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Green Bay area businesses bank on social media

New marketing tools lure customers

BY RICHARD RYMAN • RRYMAN@GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM • JUNE 13, 2010

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A dozen years ago, it was a big deal for businesses to have Web sites.

Now, Web sites are a given and it's social media — Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, texting — that business owners are trying to use effectively. The applications are new, but the challenge is the same as it was with the initial Internet presence.

"We are trying to figure out how to better relate to (the consumer) and keep them shopping with us, or get them to shop with us," said Nick Arlt, director of public relations for Festival Foods.

Festival Foods took eight months to develop its social media strategy before launching its first efforts in September. Now the multi-store grocer has a presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and it texts and blogs.

It is not alone. An online survey by Leonard & Finco Public Relations found that 67 percent of business responders said they use social media, compared with 56 percent last year.

"In the business community last year, a lot of people were still trying to get their arms around social media and how to use it for professional purposes. Now it's much more a part of most business and community organizations' communications and marketing efforts," said Scott Stein, senior account executive for Leonard & Finco.

Dana VanDen Heuvel, president of MarketingSavant in Green Bay, said the myths are that social media is free and that you can wing it.

"In reality, it's like any other marketing tool. You need to staff. You need to put resources into it," he said. "Some of the best social media overnight success stories have been in the making for 18 months or three years."

Arlt said Festival studied each application and what it could gain from them. It uses Twitter and Facebook in similar ways, such as talking about products and internal company news and interacting with customers. On YouTube, it posts videos of Mad Dog & Merrill talking about grilling and Amy Hanten's "Cooking with Amy" pieces discussing recipes and cooking techniques. With texting, it sends out information on limited-time specials available only to text recipients.

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Companies can use social media for driving sales, either online or in stores, recruiting workers or keeping in touch with customers. Furniture-maker KI, for example, posts interviews with cutting-edge experts, promotes new products, and posts ideas and designs, VanDen Heuvel said.

"The ones that are really good at it are folks that started maybe a year, maybe two years ago and really have put together some sort of strategy," he said. "They really understand where people are in their audience."

VanDen Heuvel said social media is networking on a massive scale. An item shared with 100 people can quickly be put in front of thousands, but that's hard to measure.

"That's really the 'X' factor in social media," VanDen Heuvel said. "You never know who those people are that influence 500 or 1,000 friends."

Festival uses traditional media — newspapers, radio and television — and Arlt doesn't think they'll be supplanted soon, but the company continues to expand its social media uses. For example, it has started a Facebook page for the "Fire Over the Fox" Fourth of July Festival in downtown Green Bay.

"I think the numbers show social media is here to stay," Stein said. "I'm not going to say it's going to look exactly as it does now. Things will continue to evolve as new applications are developed."

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