

Social media offers many ways to grow business

Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, oh my! For some, the added communications channels offered by social media can quickly feel overwhelming.

But whether we like it or not, they are proving to be valuable marketing tools that small and large companies alike are jumping on board to explore.

If they accomplish nothing else, they help to build brand awareness and engage with customers, something a business can't thrive without.

YouTube is an especially fun site where people from around the world have posted countless videos, ranging from the painfully amateur to the highly professional, on virtually any sub-

ject you can imagine. YouTube is a huge international phenomenon that only is getting bigger.

In November 2009, the site's ever-growing and changing video collection surpassed 1 billion views per day, which doubled by May 2010. (Statistically, nearly 1 in 3 people in the world view YouTube daily!)

Somewhere among those billions of viewers are likely to be some potential customers for your product or service,

or at the very least some insights about your target market or the competitive landscape that could help you improve your business strategy.

Can't afford to produce videos touting your business? No problem.

According to a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, a growing number of companies are experiencing success by joining conversations on YouTube and cultivating relationships with video bloggers, or vloggers. In the best cases, vloggers can become product ambassadors, making videos about the products they use and like and plugging them in online forums.

But you can't just jump in and start pushing your product, as online forums can be sensitive to outright self-promotion and could lead to opposition that can spread to other forums. Instead, said Kieran Healy, an associate professor of sociology at Duke University,

companies must establish a history of being helpful in discussions.

He uses Benchmade Knife Co. of Oregon as an example of a company doing this successfully. Benchmade's reps won't start conversations on YouTube, but they will contribute to them, answering questions posed about their knives, commenting on vlog reviews and discussing anything else regarding the company.

Today, there are almost 4,000 YouTube videos by vloggers that review Benchmade knives, so just chiming in on discussions is a big job for the company of five — but it has paid off. Rob Morrison, the company's marketing director, attributes significant sales increases to building credibility among YouTube users. "Being accessible pro-

notes brand loyalty, and that really shows on forums," he said.

One of the best things about using a social medium such as YouTube is that, when properly executed, the return on investment can be staggering. After all, your only input is the time spent locating applicable videos and forums and participating in related conversations.

Thinking a site like this might not relate to your particular business? My advice would be to check it out before making that call.

My one-minute experimental search on YouTube yielded more than 5,000 videos related to the keywords "energy technologies" and a similar number for "energy storage."

Those are just a couple of the many examples that might

relate to business in the Tri-Cities.

I encourage you to think outside the box and open your mind to the power of social media when it comes to marketing your small business. Don't assume your product or service won't "fit" before doing some homework.

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