

Business Risks, Benefits in Social Media

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Mary is a successful and seasoned small business owner. She knows her way around her computer and “smart phone,” but all this talk about “social media” is freaking her out. Twitter, blogs, Facebook, YouTube. These are terms the young tech-savvy guy she just hired throws around. Mary is wary of using social media to market her company.

Colleagues and competitors are starry-eyed about their interactive webpages, hundreds of Facebook friends and thousands of Twitter followers. They are constantly chiding Mary for barely sticking her toe into this dynamic and free (or relatively inexpensive) marketing pool. Mary’s company only has a webpage.

Mary sees social media as a time-sucker. She is not convinced the investment – in creating, maintaining and monitoring social media sites – delivers a good bang for her buck.

Her friends tell her not to worry. Do what they have done. Hire a “consultant” to be their Internet “face.” One of her friends boasted that she hired an “absolute genius” to update her webpage, write content for her company blog and tweet for her throughout the day. Without lifting a finger, Mary’s friend now has thousands of Twitter followers and more Facebook friends than she could have ever imagined.

And Mary’s friend isn’t alone in turning their “social media images” over to this “genius consultant.” In fact, the man behind the friend’s image does the same thing for 14 other companies.

Mary is not convinced. She is wise to have doubts.

If you are going to harness the power of “social media” to advance your business, you must take that power seriously. Social media has enormous potential to do your business good. But its casual and careless use also can do harm.

The company I manage, P.A.S. Associates, has a webpage. It is www.pasassociates.com. We also maintain a PAS Facebook page and “tweet” as @PASAssociates. But we recognize that these powerful communications vehicles must be closely monitored and maintained.

The standard press release and the “Strictly Business” column I write for *The Californian* are carefully crafted, reviewed and revised before they are distributed to the newspaper. It is a deliberate process that can take days and weeks.

Social media, on the other hand, is “instantaneous.” Create a message. Hit **SEND**. Like feathers in the wind, the message scatters into the Internet. If the message turns out to be “wrong,” it is impossible to stuff the feathers back into the pillow.

I am a specialist in the field of human resources, not social media. Like Mary and her colleagues, I am learning how to harness social media’s power. But from the standpoint of managing a business and managing employees, I have learned:

--For most businesses these days, having a webpage is a “must.” Working with skilled website designers and content creators, a company can present a strong, informative presence on the Internet.

--Before jumping into other social media forums, do your homework. Develop a social media “strategy.” What are you trying to accomplish? Who are you trying to reach? What do the various sites – Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, etc. – have to offer?

--Don’t do everything at once. Implement your social media strategy in phases. Is the strategy working? Should adjustments be made?

--After you select a site, or sites, determine who will manage them. Do you have a current employee with the skills to maintain and monitor the sites? Do you need to hire someone? Does your company have a spokesperson, or “public face?” Should that person be responsible for the sites?

--Determine who will have access to the sites. Will all of your employees be able to post articles and comments, or will just a select few? This is basically a “trust issue.” An embarrassing tweet or inappropriate Facebook post can instantly damage a company’s image.

--Post information relevant to your business or industry, and of interest to people you hope will be reading. Keep it professional. If you want to share photos of your children or your recent vacation, create a personal account. Don’t mix personal and business.

--Develop a company policy to clarify for employees how the sites will be used, who can access them, what can be posted.

--Creation of an intranet – a closed network within an organization that uses web browser-based technology and the Internet– can be an alternative tool for employers to allow communication and sharing of information among employees in a secure environment.

--Although social media “feels” more informal, use good grammar and spell words correctly. It may be “cute” for a teenager to text message “srsly, uv seen this b4,” but it’s not so cute for a business.

--Watch your manners. If you allow commenting and you receive critical or antagonistic responses to your posts, let it slide. Don’t respond in kind. Monitor your site. You may consider removing negative remarks or the ability to comment.

--Make sure your business' computer system is "secure" and protected from viruses that may be transported by social media sites.

--Keep up to date. A growing number of online resources exist that explain the rapidly developing business uses of social media.

The Internet is a powerful business marketing tool. For the power to be safely used, however, it must be handled with care.

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on January 28, 2011. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the [PAS Facebook](#) page or by phone at 631-2165.

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