

BY HARRIS DIAMOND

✉ hdiamond@webershandwick.com

Five Rules for Socializing Your Brand



Harris Diamond is CEO of Weber Shandwick, a global public relations firm in New York.

The world has entered a new place where people interact with brands pretty much anywhere and everywhere. We are seeing every day how social media allows people and, in some cases, whole companies to have a real dialogue around products and services.

How people value a brand today has vastly expanded to include their perceptions and interaction with brands and products, and it comes unvarnished and from every angle. Companies need to focus on better socializing their brands so they can resonate with influential online communities.

To market a socialized brand today you need to think about how to speak directly to consumers' needs and satisfy them fully on an emotional level. The following are some guidelines to effectively create and manage socialized brands:

- **Create a community of advocates.**

Today's brand community is a place where people get to share their thoughts or feelings about a brand and product. Dialogue is now wide open and inclusive. It can happen on your site, your Facebook page, your smartphone or anywhere your customers are talking with each other, such as a mom community or fan site. These spaces welcome dialogue and ignore one-way messages that are directed at them by companies or brands. Sometimes these communities also are built in person such as at events, trade shows, in-store demonstrations, retail counters or even Meetup groups. With today's channel-agnostic consumers, the best communications must focus on reaching the right people online or offline, and encourage them to join your network of advocates.

- **Move beyond "Likes."** Increasingly, Facebook is not just a destination for consumers but a part of a larger fabric of the Internet. The "Like" button shows up on content from news sources to product pages. Company Facebook pages are rapidly changing from a secondary to primary source of interaction with consumers, with the company website still relevant and important, but often less current. However, "Like" is similar to a free admission to the carnival—people will walk past the uninteresting booths and won't play. Getting large numbers of people to "Like" your page is not the end goal; it is the starting point. If you can get customers past the equivalent of "Like" and engage them, you will create affection, affinity and ultimately advocacy for your



brand and products. One-to-one engagement that can be scaled easily is a mandate for any company hoping to build and manage a successful socialized brand.

- **Protect your brand's reputation.** We've all seen the challenges presented when a brand reputation is damaged online. The negative stories in major media that start from blogs, Tweets and user-generated videos can overwhelm the steadiest of brands. Companies need to be more proactive about monitoring their online reputations and be prepared to act quickly and strategically to the viral spread of rumors, misinformation and hearsay that can erupt overnight. Online crisis simulation before you need it, as Weber Shandwick developed in our product FireBell, can help mitigate these types of crises and activate your dedicated community of advocates ready to go to your defense.

- **Socialize your C-suite.** More executives now recognize that the Internet has swept through corporate corridors and boardrooms, transforming the media landscape. A growing number of them at all levels are starting to consider taking advantage of these newer social channels to tell their company and brand stories. As storytellers and narrators of their brand promises, C-suite executives will gradually become more socialized and willingly participate in video on their websites, Facebook and YouTube company-sponsored channels and will

demand that their speeches and interviews get repurposed through the many channels now available online.

- **Be relevant.** Make sure the campaign being created is relevant to your audiences and that expectations are based on achievable goals. Compound the interest in your brand and products by not only repurposing existing content, but by adding value to your communities of interest wherever they may be. Creativity moves people, and focusing on delivering creative ways to engage your customer can have a tremendous impact on people's perceptions and behaviors when it comes to your brand and products. Work to find as many ways as possible to add value first and be confident that an engaged base of customers will follow. This core will allow you to build a bigger base over time.

Even by following all of the above, your customers today will still always be more connected, spread out and unified than your brand can possibly be. The key is to give them better access to relevant information, timely answers to the questions they ask and the means to protect reputation at all times. If you create engaged communities and give customers a place to congregate and interact, you will mitigate challenges that arise in real time. Your advocates can help you; they'll answer questions of other customers and ease your load in trying to manage millions of peer-to-peer interactions. That's the real social savvy we all aspire to. **m**