

HOW **10** BUSINESSES COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY **on** SOCIAL NETWORKS

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1. Introduction

If you had asked any successful business owner in 1987 what is the most valuable and cost effective form of advertising they'd have answered "word of mouth" without a second thought. Word of mouth has always been the most valuable tool in a business' marketing toolbox.

These days, word of mouth has evolved into something that's significantly faster, more far-reaching and an order of magnitude more complex than anything 1987 had to deal with; social media. Social media is even more important to a business' bottom line than word of mouth was, and can be a lot more beneficial, but there's a problem. How do you use it effectively?

(Still using traditional media? Make the switch and see [why you should be using social media](#) instead)

1.1 The Standard Advice

If you've looked into developing a social media strategy for your business you will have encountered most of the standard advice already. The social media gurus will tell you that you should:

- Be genuine
- Engage your customer base
- Foster conversation
- Under no circumstances try to control the conversation

This is fine and good, but what does any of it actually mean?

(Here are [10 general aspects to consider](#) in a Social Media Marketing Campaign)

1.1.1 Be Genuine

Being genuine is really just another way of saying that you need to come across as a person rather than a company. While this makes perfect sense - its social media and people socialize with other people, not with companies - it isn't particularly helpful when you are a company and not an individual person. In most cases you'll end up assigning a specific individual or group of individuals to represent your company and this should provide enough individuality to come across as genuine.

1.1.2 Engage

The second item, and the one most commonly touted by the experts, is that you need to engage your followers. For the most part there are three ways to engage through social media; you can inform, you can entertain, and you can converse. The key to doing any of these successfully is to make your information, entertainment or conversation relevant to your market. The great thing about most social media platforms is that the users will be quite happy to tell you what they find useful and what they find useless. All you need to do is pay attention to what they're telling you.

1.1.3 Foster Conversation

The third item, fostering conversation without trying to control it can be difficult and more than a little bit frightening to companies more accustomed to the world of traditional media. It becomes easier when you realize that it is actually impossible to control the conversation in any meaningful way, and trying to do so makes your company look bad. It also means you will get excluded from the conversation, which is very, very bad. The key here is fairly simple; listen to what people are saying, value what they are saying whether that is positive or negative, and provide your own take on anything that seems important.

1.1.4 Do Not Control the Conversation

All three of these strategies are the direct consequence of social media's defining characteristic; the one element that sets it apart from traditional marketing avenues. While traditional media is a one way street, social media goes an almost infinite number of ways. Unlike a television or radio ad campaign, social media allows your customers and potential customers to talk to you, and to talk to each other about you. If you keep this firmly in mind as you enter the social media fray, you shouldn't go too far wrong.

2. The Social Media Platforms - Pros and Cons

The standard advice above is useful, in a general sort of way. It's certainly true that a newcomer to the social media arena ignores it at their peril, but following it will only take you so far. It is limited in that it treats the different social networks as if they were all the same. They are not.

In many respects the major social networks have more differences than they do similarities. Strategies that work beautifully on Facebook are a disaster on Google+. Proper etiquette on Twitter will get you unfriended in an instant on Facebook. Each network is suited for different things, so it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each one before developing a social media strategy.

(Click [here](#) to find out what social media can tell you about your target market)

2.1 Facebook



Strengths:

- Very large user base
- Part of users daily routine
- Users are accustomed to engaging

Weaknesses:

- Users often engage shallowly
- Difficult to translate buzz into sales
- Few key players

Facebook started as a network for college students. It eventually opened to the public at large, but its origin as a college network still influences it today. For most, Facebook is a way to keep in touch with people they know already rather than a way to meet new people. This can make it difficult for a business to expand its reach quickly.

Because Facebook is so firmly a part of many people's daily routines, Facebook users tend to engage more easily than users on other social networks. They also trust the content they see there more. It also has the largest user base of any social network by far at over 800 million people.

Although Facebook users engage easily they often do it shallowly, which can make translating buzz into sales difficult. Also, there are few key players to help spread your reach, making for slow going in the beginning.

2.2 Twitter

Strengths:

- You can be witty and charming
- Great for organizing events
- Snowball effect

Weaknesses:

- You need to be witty and charming
- 140 characters limits your scope
- Snowball effect

Twitter bills itself as a micro-blogging service, although the emphasis is certainly on the "micro" rather than on the "blogging". The 140 character limit forces people to be creative as they try to fit as much as possible into a tiny amount of space. The cleverer you are in fitting your message into 140 characters, the more Twitter's user base appreciates you. If you happen to be clever and witty, this is great. If you are not clever and witty, this expectation is one of Twitter's biggest shortcomings.

