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SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUR TARGETED AUDIENCE

As millions of people use the web for conducting detailed research on products and services, getting involved in political campaigns, joining music and film fan clubs, reviewing products, and discussing hobbies and passions, they congregate in all kinds of online places. The technologies and tools, which many people now refer to collectively as *social media*, all include ways for users to express their opinions online:

- **Social networking** sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn help people cultivate a community of friends and share information.
- **Blogs**, personal websites written by somebody who is passionate about a topic, provide a means to share that passion with the world and to foster an active community of readers who provide comments on the author's posts.
- **Video and image sharing** sites like YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, SlideShare, and Instagram greatly simplify the process of sharing and commenting on photos, graphical images, and videos.
- **Chat rooms and message boards** serve as online meeting places where people meet and discuss topics of interest, with the main feature being that anyone can start a discussion thread.
- **Review sites** such as Yelp, Rotten Tomatoes, Amazon, and TripAdvisor are places where consumers rate products, services, and companies.
- **Listserve**s, similar to chat rooms, send messages out by email to a collection of registered members.
- **Wikis** are websites that anybody can edit and update.
- **Social bookmarking** sites like Digg and StumbleUpon allow users to suggest content to others and vote on what is interesting.
- **Mobile applications** with GPS-generated location services like Foursquare and Swarm add the component of identifying exactly where each user is in the world.

What Is Social Media, Anyway?

Since social media is such an important concept (and is so often misunderstood), I'll define it:

Social media provides the way people share ideas, content, thoughts, and relationships online. Social media differs from so-called mainstream media in that anyone can create, comment on, and add to social media content. Social media can take the form of text, audio, video, images, and communities.

The best way to think about social media is not in terms of the different technologies and tools but, rather, how those technologies and tools allow you to communicate directly with your buyers in places they are congregating right now.

Just as a point of clarification, note that there are two terms that sound similar here: social media and social networking. *Social media* is the superset and is how we refer to the various media that people use to communicate online in a social way. Social media include blogs, wikis, video and photo sharing, and much more. A subset of social media is *social networking*, a term I use to refer to how people interact on sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and similar sites. Social networking occurs when people create a personal profile and interact to become part of a community of friends and like-minded people and to share information. You'll notice throughout the book that I use both terms. This chapter is about the larger concept of social media, whereas in [Chapter 15](#) we dive into detail about social networking.

I'm fond of thinking of the web as a city—it helps make sense of each aspect of online life and how we create and interact. Corporate sites are the storefronts on Main Street peddling wares. Craigslist is like the bulletin board at the entrance of the corner store; eBay, a garage sale; Amazon, a superstore replete with patrons anxious to give you their two cents. Mainstream media sites like the *New York Times* online are the newspapers of the city. Chat rooms and forums are the pubs and saloons of the online world. You even have the proverbial wrong-side-of-the-tracks spots: the web's adult-entertainment and spam underbelly.

Social Media Is a Cocktail Party

If you follow my metaphor of the web as a city, then think of social media and the ways that people interact on blogs, forums, and social networking sites as the bars, private clubs, and cocktail parties of the city. To extend the (increasingly tortured) analogy even further, Twitter can be compared to the interlude when the girls go to the ladies' room and talk about the guys, and the guys are discussing the girls while they wait.

Viewing the web as a sprawling city where social media are the places where people congregate to have fun helps us make sense of how marketers can best use the tools of social media. How do you act in a cocktail party situation?

- Do you go into a large gathering filled with a few acquaintances and tons of people you do not know and shout, “BUY MY PRODUCT!”?

- Do you go into a cocktail party and ask every single person you meet for a business card before you agree to speak with them?
- Do you try to meet every single person, or do you have a few great conversations?
- Do you listen more than you speak?
- Are you helpful, providing valuable information to people with no expectation of getting something tangible in return?
- Or do you avoid the social interaction of cocktail parties altogether because you are uncomfortable in such situations?

I find these questions are helpful to people who are new to social media. This analogy is also a good one to discuss with social media cynics and those who cannot see the value of this important form of communication.

The web-as-a-city approach is especially important when dealing with people who have been steeped in the traditions of advertising-based marketing, those skilled at interrupting people to talk up products and using coercion techniques to make a sale. Sure, you can go to a cocktail party and treat everyone as a sales lead while blabbing on about what your company does. But that approach is unlikely to make you popular.

Guess what? The popular people on the cocktail circuit make friends. People like to do business with people they like. And they are eager to introduce their friends to each other. The same trends hold true in social media. So go ahead and join the party. But think of it as just that—a fun place where you give more than you get. Of course, you can also do business there, but the kind you do at a cocktail party and not at the general store. What you get in return for your valuable interactions are lasting friendships, many of which lead to business opportunities.

This chapter is an introduction to the concepts of social media. In subsequent chapters, I go into much greater detail about blogs ([Chapters 5](#) and [16](#)), video ([Chapters 6](#) and [18](#)), and social networking ([Chapter 15](#)).

“Upgrade to Canada” Social Program Nabs Tourists from Other Countries

The travel market is crowded. Consumers have lots of places to find information about places to visit. Into this environment, the best content and the companies that are most engaged with social networks can win the day.

