

PUT DOWN THE MEGAPHONE AND JOIN THE CONVERSATION

LISTEN AND SHARE TO ATTRACT A LOYAL FOLLOWING



With explosive use of two-way communications tools such as [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#), it's easier than ever to foster strong, dynamic consumer relationships for companies willing to open the door, listen and engage.

Instead of blasting one-sided marketing messages, companies, brands and destinations who listen and respond to fans' comments and questions, share inside scoop and perspective and energize existing communities with relevant and useful content are experiencing increased consumer loyalty.

Yes, you can stay above the fray and choose not to engage, but with minimal investment, social media is a powerful way to deepen consumer connections and prevent losing customers who won't tolerate not being heard. Because everything is so new, the bar for sophistication is low (in fact, "real" is much more valued than "slick"), tolerance for missteps is high (consumers appreciate you trying) and people are eager to interact with companies they like (and actively complain about ones that they don't.) We're working with many of our clients to develop thoughtful strategies for using social media that are consistent with their brands and authentically connect with core constituents.

Before you get started, think through your objectives to determine why you'll join the conversation and who needs to be involved (customer service, marketing, leadership) to make your online presence authentic and engaging. When you're ready, here are a few tips for effectively building community:

1. **Be a good conversationalist** – while it may be tempting to broadcast marketing messages constantly via Facebook and Twitter, you'll be more effective at engaging consumers and inspiring loyalty if you foster dialog rather than monolog. It's what the platforms are made for. Listen and respond to consumers' comments, shaping perceptions of your organization while addressing their interests and concerns. Talk about what the community cares about.
2. **Be committed** – social media marketing isn't an endeavor you turn on and turn off at will. Once you begin communication programs encouraging people to talk about, try, believe in and care about your products, services and causes, you need to invest in them continually while the platforms might change, make this ongoing commitment and you'll be rewarded by lifetime relationships with a loyal community of consumers who may be willing to pay price premiums, recommend your products and even defend the brand, if necessary.
3. **Be transparent** – if your company intern is tweeting, that's ok, just don't try to pass him or her off as the company president. Consumers want real conversation with a real person, no matter who it's with, so be honest.
4. **Be a helpful resource** – provide information from a variety of sources that keeps consumers informed including meaningful news, comments and observations about other brands you enjoy as well as issues and nonprofits that matter to the organization.
5. **Be patient** – building a community can take time but speeding the process can decrease a brand's ability to make a lasting impact.
6. **Be human** – social media's not the place for marketing speak so find your brand's voice and use it to show your personality.

- 7. Be flexible** – social media is always changing so part of jumping in is preparing not to fight the current. Right now these communities and conversations are living on Facebook and Twitter. Next year the platform may be something entirely different. The important thing is to ride the wave and be ready to adapt when the tide turns. Stay engaged, assess shifts and be ready to adjust strategy and approach when needed.

Social networks allow organizations to find out what others are saying about products and companies, keep an eye on positive and negative experiences and be alerted to potential red flags or hot topics. By empowering consumers to engage in an open dialogue with you, they will ultimately act as evangelists on your behalf – because they want to – but it only happens if you show up for the party.