Perhaps because of the brevity of the content, Tweets are very prone to the snowball effect. Tweets occasionally go "viral", and spread like wildfire. Again, this can be either a good thing or a bad thing depending on whether the message is positive or negative for your business.

Twitter is well suited to keeping in fairly superficial contact with a wide variety of people. It is also a fantastic way to disseminate small amounts of information to a broad audience very quickly. Where Twitter really shines, though, is in organizing events and coordinating activities.

2.3 Google+

Strengths:

- Deep engagement
- Hangouts (and Hangouts Over the Air)
- There are several key players

Weaknesses:

- Still a very small user base
- Low tolerance for overt marketing
- Users tend to be more judgmental/less forgiving of missteps

Google+ is the newest player in the social networking scene. It opened to the public in the fall of 2011, and currently claims about 100 million users. Some of those users are people who use Gmail or YouTube or some other Google service and who were given a Google+ account automatically as a result. No one seems to know how many active users Google+ has, but it's a safe bet that it is somewhat less than 100 million people.

Where Facebook is about maintaining relationships with people you already know, Google+ is more about forming new relationships based on mutual interests. This results in the users on Google+ engaging much more deeply, and in the conversations being significantly more 'intellectual' than on other networks. It also means that Google+ users tends to be more judgmental and less forgiving of behavior they dislike, and one of the things G+ users often dislike is overt marketing.

Two of the biggest advantages Google+ has are Hangouts and the fact that there do tend to be key players, or thought leaders. The key players are important because they tend to garner a lot of respect from the community and if you can get one of them to support you, you can generally count on their followers to do the same. Hangouts, and Hangouts Over the Air in particular, are the "killer app" for marketers on G+. Hangouts are basically video conferencing with up to 9 other G+ users. Hangouts Over the Air

is more like your own personal TV station; there is the same limit of 10 people in the hangout, but an unlimited number of people can watch the hangout as it happens (hence the “Over the Air”).

2.4 Blogs

Strengths:

- Deepest engagement of any format
- Most flexible
- Most like traditional media

Weaknesses:

- Harder to attract readers/build following
- Demanding in terms of content creation
- Harder to generate buzz/word of mouth

Blogs are often the first form of social media businesses turn to; they are the most familiar to those used to traditional media. Like traditional media channels, the direction of communication is primarily one way with the exception of reader comments which can be carefully controlled (deleted or edited) by the owner of the blog. In a way it is almost like “social media lite” and this is attractive to many companies looking for a social media presence.

By itself, though, a corporate blog is seldom an effective marketing tool. Other social media channels have established user bases whereas a blog has to build its own from the ground up. Blogs are also a tad bit more demanding in terms of the amount and frequency of content that needs to be created, and the lack of effective intercommunication between followers means it can be very difficult to generate buzz from a blog alone. The most effective blog strategies involve combining a blog with other social media platforms, as well as making liberal use of other people’s blogs (the “Blogosphere”).

3. Case Studies

3.1 Companies that Use Facebook Effectively

3.1.1 Partners Trust



Partners Trust is a real estate agency based in Beverley Hills, California. They specialize in what they call luxury homes, and cater to a wealthy, exclusive, and privacy-conscious clientele – the rich and famous. There are a couple of reasons you might think Partners Trust wouldn't have much use for social marketing. They service a very niche market that isn't known for interacting on social media platforms, and real estate is a very geographically specific business while social media is generally viewed as a global platform.

The idea is that social media is global is only partially correct. It is true that most social media platforms have the potential to reach a global market, but think about your own friends list on Facebook. How many of the people that you interact with regularly on Facebook live in the same city as you? If you are like most people the answer is most of them. Most of the people we interact with on Facebook are the people we interact with in our regular lives. Partner's Trust is using this to their advantage.

In addition to the usual generic real estate information and blog posts you might expect from a real estate businesses Facebook page, every week Partners Trust spotlights one employee to the general public. When they do this the spotlighted employee's Facebook friends are sure to notice. The majority of those friends are likely to live in the same area and Partners Trust manages to build local brand recognition while giving their employees a chance to feel like a celebrity.

This brings us to the idea that the rich and famous either don't use or don't interact on Facebook. It is true that the affluent don't generally use Facebook very much. It is also true that the very wealthy don't generally make a lot of the day-to-day lifestyle

decisions that the rest of us are used to making. This includes decisions such as which real estate agency to use when buying or selling your multi-million dollar home.

