Social Net

CORNERSTONE OF THE CLUB INDUSTRY

BY BRYAN GILLIS

So, What's All the Buzz About?

Oscar Wilde once said, "the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about." That is the essence of "buzz"—a current day expression of an age-old marketing practice known as "word-of-mouth" marketing. Most of today's leading social networking platforms, i.e. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, all have "buzz" to thank for their meteoric rise to achieving mass-media status.

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Hardly a day goes by it seems without a mention of social networking in and by the mainstream media. The same holds true of recent conversations with club leaders who report to fielding questions from their membership or committees about Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, and the like. Indeed, social networking, the digital word-of-mouth phenomenon, has arrived, and it's being consumed by hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide. That's good news for the club industry, but perhaps not in the way you may be thinking.

There's a real difference between social *media* and social *networking*—almost as stark as the contrast between being public versus private.

The club industry is a relationship-based business, built and sustained on the quality and strength of the social connections formed from and among its membership. In a very real sense, you could say the club industry was the birthplace of social networking—the original social network, if you will. But while social networking is a very good thing for our industry, social media may not be.

MEMBERS ONLY SOCIAL NETWORKING

On a very fundamental level, social networking is personal. It's individually centered and controlled, typically revolves around common interests shared by two or more individuals, and serves as the foundation to a relationship. Now factor in the key characteristics of the club industry: a private, exclusive and protected social and recreational community for club members. Thus, for social networking to have real relevance, value and impact to a club, it too should remain private and reserved exclusively for use by members.

There's no place better suited for this level of personal engagement than behind the password-protected firewall of a club's website where members already enjoy a level of comfort, trust and familiarity. Enabling social networking-like features inside of the club website adds tremendous value to the membership. In so doing, you facilitate new introductions, enhance interactions, and extend the on-property club experience to an online environment on a year-round basis.

So, social networking is good for the industry. It's a natural, albeit digital, way to build and provide more value to the membership; but, it is best utilized as a member service delivered through the club website, not the monolithic public social networks that are attracting the masses.

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS STAYS... ON FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE AND TWITTER

In contrast, Facebook and Twitter are both examples of social media companies whose astronomical business valuations are based not on revenues, but on aggregate reach—that is, the vast access they provide brand advertisers and marketers to practically any and every imaginable consumer segment. Social media, like every other mass medium to precede it, is a sales and marketing channel first and foremost.

By extension, social media has value to the club industry, particularly as a means of attracting and capturing new members, and driving new revenue through event bookings as well as banquet and catering sales. It may not be applicable to all clubs, but for those that are not restricted in how they market themselves, or are comfortable with whatever level of risks are associated with it, and who have the support of their boards to do so, social media can prove to be a very cost-effective and complementary sales and marketing channel that complements their existing strategy.

SEVEN STEPS FOR ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL MEDIA PLAN

If a club is considering a foray into the social media space, here are seven tips to help pave the way and get started.

1 Plan
Set Clear Goals and Objectives

Mistakes can cost a lot of money, and many are made simply because someone is in a hurry. The board or members may not know the difference between social networking (an activity) and social media (a place). Don't simply create a Facebook page because someone has inquired or asked for it. Consider the club's organizational objectives and program goals, and then set out to determine how social media or social networking can complement the club's strategy and help achieve them. The planning will pay dividends in the long run, especially when asked to justify the expense and effort later on. Social media is just like any other marketing channel—it takes time and money to do it right. If a club starts out without a clear definition of what success looks like, how will it know when it's close? A lack of proper planning and direction can undermine support for social media projects at critical junctures in the future.

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2 Pre-Sell
Get "Buy In" in Advance

There are already enough egos and agendas among the officers, committees and membership under normal operating conditions. Don't complicate things by releasing a polarizing topic like social media into the atmosphere without having completed the preliminary missionary work to get buy in. It's very important club leaders engage and secure the support of board members, staff and various committees before moving forward. The more people who buy into the project in the beginning, the easier it will be to enlist their support when issues of funding, resources and collaboration come into the picture.