Canada Tourism engaged travelers with a terrific social networking program called “Upgrade to Canada.” Representatives from Canada Tourism intercepted travelers at the Frankfurt and Lyon airports and tried to persuade them to switch their holiday

plans, on the spot, to visit Canada instead. People had only a few minutes to consider the offer. Fortunately, many of them were open to the serendipity of a real-time travel change, and they spontaneously changed their travel destinations.

Canada Tourism then created real-time social content about the travelers and their experiences once they arrived in Canada, and the tourists themselves eagerly shared on their own social networks, including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook.

“The results were extraordinary,” says Siobhan Chretien, regional managing director for Canada Tourism. “Not only were we able to share firsthand the travelers' stories with the world, but online we received further upgrades from over 100 countries by travelers who switched to Canada.” Social networking drove awareness of Canada as a destination. Canada's share among competitive destinations increased by a remarkable 21.5 percent.

I love the idea of requiring people to make a decision in just a few minutes. The real-time nature of how people then share their experience separates “Upgrade to Canada” from other social media campaigns from tourism organizations.

“No matter how sexy a destination is, promoting a country for tourism purposes has its challenges,” Chretien says, “especially with the world now being a smaller place with many travel options and competing experiences and destinations. The traveler of today and of the future has a vast array of options. It is not enough to run slick ad campaigns or hope that price alone will drive a sale and convert a tourist. The traveler needs to be inspired, motivated, influenced, and in some cases convinced on the spot that the time is now to make the trip!”

Smart organizations understand this new world and build a buying process around the realities of independent research and the power of social networks. Instead of generic information dreamed up by an advertising agency, they tell authentic stories that interest their customers. Instead of selling, they educate through online content. Instead of ignoring those who have already made a purchase, they deliver information at precisely the moment customers need it.

It's not just travel destinations that can benefit from social engagement. Every market is influenced by what people are saying on social networks: the good, the bad, and, in some cases, nothing.

Social Networking and Agility

Social networking allows companies to communicate instantly with their existing and potential customers. That Canada Tourism built an entire awareness campaign around real-time strategies shows the power of instant communications. Yet many organizations don't respond to people quickly on social networks.

I'm a “Pro” user of the Hightail file sharing and storage service. I've been a loyal customer since January 2009, paying more than \$100 a year for my premium

services. In December 2015, I received an email offer from Hightail with the subject line “Complete your list with our great discount.” The offer promised if I would “Upgrade to Hightail Professional” that day, I'd get 50 percent off the annual subscription price. Hightail subscription plans have confusing names: Hightail Professional is an upgrade from the Hightail Pro service I was using at the time.

The offer sounded good, so I clicked the “Get the deal” button.

However, when I logged into my Hightail account to complete the transaction, I got a nasty error message: “Your account does not meet the prerequisites for using this Sku code.”

This was frustrating, so I tweeted a message to Hightail ([@HightailHQ](#)) and waited for a response. And I waited some more. When I didn't hear from them for three days, I chose to look into competing product offerings from other companies.

Not responding quickly is a huge missed opportunity. When you reply to user messages in real time, not only do you keep the customer up to date, but you also show the world through your public feed that you're engaged. When customers are happy, they keep their product longer, they spend more money over time, and they share their happiness with others, either in person or on social networks. Hightail missed an opportunity to engage with me. And there's no doubt that some of my more than 100,000 Twitter followers noticed Hightail's lack of interest in responding to a customer.

The team at Hightail did finally get back to me and worked with me to solve the problem. I remain a customer, but it wasn't a pleasant experience.

Contrast the long delay at Hightail with an experience around the same time with [@JetBlue](#). In this case, I received a reply in just two minutes. Talk about speed! No wonder JetBlue has nearly two million followers on Twitter—it communicates in real time.

Or consider the speed at which the iconic Mary Kay Pink Cadillac responds on Twitter. Yes, the car has a Twitter feed.

In 1969, Mary Kay Ash purchased five Cadillac Coupe de Villes, had them repainted to match the “Mountain Laurel Blush” in a compact she carried, and rewarded the company's top five salespeople. Since then, General Motors has painted over 100,000 custom cars for Mary Kay, Inc.

“Today the Pink Cadillac is as vivacious as ever!” says Rebecca Gibson, a manager on the corporate communications team for Mary Kay, Inc. “She's launched her own Twitter feed and has even recently served as a company ‘spokesperson’ via social media to spark excitement about its car programs—and career opportunities.”

For Halloween, the Cadillac “dressed up” in various costumes, and fans could vote for their favorite. “Help me pick my [#Halloween](#) costume! RT favorite to vote,” the Pink Cadillac said on her [@MKPinkCaddy](#) Twitter feed. Of course, the Miss Piggy

costume won. ¹

The Pink Cadillac Twitter feed is used to communicate in a fun way. In fact, “she” does not talk about products at all. That's what the main [@MaryKay](#) Twitter feed does.

But that doesn't mean [@MKPinkCaddy](#) isn't serious about real-time communication, as I learned when I tweeted to her:

[@dmScott](#): Hey [@MKPinkCaddy](#) - Learning about what you're up to from [@beckgibson](#) at [#DSAGameChange](#) - Glad to hear you're enjoying your 40s!

