Chapter 7
It's All about the Relationship:
Interviews with the Experts on How Digital Product Companies Can Use Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media sites has caught the attention of individuals and organizations hoping to use these to market their products and services. As digital products are sold online, it makes sense to tap into these networking communities to sell products as well as to share information and gather feedback. In this chapter, experts who are currently using social media in a variety of ways are asked to share their experiences. Tips are given on what to do as well as what not to do in order to participate successfully on social media sites. Future managerial and research implications are then discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined as "the activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media" (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 5). With social media sites we are able to move beyond the one-way communication methods used in the past to promote products, to interactive Web tools that give people and organizations the ability to conduct on-line discussions and obtain immediate feedback. Given that digital products such as online music,

magazines, and newspapers are stored, produced, and disseminated through the Internet, it makes sense to tap into social media networks to market these products.

To get an idea of just how big the phenomenon of social media is, consider this: It took 38 years for radio to gain 50 million users and 13 years for television to do the same. However, the Internet had 50 million users in four years, and Facebook-just one of many social networking sites-counted 100 million users in less than nine months (Qualman, 2009).

This chapter gives a brief history of some of the most popular social media tools being used today. It then presents insights gained from per-

sonal interviews with a variety of experts who are currently using social media to market their own digital products. Strategies are given as to how these experts have been able to create their online communities and what companies can do to tap into this fast growing resource.

BACKGROUND

There are hundreds of social networking sites on the Internet today. Some of the most widely used venues include blogs, forums, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube.

Blogs

The term, weblog (commonly called blog), is defined as a "frequently updated website, normally with dated entries and usually with the newest entries at the top" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). It is estimated that there were only 150 blogs in the late 1990s (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004). However, this number increased to 10.3 million blogs in 2004 (Quibble, 2005), 70 million in 2007 (Sifry, 2007), and to over 112.8 million by July 2008, with 175,000 new blogs being added each day ("Technorati website statistics," 2008).

Blogs differ from traditional websites in several distinct ways (Quibble, 2005). Websites tend to be static and do not change often; blogs are dynamic and usually added to frequently by the author (or authors). Also, the readers of the blog can respond to the writer's text by making comments that can then be read by other readers. In addition, blogs are much easier to add content to because they do not require the expertise and special programming software to start or update as websites do. In fact, the major reason for the growth in blogs is that "software companies created the database-driven content management tools needed to run blogs so that non-coders could start their own blogs" (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004, p. 61). In other words, blogs have become easier to create than a web-

page. As noted by one website designer, "adding a new post [on a weblog] is as easy as sending an e-mail" (Demopoulos, 2007, p. 4).

Forums

Internet forums were one of the first online communication tools and are still popular for people wanting to engage in an ongoing, interactive conversation on a specific topic. Forums are similar to chat rooms except that forums do not have to occur in real time. People in forums tend to form very strong bonds as they care about the subject matter and trust each other. Forums are seen as predecessors to the blog although the strong growth of blogs has not in any way led to a demise of the forum format (Safko & Brake, 2009).

Twitter

Twitter was founded by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams in 2006 as a way for users to post updates on what they were doing. These updates are limited to a maximum of 140 characters and can be posted using a computer, text message, or instant message ("Twitter stats," 2009). It is estimated that there were six million Twitter users in 2008 in the United States, or about 3.8 percent of all Internet users.

Twitter released its most recent stats in April of 2010, stating that there are now 106 million users of Twitter and these users post 55 million tweets per day. Twitter has been called the "water cooler of the Internet" and can be used for sharing information and links, networking, and marketing. Research by Professor Jim Jansen at Penn State reveals that "20 percent of all tweets…[on Twitter] are directly related to products or services" (McDermott, 2009).

Facebook

Facebook was launched by Mark Zuckerberg on February 4, 2004, as a social networking site

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