

In Business

GETTING SOCIAL

SOCIAL MEDIA: It can take many forms, all aimed at making business a two-way street

By JONATHAN GOURLAY
Monadnock Ledger-Transcript

Social media. What is it and why is it important to business?

As defined by those who help people design web presences and instruct them on the finer points of making and maintaining contact with buying customers, service users or even a cadre of like-minded business people to share ideas, it's a two-way street... without the street.

Social media, says Pamela Gleeson, principal with Consensus Technology Inc. of Peterborough, which consults with businesses to develop effective web presences to complement their company business and marketing plans, refers to a community's sharing of information. In the age of electronic media, that essentially means any means by which a conversation is two-way. Facebook, Twitter, the tried-and-true e-mail list managers of days gone by, even call-in radio is a type of social media.

These days, however, especially in the business world, it is thought of as any enabling technology that lets businesses and customers communicate on a regular basis. If you go back in history, say 15 years or so, there were somewhat static websites that provided the framework for reader and user forums and e-mail list managers. They allowed for basic communication. Then blogs came on the scene.

"But blogs, in and of themselves are not social media," says Gleeson. "What makes it social media is the fact people can comment on them."

This give-and-take that results from customers providing feedback and peers trading tips, names and suggestions has become valuable to businesses today for a number of reasons. In cases where there are many choices of service providers or businesses from which to choose, the relationship engendered by the give-and-take often gains the customer. It is a relationship that both many customers and businesses take seriously.

In other cases, and especially in areas where there are not as many choices, say, between companies that will print your logo on organic cotton T-shirts, a vibrant social media presence could win over customers. If you are a company in the Monadnock region and want a local source for certain items, the relationship you might build with a supplier via their Facebook page before you ever place an order very well might be the deciding factor in giving that supplier your business or vice versa. Some suppliers can be picky about who sells their products.

But it's not an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of thought, planning and a commitment to keep things fresh and interesting if your intention is to host an interactive website, write a blog or create a Facebook page for your business.

"One of the key things in social media is to have a strategy and know where best to put your money," says Gleeson. She says those considering expanding their ability to connect with customers in this direct way need to first answer a number of questions: Who is the target market? Are you looking to increase sales, service branding? Is your purpose simply to collect information from potential customers? There are more than 500 million people on Facebook, so focus is important.

Once these questions have been answered, there are a number of ways to accomplish those things: Twitter, which enables users to send brief, easily read messages to computers and hand-held devices, Facebook, LinkedIn. Now there's GoWalla and Foursquare, applications that connect people to their social network to let them know where they are geographically.

"It's a good way for businesses to market to customers who may be in the area," says Gleeson. This, she says, has the added benefit of turning a virtual community into one that you can meet face to face. Gleeson, who notes she's always looking forward to see how "we can use technology to make our lives easier," explains that this can be a valuable relationship builder, especially with potential business partners as well as customers.

Little Roy's convenience store in Peterborough has been experimenting with a Facebook presence for the last few months. The initial intention, said owner Peter Robinson, was to post a lunch menu daily to catch the interest of workers in the downtown area.

"But many businesses won't allow employees to go on [Facebook] during work hours," said Robinson, "which is less than effective for us."

And while Robinson said he understands the reasoning for this, he still feels it's still a valuable tool to pursue and the crew at Roy's is currently looking at ways to make better use of the Facebook page. Whether that will be posting the day's menu the afternoon before or putting up an



STAFF PHOTO BY JONATHAN GOURLAY

Jim Therriault of New England Everyday Goods stocks some of the last remaining open shelves of his new business, but it will be his planned online presence that helps define his sales success.

How one young business is aiming for a major social media presence

By JONATHAN GOURLAY
Monadnock Ledger-Transcript

Earlier this month, New England Everyday Goods opened up at 10 School Street, behind Alice Blue, in the space formerly occupied by the Village Roaster. And if you're wondering how the company plans to grow and thrive in the 400-square-foot space tucked into the alleyway opposite the Peterborough Theater, it's simple: social media.

Well, it might sound simple, but Jim Therriault will be working hard in the coming weeks to prepare his new store's online presence because he feels that's where most sales will eventually come from. In fact, the entire concept for the new business was based on what could be done electronically.

