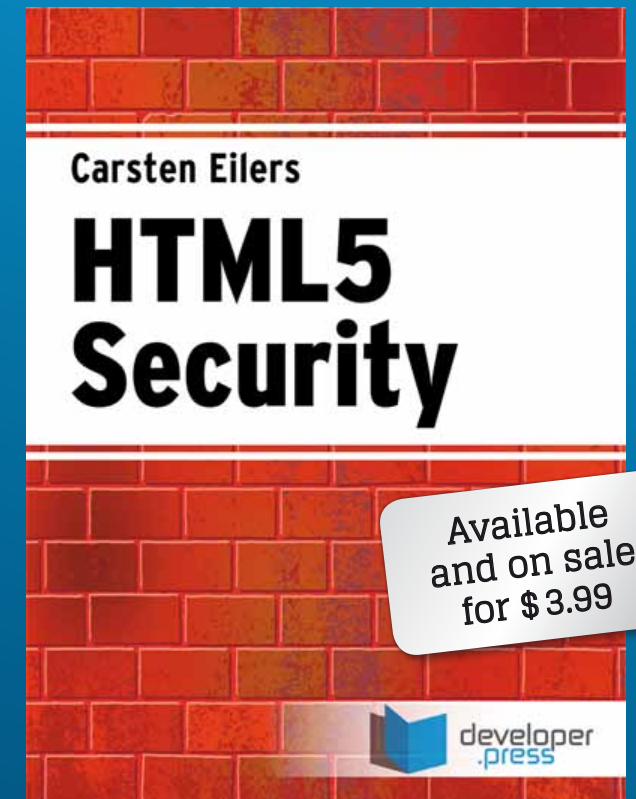
most people do not want to be sold to on a continual basis. If you believe that as a business you must join a site and try the "sell, sell, sell" attitude, you will find that most consumers will be turned off. Positive interactions with customers in a physical store translate directly to positive online interactions because it is essentially the same thing. People find interruptions in their play very annoying and you don't want to be the source of their negative feelings. As a vendor, you must communicate with a good attitude online and not bombard people with your message. Provide content that consumers may find useful but understand that the purpose of social media is beyond just your business.

4 ROI is there. It's just more complicated.

The traditional business model was a one-way, top-down, process. Companies told consumers how great their products were and consumers bought them based on that information. Companies knew that if they spent X dollars on a TV ad, they'd get Y in return. It's a much more complex system now, making it increasingly difficult for businesses to assess their return on investment. Consumers now talk to each other, as well as to companies. Companies not speaking to consumers directly are missing opportunities. Social media platforms provide a playground for consumers to play. Consumers don't necessarily want to be sold to continuously. In order to reach them, businesses must join the discussions and add value (by providing useful content). That value will indirectly come back to them in the form of real-life focus groups (i.e., product feedback), improved customer service (e.g., faster processing time, real-time customer support, decrease costs), and increased lead generation and sales, among others. Social media ROI is more indirect but if you know what you're doing, it can be just as good.

5 The line between customer service and marketing is getting blurred.

There is an entirely new way to handle customer service: Out in the open. Many companies have begun adapting to the new reality and are taking service inquiries via social media platforms seriously. For example, they keep a watchful eye by monitoring activity on Twitter where people complain about companies publicly. Smart companies will address those complaints where they were made, out in the open, with sincerity. You would be amazed at the goodwill that creates. Increasingly, consumers will expect to use social media as a way to express their opinions, whether positive or negative, and regardless of whether your company is ready to handle it. Customer service is taking on a new meaning as individuals expect to be able to communicate with companies using social media. Companies who adopt policies to effectively reply to and work with clients will have a huge advantage in the marketplace. Along with the social points gained, this tactic can boost the effectiveness of the support delivered, given that a single answer can help multiple consumers at the same time.

6 Social is having a ubiquitous effect.

Within a few short years, more people will be using their mobile devices for everything from text to socializing to gaming to commerce on a global basis rather than desktop or laptop computers. Location-based social media is as close as your pocket during the day and bedside during the night. It's everywhere and going to continue to be everywhere. Companies ignoring these realities will lose out. Even though smartphones are being used more than ever before, I still continuously field calls from people asking for a desktop version of their website and who consider a mobile version as a nice-to-have. I don't think that will be the case in the next few years. Farsighted companies will ask for a mobile version, seeing it as important to their marketing strategy as a Yellow Pages listing seemed in the past. Social media, especially those that integrate well with mobility will feature prominently in the next few years. The term "SoLoMo" meaning Social, Local, Mobile is one to lookout for.

