



Connecting with customers

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Networking online allows two-way communication

By Kyle Peterson — Daily Staff Writer

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Allison Nelson, owner of A Snack in the Face bakery, 2414 Lincoln Way, has a special routine whenever she makes something particularly delicious. She'll take the item out of the oven, put it on the counter and then grab her iPhone.

"I snap the picture of the product, I bring up my little app here, punch in what I've got to say about it, attach the photo – boom, gone," Nelson said with a laugh.

The whole production takes about 30 seconds, and then the sweet treat zooms off into the Internet, to be seen, hopefully, by hungry customers everywhere.

Nelson is a part of the bold new world of Twitter, the Internet's fastest-growing social networking site, and you've just witnessed the birth of a tweet.

Seem simple? It is.

On the surface, Twitter is about as simple as it comes. Users can post, or tweet, about whatever they wish – but messages can't exceed the Twitter-defined limit of 140 characters. Friends can follow each other's posts, reply to messages and "re-tweet" content they find valuable.

The site is clean and uncluttered, with few add-ons and none of the high-tech features of its competitors. Twitter not only requires users to define their world in bite-sized chunks, but it defines itself just as simply.

Yet, it's quickly taken the social networking world by storm. Unique visitors increased 1,382 percent from February 2008 to February 2009, according to Nielsen Online.

Facebook, with 228 percent growth, is passé. And MySpace went the way of the phonograph.

But with only 140 characters of self-expression allowed, is Twitter really very useful as a branding tool?

After speaking with business owners, marketing managers and exploring a small microcosm of the Twitterverse, the answer is clear: Yes.

"You can't say your name enough – loud enough, bright enough, big enough," said John Crawford, owner of Alpha Copies, 2310 Lincoln Way. "You just have to keep repeating it a number of different ways."

Crawford signed his business up for Twitter at the suggestion of a customer.

"We've posted that we have job openings, we've promoted that we're open 24 hours, we offered a discount to veterans for Veterans Day," Crawford said.

It's a small bit of branding, but every bit counts.

Twitter also allows businesses to share their expertise and interact with their clientele.

Kim Smith, marketing manager for Wheatsfield Grocery, 413 Northwestern Ave., tweets "interesting food related, farming related, organic related articles that are informative for people to better understand the industry."

"Yesterday there was an article on the New York Times about this pig confinement, and it was a debate whether or not it was ethical," Smith said.

It's an opportunity for Smith to educate the 2,500 members of the co-op and establish her company as an expert in the eyes of consumers.

Listening is also key, said Jill Haverkamp, marketing and public relations manager with Olde Main Brewing Co., 316 Main St.

"Being on Twitter and on social media in general allows for a lot of two-way communication," Haverkamp said. "We get a lot of questions on there. 'Where can I get the dinky wheat in Waterloo?'"

Because of the two-way conversation, some companies fear inviting critics.

"If somebody does say something negative about your company, that gives you an opportunity to respond," Haverkamp said.

The interaction on Twitter is business to business, too.

"We find a lot of people in the Des Moines area at other agencies follow us, and we follow them back," said Corey Johnson, assistant director of copywriting for Innova Ideas & Services, 304 Main St. "It's very interesting to see what others have to say and are putting out there."

In the end, though, business is about making tough choices with limited resources. Time is money, and money is tight – especially in today's troubled economy.

But Twitter is a solid investment, Johnson said, who not only tweets on behalf of Innova, but also works with the agency's clients to help them successfully utilize the social networking site.

"Everyone understands the value of it, they just don't understand the ROI," Johnson said. "It's something hard to measure, because it's not all about the dollars and cents."

Marketers and business owners who currently use Twitter seem to agree.

Whether it directly led to measurable profits or not, all of the businesses interviewed said they saw value in the service.

Intangible benefits ranged from, "I've seen definitely an increase in our web traffic," to "I certainly think awareness is up a lot higher," to "You don't know who your next customer is going to be."

Some businesses have seen direct, monetary benefits as well. Johnson said Innova has found business leads through the social networking site. But those opportunities aren't particularly common.

"Twitter is not an e-commerce site," Johnson said. "It's a conversation. It's a chance to listen. It's a chance to put your personality out there."

Hopefully, consumers like and trust you. Then they tell their friends.

That's where the real power of social media lies.

"We can say whatever we like about ourselves," Nelson said. "It's what everybody else has to say that has any value at all."

This is good news for her bakery, since most people have good things to say.

"There was one cake I did that had like 200 views, and that's because it got posted and re-posted by people," Nelson said.

A few fans have even mentioned her in their messages by using the bakery's handle, @ASnackInTheFace, in their posts when they've got an hankering for the products. It's almost a tacit online endorsement.

For this purveyor of baked goods, there's nothing sweeter than that – a customer, craving her goodies and tweeting in Ames, passing along the word:

"It's a @ASnackInTheFace kind of day."

- @ASnackInTheFace
- @Innovaldeas
- @AlphaCopies
- @Wheatsfield
- @OldeMain

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