

Cover Story

SOCIAL MEDIA

Dealers Making Friends, Fans and Followers

by jim rapp

"Oh, no, don't tell me that I've got to be on Facebook and Twitter or whatever else is out there. I'm still trying to figure out how to improve my web site."

Welcome to the new world of personal communications—social networking, social media, or whatever you want to call it. It's growing like wildfire and your customers are using it.

It took about a decade for e-mail to become popular, while social media has taken only a few years, and its greatest growth is yet to come. Facebook started just six years ago yet it already has 500 million users worldwide. Twitter is even newer, with about 70 million users. LinkedIn has 60 million users.

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Businesses large and small are jumping on the bandwagon. They're learning that social media is a lot more than advertising—it's a form of communication that more and more people prefer, and not just the young.

It's fast, direct, and in the business world, it will let you know very quickly what customers think about you and your company, good or bad.

It gets you closer to your customers, and if you put some effort into it, can be your most effective form of advertising, your only cost being time.

Researchers at the University of Maryland's School of Business report that social media adoption by businesses doubled from 12% to 24% just in the last year.

Their surveys also indicate that businesses are using social media to identify and attract new customers, build brand awareness and stay engaged with customers. And if you don't think social media is appropriate for business-to-business communications in the office products space, consider this: Staples has more than

103,000 "friends" on Facebook, Office Depot has over 8,500 and OfficeMax has close to 5,000.

How many independents are using social media today? There are no numbers available, but my anecdotal reading from dozens of phone contacts over the past several months suggest it is less than 50%. Many are just getting started, as the experiences of the following dealers indicate.

Starting From Scratch

"The best way to get started with social media is to get active with it personally," says Joel Vockrodt, Office Peeps (formerly Office Systems), Watertown, South Dakota.

"That's what I did. I started by inviting everyone I knew (about 400) to join me on Facebook and about 150 said, yes. Some were customers, some were relatives, some employees, many just personal friends."



"Then we did the same with our business, and at the last count we had 274 friends, and increasing every day. Our name change gave us something to talk

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Ten Tips for Social Media Success

- Assign one person to handle your social media, preferably a good communicator.
- Allow enough time every day for that person to stay in touch.
- Understand the differences—Twitter for short “sound bites,” Facebook for longer messages, LinkedIn for more manager-to-manager discussions, YouTube for videos.
- Be informal, brief and focus on them, not you.
- It’s about listening and responding to what they’ve said, and right away.
- Use closed captioning with sound.
- Invite customers to do testimonials, help them with the script and use videos when possible.
- Use humor, make it fun, and add fresh content regularly and frequently.
- Cross-promote, mention your web site on social media and vice versa.
- Look at what other dealers are doing; share your experiences.

about. We also explained that we are in three different businesses—supplies, furniture and machines. We are careful to present this as information, not hard sell.”

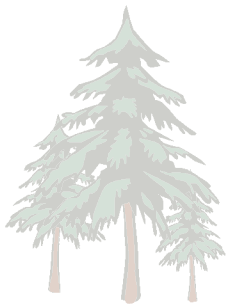
Office Peeps is known for its involvement in all sorts of local charitable activities, and Facebook and Twitter are naturals for getting the word out. They sponsor the local “Relay for Life” drive and placed this notice on their Facebook page: “Anyone that likes our page, please let us know, and we will donate \$1 to the cancer drive, for a total of up to \$1,000.” Not only did they hear from a large number of their own friends list, but also heard from friends of friends, which helped them increase their total number or contacts.

“Educating and informing while promoting works well,” says Joel. An example is a posting that tells customers that the postal service charges an additional fee if they have to hand-cancel mail and clasp envelopes require hand canceling.”

The company mentions rebates that are shown in the S.P. Richards and United catalogs, along with links, so the customer can go directly to the site.

“We cross-promote as much as possible,” Joel explains, “and our logo goes on everything.”