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7 Yes, it's more than Facebook and Twitter.

The basis of social media is the communication between people. It's not a particular product or service that large companies like Facebook or Twitter provide. Indeed, there are hundreds, if not thousands of variations to these platforms, ranging from location-based social media platforms such as Foursquare to photography-rich sites like Pinterest, to business-oriented sites like LinkedIn, Evite, WordPress, Google+, blogs and comment sections of unique, niche topics for popular idiosyncratic tastes. There is hardly a business that cannot find a suitable audience. And if there are exceptions then someone is probably building that platform now.

8 You're going to have to re-think how your departments interact. No more silos.

The typical or traditional view of departments in larger companies is that they are like silos on a farm. Whatever happens within one department is essentially independent of the others. Marketing cannot continue to work that way. A while back, I provided a multi-day

SEO training program and strategy consulting sessions to a one of the largest insurance companies in the US. The company had sent several representatives from each of four different departments (print marketing, online/web programming, etc.). Each group of individuals from the different departments claimed that specific parts of my workshop fell within their jurisdiction and ignored (to an extent) the other information that was presented. It was a large task to get them to work together. With social media, a coordinated effort is more important than ever. There needs to be more integration across company departments to get a consistent branding message out.

"Social media isn't replacing standard best practices. Look at the shift as a new iteration of marketing."

9 **It's easy because my neighbour's kid can do it.**
When I got into the web business in the 1990s, it was common to hear that someone's high school student son or daughter could build a website as they questioned the need to spend money on such an endeavour. Hearing that drove me nuts, if not only for the shear ignorance! These days, if your business doesn't have a website, it doesn't exist as far as consumers go. Now that Web 2.0 has emerged, history is repeating itself. Your neighbour's son or daughter could easily sign up for an account on Facebook but why waste the money, or so the saying goes. Unfortunately, their ability to help you ends there. You can drive a car but can you race one in the Indy 500? When you run a marketing campaign in the social media world, you

have to understand the process that you're getting involved in. You need to be able to look at the big picture or make a concerted effort toward strategic planning, idea generation, or implementation (e.g., creating content). Coming up with novel, interesting ideas is one of the hardest and overlooked parts of the plan. You need someone much more experienced, with a deeper understanding of your unique business objectives than a high school student.

10 **A business strategy is needed.**
Just like the physical world, businesses using the Internet and social media for marketing need to have a strategy in place to take full advantage of its potential. Keep in mind that if your product or service sucks, your staff sucks, your sales reps suck, your board of directors suck and your prices suck, then your return on investment is going to suck, too. No amount of spin in the social media world will save you. Consumers are out there sharing ideas with each other, reviewing products, separating the good from bad (on the whole) and if you aren't offering something worthwhile, it will be easy for someone to tell someone else as reviews are open to all and are often permanent. Your business strategy begins with a solid company. Once you've established that, you're ready to engage your audience with a strategy that best suits your company's social media marketing needs.

Standard Business Marketing Practices
Social media platforms are providing new means of communication between companies and clients, producers and consumers. As it matures and solidifies, it will no longer be seen as an emerging phenomenon but be considered as a key aspect of marketing. That said, it's important to remember that there is a line that, as with all marketing tactics, separates effective practices from annoyances. Approach your social me-

dia marketing strategy conscientiously and you'll have a better chance at success. Social media isn't replacing standard best practices. Look at the shift as a new iteration of marketing.

With over 15 years of Internet marketing experience, **Brian Rotsztein** (www.rotsztein.com | @brianrotsztein) is an entrepreneur who brings a seasoned approach to working with clients. As the head of multiple web design/Internet marketing companies and brands (RedstoneX.com, Uniseo.com, Nuvocore.com, etc.), he helps businesses gain a competitive advantage. He holds two Master's degrees, has taught university courses, is a noted conference speaker, and provides professional consulting and training services worldwide (SEO, social media for business, and others).