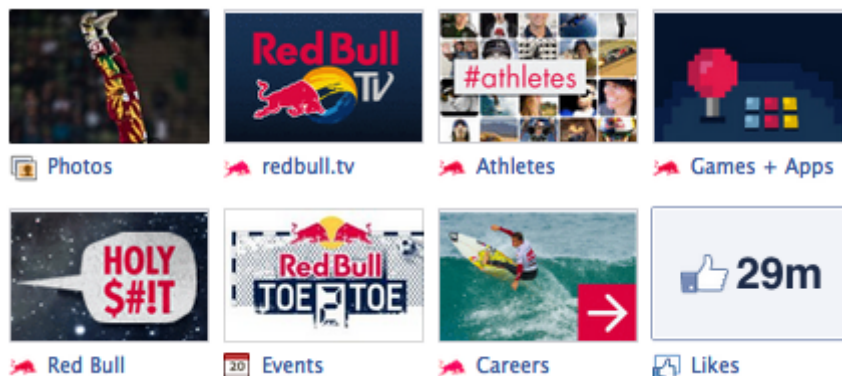
The market segment Partners Trust services is the very wealthy, but the people they really need to build brand recognition with are the personal assistants that take care of those very wealthy people's day-to-day needs, and those personal assistants do use Facebook and are likely to be friends, or friends of friends with the same employees Partners Trust is highlighting every week. This is a brilliant example of how to leverage the real-world relationships aspect of Facebook to market without marketing.

3.1.2 Red Bull



Whether or not you use their products, you're sure to have heard of **Red Bull**. Their logo seems to appear almost everywhere, and you're probably familiar with their slogan as well. It's "Red Bull gives you wings," just in case you aren't familiar. The company sponsors an astounding assortment of athletes, sporting events, tournaments, daredevil world record breaking attempts, and just about anything else to which you can append the word "extreme".

A lot of their advertising is done through innovative use of traditional media. They are masters of the publicity stunt, for example, and they put a lot of effort and money into their print and television campaigns, but it is their unique approach and use of Facebook that is of particular interest.



Some will talk of the clever way they use “like-gating” (requiring you to “like” their page before you can access the whole thing), but the benefits of like-gating are temporary, especially if you don’t give people a reason to come back. It’s a fairly trivial thing to get people’s attention; it can be a Herculean task to keep it. Red Bull seems to have realized very early on that the best way to capture *and keep* the public’s interest is by providing compelling content, and this is what they do with their Facebook page.

As sponsors of spectacle they certainly have access to a lot of spectacular content. Much of this content, from extreme sporting events and daredevil stunts to their sponsored athletes, is brought together and made available through their “Red Bull TV” channel. They make available a surprisingly large collection of thrilling and exciting videos right on their Facebook page. Between Red Bull TV and the several casual games they’ve created specifically for their page they give visitors ample reasons not just to view the page once, but to keep coming back.

3.1.3 IdeaPaint

IdeaPaint is a manufacturer of dry-erase paint. They offer several varieties and colors in over 70 countries. As a smaller company with a relatively specific market it is very important for them to make the best use of all marketing avenues and they certainly seem to be doing so with their Facebook page.

Here we have another company taking the characteristics of their company or product and extending them naturally into the social space. IdeaPaint's product, dry-erase surfaces, is naturally collaborative. People use whiteboards when they are working together to generate ideas. Their Facebook page manages to take that essence of what they manufacture and sell and demonstrate those qualities admirably.

In addition to acting as a node or nexus for their other social media presences, including their blog, YouTube channel and Pinterest account, they've managed to make their Facebook page collaborative. The majority of the content posted there is actually posted by their customers who are encouraged to post stories and pictures demonstrating witty, creative and unusual uses of IdeaPaint's products. This results in a sense of community and belonging amongst IdeaPaint's clientele. That sense of community brings about the true goal of all social media marketing; it turns customers into fans and fans into evangelists for the brand.

3.2 Companies that Use Twitter Effectively

3.2.1 CBS (The Big Bang Theory)

Five to six years ago television network CBS was in the old folks home, and that's about the only place it was. They were losing ratings to the other networks and were looking for a way to reinvent themselves in the eyes of the public. Fast forward to 2012 and CBS has managed to change everything around and Twitter has played no small role in doing so.

