



SOCIAL MEDIA TIP OF THE MONTH

In this new monthly series, EM brings you tips and tricks from pros and experts who've been eating social media marketing for breakfast. So eat up, and check us out on Twitter @eventmarketer and facebook.com/eventmarketer for more.



THIS MONTH, EM looks at custom social media platforms with the help of Anne Driscoll, vp-business operations at leading custom social media platform provider, Ning. A custom social media channel is an online community owned by the creator and designed for a single purpose or audience. A brand can either build one from scratch or build on top of one of the many commercially available free and paid platforms. Ning is the largest of the free platforms, though it does have advanced customized features available for sale.

SIX WAYS TO TURN A CUSTOM B-TO-B SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM INTO YOUR BRAND'S OWN VERSION OF FACEBOOK [MINUS THE POSTS FROM YOUR MOM]

SO WHY NOT just create a branded page on Facebook and call it a day, you ask? In one word: ownership. Unlike commercial sites, custom social media platforms offer brands complete ownership of their content and total flexibility to design and post whatever they want, how they want and to whom they want. This gives brands the opportunity to control the medium and the message for very targeted groups. But there are a few rules to follow in order to give life to a wholly-owned online community. Here are six to get you started.

- 1 **Start the conversation early.** Begin to develop audience interest and engagement on your custom platform before your events. Speakers and brand product experts should be encouraged to be frequent posters on the custom site, once it's built. And make sure they respond to questions and comments in a timely manner, whether you're building up to a specific event or it's between live activations.
- 2 **Break down the barriers between your brand and your audience.** Give the members of your site some control over what's posted and talked about. That's how this year's Grand Ex winner Mountain Dew did it, and you can, too. The more comfortable with your brand they are, and the more input they have, the more likely they will be to interact with you on your platform, instead of expecting you to meet them on theirs.
- 3 **Whatever kind of experience you create with your platform, make it mobile-ready.** Most attendees do not want to, and therefore will not, whip out a laptop in order to interact with your brand's platform. The big commercial guys are out there, and very mobile-friendly, so you better be, too.
- 4 **Don't be afraid of the big boys: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and the rest.** Your desired audience will keep posting on those sites, even after they adopt your platform, so make sure you're not missing out on that content and feedback by adding integrated widgets to aggregate that outside content into your site.
- 5 **Remember that on your platform, you own the content.** On Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg owns it. So own it. Make sure the site feels like your brand, and make sure you're collecting the data and metrics you need to get to accomplish your brand's goals. This is as much a representation of your brand as your biggest trade show booth, and it should be seen by thousands more people.
- 6 **Use a platform you can count on to be stable and robust.** If your IT department has the programming chops to build it from scratch, more power to 'em, but if not, use one of the many custom platforms out there. Just make sure it's an established one, with a nice, reliable track record, like Ning, Elgg or SocialGo. You don't want to have tech problems distracting customers from all that yummy content you're giving them. **EM**

—Kenneth Briodagh