

Status Update

By Gretchen Salois

In a wireless workplace, it's impossible to ignore social media's role in manufacturing

April 2013 - The saying, "image is everything," holds true in many regards when surfing the Web. A company's website is a modern-day business card and it takes some know-how to figure out how to approach online onlookers and captivate their interest. Social media is a prevalent force, and that means more than simply having a website or Facebook account. It means having a strategy in place—and more and more companies are investing in this evolving part of the industry.

The manufacturing industry is adjusting as customer demands include online resources. "I think that social media as a whole has been a difficult tool set for the manufacturing sector to embrace," says Scott Fasse, vice president of marketing at United Performance Metals, Hamilton, Ohio. "Understanding the application of tools like LinkedIn and YouTube is fairly straightforward and as a result, they have become more common in the sector.

"Other tools like Facebook and Twitter are capable of providing benefits but will require a more creative approach," he continues. Indeed the latter of those applications involves a daily commitment to relevant interesting updates and concise nuggets of information. In an arena where quantity of posts overshadow quality of content, it can be tricky to discern what messages will spark the interest of clients and customers.



Selling strategy

Figuring out a target audience is just the beginning. Adhering to a social media strategy requires time. "The importance of an interactive, easy-to-use website has increased exponentially in the past two years," Fasse says. "We are seeing the emergence of the next generation of purchasing managers and engineers—a group that has grown up with the Internet. For this generation, the Internet is not seen as a tool; for them it is the way business is conducted." Businesses are emerging to handle the growing demand to have an efficient and effective online presence geared toward the manufacturing sector. "Prior to the recession, fewer industrial/B2B companies were interested in social media," says Philip Paranicas, director of digital media at ThomasNet, New York. He adds that at the time, it was an emerging marketing tool. "The recession has helped fuel the popularity of social media and other digital strategies since companies are looking for new ways to expand their reach and maintain or grow their businesses."

ThomasNet offers a [website](#), to help suppliers and others in the manufacturing industry source raw materials, such as metals, as well as different components, equipment, and maintenance, repair and operations products. The company also works directly with suppliers, product and custom manufacturers, distributors and service providers to develop Internet strategies with services such as content-rich websites with online catalogs, CAD models and project portfolios. Emailing marketing campaigns and social media strategies also make up a large part of its offerings.

Social media in particular requires “constant feeding,” says Paranicas. The process includes goal setting, writing unique content for each company, including blogs and posting to LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, and Facebook etc. “[Many of our customers] want to be engaged in a meaningful way, wherever their prospects are,” Paranicas says. “Other manufacturers are coming to us for the first time because they don’t have the expertise or resources to develop and execute an effective social media strategy on a consistent basis.”

Paranicas uses an example of a current customer, Continental Steel and Tube Co., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., that needed a social media strategy. The company sells steel, titanium and aluminum products for aerospace manufacturers, automakers, defense contractors and other markets. “About 95 percent of their business comes from a website ThomasNet developed for them,” Paranicas says. “As new generations of their prospects and customers engage with suppliers through social media, Continental needs to be there as well. Now the company has

a unified brand presence on the Web and through social media, too.”

Fasse agrees focusing on social media is inevitable. Social media and other forms of online communication have become an essential part of managing customer relationships. “For many customers, it has become an expectation that your website will not only provide ample information but also the ability to carry out transactions.

“Social media holds the potential of not only providing the catalyst to keep customers returning to your website, but another opportunity to penetrate the barriers that today’s technologies afford purchase managers and decision-makers,” Fasse continues. The opportunities to cement relationships with lunches, dinners, trips to the golf course or even a phone call, for that matter, are becoming much more difficult to obtain. Companies that are creative enough to leverage social media as another tool to build customer relationships will be the winners. Properly executed, social media could be the entry that paves the way for a phone call or personal visit.” MM

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