

# distribution social media

forum  
nodes

community  
feedback  
BLOG  
exchange  
facebook  
content  
information  
friend links  
online  
twitter

## Socially Networking with Greenville's Execs

**J**ohnny Carson's Amazing Carnac wld hold the envelope 2 his temple & divulge the answer 2 the unspoken contents of the sealed question. Such is the game social media novitiates play when they jump in2 ths marketplace looking 4 the answer 2 an unarticulated question. (137 characters!)

So it is not surprising that big business, C-level executives and corporations are fumbling a bit in the social networking universe. Still that hasn't stopped them from testing the waters. A recent survey by PR firm Burson-Marsteller found 54 percent of Fortune 100 companies have a Twitter presence, 32 percent have a blog and 29 percent have a Facebook page. If they are only using one social media channel, 76 percent make Twitter the tool of choice.

Trey Pennington (@treypennington), owner of The Pennington Group and a self-described "connector," says companies are struggling to figure out how to "monetize" the social networks where so many potential customers are spending so much of their time. But that may be the wrong approach. "There is a difference between making money with social media and making money on social media," he says.

CEOs, Pennington says, "are slower to adapt because they have really valid concerns about liability, ethics and allegations. And the values represented by the Twitter community of "authenticity, transparency and personality" will not be well served by having "a PR firm doing the executive tweets."

BY LAURA HAIGHT



For Pennington, tweeting is about developing relationships with the “Twitter community.” Those relationships eventually bear fruit for business whether it’s a client referral, a sale, or a customer service save, he says. If followers are the currency of the twitter stream, Pennington – with 30,126 of them – is a billionaire.

At DNA Creative Communications, owner Debbie Nelson (@debbiednacc) says her clients are constantly asking about social media and “how is it going to work for my business.” She sees a great fit for non-profits and has developed a program called “Becoming E-Literate in a Social Media World” to help them understand the e-networking tools and how to make the most of them.

“It used to take an hour to give,” Nelson says, “but now it’s 3 1/2 hours because there is so much interest.” DNA also hits on Pennington’s “authenticity and transparency” mantra, encouraging its clients to use the networks as a way to raise awareness, increase its connection to the target audience and “engage in the conversation.”

This conversation, Pennington warns CEOs who are holding out on the social networking tidal surge, is going on with or without you. “You can be mute, but not invisible,” he notes.

How to carry on that conversation is as important as any other aspect of a company’s marketing strategy, says Betty Parker Ellis (@BettyEllis), president of Communication Works LLC, a public relations and training company. “How do you talk to your customers? How do you listen to them?” Ellis asks. “Social media now is a vibrant part of creating that relationship.”

In Greenville, so closely entwined with the auto industry, you might think Twitters actively followed the likes of GM or certainly BMW. No, says Pennington. But they do follow Ford through the tweets of their social media guru Scott Monty (@ScottMonty) based in Detroit.

Scott’s tweets help develop a personality – one Ford hopes will extend positively to their brand. His tweets are honest

and clearly written by a person and not a marketing committee.

He answers questions, offers insights into everything from how to use Sync to what car was used in a Seinfeld episode. And he monitors tweets that talk about Ford and responds to them quickly. A local reporter tweeting Monty received a direct response within 30 minutes, Pennington says.

Responsiveness is a big part of effective twittering. At Liquid Highway’s corporate offices, CEO Dwain Waller is rolling up his sleeves and diving into a drum of green coffee beans. Periodically, he stops and checks Twitter on his mobile. Wife, Keeli, he says, is the real “voice” of Liquid Highway (@liquidhighway) on Twitter and Facebook, but he keeps his hand in and responds to some tweets directly.

Liquid Highway’s tweets are part of a three-pronged strategy that advises customers of upcoming events, engages followers in a conversation and imparts information about coffee or about the company’s vast charitable agenda. “It’s always my goal to be on the cutting edge of things,” Waller says, noting that social media is the #1 advertising method they use.

Waller also believes one of Twitter’s best advantages to a business is as a customer service tool. Dwain has programmed searches for his company to see what customers are saying and often to “respond quickly – maybe even while they are still in the store.”

At i2i, Managing Partner Paul Hebert (@incentintel) is an avid blogger and tweeter. As a firm that works with companies to design and implement motivational, incentive and reward programs for employees, Hebert uses social media for knowledge gathering and relationship building.

So, to tweet or not to tweet? Paul Hebert says that’s not even the question. “You can’t look at social media as the answer if you haven’t developed the question.” ■