[@MKPinkCaddy](#): [@dmScott](#) I'm loving every minute of being 45, including the fact that I still have no wrinkles.

[@dmScott](#): [@MKPinkCaddy](#) Not to mention a beautiful pink complexion!!

[@MKPinkCaddy](#): [@dmScott](#) Oh stop, you're making me blush!

What a fun conversation! Something as simple as a Twitter feed can humanize a brand. The Pink Cadillac is treasured within Mary Kay and is famous around the world. But to many, it might seem dated. The car's real-time Twitter feed helps modernize the brand by making its icon retro cool.

It's not just travel destinations, cosmetics, and air travel that can be promoted via social networks like Twitter. It's also you and your career. Let's look at how people use social networks in the job market.

The New Rules of Job Search

Company lost its funding. Outsourced. Caught in a merger. Downsized. Fired. It seems like every day I learn of another person who is in the job market. Usually that's because when they need a job, all of a sudden people jump into networking mode, and I hear from them after years of silence. Hey, I'm okay with that; it's always good to hear from old friends. And I've been fired three times, so I certainly know what it's like to be in the job market.

Since looking for a job is all about marketing a product (you), I wanted to include a section in the book for those of you who are currently in the job market, soon to graduate from college or university, or otherwise looking for a career opportunity.

If you're like the vast majority of job seekers, you'd do what everyone knows is the way to find a job: You prepare a resume, obsessing over every entry to make sure it paints your background in the best possible light. You also begin a networking campaign, emailing and phoning your contacts and using networking tools like LinkedIn, hoping that someone in your extended network knows of a suitable job opportunity.

While many people find jobs the traditional way, social media allow a new way to

interact and meet potential employers. The old rules of job searchers required advertising a product (you) with direct mail (your resume that you send to potential employers). The old rules of job searches required you to interrupt people (friends and colleagues) to tell them that you were in the job market and to ask them to help you.

As people engage with each other on social media sites, there are plenty of opportunities to network. Just like at a physical cocktail party, if you are unemployed and looking for work, the people you meet may be in a position to introduce you to that perfect employer. The opposite is also true: Smart employers look to social networking sites to find the sort of plugged-in people who would fit in at their company or in a certain job. In fact, on the day that I wrote this, a friend asked me to tweet a job opportunity. Had you been watching my Twitter feed that day, perhaps you'd have a new job now.

To find a job via social networks, you have to stop thinking like an advertiser of a product and start thinking like a publisher of information.

So you want to find a new job via social media? Offer information that people want. Create an online presence that people are eager to consume. Establish a virtual front door that people will happily link to—one that employers will find. The new rules of finding a job require you to share your knowledge and expertise with a world that is looking for what you have to offer.

How to Find a New Job via Social Media

David Murray ([@DaveMurr](#)) says that after being laid off, he immediately did the traditional things, updating his resume and calling a bunch of contacts. But he eventually realized that he would also have to change gears and pay attention to blogs, social networks, and online communities. Murray already had a Twitter account, so he reached out to his Twitter followers and publicly announced that he was looking for work.

“I guess you could say I used a new tool for old-school networking,” Murray says. “The response was overwhelming, and I received several leads and opportunities that were far more fruitful than my previous attempts.”

Murray then hit on a creative way to use Twitter Search ² in his job hunt. “I came across a comment from Chris Brogan [[@ChrisBrogan](#)] on how he used Twitter Search to keep track of his tens of thousands of followers using RSS feeds,” Murray says. “So I simply began entering keywords in Twitter Search like ‘Hiring Social Media,’ ‘Social Media Jobs,’ ‘Online Community Manager,’ ‘Blogging Jobs,’ and so on. I then pulled the RSS feeds of these keyword conversations and made it a habit to check these first thing in the morning every day.”

Bingo. Murray came across lots of conversations related to his keywords, and if something sounded like a good fit for him, he took the liberty of introducing himself via Twitter. “Many times, the jobs had not been officially posted,” Murray says.

How cool is it that on Twitter you can express interest in a job opportunity that hasn't even been announced yet? It's like getting inside information!

Hired. It didn't take long at all for Murray to land the ideal job. His example is of someone who had already established himself in his career; he was looking for a new job because of a layoff. But what about new (or soon-to-be) university graduates searching for an entry-level position?

When Lindsey Kirchoff was a graduating senior at Tufts University near Boston, Massachusetts, she started a terrific blog called *How to Market to Me*.³ In her blog, Kirchoff offers her opinions on how to market to millennials like herself. “The blog is my opinion,” she says. “It's about the advertisements that ‘get’ me as a collegiate and twenty-something consumer. The companies that understand my values, participate in my humor, and reach me when/where I'm most likely to need them. It's also about companies that don't do any of those things and how they can better reach me (and people like me) in the future.”

She used her comments on other people's blogs, Twitter feed ([@LindseyKirchoff](#)), and other social networking tools to share her ideas about how companies should market to people like her—a focus that also served to showcase her understanding of marketing.