3 Assign Ownership
Put the Project in Capable Hands

Fight the temptation to enlist a board member's GenY niece or nephew to build out the club's Facebook page or manage the club's Twitter feed. The same goes for junior staff members that represent to use Facebook "all the time." This is an important project that requires adult supervision. Treat it as such. Career flameouts of the highest magnitude have resulted from mismanaged and poorly executed member-facing projects similar to this. Finally, fight the urge to form yet another committee. Bureaucracy is the antithesis of the social Web. Social media is transparent, authentic and adaptive—committees typically are not.

4 Engage and Inquire
Ask Your Current Members What They Think

If you want to know what your future members will look like, take a look at your current members. Find out what they think about social media: are they on Facebook, do they tweet or watch videos on YouTube? Your existing members are like a free focus group. So long as you respect their time and privacy, leverage this valuable resource by finding out where your members visit online—chances are that your target audience is very similar to your current audience. Armed with this information, you can better prioritize which social media channels to focus on first.

5 Study
Do Your Homework

Before you start broadcasting over social media, take some time to listen. Visit the social media sites your members frequent. Listen to the conversations, and observe the etiquette of exchanges and posts. Is it a forum or environment that would reflect well on your club's brand and image? Is the club the subject of discussion, and if so, what is being said about it? Not all social media will be well suited to your brand, so take the time to research the different options and carefully choose one that appears compatible, rather than hostile.

6 Invest
Be Ready To Commit Resources

Nothing is free—certainly not social media, despite the conventional wisdom. It may be free to register, but it takes considerable resources, by way of direct and indirect time and money to participate. There is only one way to do it right, and that's all the way, not half way. There is no "field of dreams" in social media. They won't come simply because you've built it. You need to provide a good reason, and that reason centers around content—information and interactions that are authentic, relevant and compelling. Anything short of this will be viewed as a waste of time. The more you post or tweet, the more engaged your audience becomes. Like those virtual pets, if you don't feed Facebook or Twitter several times a day, your audience will die off quickly. It's very important that clubs understand early on the commitment and cost behind maintaining their social media pages. Depending on the number of media channels and level of engagement, handling the social media side of club communications can be a full-time job that is at least equal to the amount of time required to maintain and derive value from your club website.

7 Evangelize
Enlist Your Membership

If social media sounds like a lot of work (and it is), take heart: you don't have to do it alone. Communicate your social media efforts early to your membership and get them to participate in the initiatives and advocate on the

club's behalf. Your current members are often your best marketing tool in the "real" world, and they can be equally effective in the virtual world of social media.

MAKING SOCIAL MEDIA WORK FOR YOUR CLUB

Like anything new, it'll take time before the marketing science of how to leverage social media and social networks becomes clear. For now, and for just about any organization, it still remains an exercise in trial and error. There are no short-cuts or silver bullets, nor are there any tried and true best practices to speak of yet. They are coming, but largely unproven up to this point.

Take note though, there are a few things you can be doing to take advantage of the social Web in its current form. First, recognize that the private club industry and the members it serve are unlike any other. Normal business assumptions, logic and practices often do not apply. Don't run off to build a club Facebook page or a Twitter feed simply because some strong willed member challenged you on it. Most that make those recommendations are thinking in very conventional terms and perceive social media to be a good place to build a social network. The theory simply does not apply in the private club market. What's the value of directing your members to a massively populated public medium, cluttered with commercial sponsors, advertisers and markets, which have been fraught with well-publicized issues surrounding user security and privacy? In contrast, private social networks integrated into your current club website are a far better, more practical and relevant way of delivering new services and more value to your members.

Social media (vs. social networking) on the other hand, could and should play a very important and valuable role as a sales and marketing channel to attract and capture new members, and drive new revenue. It will take some diligence however to determine the logistics and the mix of which services to use, how to use them, and most importantly, how to measure success; but, this too will come in time. Until then, apply the seven steps above and the club will be well on its way to leveraging and benefiting from the new social Web. ∎
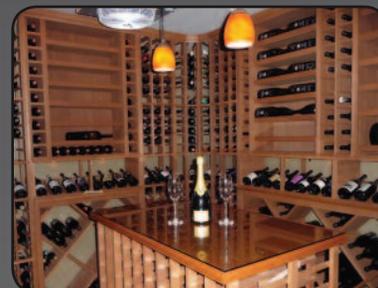
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