

Wading into social media

Some seek to optimize marketing with online presence

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Russ Wheat says BHW1 helps its clients target their social media marketing campaigns by using research and analysis.

—Staff photo by Jeanne Gustafson

So-called social media, Web sites that allow people to interact with one another on the Internet, are growing fast and changing the marketing and public relations game, some companies and organizations here say.

People engage with social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, by posting responses and comments to text, pictures, or video that someone else has posted on the Internet. They add their own content to virtual pages that are visible to people anywhere; they begin or contribute to online conversations; and they broadcast messages to communities of "followers."

Yet, social media remains a foreign language to many businesspeople, says Russ Wheat, a principal in BHW1 LLC, a Spokane advertising agency.

"Businesses continue to struggle with it, because it's an unfamiliar territory," Wheat says. BHW1 cites research from Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research Inc., that says 82 percent of all adults who use the Internet use some form of social media, and that the fastest growing user segment on social media is adults over the age of 35. In the Spokane area, there are more than 155,900 adults registered on Facebook alone, Wheat says.

Though many companies here say they feel it's imperative that they participate in such sites, few say they see that participation as supplanting conventional advertising methods of reaching customers, Wheat says.

Rather, they see that interaction as a necessary public relations enhancement and another way to connect with their clients, says Kelli Hawkins, a spokeswoman for Numerica Credit Union, in Spokane Valley.

"We don't want to use social media as a way to shove our marketing plan down people's throats," Hawkins says. "It's supposed to be kind of personal; they want to be entertained and know that we're real people here."

Organizations ranging from health-care providers to financial institutions, and from small businesses to utilities, are retooling their marketing to offer online content that they hope will entice their customers and potential customers to opt in to news feeds and other interactive communication.

The trend even has caught on at City Hall.

"For us it's all about using as many different approaches as we can to get information out to reach as many citizens as possible," says Marlene Feist, a spokeswoman for the city of Spokane.

Dan Kolbet, a communications manager at Avista Corp., spoke last week at a social media conference aimed at large utilities. Meanwhile, the Spokane Valley Chamber of Commerce and Greater Spokane Incorporated each plan to hold work-shops about the subject this month.

All of the social interaction is found on several different types of sites. Facebook and MySpace are social networking sites that allow individuals to create personal pages and write notes or post video or still pictures that people who they confirm as "friends" can see. Any individual or organization can create a group or event page on those social networking sites, and categorize it in different ways, such as a business, educational enterprise, or social group.

Twitter is a Web site that assigns each person or organization that registers an identity through which they can post brief "tweets" of 140 characters or less. Other users can sign up to receive all of the tweets of any user, or can search for tweets by keywords at the Twitter Web site.

YouTube allows individuals or companies to create a "channel" to which they can upload video clips that anyone can search for and view. Blogs are "Web logs"—user-friendly sites that allow anyone to set up a page with their own name and Web site address and to post articles, comments, pictures, or video as frequently as they like. Blogs often are treated as online journals, and sometimes are located on a larger site, like Blogger.com, or can be operated through a company's own Web site.

Many companies now say they know they need to have a social media presence, Wheat says. Some still are figuring out just what

that will mean and how it can benefit them, while others have jumped in with both feet and hired specialists or have defined keeping up with social media as part of an employee's or a department's official duties.

Inland Imaging LLC, of Spokane, has seen its online traffic increase 25 percent since it hired digital media specialist Adam Clear last October, says Jason Miller, director of marketing for the medical imaging company. That has translated to an increase in the number of medical imaging tests the company does, he says.

Now, even though the big social media sites are free to use, more and more businesses and organizations are seeking the services of professionals to help them define their presence on social media sites better and help them determine what their goals should be by doing market research and tracking responses for them.

Wheat says a lot of companies create a presence on all of the social media sites they can, but with no real plan or reason behind their choices, which costs them unnecessary time.

"Our agency isn't on Twitter," for example, he says. "Who wants to get 'tweets' from an ad agency?"

"The ones using it best are mom-and-pop shops," Wheat says. "Ask big agencies if they have a strategy, and most will say 'no.'"

Because of the personal nature of social media, customers feel like they can get to know a spokesman a little more, says Avista's Kolbet. He says his Twitter account identifies him as a spokesman for Avista. He sends out "tweets" throughout the day—brief transmissions that are seen by people who subscribe to his posts or by anyone who goes to the Twitter Web site and searches for key words found within the posts. During his work hours, the tweets are directly related to Avista topics, but after hours he still uses the account, and his tweets might relate some information about his family or his continuing education. Kolbet says this is no accident; it allows Avista customers to feel a connection with him and like they can engage him in a conversation when they have a question.