At the time, Kirchoff was on the hunt for a job upon graduation, hopefully at a mid-to-large marketing firm with a strong entry-level program. Soon her active social networking led to discussions both online and in person with marketers at HubSpot, a Boston-based marketing software company. Partly based on her solid understanding of social media as demonstrated by her blog and use of Twitter, Kirchoff was hired full-time at HubSpot on the Content Creation & Blogging team and started working soon after graduation.

What Kirchoff and Murray both did was to show potential employers that they were available and ready to contribute. They put their enthusiasm and expertise out there to make themselves stand out from the other candidates, who would simply send a paper application or CV.

Some people might argue that this technique works only to find jobs related to social media and marketing (like Murray and Kirchoff did). While it's true that social-media-savvy people are often the first to use these techniques, I'm convinced that they would work for many other kinds of job seekers. These days, Twitter is used very widely, and tweets like “I'm looking for an accountant to join my London office” appear frequently. You should be monitoring what people are saying in your field. Plus, if you're an accountant, salesperson, or production manager looking for work, then you're really going to stand out from the crowd of 1,000 resumes if you use

social media to find a job.

As long as we're discussing social media and job searches, here's an important consideration: *What comes up when you Google your name with the name of your most recent employer?* Potential employers do that all the time. And you can influence what they see! Remember, on the web, you are what you publish.

Insignificant Backwaters or Valuable Places to Connect?

At specialty sites of all kinds, like-minded hobbyists, professionals, fans, and supporters meet and discuss the intricate nuances of subjects that interest them. Interactive forums were once seen as insignificant backwaters by PR and marketing people—not worth the time to even monitor, let alone participate in. I've heard many marketers dismiss online forums with disdain, saying things like “Why should I worry about a bunch of geeks obsessively typing away in the dead of night?” However, as many marketers have learned, ignoring forums can be hazardous to your brand, while participating as a member allows you to reap rewards.

In a post on his blog titled “Sony, Rootkits and Digital Rights Management [DRM] Gone Too Far,” Mark Russinovich presented his detailed analysis on characteristics of the software used on Sony BMG Music ⁴ CDs to manage permissions for the purchased music. Russinovich argued that shortcomings in the software design create security issues that might be exploited by malicious software such as worms or viruses. He also showed that both the way the software is installed and its lack of an uninstaller utility were troublesome.

“The entire experience was frustrating and irritating,” Russinovich wrote on his blog. “Not only had Sony put software on my system that uses techniques commonly used by malware [malicious software] to mask its presence, the software is poorly written and provides no means for uninstall. Worse, most users that stumble across the cloaked files with an RKR scan will cripple their computer if they attempt the obvious step of deleting the cloaked files. While I believe in the media industry's right to use copy protection mechanisms to prevent illegal copying, I don't think that we've found the right balance of fair use and copy protection, yet. This is a clear case of Sony taking DRM too far.”

The reaction to Russinovich's post was immediate and dramatic. In the next several days, hundreds of comments, many harshly critical of Sony BMG Music, were posted on his blog. “Thank you very much for bringing to light what Sony is doing. I have purchased many thousands of dollars of their products over the years. Next year's purchases will be zero,” said User101. “I SAY BOYCOTT THE BASTARDS!!” said Jack3617. “If you plan on boycotting, let the offending company know. They need to know that they are losing customers and WHY. Perhaps others companies [sic] will get the message as well,” said Kolby. “Great article by Mark and scandalous behavior by Sony,” said Petter Lindgren.

Hundreds of other bloggers jumped in with their own takes on the issue, and chat rooms and forums such as Slashdot [5](#) were abuzz. Many people expressed frustration that the music industry disapproves of music piracy and sues music downloaders, yet it treats its customers poorly (which reflected negatively on the entire industry, not just Sony BMG). Soon, reporters from online news sites such as ZDNet and InformationWeek wrote their own analyses, and the issue became international news.

So where was Sony BMG during the online hullabaloo? Not on the blogs. Not on the message boards. Nobody from Sony BMG participated in the online discussions. Nobody spoke with online media. Sony BMG was dark (not participating in the communities at all), which added to the frustrations of those who were concerned about the issues. Finally, five days later, Sony BMG's global digital business president, Thomas Hesse, went on NPR's *Morning Edition* to defend the company. The choice of radio as a forum to react to a storm of protest on the web was a poor one. Had Hesse immediately commented on Russinovich's blog or agreed to speak with a technology reporter for an online publication, he could have gotten his take on the issue onto the screens of concerned people early in the crisis, helping to diffuse their anger. But instead of understanding customer concerns, Hesse downplayed the issue on *Morning Edition*, saying he objected to terms such as *malware*, *spyware*, and *rootkit*. "Most people, I think, don't even know what a rootkit is, so why should they care about it?" he said in the interview.

Online debate intensified. Sony BMG reacted with the announcement of an exchange program. "To Our Valued Customers," the announcement read. "You may be aware of the recent attention given to the XCP content protection software included on some SONY BMG CDs. This software was provided to us by a third-party vendor, First4Internet. Discussion has centered on security concerns raised about the use of CDs containing this software. We share the concerns of consumers regarding these discs, and we are instituting a mail-in program that will allow consumers to exchange any CD with XCP software for the same CD without copy protection and receive MP3 files of the same title...."