Although there has been a network spanning push at CBS towards social media in general and Twitter in particular, the best example of how to use Twitter for promotional purposes comes by way of "The Big Bang Theory" series. Producer Bill Prady has done a wonderful job of taking the characteristics and limitations of the Twitter platform and turning them to his advantage.

The main advantage Twitter has over other social networks is that it functions in real time. There's a sense of immediacy that comes with Twitter that you don't get with other platforms. Prady makes use of this by live-tweeting new episodes of the show as they air, providing fans with behind the scenes information and trivia they wouldn't otherwise have access to. It's similar to the extras and commentary you usually get on a DVD release, but free and available immediately.

The 140 character limit and the sheer volume of traffic that Twitter engenders also means that Mr. Prady can pick and choose what information he shares and what questions he answers, and that he doesn't have to provide much in the way of excessive detail. Bite-sized trivia tidbits are the order of the day.

This sense of "event" that arises from the live-tweeting by the show's producer has helped build a very strong sense of community among the shows fans. This in turn has propelled "The Big Bang Theory" to become the most watched show in its time slot, and has had a significant impact on the fortunes of CBS.

3.2.2 Comcast

Few industries engender as much anger and contempt in the hearts of consumers as the cable company. Long seen as the poster children for terrible customer service, price gouging, and failure to deliver on promises, the cable company is the company everybody loves to hate. This is where **Comcast** comes in with their *two branched approach to Twitter*.

It is no exaggeration to say that people love to complain about the cable company, and these days the place they do a lot of their complaining is on Twitter. If you do a search on Twitter for Comcast you'll see a seemingly endless stream of invective and abuse heaped on the company for every service outage, billing error, and customer service misstep. It's very public, and it's very permanent – a tweet is forever.

Most companies would treat this as a PR nightmare, but not Comcast. Thanks to Frank Eliason (and now Bill Gerth) Comcast treats this aspect of Twitter as a means to address customer issues that they might otherwise never have heard about. By performing that same Twitter search for Comcast they are able to find and address problems their customers are having as they are having them. This is a revolutionary way to use social media; not so much to talk to talk to your customers but rather to listen to them.

The second branch is of the more traditional "talk to your customers" variety, but it makes ingenious use of Twitter's immediacy. If a significant service outage occurs, or any other sort of time sensitive information needs to be disseminated to Comcast's customers, a tweet is often the first method they turn to. Knowing that Comcast will tweet about it if there is a problem that affects many customers, anyone who experiences a problem can check Twitter to see if their problem is unique or widespread. This gives them the satisfaction of an explanation immediately, and often saves them a long wait time on the customer support line.

3.2.3 Emerson Salon



Emerson Salon is a hair salon in Seattle, Washington. If you are active on Twitter there's a fairly good chance you've already heard of them. In 2008, Alex Garcia and Matt Buchan bought a salon on Capitol hill in Seattle, renamed it (after Ralph Waldo Emerson), and gave it a complete makeover – a makeover that included an entirely new business model.

What Garcia and Buchan realized is that the beauty industry is a very social industry. They've turned this facet of their industry to their advantage by embracing several varieties of social media. Their success can be attributed in large part to the seamless way they've integrated multiple social media platforms into a cohesive whole, but the way they've made use of Twitter is particularly noteworthy.

As has been noted already, one of the things that differentiates Twitter from the other social media platforms is its immediacy. Twitter is all about what's happening here and what's happening now. Emerson Salon takes advantage of this in a couple of ways. When you book an appointment through their website, which most of their regular customers now do, you are given the option to share your appointment via twitter. This has the potential to start Emerson-centric conversations with that person's twitter followers which can often result in additional booked appointments.

The other thing Emerson is doing right on Twitter is building and fostering community. They don't just tweet about their specials and services. They don't even tweet strictly about hair care and beauty. Although they do tweet about those things a fair bit, they also tweet about local events and happenings. They tweet about and link to the social media accounts of their stylists and often of their customers. In doing so, they build a sense that they are not just a business but rather a group of individual people that are part of a larger community. This has translated into a rapid and steady rise in business volume since they made social media such an integral part of their business.

