

By MaryBeth Matzek

Wait-and-see approach

Many companies are perplexed about the best use for social media



WHEN OPRAH WINFREY JOINED TWITTER in April, many observers saw it as a watershed moment for the Web 2.0 phenomenon. Pundits began theorizing Twitter and its social media siblings – LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook – were poised to change the way businesses and individuals communicate.

That assessment may be premature, at least in Northeast Wisconsin. A recent survey by Leonard & Finco Inc. found that 44 percent of area business and community professionals were not engaged in any form of social media. Although businesses aren't there yet, they are curious, says Susan Finco, owner and president of the Green Bay public relations firm.

"We've noticed a real disconnect between the media and businesses when it comes to social media. So many businesses aren't using it. They aren't sure what it is and how to use it to their advantage," she says.

Business professionals are curious, says Lori Kaye Lodes, the Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce's marketing and communications manager. "Our members want to know about it and if it's a waste of time or not," she says, adding the chamber held a half-day seminar in May to educate members about social media and ways they can use it to their advantage.

Education is essential before jumping into social media, says Meg Hoppe, creative director and principal with the Weidert Group in Appleton. She says some businesses make the mistake of thinking social media immediately can lead to increased sales.

"Everyone has jumped on the Twitter bandwagon, but it has limits. It needs to be integrated with other forms of marketing," says Hoppe, adding she wasn't surprised a recent Nielson Online survey found that 40 percent of the people who sign up for a Twitter account never use it. "I tell clients interested in social media to start small and learn the ropes. You may realize it's not for you."

Before jumping into social media earlier this year, Hoffmaster, a manufacturer of disposable tabletop products

in Oshkosh, researched its options, says vice president of marketing Cindy Herbert. "We knew we couldn't just get a Twitter account and have the business flow in. We realized we needed to integrate whatever we were doing with social media into all of our other marketing."

Hoffmaster created the character of Nate, a restaurant owner. They introduced him in YouTube videos, then launched Twitter and Facebook accounts for Nate. In his first week on Twitter, Nate had 250 followers.

"We use the tweets to share tips we think restaurant owners – our primary market – are interested in. We are integrating Nate into the ads and other materials heading into our main trade show," Herbert says. "We think he's helping us reach a larger audience."

Hoppe says it's important for business owners to realize

"Everyone has jumped on the Twitter bandwagon, but it has its limits. It needs to be integrated with other forms of marketing." — Meg Hoppe, The Weidert Group

that what works for one industry may not work in another. "Established brands like Starbucks and Zappos can find success easily with Twitter because they have a wide base of followers. If you're a small business or primarily do B2B, it may be more difficult to reach those followers," she says.

Scott Stein, a senior account executive with Leonard & Finco, says businesses shouldn't sit on the sidelines too long. "Ten years ago, we debated the need for websites and now look where we're at," he says. "If you decide social media isn't for you, that's OK, but you need to make sure you are keeping up on the latest trends and technologies or your business may be left behind." ❶