Unfortunately for Sony BMG, the exchange program didn't end the issue. Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott sued Sony BMG under the state's 2005 spyware law. California and New York followed with class-action lawsuits. Soon after, law student Mark Lyon started a blog [6](#) to track Sony BMG XCP rootkit lawsuits. "I trusted Sony BMG when they asked to install a 'small program' on my computer," Lyon wrote on his blog. "Instead, they infected my computer with poorly written code, which even if it wasn't designed for a malicious purpose (like reporting my activities—something they expressly promised they were not going to do), opened me up to a number of computer viruses and security problems. This site exists to help others who have been harmed by Sony BMG and their XCP Content Protection." As of this writing, Sony has settled with 40 states, and Lyon has continued to cover all the action on his Sony Suit blog.

We will never know what would have happened if someone from Sony BMG had quickly jumped in, apologized, stated Sony's plan of action, and offered the exchange program immediately. Yes, I'm sure it would still have been a crisis situation for the music publisher, but I'm also certain that the negative effects would have been substantially reduced.

When responding to a negative comment in a social network, it is best to reply quickly, honestly, and in the same media.

What's important for all organizations to take away from this incident is that it is critical to respond quickly to situations as they unfold on the web. Reacting quickly and honestly in the same forums where the discussions are taking place is essential. You may not be able to completely turn a negative situation around, but you will instantly be seen as a real person who gives a name and a personality to a large, seemingly uncaring organization. Just by participating, you will contribute to making the situation right. The web's power of linking should ensure that participants who see your posts on one forum or blog will link to them from other forums and blogs, so you don't have to worry about contributing to multiple places. What's important is first getting out there; after that, remember that authenticity and honesty are always paramount.

Your Best Customers Participate in Online Forums—So Should You

On the web, customers, stakeholders, and the media can immediately see what's on people's minds. There's never been so good an opportunity to monitor what's being said about you and your products than the one we have now. The Internet is like a massive focus group with uninhibited customers offering up their thoughts for free!

Tapping this resource is simple: You've got to monitor what's being said. And when an organization is the subject of heated discussions, particularly negative ones, it just feels weird if a representative of that organization doesn't jump in with a response. If the company is dark, not saying a thing online, participants start wondering, "What are they hiding?" Just having a presence on the blogs, forums, and chat rooms that your customers frequent shows that you care about the people who spend money with your organization. It is best not to wait for a crisis. You should participate as appropriate all the time. How can you afford not to become closer to your most vocal constituents?

Let's look at another example, but one with a much different outcome. It happened when Nikon introduced a new "prosumer" digital camera, the D200 model, which appealed to very advanced amateur photographers and professionals alike. Nikon launched the new model globally through specialty distributors and high-end camera

stores frequented by these target buyers. But Nikon also offered the D200 outside the normal distribution channels by selling the model in big box stores such as Circuit City and Best Buy. The camera was a hot commodity when launched just prior to the holidays, and supply was constrained when it first hit the stores.

“The places where camera guys like me normally get Nikon gear were caught out because of a lack of supply,” says Alan Scott, an experienced photographer and longtime Nikon customer. “People who preordered the D200 or who were waiting for camera retailer sites to go live with an announcement of availability were gnashing their teeth wanting to get the camera.”

Like many other photographers, Alan Scott frequents popular online digital photography forums, including Nikonians: The Nikon User Community ⁷ and DPR: Digital Photography Review. ⁸ “The forums were active with lots of people complaining that they couldn't get the camera from their normal long-term suppliers but that the big box stores had them,” he says. “Then a thread was started on Nikonians and later picked up on DPR that discussed how popular New York City photography supplier B&H Photo-Video, a trusted source with a knowledgeable staff that many professionals and high-end hobbyists go to, had taken orders but then were canceling them.”

The first post, from ceo1939, said, “I ordered a D200 from B&H this afternoon about 4:30 Mountain Time. The charge was made against my credit card. An hour later I got an email that said they had a technical problem and the camera was actually not in stock, but they would hold my order and charge for it when they actually get in stock. I tried canceling the charge, and got an email back on how to handle a disputed charge. I will see what happens when I call them in the morning.”

Many camera enthusiasts and customers of B&H were monitoring the thread at this point. “Within a few hours, several dozen posts appeared on the thread, and the tone had become critical of B&H, with people complaining that the company was purposely screwing them,” Scott says. “Forum participants said that email notifications from B&H did not work and people who called in were getting cameras in front of those who had signed up for an alert system.”

The B&H situation sounds a bit like the Sony BMG incident, doesn't it? In both cases, avid participants in specialty online forums sounded off about a company, its products, and its business practices. Both sets of threads occurred in little-known nooks of the web, far outside mainstream media channels and other typical places that PR people monitor for what's being said about their company and its products. But the B&H case is very different because a B&H employee was an active participant on the boards.

“Unfortunately as everyone who frequents this site knows, Nikon USA has been remarkably reluctant (diplomatic, eh?) to put this camera in retailers' hands,” wrote Henry Posner of B&H Photo-Video, Inc. on the DPR thread. “The result in this

particular case is that had we left the order open, we'd still be sitting on your money and would have been unable to fulfill the D200 order and it's reasonable to presume you'd be chafing to get your camera, which we'd have been (and are) unable to supply due to circumstances beyond our control...We regret and apologize for having vexed you.”