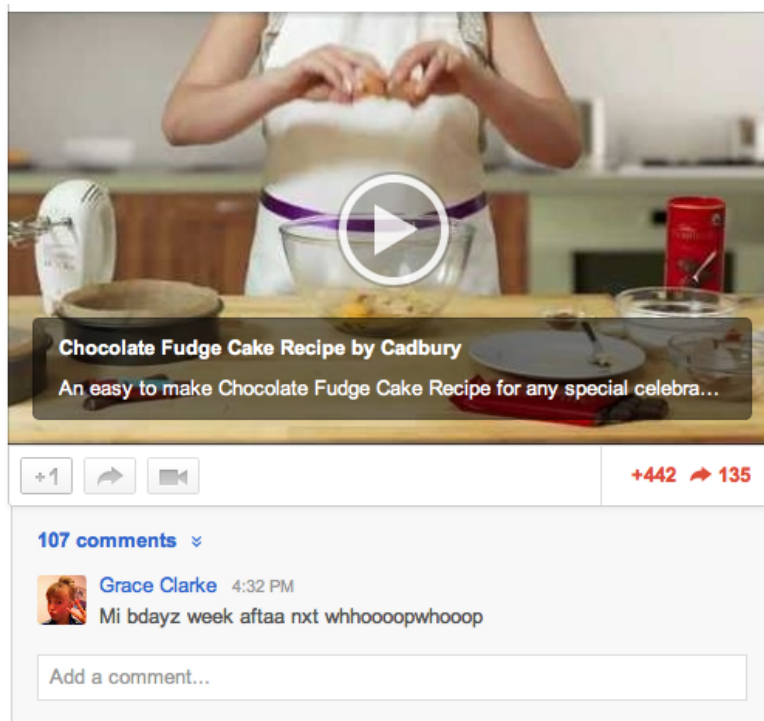
3.3 Companies that Use Google+ Effectively

3.3.1 Cadbury



Cadbury is a brand name that is familiar to just about everybody. The largest confectionery company in the world, the iconic British chocolate company is also currently one of the most active brands on Google+. It is on Google+ that they've made innovative and effective use of one of Google+'s unique features; hangouts on air.

A hangout on Google+ is basically a video chat for up to ten people – not terribly useful for most businesses. With the introduction of hangouts on air, though, the equation changed drastically. Hangouts on air is also a video chat for up to ten people, but with the option of an unlimited number of spectators, making it more like interactive television. This has enormous possibilities for businesses both large and small, and Cadbury has been taking advantage of them, for the most part in the form of Q&A sessions.



Doing a Q&A session via hangouts on air has two primary benefits for a company. It builds interest in the company's brand, and it provides direct feedback from customers about what they like, what they don't like, and what interests them about the company. A Q&A builds interest by giving customers a "behind the scenes" look at how the company works, how their products are made or developed, or anything else that people are wondering about. Again, in the same way that a DVD release of a television series adds value by providing behind the scenes extras, Cadbury is adding value to their brand by doing the same.

The feedback received during a Q&A can be invaluable and is the kind of information that would be difficult or impossible to get any other way. Because the information is gained through the medium of a real-time conversation with a company insider and other customers the opportunity exists for more in-depth follow up than is available through traditional market survey methods. Because they are able to solicit questions in advance of the session, they are also able to control (within reason) the direction and tone of the conversation.

3.3.2 Burberry

Another large British brand, Burberry was one of the first luxury brands to put up a business page on Google+. This fact is, in and of itself, a valuable lesson in using social media effectively. In social media circles, one can never underestimate the cache and prestige that attaches to being an early adopter. Being able to say that you were “first” or even “one of the first” gives you an air of forward thinking pioneer that carries a lot of weight in on-line circles.

Beyond that, however, there are a number of other things that Burberry is doing very right on Google+. They take good advantage of the integration between Google+ and YouTube (also owned by Google) as well as making use of animated Gifs and other rich media options available. These technological differences between Google+ and other social networks allow Burberry to showcase their products in ways that aren't possible elsewhere and that feel more interactive to their customers.

The third way that Burberry is using Google+ to best advantage is with regards to Google+'s search engine integration. Google+ pages are often given preferential positioning in Google search results and, merely by paying attention to keywords and phrasing in their Google+ posts, Burberry leverages that preferential placement to improve their chances of being noticed by new followers.

By staying flexible and willing to adopt new technologies, Burberry managed to grab the attention of a budding new social network. By presenting a variety of information in unique and compelling formats they manage to broaden their message rather than merely duplicating it. By making an effort towards search engine friendliness they also manage to also broaden their audience by attracting new fans.

3.4 Companies that Use Blogs Effectively

3.4.1 Martell Home Builders

Martell Home Builders is a custom home construction company based in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada. Most building companies are beholden to realtors for the majority of their business. Martell has done a number of innovative things with their blog that has allowed them to do most of their own business generation directly.

