



Creating a Social Media Strategy

Frequently Asked Questions...and Answers

A White Paper in Cymfony's Influence 2.0® Educational Series

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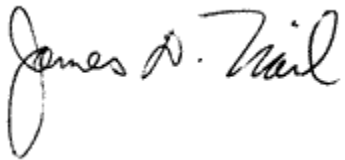
To Our Clients

You recognize that use of what are known as “Web 2.0” or “social media” technologies – blogs, wikis, video sharing – has changed the way you communicate with customers, journalists, business partners, and other stakeholders. These new tools are making communication faster, more transparent, and two-way. Cymfony calls this new dynamic “Influence 2.0”.

Many of you are in the early stages of developing your social media strategies and ask us for our guidance in developing your approach. This document is a compendium of some of the frequently asked questions, and answers, from our client engagements and our active participation in the dialog around social media.

As you know, Cymfony’s core business is “market influence analytics” – helping you understand how this Influence 2.0 world affects perception of your brands and services, your corporate reputation as well as the trends and issues as expressed in a wide range of media – from blogs, boards, and social networking sites to traditional print, broadcast and e-news.

Please let me know if there are additional questions you have and don’t hesitate to call on us to discuss your particular social media strategy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James D. Nail". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jim Nail

TNS Cymfony

Chief Strategy & Marketing Officer

Frequently Asked Questions ... and Answers

Q: Should I start a blog?

A: The tail should not wag the dog.

Many people confuse the concept of a social media strategy with starting a blog. This is like the tail wagging the dog. Don't start with the tool – “a blog” – start with a frank discussion of what your goals are, then match the tool to that.

- Do you want to increase channels of communication with your consumers and influencers? A blog can be an excellent channel.
 - GM and Microsoft have used their blogs to address negative discussions of their products, strategies, and business focus.
 - Boeing has won admirers and readers for its blog by sharing its perspective on issues that will shape the future of the airline industry.
- Are there detractors of your company or its products spreading their views?
 - Consider creating your own discussion board and inviting those critics to come express their issues directly to you. Intuit hosts an entire community area on the Quickbooks web site where customers come to report bugs, request new features and ask product questions.
- Do you want to improve employee communications and knowledge sharing?
 - Test a wiki, a collaborative site where individuals create content and edit other's contribution. McDonald's is extensively using wikis to help far-flung work teams collaborate efficiently. The project record built up on these sites also helps new team members get up to speed and become valuable contributors quickly.

Of course, your social media strategy should build on some aspect of your brand or business strategy. The topic of your blog, for example, should speak to an important audience and reflect a key attribute of your company identity. In 2006, blogs such as Starwood's “thelobby.com” offered travel news and tips for the “road warrior” segments of its customer base. Wells Fargo Bank's “Guided by History” presented emergency preparedness tips to enhance its heritage of corporate responsibility and community involvement.

In 2007, more businesses will come to view the world of social media less as a ranter's paradise and more as an influential business resource where they can engage with customers in valuable dialogues. If this is your goal, by all means jump in.



Q: If I decide to start a blog, can I control the conversation?

A: Influence 2.0 rule #1: think conversation, not control.

Blogs are about having a virtual conversation; they're not just a soapbox. The first rule of conversation is that it is a two-way experience.

On a blog, that means allowing (and encouraging) comments. Many companies are uncomfortable with this at first but comments are the way readers reply; without them, you're not blogging, you're advertising, conducting PR, or lecturing. Companies like Dell and Boeing have been pilloried in the blogosphere when they initially did not allow comments; they have since earned bloggers' respect as they have become more open.

This does not mean, however, that you have absolutely no control and must allow absolutely everything. It is acceptable to use editorial discretion to eliminate spam and advertising slipped in under the guise of comments, reject off-topic comments, and delete submissions with offensive or abusive language. As with all aspects of blogging, the key is to clearly state your policy – to be “transparent” – so visitors know what to expect.

This editorial discretion is limited however: it does not give you permission to delete negative or critical comments if they are on-topic and within the bounds of civilized discourse. While companies fear a flood of criticism, few have experienced it. You're likely to be pleasantly surprised that your loyal advocates are likely to be the most vocal visitors to your blog and will often come to the company's defense if another reader is critical.

But there are other rules that apply, too.

Use an authentic voice, or voices. Are there developers, researchers, customer support folks, shy executives and others whose voices should be heard on your blog? Let them speak. At all costs, avoid sounding like a marketing brochure.

Third, if you define your blog as a place to talk about a limited set of topics, have a plan for off-topic discussion. For example, if your executives are blogging about their industry perspective, some customers may post customer service questions. If you anticipate this, clearly post your customer service URL or toll-free number on your blog and have a process to forward those types of comments to the appropriate department for resolution.

Q: Who should own our social media strategy? Marketing, PR, IR, or Customer Service?

A: All of the above.