Unlike in the Sony BMG example, people at B&H had been monitoring the messages and were prepared to participate. “So in steps Henry Posner, who is with B&H,” Alan Scott says. “He came into the forum and said, basically, ‘You’re right, we screwed you,’ but then explained what happened, apologized, and said that B&H will make it right. By acknowledging the issue, one guy with one post changed the whole tone of the thread and the reputation of B&H. After that, the posts changed to become incredibly positive.”

Indeed, they were. “Henry’s participation in various web forums is something I respect greatly,” wrote BJNicholls on one thread. “I can’t think of someone of power with any other business who engages in public discussion of store issues and products.”

“I also admire his forthrightness,” added N80. “He admits there have been some mistakes and that the situation has been hard to handle. However, he firmly denies the charges of lying and deceitfulness that have been flying around. And I absolutely believe him.”

What happened at B&H was not a coincidence or a one-time situation. The message boards and online forums are a critical component of the company’s marketing and communications strategy.

“I spend a great deal of time poking around in the forums,” says Henry Posner, director of corporate communications for B&H Photo-Video. “Being a part of the forums is really important and is actually in my job description. Because my background is in professional photography, as a person who has actually used the equipment we sell I have legitimacy in the forums.” Before joining B&H in the mid-1990s, Posner worked for a company that provided photography services for colleges and high schools; he covered events such as basketball and football games.

Posner monitors about a dozen message boards and forums on a daily basis. “I try to find things about photography equipment or technique where I can make a meaningful contribution,” he says. “We want to make certain that my credibility is maintained—that’s the most important thing—so I don’t go in and say something like ‘that’s right’ just to get my name and the B&H name into a conversation. But if I see that there is a discussion that I can add value to, about equipment or a technique that I am familiar with, I will jump in.”

B&H has a mail-order catalog, an e-commerce website, and a 35,000-square-foot retail store in Manhattan. “Our customer is anyone from the amateur up to the professional photographer working in Beirut who is running around with cameras

bouncing on his hips while looking for a WiFi connection to send images back to the bureau,” he says. “I contribute to the forums when it is appropriate, but if anyone ever asks about where to buy something being discussed, I immediately take the conversation offline via email. I don’t want to promote my company directly. The other conversations I look for are when people are talking about B&H itself. I often hold back and let others speak for me. Other people will often say positive things about B&H because I am so active in the forums. So if someone does jump in about B&H, I will thank them, and then I will address the issue directly.”

Don't you wish your customers had been as understanding as the photography enthusiasts on these forums the last time your company screwed up? Well, as Henry Posner shows, if you actively participate in the online communities that your customers frequent, you will earn their sympathy and patience when things go wrong.

Your Space in the Forums

The last two examples were of companies that had discussions started about them on online forums. But how should a marketer interact? “Participation in forums is a must,” says Robert Pearlman, editor of collectSPACE: The Source for Space History & Artifacts. ⁹ Pearlman started collectSPACE in 1999 because there wasn't a single site to serve collectors of space memorabilia and to preserve space history. “Before the Internet, there were space memorabilia collectors, but they were in pockets of communities in Germany and Japan, in Houston, and near the Kennedy Space Center in Florida,” he says. “But there was no way for them to communicate with each other. The biggest impact is that collectSPACE has educated the market. We've brought the various pockets of collectors into one place.”

The collectSPACE community has grown into a network of collectors around the world who share their knowledge of the pieces that they own. The site counts 100,000 registered users (about 5,000 actively post on the site) and reaches about 4.5 million readers monthly through syndication of its news articles and the approximately 375,000 unique readers who visit the site each month. Interestingly, collectSPACE also includes many people who worked in the early space program; they participate in the forums and talk about the history of the artifacts that they had a hand in building. Pearlman says many astronauts read the forums because they are able to get a sense of the market for the memorabilia that they may have amassed over the years and to find out what fellow astronauts are up to on the lectures and appearances front. Astronauts also use the forums to monitor the history of the space program and protect their legacy.

“In other areas of collecting, collectors and museums have been at odds,” says Pearlman. “Museums looked at collectors as hoarders storing stuff in the basement, while their own mission was more altruistic: sharing with the public. And collectors looked at museums and said that they did a good job with major items like spacesuits

and spacecraft but did a lousy job with literally the nuts and bolts except put them away in the archive. What collectSPACE does is allow museums to read what their 'competition' is doing and interact with collectors and ask their advice. Collectors have helped to plan exhibits and loaned items to the museums, and at the same time, museums were able to sell surplus items to collectors."

Pearlman sees a huge benefit to participating in the collectSPACE forums for dealers, manufacturers, and auction houses that specialize in space items. "By participating in the forums, dealers and manufacturers now know what collectors are interested in," he says. "Products can be developed based on what the current trends are in the market. Auction houses and dealers have been able to preview items to the market before a sale to gauge interest. In the case of unique items, you get instant feedback through a mini-market study."

