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When Facebook and Twitter Fail: PR Can Monetize Custom Social Networks by Following Four Rules for Success

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Many organizations have built online communities to serve as hubs for all things related to their businesses—where their customers can meet, share and get the inside scoop. By doing so, they're forging long-term relationships and creating a sense of community that breeds loyalty.

But there are still many questions concerning control, monetization and other issues that are difficult to resolve on an open network. Therefore, in addition to helping your company or clients insert themselves into conversations on Facebook, Twitter and other uncontrolled environments to which they haven't been invited, PR should consider recommending that companies or clients build their own micro-networking sites to create open conversations they can better control around their products, services and causes.

I've already seen numerous examples of companies employing variations of this strategy. For example: Earthlings, a small organic baby clothing company, used our micro-networking site, SocialGO.com, to integrate a social networking site into its existing website, in which parents rally around issues related to safety, health and other things that also directly relate to the business. By creating this community on their own fully-controlled network, they have provided themselves with a fantastic platform for soft-selling their products.

Other users have created monetized social networks around housing, psychics, casinos and even circus clowns.

PR professionals are well aware that website design—particularly when it comes to creating social networks—is expensive. If it weren't for do-it-yourself services, this kind of social media strategy would be entirely the domain of companies with deep pocketbooks. Fortunately, there are services that allow you to quickly build social networks with Facebook-like features around your client's business—without sourcing to a third party.

However, if you're going to go this route, there are a few must-haves—as well as pitfalls—to be aware of:

1. Must-have: ownership. Be sure that the service you utilize lets your company or clients completely own the site, including its content and data, and that they have final say over their network's membership and member activities. While this sounds like a no-brainer, many social networking creation services are based on a "network of networks" model. Under this model, you create a social media site that is actually a subset of a larger social network. This is fine until you need to export data, migrate your site to an alternate platform or remove troublesome content. Many business owners awake to find that the social network they invested so much in doesn't actually belong to them—and that they're at the mercy of the host network for their most important decisions.

2. Must-have: customizing capabilities. The second key requirement is complete customizability. Most small businesses enlist a DIY service because they can't afford custom design. Whether or not they can afford it, however, custom design is the standard for business.

Think about it: Users take a leap of faith by offering personal information through any site. If the site looks cheap, you're much less likely to take that leap of faith. A pro-level, customized design, on the other hand, gives your site an aura of stability and dependability.

Fortunately, it is possible to create the appearance of custom design without the price tag through a DIY service. However, be aware that, although many services based on the "network of networks" model offer white-label options, the fact that your client's members have to join the host network ultimately makes it impossible to truly white-label your company or client's site. Make sure you have the option of completely erasing all mention of the platform that your site was built on and creating networks that stand totally independent of any host network.

3. Must-have: multiple monetizing sources. The third key requirement is that the platform should give your clients the ability to monetize their sites from multiple sources. If your client is operating a retail site, they want to make it as easy as possible for customers to spend money. Look for a platform that makes it simple to set up your own online store with all the bells and whistles that customers would expect.

But don't limit your vision to direct sales. I've observed site owners making tidy profit by charging a small facilitator's fee for transactions between members. A service that offers a ready-made trading platform makes this easy.

Also, be sure the platform you use gives you the tools and freedom to advertise and fully utilize sponsorship. In many cases, sponsorship is more effective for smaller organizations than advertising. Other things to consider include the ability to collect dues for membership, donations and features that enable you to offer premium memberships to members who pay. This can be particularly useful in that it enables your company or client to charge members to access certain features and information, and can also allow clients to offer pay-per-view content.

4. Pitfall: spam. One final item bears consideration when it comes to creating one's own network: spam. If you're going to use a service that requires you to create a network within a wider network, members will likely be bombarded with all kinds of messages, ranging from the annoying to the obscene. For this reason alone, the model that best suits businesses and serious users is one that allows you to create a network that stands completely independent of any host network.

The key to running a site that successfully furthers your client's business or cause is providing real value. If you were in your client's customer's shoes, what would bring you to the site and make you want to stay?

By identifying that and implementing it into the site's features and functionality, along with the other recommendations in this article, you will have the foundation for helping your clients build fruitful relationships with their customers.