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July 19, 2009

The Expanding Universe of the Social Media Sphere

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Social media give businesses the opportunity to share knowledge and influence customers like never before. Unlike traditional, outbound marketing, in which businesses buy space in newspapers or airtime on television, the social Web offers an almost infinite number of free or low-cost distribution channels to directly reach and influence consumers.

Small businesses can participate in this increasingly social world of consumer-business mass collaboration in several ways.

Networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter let people connect with peers, customers and “influencers,” people who win a strong following of friends, fans and supporters by regularly submitting high-quality content to social media sites. Company-sponsored fan pages on Facebook allow businesses to stay current with customers and get instant feedback about products or services.

Blogs can create and maintain personal bonds with customers. Blogs with interesting content and regular updates attract inbound links, which draws search engines. A blog syndicated with an RSS feed automatically sends new posts to subscribers.

Writing and publishing **original articles** and online press releases optimized to attract search engines allows a company to share news about a service or product. It can be submitted to a free or subscription-based online newswire service to help build links and traffic to a business’s Web site. (Find article directories by googling "submit article.")

Establishing a reputation on social news and bookmarking sites like Digg, StumbleUpon and Delicious can generate business for consultants and other professionals. These sites cater to a narrower topic- or industry-focused audience. Network members can submit original articles or share links to articles they think will resonate with the social community, but before they can promote their services, they must earn credibility in the community as “thought leaders.”

Videos are another vehicle for disseminating marketing messages online. According to February search engine numbers from comScore, video searches on YouTube now represent 25 percent of all Google search queries in the U.S. Businesses should weigh the benefits of hosting videos exclusively on their own sites to attract the most direct traffic versus uploading the videos on third-party sites like YouTube and MetaCafe where they might be seen by more people but divert traffic (and potential links) away from one's Web site.

Every business should have a social media strategy based on the needs and interests of its customers. Success in social media and search engine optimization requires a long-term commitment to continually publish high-quality, relevant content that draws Internet attention.

WESST offers various low-cost workshops (as well as one-on-one consulting) to help small businesses leverage these powerful inbound marketing tactics. A “Facebook for Business” webinar is planned for 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. July 29 in Albuquerque. No prior Facebook experience is necessary. Registration before July 22 is \$17. Call 505-246-6900 or visit www.wesst.org

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding resources for their business or idea. To learn more about resources available to New Mexicans, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