As moderator of the collectSPACE forums, Pearlman has personally followed hundreds of thousands of posts and seen the good and the bad from space memorabilia dealers. "If there is a post that is not flattering to a business, someone from that business needs to have been monitoring the posts and respond as required," he says. "In discussion forums where people have a common bond, people feel that the forum is theirs. We see people who have 1,000 or even 5,000 posts, and they treat that as a badge of honor. People who represent businesses need to let the collectors know that you care enough about them to go to [their] turf instead of expecting them to come to yours."

As Pearlman advises and as the Sony BMG and B&H Photo-Video examples show, marketers must actively participate in the communities that matter for their markets. But you can't just stand on the virtual sidelines and post only when you have something for sale or comment about your products or services. The most successful companies come in and provide ideas and advice on a wide variety of subjects and topics in their field. They are full and active participants in the community. Then, when people complain or want specific product advice from a company, they trust the community member more. Active participation can pay off exponentially for companies that are treated as members of the community.

Wikis, Listservs, and Your Audience

Close cousins to the forums like Nikonians and collectSPACE include group email lists (often called listservs) and wikis. Just like forums, a listserv is a way that groups of like-minded people stay connected to one another. Typically, any member can post to the list, but instead of requiring people to go to a central place to read messages, a listserv sends messages out to the members of the group via email.

Lisa Solomon, Esq., [10](#) provides legal research and writing services to other attorneys on an outsourced basis. Solomon has been extremely involved in participating in listservs such as the Solosez [11](#) discussion list for solo attorneys, which is run by the

American Bar Association. “The listserv has been important in the way that I develop my law practice. I am an active participant and try to always add value to the subjects that are being discussed. In my listserv signature is my web address. That is the place that I send people to show them what I do. I have writing samples on the site, and that's how they can check out what I do at their convenience. The participation has been great for meeting contacts and building business.”

Wikis are websites that permit users to update, delete, or edit the content on the site. The most famous wiki is Wikipedia, [12](#) the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit, which has more than 23 million articles in some 275 languages, all contributed by people like you and me. If you haven't done so already, you should hightail it over to Wikipedia and conduct searches on your organization name, important brand names, your CEO, and other notable executives and board members. The fact is that Wikipedia entries loom large in search engine rankings, and Wikipedia is in the top 10 most visited sites on the web.

When you find an entry about your company or brand, you should check it for accuracy. It's fair game to correct any inaccuracies (such as the number of employees in your company). But don't try to manipulate the entry. The Wikipedia community is quick to react when articles are edited to present a certain point of view. It is not uncommon to see an entry updated several times per day, and with larger organizations, the updates can be much more frequent. In fact, one of the pillars of the community is: “All Wikipedia articles must be written from a neutral point of view, representing views fairly and without bias.” So if your organization was party to a lawsuit that makes you look bad in some way and it's in Wikipedia, don't try to remove the reference.

Sometimes, it might be best to create a new article on Wikipedia. For some organizations, writing something on a particular niche where you have expertise may have tremendous value. Make sure that you aren't promoting your company and its products or services, though; it needs to be an article of value to people researching the topic you know well. As a starting point, you might notice that there are articles in the area where you are knowledgeable and that those articles link to an empty Wikipedia page. Blue (or purple, if you have already visited them) links represent pages that do exist. Red links point to pages that don't yet have any content. If you see a bunch of red links indicating that an author expects new content to be added, and you have knowledge and expertise in that area, maybe it's time for you to create a page to fulfill a need. For example, a technology company might provide details on patents it holds that relate to products that already have Wikipedia entries.

Social Networking Drives Adagio Teas' Success

As social networks become more important for organizations of all kinds, the challenge becomes how to integrate them effectively. Adagio Teas, [13](#) a family-owned

gourmet tea company founded in 1999, has used social networking to become the most popular online destination for tea enthusiasts. Social sharing and crowdsourced product creation aren't "bolted-on" strategies at Adagio Teas. Unlike at most companies, social networking is a critical component for driving business.

I learned about Adagio Teas from my daughter, Allison. She's a loyal customer and eagerly shared with me how the company works. As of this writing, Adagio Teas sells a remarkable 68,050 blends of tea. The vast majority of blends are created by its customers either for their own enjoyment (think private blends) or as a blend that is sold to others on the site. Creating blends via crowdsourcing is a brilliant strategy for driving social interaction, because people are eager to share their creations on networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr.

"The idea of customer-created blends came from growing up in a Russian background," says Ilya Kreymerman, chief technology officer and member of the family that founded and runs Adagio Teas. "Tea was always something that was in the house, and when my mom and dad had company over, they would always drink this blend of tea that my mom made herself. So the idea of having people create these unique blends was second nature to us. We found a way that people can not only make it but also share with friends, the same way that my mom would share it when people came over. The idea is not just making it for yourself but making it for yourself *and* for a large community."

Avid tea connoisseurs can search the database for a perfect blend, or as with Amazon's bestseller list, browse teas based on popularity and customer reviews. That's another important social aspect: Like popular authors on Amazon, those who create delicious blends build a following with Adagio customers, driving sales with their ratings and reviews. If you like a blend, you can see what other blends that creator has made. Repeat customers can create a profile to keep track of teas they enjoy most, and they can also add teas they want to try.

