

Catching the Social Media Wave

By Wayne Wilson

“Social media is kid stuff.”

“It’s a distraction and a time waster.”

“No one will ever make any money using social media.”

Just when we had convinced ourselves that it was safe to ignore it, a social media wave is crashing over our heads. What do we do now? Maybe it’s time to catch the wave.

Social media is a burgeoning and rapidly evolving phenomenon. Its most familiar embodiments are those web sites we thought were just for kids – [MySpace](#), [Facebook](#), and now [twitter](#), among numerous others. It also includes professional networking web site [LinkedIn](#) as well as some 200 million blogs. ¹

Structurally, social media (or what some refer to as Web 2.0) is online information content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies. It’s interactive, user driven (or includes a high degree of user participation), community oriented, accessible, and visible. ²

According to recently published statistics, [Facebook](#) now has over 200 million registered users, ³ [LinkedIn](#)’s number exceeds 40 million, ⁴ and [twitter](#) is growing at a year over year rate of 3000% with over 17 million users in April 2009. ⁵ Amazingly, the majority of Twitter users are age 35 or older. ⁶

And while much of the material on [Facebook](#) and [twitter](#) is personal in nature and not particularly useful for serious business people, the phenomenon is turning a corner and can no longer be ignored by businesses. Recently, USAToday reported that [Wells Fargo](#) and [Bank of America](#) have begun to use [twitter](#) to communicate with customers. ⁷ And numerous other large businesses are seeking to exploit social media. ⁸

How should you approach the social media wave? The same way a surfer does a big ocean wave – proactively lest you be swamped by the wave while recognizing that much trial and error learning will be required before the wave can be mastered.

Here are a few suggestions for putting your toes in the social media water.

Step 1 – Set up some social media accounts and begin to experiment.

The path to profitability for Web 2.0 is no clearer today than it was for the first generation of the web in the late 1990’s. Think of it as a land rush – you need to stake your claim early before all of the good territory is taken.

Look for the simplest, most obvious opportunities. Today's Web 2.0 is all about communication and group interaction. Look for opportunities to connect with stakeholders and other members of your business eco-system.⁹

The early winners in the Web 1.0 e-commerce boom were mail order and direct marketing companies which had established telesales, warehouse and distribution systems to rapidly fulfill customer orders. Many millions of dollars of investor money were lost by the likes of Web Van, which had to start from scratch.

Step 2 – Assign a specific person or small group to lead the effort.

Social media website partisans view the media as their domain and off limits to corporate America. Social media accounts should be set up and maintained by individuals who can establish a personal as well as a corporate presence.

There is also a learning curve to gaining proficiency with some of these platforms. A good candidate might be a marketing department staff person who already writes a blog or has a personal presence on one or more of the social media sites and has a passion for the medium.

Step 3 – Don't expect results over night.

It's better to think of the current stage of social media as the research and development (R&D) phase. Successful uses are beginning to emerge but their ultimate business utility is yet to be determined.

While [LinkedIn](#) is clearly intended for business and professional networking, some corporate sales reps are finding [Facebook](#) useful for identifying contacts and qualifying prospects,¹⁰ and Honda recently sponsored a new car introduction buzz campaign on Facebook.¹¹ In general, early social media users are focusing on:

- Networking
- Customer service / information dissemination
- Marketing awareness

Step 4 – Involve your customers and suppliers.

Social media is all about creating communities of interest on the web. For example, **Dell** has a great user community site¹² (<http://en.community.dell.com/>) that includes blogs, forums, media galleries, and wikis covering topics of interest to techies and other Dell customers. The site also includes quick links to Dell's pages on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [twitter](#).

Starbucks, the high-end coffee shop chain, is using [twitter](#) as an online suggestion box as well as a mechanism to quickly respond online to customers' complaints or concerns.¹³ Even the telephone companies are getting in on the act with Quest Communications launching a page on [twitter](#).¹⁴

One of the more interesting social media web sites is the new White House web site at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>. Barack Obama's presidential campaign made heavy use of social media to connect with younger voters, and the President's team has carried over those lessons to the new White House site, which includes a blog, e-mail subscriptions, multi-media, and links to the White House pages on all of the major social media platforms.¹⁵

Step 5 – Take your time and do it right.

The social media wave is not really one wave but a series of waves much like ocean waves. Surfers know that very large waves are often tucked in between a series of smaller waves. They time their efforts to catch a wave large enough to provide a great ride. If they can catch it, the effort will have been very worthwhile.

The same principles apply to business uses of social media:

- Be pro-active getting started
- Be thoughtful about useful and appropriate uses¹⁶
- Be responsive to the concerns of your customers and other stakeholders

But get going!

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Notes:

¹ A **blog** (contraction of weblog) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, and other material such as graphics or video. See

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

³ <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LinkedIn>

⁵ Twitter.com Quadruples to 17 Million U.S. Visitors in Last Two Months at <http://bit.ly/FuMx3>

⁶ Marketing Charts at <http://bit.ly/Juoiv>

⁷ Banks jump on Twitter wagon, USA Today, May 12, 2009, p 1B at <http://bit.ly/ITbZQ>

⁸ Putting Twitter's World to Use, The New York Times, April 13, 2009 at <http://bit.ly/ja8ZJ>

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business_ecosystem

¹⁰ How to Use Social Networks and the Pitfalls to Avoid – RainToday at <http://bit.ly/7vEHy>

¹¹ 2009 Honda Civic Hybrid | Facebook at <http://bit.ly/NTGfO>

¹² <http://en.community.dell.com>

¹³ <http://twitter.com/Starbucks>

¹⁴ Qwest takes to Twitter for customer service - Denver Business Journal at <http://bit.ly/wJx0e>

¹⁵ Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, Vimeo, and iTunes

¹⁶ Ask an Expert: Twitter for small business ... reconsidered - USATODAY.com at <http://bit.ly/y9pCN>