

BE SOCIAL

If distributors are not utilizing social media yet, they could be missing out on ways to engage their customers — and build their brand

By Tina Serio

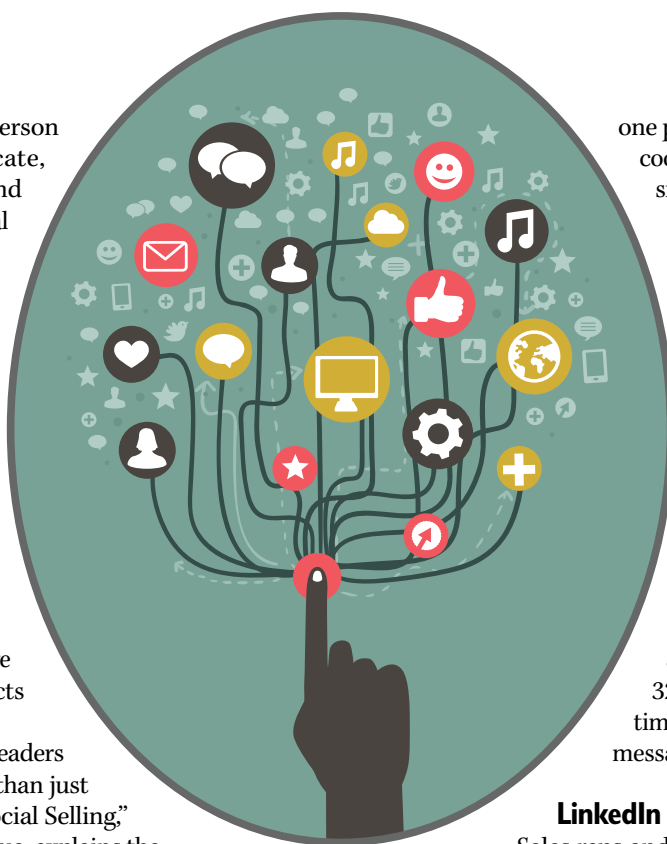
Social networks allow a person to connect, communicate, contribute, coordinate and learn. When maximized, social networks can take a company with a previously limited reach, and grow it exponentially. While recent research indicates that distributors realize the need for social media, the actual commitment to connect successfully is lagging behind other industries. Unfortunately, those who fail to evolve their communications strategy will miss out on the opportunities to create and build on the relationships that are forged with customers, prospects and vendors online.

Emerging young business leaders rely on social media for more than just fun. In its “Grand Guide to Social Selling,” sales and marketing firm, Eloqua, explains the importance of having a social media strategy:

“Unless you work under a rock, you’ve probably witnessed how the Internet upended the sales cycle. Buyers are able to do the vast majority of their research online with a simple Google search. Social media fundamentally changed the way people bought again as potential buyers could reach out to peers in the industry, accessing a tremendous amount of ‘street knowledge’ without ever having to deal with a sales rep.”

Delegation can help distributors eat this elephant one bite at a time. With a team of tech-savvy employees and a plan in place to proliferate reach, a company’s news, product announcements, success stories, and company events will spread with the efficiency and ease of a well-oiled machine.

Specifically, a distributor’s “Social Media Team” should include



one point person, typically a marketing coordinator or someone in a similar position. This person is in charge of the company’s social media pages.

An active presence on social media networks can significantly impact the vitality of a company’s brand. Additionally, sales and manufacturer representatives can create their own profiles. Their individual pages can act as their own brand, too, but also support the company’s main marketing message.

If your company or employees are not already participating in social networks, getting started is an easy thing to do (see sidebar, pg. 32). Once everyone is on board, its time to start maximizing the marketing message via key social sites.

LinkedIn

Sales reps and the distributor’s leadership team members should reach out to and connect with all of their business contacts who are on LinkedIn. The number of LinkedIn professionals is growing by the minute. According to a 2013 blog by Deep Nishar, senior vice president, product and user experience at LinkedIn, there are 200 million site members with 172,800 new registrations each day.

Employees should join LinkedIn Groups for their professional and community associations. Some examples include American Marketing Association; ISSA Young Executive Society; IEHA; BOMA; U.S. Green Building Council; B2B for Distributor Executives; IFMA; and *Sanitary Maintenance*. Distributor reps can also join LinkedIn Groups within their community (BGSU Alumni, Northwest Ohio IT Executives, etc.) For example, an employee located in Toledo, Ohio, can conduct a quick search of groups to show more than 85 LinkedIn groups with

the words “Northwest Ohio” in them. There is at least one group that’s right for everyone.