The website has not been unveiled just yet because the 21-year Peterborough resident wants to make sure it is capable of doing everything he wants it to. That includes different ways of making sales on items, blogging about new additions to stock, and maintaining an active and vital web presence via other channels such as Facebook. The plan is to have it all going by early next year.

Therriault and his wife, Susan, operated the Peterborough Shoe Store for 5 years until late 2008, so he knows a shoe or two about retail and the pressures a store owner can be up against when it comes to inventory, supply and demand. As he and Susan witnessed at the shoe store, which specialized in several brands, keeping the shelves stocked with the models and sizes of shoes they wanted became more and more difficult as more manufacturing started taking place overseas. Add to that the reliance on — excuse me — foot traffic, and you have a potent impetus for moving sales to an online world where your market is, in fact, the world.

"The trick," says Therriault, "is conveying the mystique of the New England product." It will be his task to show online shoppers what the products his business sells look like, smell like and feel like. While the first of those qualities will be relatively easy with high-resolution graphics, it'll be the remaining tangibles that will likely increase the odds of making a sale.

"Because they can't have that sensory experience with it until they receive the product, we want to let them know why we have it [for sale], why we like it, and show that story," he says. "We're looking to make sure every product we carry has a story."

And they do, beginning with the fact that every product in the store was and will be manufactured in New England. From Maine's Roy Toy Company, which was a Depression-era startup, to Just Soap, a Massachusetts-based company that relies on the owner's leg power and a specially designed hookup between a vat and his bicycle to mix all-natural soaps, each has an interesting story. But not overdoing it on the story front, says Therriault, is the key. "I want to give online customers enough so they'll say, 'Hey, this is pretty cool.'"

Not only are there a number of cool stories to go along with the items being categorized as inventory at New England Everyday Goods, but the goods themselves and their prices are pretty cool as well.

Therriault says his aim is to make sure that two-thirds of the inventory sells at about \$20 and less, while the remaining third does not go much above \$70. At such prices, these are not strictly works of

art, though some are (just not priced like some works), but items to be used. We're talking wood cutting boards, ladles, various kitchen tools, door and window draft stoppers, braided wool rugs, handmade stoneware, candles, jams, salsa, baking mixes, baskets, pet items, fleece heat packs for homeopathic therapy, garden tools, car magnets, some decorative glassware, hand-woven baskets, witty signs and hanging geometric wind chimes made from recycled steel.

Half of all the inventory at New England Everyday Goods comes from husband-and-wife teams or single artists and craftspeople, companies that carry staff of anywhere from one to two. Another quarter are produced by companies that might have outgrown the mom-and-pop stage to employ up to six people (typically when the supply part of the equation improves), and a final quarter of the wares come from larger, more-established companies that have experience at full-scale manufacturing, carry a certain amount of inventory, but haven't yet cracked the Monadnock region market and see the benefit of an additional online sales source.

His aim is to price items so that the supplier at least recoups their wholesale costs while he can turn a little profit.

One of Therriault's aims is to also make sure the items he sells do not compete with other area retailers. If Therriault comes across coffee or candles that can already be purchased at another regional store, chances are he won't even consider carrying the line in his. Otherwise, he says, it's too easy for two business owners to cannibalize each other. No one makes out, and even the supplier can be a victim.

Instead, he says, "I think we can all work pretty collaboratively. I really try to do that."

While the store has been actively selling its wares from its physical location since Oct. 1, Therriault says that traffic he estimates will be visiting the website and keeping track via Facebook will easily dwarf the numbers he gets coming through the door. He explained that while all the popular logic was to have the storefront open by Oct. 1 in order to take advantage of leaf-peeping season, the traffic he got from tourists might have proved his point about being a store of everyday goods.

"We had lots of people from out of town in here on busy weekends, but the tourists didn't buy anything, the locals who come in, however, do." Thankful for regional residents, Therriault says that's what happens when you do not have a "gift shop" per se. His concentration on items that get used on a regular basis is what he hopes will translate well to the website.

