

What can Twitter do for consultants?

Social media is a fast changing field in which the number of people who claim to have expertise far outweighs the number of people who actually have it. As someone still finding his way, Malcolm Sleath from coaching consultancy 12boxes shares his own experience to date.

by MALCOLM SLEATH

Getting involved with social media is a multi-faceted investment. Simply spending time at it is not the answer, any more than throwing money at a problem automatically provides a return.

My investment falls into three headings: hands on experience of social media; intelligence about competition and customers; and the opportunity to build an authoritative, yet approachable, professional presence.

Experiencing the medium

The first reason for getting involved in social media is that it is here to stay in one form or another. The point is not that Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or anything else, is 'the future', but that the existence of these elements is changing the way in which we

communicate. To draw an analogy from television, any TV drama or film we see today in the UK is using a grammar that was influenced by the way advertising agencies learned how to tell stories in thirty-second slots while commercial television was in its infancy. What we take for granted today would have been unintelligible to all but a tiny proportion of an audience in the 1950s.

One of my clients recently critiqued my communication technique by referring to herself as being part of the 'MTV generation'. Love it or hate it, MTV and its imitators changed the way that people perceived the world. Bite sized chunks are not a substitute for a coherent argument or a story well told, but they are increasingly the way in which our attention is drawn to the in-

formation in which we are likely to be interested. My belief is that experiences such as Second Life and games will have a similar effect. Familiarity with social media will teach you how your clients are learning to filter messages. It can be a sobering experience. Here are a few examples of what is changing.

- If you give a speech at a conference, or deliver a webinar, bear in mind that the audience can now communicate with one another as well as with people not present, while you are still speaking. Sometimes the dialogue is projected where the speaker can see it. Often it is not. At least one experienced speaker has already found themselves completely thrown and humiliated by a reaction in the hall that they did not understand.

• Standing in an early morning queue at St Pancras in London on December 19th 2009, I knew that Eurostar were telling only part of the story about what was really going on in the channel tunnel. Even as I was listening to bland announcements about adverse weather conditions, I was reading tweets from people who had friends and relations who had been stuck overnight without adequate food or water. I might have been one of only a few people present accessing Twitter, but people in my immediate vicinity, and friends not present who were due to travel later in the week, were made aware of what I was reading. I certainly knew more than the Eurostar personnel who were present were telling, and was in a better position to make a decision about what to do than if I had relied on them as my sole source of information.

• I don't have the statistics to support this personal impression, but at present, directly or indirectly, I seem to be exposed to more new information relevant to my professional field through content generated by social media users than from almost any other single source. Even if this is not objectively true, the fact that I think it might be true is important.

To take Twitter as an example, I think of it as the twenty-first century equivalent of the seventeenth century coffee houses in London. Coffee houses enabled clusters of people to come together to discuss issues of mutual interest. Much of what was said turned out to be unreliable rubbish – think of the South Sea Bubble for starters. As with Twitter, there would have been a great deal of empty self-promotion of one kind or another. But there

twitter

was no doubt that the right coffee house was the place to be if you wanted to be a 'player'.

If you monitor, the right people, it's possible to get a sense of mood and what is going on. In particular, I find following the right people leads me to new sources of information.

With social media, just as in the coffee house, over time we learn who is worth listening to and who is not; who is there to grandstand and who is likely to be a source of surprising and interesting information.

Intelligence about customers and competition

When I first started using Twitter, like many people my intention was to see if I could use it to get better professional exposure for myself. To help identify my target audience, I set up a number of searches using key words that I thought relevant, and monitored what came up.

Within a week I had learned more about what else was going on in my own field than I had learned in the previous twelve months. At first it was a very uncomfortable experience. I came across people who were clearly much better at doing some of the things I thought I was doing quite well.

I didn't learn about these people as a result of their own self-promotion, but from people who

had read their articles and blogs on line and decided to tell others.

Frankly, some of the material I found was so good that at times I wanted to give up altogether. But then I realised what I was getting out of it. It was helping me to identify my real competitive advantage. Although many people seemed to do many things better than me, I could clearly identify what I could do better than them.

It helped me to be clearer about the value I was adding to my own clients and educated me in better ways to communicate what that value was. It signalled clear choices about my strategy. I could try to incorporate what others did into my own offerings, or use what I was learning to define my own niche more tightly and set out to dominate it.

Before you go rushing off to my website to see what I have learned, I must point out this is an ongoing 'work in progress'. Like the farmer in the last century who refused to buy an agricultural encyclopaedia from a travelling salesman, "I don't farm half as well as I already know how to". I've got weeks ahead of me of solid hard work. But without the exposure to the ideas of others, forced on me by following links provided by people whose thoughts I had learned to respect, I would still be going around in circles instead of seeing where I needed to go next.

Continued on page 20...

... continued from page 19

In my experience, customers are a harder nut to crack than competition in that social media is a very indirect form of lead generation. What I tend to pick up is the way people are currently expressing dissatisfaction with the way things are. This is a very good starting point for a dialogue. It is something I can begin to reflect in my blogs, articles, and other more direct forms of promotion.

Building reputation

For the consultant, social media can be an important platform for building credibility and trust by grabbing and then holding attention over time. But you cannot build your own reputation except by providing the raw material for other people to build it for you.

To begin the process of building reputation, you need a clear idea of your target audience and what will interest them. You have to consistently address their concerns and show up regularly to do it. It requires a great deal of work.

Don't rush into it. Think of it as visiting a club as a guest, with the possible intention of becoming a member. Allow yourself a week or two to get a sense of what is going on. Look at what other people do, and decide for yourself what works and what doesn't.

In the case of Twitter, you will find that some tweets intrigue you enough to look up the originator's profile, and perhaps even go to their web site and decide to follow them. Monitor your own reactions and what makes you decide to follow or not follow someone. And then observe what makes you decide to 'unfollow' someone.

You will hear it said that you should project an individual personality, as opposed to a corporate presence. Some people do this in a rather clumsy way by (for example) posting a great deal about the antics of the family kitten before dropping in a clunking piece of self-promotion. After a couple of weeks of this, I tire of it and stop following them.

For a professional persona, try making any personal information relevant to your audience. For example, if your audience is likely to be travelling a great deal, they may actually find it interesting to hear about your Eurostar experience. They are less likely to want to know that someone in your household has just boiled the kettle dry.

If you are tempted to treat social media as if it was a real-time personal diary (immediate, intimate, and indiscreet but without the protection of a clasp lock and il-

legibility) then get another profile for your personal stuff. Otherwise, make sure that what you share about yourself is consistent with your professional image.

People are more likely to click on the abbreviated links in your tweets if they think they will lead to something interesting. To build an authoritative professional presence, with a reputation for objectivity, think in terms of an 80/20 rule. For example: if eighty percent of what you post on Twitter is of interest to your target audience but is not originated by you, and only twenty percent of the stuff you post links to an article or blog posting you have produced, you are more likely to be seen as a reliable source of relevant and interesting information than if you simply post about your own material.

But this is just a rule of thumb. Even if it works today, there is nothing to say that it will work tomorrow. You'll only find out by doing it and monitoring the outcome.

Like 'networking', the rewards from social media are not usually what you think they are going to be, and they result more from what you put in than what you take out.