Social media narrows the gap between companies and their customers, so we need to think more like our customers. And people don't compartmentalize communications the way a corporate organization chart does. They just get information and act on it.

A social media strategy should not be created in isolation, but should be part of an integrated marketing and communications programs. In today's world it is particularly important to recognize that the influences on your consumers come from many places – the blogosphere, the press, your advertising, and perhaps most important, their peers.



Will customers and prospects read about product features and benefits in social media? Yes.

Will journalists, bloggers and others who include important stakeholders relay messages about your company in social media? Yes.

Will customers post about your products and services? Yes.

Will investors look for news, rumors and insight? Yes. You get the point.

Your goal should be to make sure that you are consistent and integrated in your approach. No matter if leadership comes from public relations or marketing, make sure that you reach across traditional functional silos in establishing your social media strategy.

Q: How do you handle a crisis that breaks in the “blogosphere”?

A: How do you handle a crisis?

In any crisis, fast response is critical. The internet accelerated the news cycle and now blogs are escalating expectations further that companies will communicate frequently and directly. If there is no response from the company, other bloggers are likely to spread the news and in the absence of a company response, speculate further about the issue.

While blogs are the starting point of more and more crises, the bigger risk is still that the event crosses into mainstream media. It is likely you already have a crisis communications plan, but have not updated it recently. Blogging and engaging in social media should now be as much a part of the plan as outreach to traditional media outlets.

A corporate blog has a number of advantages in responding to a blogger publishing unflattering news or mounting an attack. First, it allows you to put your side of the story in the public realm quickly, where all your stakeholders get first-hand access to it. Often this is enough to demonstrate that the blogger has his facts wrong or is otherwise biased. Second, journalists are actively using blogs to research stories, and it is likely the blog will reach more of them than you can with even the most aggressive media relations outreach campaign.

While social media gives you new outlets, words alone will rarely quell the situation, especially if the company is truly in the wrong. Online or offline, actions speak louder than words. Witness JetBlue. A day after their weather-related meltdown in which passengers were stuck on the tarmac for hours and multiple flights were cancelled, the CEO was on major news shows apologizing for the snafu. The next day JetBlue published its Passenger Bill of Rights. There has been no impact on JetBlue revenues from the crisis.

Q: Should we reach out to bloggers and discussion forums?

A: Yes, YOU should.

I capitalize “YOU” to emphasize that you should be totally transparent in your outreach – state your position at the company and interest in the issue. Never pretend to be a consumer or anyone else. As long as you are honest, most bloggers are citizen



journalists who want their views heard and will give you a fair hearing and welcome your comments. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association has issued draft blogger contact guidelines which you can download at www.womma.org.

Be aware that unlike journalists, bloggers have no commitment to “fairness” or neutrality. Part of the appeal of blogs is that they are often highly opinionated, even biting in their view of a story. If you reach out to a blogger critical of your company, try to understand their motivations and goals. You’ll find a useful framework in a Cymfony-sponsored white paper by John Palfrey of the Berkman Center for the Internet and Society at Harvard Law School entitled “An Analysis of Aggressive Online Behavior Targeted Against Corporations” available at www.cymfony.com/onlinebehavior.asp.

Similarly, in discussion groups you must be authentic. Full disclosure is important. If you truly believe in the value of the brand you build and bring to market and want to set the record straight, go for it. Keep your response on topic and avoid blatant self promotions. A little bit of humility shows respect to other community members and will earn you greater credibility.

The recurrent theme here is ethical behavior. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association has established a code of ethics called the Honesty ROI: honesty of relationship, opinion and identity. More about the code and accompanying educational materials can be found at www.womma.org/ethics. (Now, in the interest of transparency, let me disclose that I am a member of the Board of Directors of the association.)

Q: Why create “community” and promote user-generated ads? Won’t they manipulate our brand identity?

A: They are doing it anyway.

Consumers have plenty of opportunities to comment on your brands and grab your identity anyway, so why not in your sandbox. Besides, engagement pays.

iPod, Viking, and Converse topped the list of fastest growing brands determined by strategic brand and design consultancy, Landor Associates. The list isn’t so surprising. The drivers behind this growth will surprise a lot of marketers. In an interview with Fortune Magazine, Hayes Roth, chief marketing officer for Landor, summed up the factors behind these brands’ growth this way:

"Today it's all about trust, community, and creating a dialogue with your customer that shares real knowledge."

These sound like soft, fluffy, "feel-good" characteristics that are a tough sell to a CEO, much less a CFO. But the Landor study showed that iPod added \$4.5 billion in bottom-line value; Viking added \$147 million; Converse added \$298 million.

Similarly, Steve Bennett, CEO of Intuit wrote in the company’s 2005 annual report, “...positive word of mouth creates a durable advantage for Intuit that translates into sustained revenue and profit growth.” Those are ideas that any CEO and CFO can warm up to!

For thoughts on building a foundation of trust and engagement see http://blog.cymfony.com/2006/09/foundations_of_.html.



