



Jennifer Acevedo

Lost in the blogosphere?

If you're like me, it seems like you can't pick up a newspaper or magazine or tune in to your favorite news broadcast without hearing about the explosion of social media. No longer the domain of 16-year-olds, the medium has evolved and social networking sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter are now the darlings of corporate America. They're everywhere.

And sure, if you're Ashton Kutcher it's not difficult to announce your presence and watch the followers pile in. But for the majority of consumer brands struggling to come to terms with how to best utilize this new and unfamiliar means of communication, it's not quite that simple.

as your marketing department. A recent Nielsen study found that recommendations from known people (friends, acquaintances, colleagues) and consumer opinions posted online were the two most trusted forms of "advertising" for brands.

If you're part of your organization's package development team, make the time to use social media to take your brand's pulse on a regular basis. Better yet, use it to anticipate and identify unmet needs that your brand's packaging might address. Get your feet wet by doing a Twitter search for "packaging" and one of the brands you work on. Careful, though, it's addictive...

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Having spent the last few months immersed in all things social media, I'd like to offer a few insights I've gleaned that have been helpful in understanding the potential of this powerful tool. And, if you think that social media isn't relevant to packaging professionals, think again!

Opportunity knocks

About five minutes after the invention of e-mail came the birth of SPAM. No matter how good your filter, or how diligent your network administrator, chances are you're still getting your fair share of unsolicited e-mails on a regular basis. Used, and abused, as a "cheap" means of communicating with a large number of people, the price of this mass approach has been paid in the pervasive "fastest delete key in the West" mentality of most recipients.

Enter social media tools like LinkedIn or Twitter, which operate on an opt-in model. Your message is only received by those who have chosen to interact with you; they are receptive, for now. Resist the temptation to unleash a barrage of self-promotional missives. Instead, think about the value you can potentially bring to this select audience of engaged consumers—and the insights they might share with you.

Who owns your brand?

Call it the ultimate in word of mouth, but your consumers have opinions, and they are connected. In today's world of instantaneous and unrelenting communication, the consumer controls your brand as much

Remember the big picture

There's no doubt that the allure of social media is compelling. Some will be tempted to dive right in, without a thought of how this new means of communication will support the overall brand strategy. Others will take a more conservative approach, waiting to see what others in their space will do and potentially missing the opportunity to take a leadership position.

Wherever your organization's level of engagement falls on this spectrum, don't lose sight of the big picture. Social media is a vehicle, not a strategy. These tools won't, in and of themselves, double your sales or make an inherently flawed product or process succeed. How you will use them depends greatly on your role in the package development process. But, to be sure, there are unique opportunities to connect with your peers and your customers and to gather and disseminate information in ways that have historically been either too expensive or too unwieldy to consider. 🌐

About the author: Jennifer Acevedo is the Director of Education and Certification for IoPP. Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/iopp_education.

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