Some professionals here say they use social media beyond just broadcasting messages to their clients. Miller and Hawkins each say they use Twitter and other social media sites to network with other professionals in their industries.

Because social media is evolving so rapidly, and because large organizations can be slow to adopt new things, some still are trying to define their goals, Wheat says.

"The truth of it is, we're just not sure what to do with it," says Kevin Benson, director of annual giving and special events for Providence's Sacred Heart Medical Center and Children's foundations here. He said he's taken on the role of trying to help Providence here coordinate its social media efforts and define its goals.

Inland Imaging started its online social media campaign in April of last year, testing the waters by assigning one employee to spend three to four hours a day working on social media sites, developing a Facebook site for the company, and tracking the progress of the campaign. The effort was so successful so quickly, resulting in a measurable increase in the number of mammography screenings the organization did, that in October Inland Imaging hired its full-time digital media specialist, Miller says.

Wheat says goals vary by business or organization, but include increased sales, better public relations, and additional traffic to a Web site, where a business might have an online store, for example.

Some of the benefits of social media are that customers choose to receive information, and can easily opt out if they want, so they are more likely to see information that's imparted in a positive light, and an organization can get its name in front of potential users.

Inland Imaging's Clear says it's important for companies to present information that's not just educational or advertising, but is entertaining.

"If you just 'yell' at them, they will become disinterested and not listen when you want to get your message out," he says.

For Avista, social media, such as the utility's blog site, allow it to explain things to its customers in more depth or in a way that doesn't necessarily come through in a newsletter, Kolbet says.

"People want to have a dialogue with a plain-spoken person," he says.

For one of its clients, BHW1 launched a casting call for a television and photo ad shoot entirely on Facebook, Wheat says. More than 100 people showed up for the auditions, he says.

Facebook ads, for which Inland Imaging sets a budget of \$10 a day, can be so specifically targeted, Miller says, that the imaging company plans to use them to advertise its services to radiologists at rural hospitals in its market areas, since most people include their location and their profession in their profile on social media sites such as Facebook .

"If we can get out in front of our niche audience," that's a highly effective tool, he says.

Social media costs and challenges

"Advocates like me will say it's absolutely free," Benson says, adding that "the soft costs are if you want to do it well and right it takes an enormous amount of time," and organizations such as Providence haven't determined the return on investment yet.

"We're not so much spending more money on it. We're just prioritizing the resources," Kolbet says.

"Compared to traditional media, the cost is substantially less," Wheat says. He says BHW1 offers its clients a package that includes an initial market research audit, marketing strategy development, regular maintenance and tracking to help companies optimize not only what they broadcast, but when they broadcast it.

In developing the social media marketing system it promotes, BHW1 found that a lot of companies simply don't respond to what's said about them on the Internet.

"What we found is no one's engaging those people. Everybody's talking about you out there both good and bad, and you need to capitalize on both," Wheat says.

"It's hard to spend the time and that's why a lot of companies are shying away from it," Wheat says.

For Avista, it's important that the highly-regulated utility not break any news on its social media sites, Kolbet says. Rather, he says, it tries to provide context for the news once it's out there.

Several organizations here say they are preparing policy guides for use of social media. Feist says it's challenging to write policies that recognize people's freedoms while they are "off the clock," but also acknowledge that a person isn't someone completely different in their private lives and what they say online is there for anyone to see and judge.

For example, elected city officials who link their blogs to the city of Spokane's Web site must ensure that they don't use city resources for campaigning or promoting a position on any ballot measure, Feist says.

Inland Imaging allows its employees to use social media while at work, and Miller says it has resulted in a strengthened company culture in the organization, which has more than 500 employees.

"Our vascular manager went to Japan, and he blogged the entire time. It was a little clinical, but also cultural," he says, allowing the company to share how medicine and imaging are done in Japan. "It's a human interest story and a way of featuring employees."

The anonymity of the Web creates challenges in raising the official flag of a company, and making sure that people aren't getting misinformation, some say.

Benson creates group pages to promote fundraisers and events, but says he sees "Providence" Facebook pages that are not created by any Providence facilities. Most of the time, the unofficial Providence pages he's seen are created by Providence patients who want to share their experiences, but he says the potential for con

fusion makes it that much more important for the organization to develop an official presence. "Anyone can copy and paste a logo," and create a quasi-Providence Facebook page, Benson says. Meanwhile, the city of Spokan.