And the research the owner of New England Everyday Goods has done has resulted in a mix of suppliers who run the gamut from artisans to collectors of ancient manufacturing castoffs. In one case, candles; in another Ma's Bobbins, another Maine company that sells wooden bobbins collected from long-forgotten textile mills and sells them as candleholders.

It will be interesting to see how Therriault conveys all that via his planned social-media outlets, and could be a good test case for how the technology supports local business in the Monadnock region.

entire month's worth of specials has yet to be determined.

"We're working to find ways to use technology to reach our customers, but we also don't want to be intrusive in their lives," he said. "We see the potential."

Another way an active Facebook presence, Twitter account, or interactive blog might help, especially in our region, is in their ability to help get the word out about companies that otherwise do not have an expansive presence in a targeted market.

In a region that is sparsely popu-

lated, a company that relies on foot or car traffic for its business can have a tough time. So if you produce a specific type of pottery or offer a unique service for optimizing motorcycle engine heads and you live off the beaten path, an active web presence combined with a social media presence can become a valuable tool.

Computer Technologies of Keene, which has consulting business clients in our region, has had a Facebook page for close to a year.

Bill Stevens, a manager with the company says maintaining the Face-

book presence "takes time, but is not a huge commitment. We're just getting our feet wet with it as a marketing tool."

People want to be able to connect with companies in this way, and, says Gleeson, companies are realizing the power of social media and want to get involved in it. And the overriding point is that the online map that has the most value is a map whose one-way streets are being blocked off. If you are going to travel using the online map, understand that more and more roads are accommodating two-way traffic.

Business in Brief

GREENFIELD

Donald Shumway receives award

Crotched Mountain Foundation President and CEO Donald L. Shumway recently received the 2010 David B. Robar Advocacy Award from Granite State Independent Living at their 30th anniversary celebration. The award recognizes individuals who are dedicated to advocating on behalf of the disabled.

During the presentation of the award, Clyde Terry, CEO of Granite State Independent Living, remarked on Shumway's years of dedicated service, unrelenting advocacy skills and record of achievement in New Hampshire. "Don's unwavering dedication to improving the quality of life of all persons with disabilities and their families spans more than the three decades," said Terry. At the event, Senator Jeanne Shaheen was given the 2010 Independence Award and the USDA Office of Rural Development received the 2010 GSIL Partnership Award. The celebration coincided with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and was attended by more than 400 people.

PETERBOROUGH

MDS adds new employee in Peterborough

Terry Fecto has joined Monadnock Developmental Services as an ISO program manager, working out of the Peterborough office. In recent years, Fecto has amplified his 25 years of sales and marketing experience through specific training in community rehabilitation education and job development, which will serve him well in providing employment supports for people with developmental disabilities. Fecto earned a Bachelor in Science in Business from Franklin Pierce University and lives in Marlborough.

HANCOCK

Harris Center welcomes new trustees

The Harris Center for Conservation Education in Hancock has announced that four new trustees have joined its Board of Trustees, broadening the perspective and skills to oversee the organization.

The four new trustees were announced Oct. 16 during the Harris Center's annual meeting and 40th anniversary celebration. Three outgoing board members were also honored for their dedicated service to the Harris Center.

The new board members include:

Charles A. Levesque of Antrim, founder and president of Innovative Natural Resource Solutions LLC, a consulting firm with offices in Maine and New Hampshire.

Craig Stockwell of Keene, an artist who also teaches art at Keene State College, Union Institute and University of Ohio, and Vermont College of Fine Arts. Stockwell's works have been shown and acclaimed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Nielsen Gallery in Boston, the Fitchburg Museum, Spheris Gallery and many others.

R. Charles Van Horn of Hancock is a certified public accountant and personal financial specialist with offices in Antrim. He has been involved in the accounting, tax, financial and investment management field for more than 40 years.

Thomas Warren of Dublin is President of Thomas Warren & Associates, Inc. which provides specialized compensation consulting services to major companies across the nation. Warren is an avid and experienced birder who also serves on the board of New Hampshire Audubon.

Board members who have completed their terms and are going off the board include Hunt Dowse and Stephen Froling, both of Hancock, and Nathanael Greene of Peterborough.

For more information, visit www.harriscenter.org.