

Published in the **Valley Business News**
for the Santa Clarita Valley Chamber of Commerce
May 2009

Connecting to the Social Media Conversation

by Teresa Todd

Just a few years ago, Facebook was simply a novel way for college students to connect with one another and Twitter referred to chirping birds. Today, company reputations are built and destroyed almost instantaneously – in 140 characters or less – as millions of conversations are taking place online.

Whether it's blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Ning or any other social media networking site, business owners should realize that conversations about their products, services, brands and companies are happening with or without them.

Do something out of favor with customers and a bevy of blogs, chat rooms and online forums will take you to task. Disgruntled customers have always been quick to share bad experiences. The difference today is that instead of voicing their concern to the Complaint Department, that same experience is more likely to be shared on Twitter and Facebook universes.

Monitoring social media conversations not only enables companies to combat negative setbacks, but to also identify and develop opportunities.

-- **Gauging impact.** Not all online buzz is noteworthy nor does it require attention. However, social media has turned everyone even remotely associated with your brand into a potential ambassador. Listening and responding appropriately are key to managing your company's reputation and fostering a relationship with current and potential customers.

-- **Competitive analysis.** Just as a business monitors conversations occurring with their own customers, social media offers a way to examine conversations involving competitors. What are the advantages and disadvantages of competitive product offerings as compared to your own? Where does your company fall within the industry as compared to your competition? What insight can be gleaned as to how customers make decisions regarding products or services?

-- **Emerging trends.** Taking an industry-wide approach, social media provides the means to identify trends and changes as they occur. Shift happens and being among the first to spot trend changes allows a company to react quickly and maintain a competitive advantage.

-- **Personalized messaging.** Marketers have always tried to put the right message in front of the right people, but with mixed outcomes. Social media allows companies to customize their messages to reach specific target audiences through the communication channels they prefer most.

Think of your online presence much like a storefront window. While the overall impact of a store window may draw customers into the store, it will be the product or service offering and relationship created that earns a customer's business. The same principles apply online, whether it's through a website, blog, tweet or post.