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"If you look at our web site, you'll know about our Facebook page, and vice versa. What's so great about Facebook, LinkedIn and the others is that it's a way for your business personality and your own personality to come through. It's a natural for independents, who are closer personally to their customers than the big boys."

Bret Wrigley of Wrigleys Office Supply, Boyerstown, Pennsylvania, also cross-promotes, linking his web site to Facebook, Twitter, and to dozens of information sources—wholesalers, manufacturers, community sources, even some of their customers.

"You can't put all the links on your web site—it's too many, but you can put them on your social media, where you're adding and deleting items daily," says Bret.

Wrigley's posts customer news frequently—positive things they're doing such as charitable activities and so on.

"We hired an outside resource to help us, Jennifer Schulman from Fortune Web Marketing. We had not the time or the know-how to do it ourselves. We are quite pleased with the results. We also hired a college student part-time to help, and also worked to get as many employees as possible on Facebook. As a result, several of those individuals are the administrators of the program."

The Multiplier Effect

Hummel's Office Plus, Herkimer, New York, recently celebrated its 75th year in business. With a large commercial operation and three retail stores, the dealership is very well known in central New York state, but they've discovered that being on Facebook has dramatically increased the number of people who have heard about them, even though they've been at it for less than a year.

Vice president Justin Hummel explains, "Social media is important because it allows you to reach lots of people that you will not reach any other way, even through traditional advertising."

"It's also another way to tell customers who you are—a family business, a local business, active in the community, etc. We're more than just another business selling something. You're spending your

money with us and we, in turn, are spending it with you."

Justin makes an important point here: Using social media—Facebook, Twitter, or whatever—is perfect for the person-to-person, friendly, informal communication that local independent businesses are known for.

Hummel's also gets a multiplier effect by mentioning Facebook on its web site and mentioning its web site on Facebook. They do the same by cross-promotions between their commercial business and retail stores.

I asked Justin what they've learned that will be helpful to other dealers. He responded, "Put a team together that knows the most about the subject. We have six people who meet regularly, mostly from our marketing and IT departments. We avoid controversial topics and self promotion. We talk about local activities, helpful hints about running an office, green topics, etc. It's basically friends talking to friends. That's the whole idea."

Make it Exciting

"Our slogan is 'Putting People Before Product', and that's what we try to do with social media," states Betsy Hughes of Friends Business Source, Findlay, Ohio.

"We also try to make it fun and exciting, to personalize our company and the culture that we represent."

One way they do that is by focusing on their people and how they produce that extraordinary service. They place pictures with postings wherever possible and produce their own in-house videos.

"We encourage customers to produce their own videos about something that will be interesting to others, and then forward them to us for our own posting, Betsy explains.

"We did an 'Ugliest Chair' contest recently, which got a lot of attention, and which reminded everyone that we sell furniture as well as supplies.

"One important lesson we've learned," Betsy explains, "is that you've got to be consistent with your posting and work on it every day, otherwise the information gets stale and your audience dwindles."

First Class Office Supplies in Blue Island, Illinois, sold only school supply kits up until a year ago. Now they're selling office supplies, which means that their business is more local.

"Using social media has helped us get better known here in our southern Chicago neighborhood," says owner Julie Bailey.

"New buyers and office managers are coming in all the time. Many are young and Facebook and Twitter are forms of communication they're familiar with. I look at it as just another way to communicate with your customers. It adds personality to your business and it doesn't take a lot of your time."

"I think of it as little conversations that customers want to hear. When a customer says something that strikes me as interesting, I put it out there to share with others."

For dealers that haven't started, Julie says, take the time to set it up, just get started. "You'll learn as you go along and you'll be surprised at how much interest you get from customers."

Planting the Seed

Angela Moffatt of D&D Office Plus, North Versailles, Pennsylvania, likes to think that putting your business on Facebook or other social media is "planting the seed," reaching out to the younger generation, letting them know who you are and making the

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Schulman on the Media

Jennifer Schulman is president of Fortune Web Marketing and adviser to a number of office products dealers on web site development. Here are a few of her tips for those just getting started using social media.