For example, a top-ranked tea as I write this, Sherlock, is a blend by Cara McGee: "All at once exotic and mysterious and perhaps a little bit insane, with a lingering hint of smoke. Inspired by BBC's *Sherlock*, which I am in no way affiliated with. This is created purely for my own enjoyment. Ingredients: lapsang souchong, assam melody, oriental spice."

McGee uploaded a video where she talks about the blend. There are also customer reviews and social sharing tools that include Facebook (with over 1,000 likes), Twitter, Tumblr, and Pinterest. The Sherlock blend is part of a theme that Adagio calls Fandom Signature Blends, which also include such teas as Avatar, Big Lebowski, Doctor Who, Harry Potter, and many more blends based on popular movies, TV shows, and books.

"A lot of what drives people to buy the tea is not really the tea itself, it's this story around the tea," Kreymerman says. "You take a pot of tea and infuse it with a

character or TV show or video game and suddenly people have an attachment. You're piggybacking on their love for a specific character. Instead of it just being a cup a tea, it's now got all of this background and emotion baked in.” And people are naturally eager to talk on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks about tea that has a connection to the books, movies, and TV shows they love.

Another social aspect kicks in when customers add friends to their profiles. If you log in to Adagio with a Gmail account, you can instantly find out whether one of your contacts also has an Adagio Teas profile. Or if you're reading a review and like someone's taste in tea, you can friend that person.

With all the sharing going on with customers at Adagio, it's no surprise that the company itself is active on social networks. It has an excellent Tumblr blog [14](#) (“The official blog from the people behind Adagio”), and is active on Twitter ([@AdagioTeas](#), 22,000+ followers), on Facebook (55,000+ likes), and on other social sites.

“People historically have spent a lot of money to advertise products,” Kreymerman says. “But we never use traditional marketing, advertising, things like that because it's incredibly expensive. You're kind of shooting in the dark. I think the more interesting thing is to provide customers with value by putting the money towards a really interesting site or really interesting idea or making their experience better instead of just kind of directing them towards your store. We listen to the audience, and a lot of our good ideas come from listening to what people are talking about on Twitter and Tumblr. And once in a while, we hear the same question coming up over and over again and realize that we have to address it.”

And Adagio really is active, using social networks to communicate with customers. The mistake made by so many other companies is just using social media like Twitter as a one-way broadcast advertising channel. For example, [@AdagioTeas](#) tweeted: “We are developing a wish list feature & would love feedback. Would you use it as a bookmark for yourself, or as a list to help guide others?” A follow-up tweet thanked customers for their suggestions, announced the launch of the wish list, and prompted further discussion.

People love this kind of interaction and happily talk up organizations that provide it. For example, [@jamieworley](#) tweeted: “It's so cool that [@AdagioTeas](#) sends me twitter DMs to let me know where my tea shipment is!” And it is cool. I wish some of the companies I frequently do business with used Twitter Direct Messages (DMs) to communicate.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, Allison made her own blend because she wanted to have interesting Christmas and holiday gifts for family and friends. The “Create a Blend” widget is really easy to use. Many people love mixing teas, and Adagio has made it fun and easy to mix different flavors to create a unique and tasty blend: You name your creation and choose the types of teas and the percentages of each. You then have an opportunity to create a custom label, either simple text or something

much more elaborate.

Here social networking pops up yet again, because you can upload a Facebook photo to be part of your custom label. Instead, Allison made a hand drawing for her label, which she scanned and saved as a JPEG and then imported into Adobe Photoshop. There she added text before uploading the image to the Adagio Teas app. Her “scottea dog” blend is “Just a cute jumpy Christmas blend of assam melody, hazelnut, and peppermint.”

Another fun social aspect of Adagio Teas is that the creator of a custom tea earns points whenever a customer buys that blend. Points can be used to get discounted or free tea. This encourages social sharing by people who create blends—when their new blends are ready to be sold, many people will tweet about them, or post an image of the label with a link on Facebook, or make a Tumblr post talking about the blend. After all, it's in their best interest to do so.

By building social networking features into all aspects of the customer experience, Adagio Teas drives business success. As customers talk about teas on social networks, fan their favorite blends, or even create their own to share with their friends, new people learn about the company. It sure beats traditional advertising to get the word out.

Social media sites are places where people congregate to discuss things that are important to them. Where are people discussing your industry and the products and services you offer? If that place already exists, you should monitor it and participate as appropriate. If it doesn't yet exist, consider starting a place for colleagues and customers to meet and revel in information that is important to your market.

Now let's turn to blogs, another form of social media.

Notes

1. <https://twitter.com/MKPinkCaddy/status/528275560649486336>
2. search.twitter.com
3. howtomarkettome.com
4. sonymusic.com
5. slashdot.org
6. sonysuit.com
7. nikonians.org
8. forums.dpreview.com/forums

[9. collectspace.com](http://collectspace.com)

[10. questionoflaw.net](http://questionoflaw.net)

[11. americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/resources/solosez.html](http://americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/resources/solosez.html)

[12. wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)

[13. adagio.com](http://adagio.com)

[14. adagiotecas.tumblr.com](http://adagiotecas.tumblr.com)