One of the simplest things Martell Home Builders has done, with possibly the most far-reaching effects, is to integrate their blog with their other social media platforms. Each blog post has options to subscribe by email (the most common method for reading blogs) and to share the post on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These options are placed very prominently at the top right of the page. This maximizes the chance that a visitor will come back in the future, and that members of their social circles will also visit.

Another thing Martell has done is to provide photo galleries of the houses they have built. For prospective customers with a picture of a dream house in their heads, this provides a sense of concrete reality that may previously have been lacking. It also gives Martell a chance to demonstrate their skills, and goes a long way to giving them credibility in the eyes of their visitors.

One of the most innovative things Martell Home Builders has done is to equip their contractors with GPS devices and offer customers a “Where Is My Contractor” function. They also provide a “Real-time Web Platform” that gives their customers a time line and ongoing pictures of their house as it is being built. Between the two, customers can follow the building of their new house from the comfort of their old house. This sense of transparency and accountability is invaluable in reassuring new homeowners about Martell Home Builders' credibility.

3.4.2 Ford Motor Company

Ford has maintained an active on-line presence for many years now and are masters of effective social marketing. They are active on Facebook and Twitter, of course, and use both of those platforms effectively, but the real lessons to be learned from Ford are in their use of blogs.

The first effective strategy they employ is in the formatting of their blog. The formatting of their blog posts places the initial focus of the reader's attention on the comments rather than the post itself. This sends a couple of subtle messages to visitors. First, it tells visitors that comments are both welcomed and appreciated. Given the number of corporate blogs that don't allow comments at all, this is refreshing. People enjoy and have come to expect discussion and interaction in their on-line lives and by encouraging rather than stifling this, Ford encourages readers to return over and over again.

The second message this sends is the idea that what the readers have to say is more important than what the company has to say. Ford backs this up by soliciting opinions and ideas on current offerings and future developments. They follow through on their commitment to their customers opinions by actually implementing many of the suggestions they receive this way. Everything about their blog says that Ford is a company that listens to its customers.

The other effective use of blogs exhibited by Ford has nothing to do with their own blog at all. It has to do with their use of other people's blogs. One of the down sides to the blogging platform is that it doesn't come with a ready made network of potential fans. Building a blog audience is a long and often slow process. To counteract this, Ford has made very effective use of already established blogs to generate buzz and drive traffic back to their own blog.

In 2010, as a precursor to bringing the Fiesta model line back to North America, they provided 100 independent bloggers and social media users with a free Ford Fiesta. There was only one string attached; they were to share their experiences with the car, whether good or bad, publicly.

That was it. They gave 100 people a free car, got their promise that they would talk about the car, and then stepped out of the conversation. By not trying to control the bloggers' posts in any way they sent a couple of very powerful messages. The first message was that they respected the bloggers right to speak freely which, to most bloggers, is more important than the free car. The second message was that they were

so confident in their product that they had no need of controlling the discourse. The result was generally positive reviews from the bloggers and a very successful American product launch.

4. Have You Been Tracking & Optimizing?

The keys to social media success are fairly straightforward in theory:

- Know the platform
- Know your Customers
- Provide value

While it's true that the gap between theory and practice can be a wide one, the cases above provide solid examples of how to narrow that gap significantly. As far as knowing the platform, the first thing to keep in mind is that the different social media platforms are exactly that: different.

Twitter excels at organizing events and at talking about “here” and “now” types of things but Twitter attention is fleeting and required ongoing effort to maintain. Facebook is invaluable for its incredible reach and its integration into the lives of its users, even though those users tend to engage quite shallowly. Facebook is the closest thing we've ever had to functional subliminal advertising and, as such, is a necessity. Google+ provides an unprecedented level of access to thought leaders and industry specialists but is very unforgiving of mistakes; especially overt marketing.

Knowing your customers means getting to know them and engaging them on topics that interest them, whether or not those topics are directly tied to your business. Perhaps a clearer way to put it is to say that social media is for branding, not for sales. If you try to use social media to drive sales you will fail, often spectacularly. If, however, you use social media to build brand – to provide your customers with an image, or an experience rather than a product – you will often be met with unexpected levels of success.

Providing value is a direct result of knowing your customers. It is, in fact, impossible to provide value to your customers without understanding them well. Unless you understand what drives your customers you won't be able to determine what they will consider valuable. Do they value interaction and discussion like Ford's customers? Do they seek entertainment like Red Bull's demographic? Do they crave access like the audience of *The Big Bang Theory*? Once you know that, simply provide your customers with what they value, under the banner of your particular brand, and success is within your reach.

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