When participating in online conversation, the social media coordinators and employees should keep in mind proper grammar, politeness, and engaging in a way that adds valuable feedback and information, not just slightly veiled product advertisements.

LinkedIn is a beneficial tool for learning about the background of prospects. For example, a sales rep who expects to see a prospect at an upcoming networking event, such as a local USGBC chapter meeting or an ISSA Regional Meeting, can use this information to strike up a conversation or glean the prospect’s needs. It is also a convenient follow-up tool for prospects and contacts that the distributor sales representative met at similar events, but for whom he/she was not able to obtain a business card.

YouTube

As one of the most well known social media venues, YouTube allows users to post videos and even have a company channel. A distributor can create custom presentations and set them to music, do a quick video demonstration of a new product or service, or even introduce new sales representatives to all of their subscribers or viewers.

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FIRST STEPS

If starting from scratch, or rebooting a neglected social media campaign, follow these simple tips:

- » Distributors should be sure to have company pages and accounts set up for at least Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.
- » The distributor’s top executives should ask distributor sales reps and manufacturer reps to establish profiles on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.
- » Employees should be sure to use a good profile photo in which their face can be seen.
- » Establish a YouTube Channel for the company and customize page artwork, add links on the company website, Facebook page and printed literature.
- » Distributor executives and sales representatives should connect to their vendors, customers, prospects and colleagues.
- » To make maintenance easy, users should download the proper smartphone and tablet apps.
- » If necessary to transition into this forum quickly, a consultant could be hired to train and mentor internal team members and launch initial campaigns.



Sharing manufacturer videos is an easy and professional way to establish a presence online. However, distributors should obtain permission from the appropriate groups when broadcasting manufacturer brands or likeness.

Facebook

In order to expand one’s reach on Facebook, social media coordinators and distributor sales reps should “Like” companies and organizations, such as their vendors’ pages, company pages, non-profit organizations, and customers’ and prospects’ pages.

It is expected that Facebook users will share fun things on both their own profile page and on their company’s Facebook page, but employees must use or change their privacy controls to target posts to appropriate audiences.

For example, a sales rep’s “Girls Night Out” should be screened from industry peers. It is fine to post an occasional family photo and to provide positive feedback to client “friends” that also do so. After all, the jan/san industry is a relationship business and we strengthen our relationships when we can engage and relate to people on many levels.

Company pages can feature posts such as customer events they are helping with or attending, with (approved) photos of customer staff members. Personal profile pages can do the same thing. The social media coordinator can also “share” his or her company’s and manufacturer’s YouTube clips.

However, one of the reasons a distributor develops and plans a social media team is so that it can help execute a marketing agenda. The distributor’s company page should post information about upcoming company events, current product spiffs, or recent personnel promotions. Members of the social media team should then share that post to increase the reach of the message.

Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging social media site. Each post must fit within 140 characters. When setting up a new account on Twitter, tweeters can use the search tool to find categories, companies, or

groups that interest them. They can choose to follow news personalities, manufacturer reps, industry consultants, associations, friends, companies and other organizations. To build relevant business followers, distributor reps and other social media team members can promote their user name, and their company's user name, by placing a "follow link" in their e-mail signature. Distributors should make it easy for their potential audience by providing a link via

other social media pages, company website, advertisements and printed literature.

Hashtags (#) are a key aspect of Twitter, allowing one to categorize tweets by topic and enable public searches by that topic to find related tweets. Users should not use more than two hashtags per tweet; it tends to waste message space. If the social media team has a lengthy message to communicate, using a URL shortener, such as bitly, can save space. Twitter can also be connected to each

team member's LinkedIn profile, allowing new posts to generate on both mediums at the same time (given the message is within the 140 character tweet limit).


Put It To Use

Once a distributor has its social media team in place, built out the networks and developed a marketing plan, it is time to capitalize on it.

For example, with the promotion of a distributor open house or other type of customer appreciation event, the social media coordinator can create an event page on Facebook. This can be done six weeks out, but remember to promote the event up until the event date. A

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photo of the printed invitation can be posted on the event page to provide the details. If a video of a seminar or award ceremony from the previous year's event is available, post it to YouTube and display on the Facebook page as well. Encourage sales reps, vendors and customers to post pictures of last year's event, as well as new products that will be showcased, to help generate interest.

If Joe Smith from Community College sees that Jane Doe from State University is attending, he is likely to realize he should be there, too. As word spreads, so will awareness of the distributor's brand, event and vendor products. Ultimately, live event attendance will rise, giving the distributor more opportunities to reinforce relationships — key to the company's bottom line. 

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