Q: Do we need to monitor social media or should we just dive in?

A: And now for a word from our sponsor.

Seriously, we do believe in our own value proposition – that an important component of any social media strategy is setting up an infrastructure for monitoring and analyzing social media. There are several reasons to do this.

This is a conversation, not a broadcast. In any conversation – in a business or social setting – you wouldn't just barge in. You'd likely listen first, understand what the group is talking about, then contribute your point of view, and then keep listening as part of your participation. Social media is no different.

Listen to the true voice of the consumer. You might be surprised at what you hear. In our work at Cymfony we often uncover clues to what the real issues are for consumers. There are many examples of this: brand managers positioning their prescription drug products around effectiveness, while patients on forums talk about comfort and side effects. Sony was touting the vast gigabytes of storage on their Blu-Ray device when enthusiasts cared most about how many titles are available for the device.

Metrics matter for any initiative. Establish a social media benchmark that shows volume of discussion around your categories, a breakdown by key topics, brand awareness, and brand sentiment before you embark on a campaign using Web 2.0 tools.

Learn where the discussion is taking place and who the influencers are so that you understand the landscape you are trying to enter.

Jeff Bartlett of ConsumerReports.org, quoted by noted automotive journalist Royal Ford, says it well: "Blogs and forums are very powerful tools for consumers, and ready-made intelligence for manufacturers."

Q: Is it legal to monitor social media?

A: Yes.

The discussion boards and blogs that Cymfony aggregates and analyzes are available to anyone with an Internet connection and a browser. In contrast to email and chat which are more private, personal forms of communication, when someone uses a board or blog they know their information is public so they expect (and hope!) that as many people as possible will read their opinions.

In addition we do not gather and track any personally identifiable information, such as name, address, zip code, etc. We capture and store the screen name so our clients can sort and analyze by the author, but a screen name does not connect directly to the individual's offline identity.



Q: Do we really need to do anything about this right now?

A: Online is the new offline.

Just as people will never give up access to the internet or the convenience of their mobile phones, people will not go back to being a passive audience that receives one-way messages. Blogs, YouTube, MySpace, etc. are no longer techno-curiosities. Time Magazine recognized social media as a bona fide societal trend, naming “You” its Person of the Year” in 2006.

If you have teenage children at home, then you are aware of the fact that for their generation, there really is no distinction between online and offline. One is an extension of the other. Friendships barely exist without Facebook. Messages are no longer sent via email but posted on the Facebook wall – to be read by all.

But it’s not just the young generation. Comscore notes that nearly 50% of MySpace users are over 35 (maybe that’s why the teen in the know won’t be seen there any more). Other social networking sites are growing quickly by targeting older, affluent audiences such as Eons (for the age 50+ site) and Gather.com (which sponsors our local Boston public radio station, positioning themselves as “the social network for the NPR audience”).

Not only is social media becoming used by a broader range of the population, but it is increasingly impacting purchase decisions. A recent Jupiter report found that 77% of online users go to consumer review sites before buying a product. Compete, Inc. reports that 24% of car buyers say they changed their mind about which brand of car to buy after reading online reviews.

A study of consumers’ behavior in researching pharmaceuticals by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council noted that consumers often give greater attention to sites that feature more personal communications than to manufacturer sites such as drug brand sites run by pharmaceutical marketers. Study author Professor Pamela Briggs of Northumbria University notes, “The great strength of the internet is that you can find people who have had the same problem that you have and see how they have coped with it...to act as if that is not happening is missing the point.”



Resources

Cymfony Influence 2.0 White Papers

- “Making the Case for a Social Media Strategy”
www.cymfony.com/wp_social_mktg_req.asp
- “An Analysis of Aggressive Online Behavior Targeted Against Corporations”
<http://www.cymfony.com/OnlineBehavior.asp>
- “Corporate Blog Learnings, the Age of Discovery”
http://www.cymfony.com/report_corp_blog.asp

Cymfony Knowledge Center

- Blogs: http://www.cymfony.com/know_center_blog.asp
- Customer Engagement: http://www.cymfony.com/know_center_engagement.asp
- Social Media: http://www.cymfony.com/know_center_cgm.asp

Cymfony Influence 2.0 Blog

- Can This Industry Be Saved: http://blog.cymfony.com/2007/04/can_this_indust.html
- Five Indicators That 2007 Will be the Year of the Corporate Blog:
http://blog.cymfony.com/2006/08/five_indicators.html
- Foundations of a Breakaway Brand:
http://blog.cymfony.com/2006/09/foundations_of_.html
- 5 Tips on Listening to Customers:
http://blog.cymfony.com/2006/02/5_tips_on_liste.html

Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA)

- An Introduction to Word-of-Mouth Marketing: <http://www.womma.org/wom101/>
- Ethics Code: <http://www.womma.org/ethics/code/>
- Blogger Contact Guidelines : <http://www.womma.org/blogger/>