- Promote your social media sites at every opportunity—on your own web site, all your advertising and promotional media, on your e-mails, invoices, correspondence, etc.

- Start with the three main sites—Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. More and more firms do online videos. With YouTube you need a video contact. Lots of companies provide this service, including our firm, or you can do them yourself. Ask your manufacturer reps what they have available.

- People are going to turn you off if you're constantly promoting your company. Provide something that will interest them—how to make their office eco-friendly, how to measure for the proper

chair height, product demonstrations now and then, community involvement, trade shows, etc. Contests work well. Give prizes. Then post the winners.

- Put staff member in charge of handling social media or outsource it. Don't expect it to take off immediately.

- Remember this when posting: Be insightful, informative and intuitive.

case that there's someone else in this business besides Staples and Office Depot.

"My idea is simply to create awareness for D&D—we're right here in your own backyard, we deliver, we don't just sell office supplies but also furniture and custom printing. Whoever reads that may have nothing to do with ordering or may not even have a job yet, but someday they will," Angela explains.

If you take a look at D&D's Facebook page, you'll see that they talk about local events, ask about how they compare with national chains, ask visitors about their favorite pen and why, along with a thought for the day.

In Bensonville, Illinois, Feller Business Solutions has found Facebook and Twitter are not only great ways to communicate with customers, but with other dealers, wholesalers and manufacturers.

"And it's not just with members of our own buying group, but dealers across the country," reports Feller's Wendy Pike enthusiastically. "We've learned a lot about promotions, computer systems, hiring, benefits, and on and on, as we get to know other dealers online, many that we've never met."

Wendy is a member of "Office Products Women in Leadership," who communicate primarily via Facebook, and have conducted several webinars.

"Twitter is today's cold calling," says Wendy.

For dealers who haven't started, she suggest that you start with Facebook, make sure it's a business page, not a personal page, and that you link not only to customers, but to other businesses, vendors

and supporters.

"It's important to have fun," Wendy points out. "Post videos, run contests, and post what manufacturers are talking about and promoting. Check out your competitors, and, very important, update sites regularly."

She recommends that everyone read the book, "Twitter Marketing for Dummies," by Kyle Lacy.

Listening to Customers

The Phillips Group, Middletown, Pennsylvania, was an early social media adopter, and continues to try new approaches and learn from the experience of others.

"There's still a lot of uncertainty as how it can work in a business," says Christy Myers, director of human resources. "It's a very personal form of communicating. We need to do a lot more with it, including reaching out to employees and prospective employees, as well as to customers," she admits.

"There's tremendous value in using it to get feedback and viewpoints from customers, to be sure you have your finger on how your customers are feeling, as well as being able to promote your own services and products."

"Customers tell us they like the idea of it. They like to give feedback. It would seem that the key to its success is how interactive you make it."

Christy believes there are still many unanswered questions about dealers' use of social media—how open can we be on a day-to-day basis with employees' use of

the media? Who on staff should be involved in its operation? How will this affect productivity?

Don't Be Late to the Party

Too many dealers are still playing catch up with the big boxes when it comes to online ordering and effective use of their web sites. Don't let it happen with social media.

The big boys are already using it, but this time independents have a built-in advantage—their closeness to customers. That's what social media is all about. It's person to person, it's informal and it's not about selling customers but communicating with them.

Today's web tools, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the many other social media options, are all about customer engagement. Your objective is to get people talking about something important to them and hopefully, also to your business.

Armed with this valuable feedback, you can quickly make decisions about your services, policies, procedures, pricing, etc., which will, over time, improve customer loyalty and advocacy.

Speed up your learning curve by looking at what other dealers are doing, hire the know-how if you don't have it, and as the owner or manager, get personally involved.

This medium is fast-moving and changing at the same time.

Don't be late to the party.