

FACE VALUE

The business world is realising that the gentler and more personable approach of social media networking is invaluable in terms of relationship and reputation management. By James Retief





Most people have heard of Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, internet-based platforms used by millions of people around the world to keep in touch with friends, share photos and videos, post random thoughts and generally maintain an online presence. While these three are probably the most popular social networking sites, there are many others, including Flickr, YouTube, Tumblr, Delicious, MXit and Eventful, to name a few.

These social media platforms were originally the exclusive domain of the individual, a place where people could upload a picture of their dog having a bath, post a video of their child scoring in the school soccer match or pontificate on the artistic merits of the local am-dram production. As Cape Town's Mike Wronski, MD of Fuseware, a company specialising

'Social media is like word-of-mouth on steroids ... essentially it gives everybody in the world a voice'

in social media research and analysis, puts it: 'Social media is like word-of-mouth on steroids ... essentially it gives everybody in the world a voice'.

Business has taken note of this fact and come to realise the value of this medium of communication, not as an arena for hard-core marketing, but rather as a vehicle for a gentler approach to reaching customers and building and maintaining both relationships and reputations.

With registered global users on Facebook and Twitter totalling approximately 500 million and 190 million respectively, and growing on a daily basis, businesses have the opportunity to reach a vast number of global consumers. Fuseware has developed technology to analyse how people use social media.

'We have systems that scour the web for conversations on social media and we can profile everything, from people to businesses, so we've got lots of information on how social media is being used. We then use this information to develop unique marketing strategies for companies,' says Wronski.

The choice of which platform to use in order to engage with customers is largely dependant on the market being targeted. While MXit boasts by far the largest number of users in SA (somewhere in the region of 20 million), the demographic of these users is very specific and therefore suited to a particular niche of brands and businesses. Facebook (with approximately three million SA users) and Twitter (with about 55 000 active users here) have a broader appeal and are the platforms most commonly used by businesses at the moment.

As stated previously, social media is not particularly well-suited to traditional marketing or advertising campaigns as it is notoriously difficult to relate numbers of Facebook and Twitter fans to increased sales – particularly in the short term. The return on investment in the instance of social media is achieved through building brands, providing virtually instant access to company and product/service information, and the promotion and protection of reputations.

Retail chain Woolworths launched its social media activities earlier this year and says that one of the most important

results has been learning about its customers – about their needs, expectations and concerns. By establishing a social media presence, Woolworths has also acknowledged the fact that technology has changed how the world interacts and communicates and that customers expect companies to have a presence in the social media sphere.

Yuppiechef, a high-end kitchen-tool online retailer, was established in 2006. At the time the Yuppiechef website was supplemented by a blog that contained information about new products, food and kitchen-related events.

Andrew Smith, MD of Yuppiechef says, 'We found in the last year or so that blogs were not where people were discussing things. Facebook and Twitter is where the real discussions are happening. We realised we still needed a place for good content so we converted our blog into an online magazine called *Spatula*, but the real discussion now takes place on Facebook and Twitter. For this reason we place a lot of emphasis on our social media activities.'

Be careful of only offering click-through options and competitions. 'That does not build relationships, it only tricks people into doing something'

One of the most important aspects of social media is the immediacy with which companies can interact with consumers. Whether it is to complain or compliment, people use social media platforms because they want an instant response. It is therefore important for companies to realise that managing a social media presence is not a throwaway task that can be lumped on to the already heavily laden shoulders of the CEO's personal assistant. A dedicated staff member or team is required, not only to post regular updates and tweets, but also to monitor activity related to the company and to respond to comments from followers as soon as possible.

Yuppiechef recently appointed Marina Pape to manage its social media presence. She is very aware of the delicate balance companies need to maintain in terms of their relationship with their followers and what they are hoping to achieve through this interaction. 'You need to give your

followers something interesting and useful. If you irritate a follower once, you'll lose them. I try to ensure each post achieves four things – it connects, it is inspiring, it is entertaining and it is educational.'

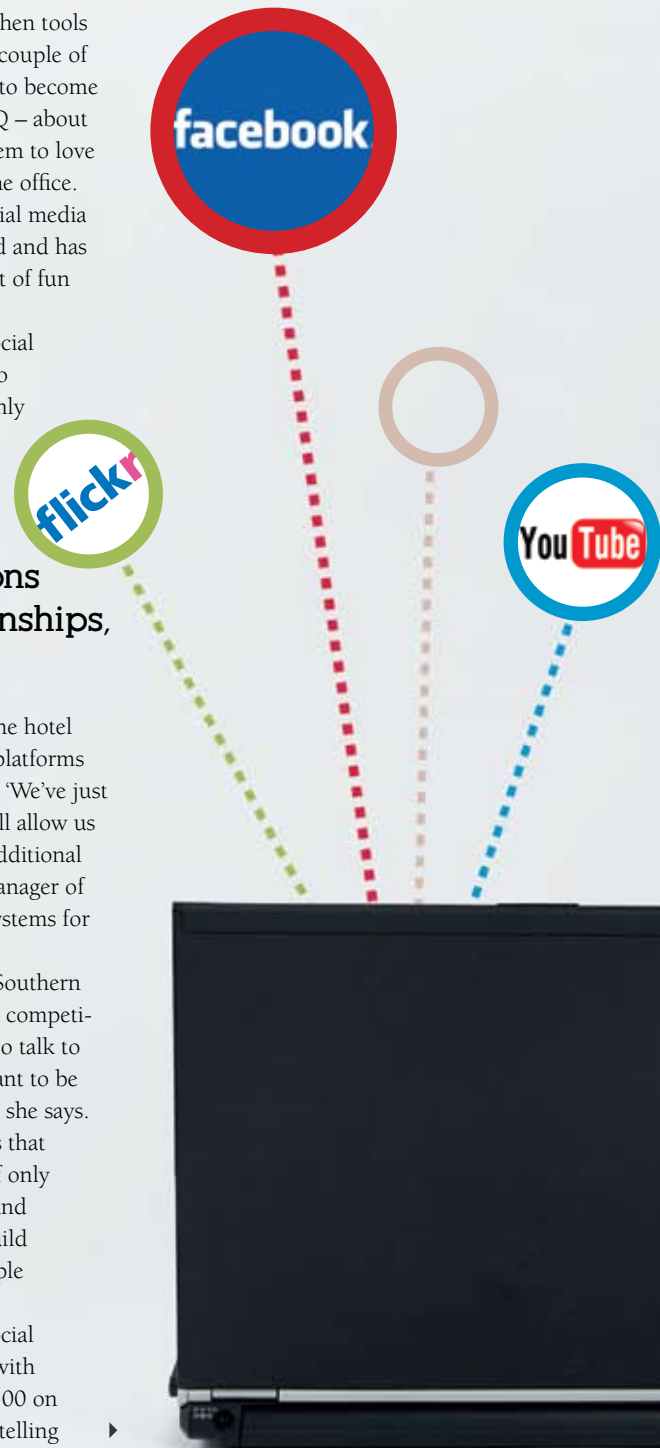
Marina also stresses the importance of social media being 'human' – followers don't want to spend time on something that comes across as automated. 'When I started posting on Facebook I was a lot more timid and focused on kitchen tools and products, but over the last couple of months my posts have evolved to become a lot more about Yuppiechef HQ – about what's going on here. People seem to love knowing what's happening at the office. It's also important that your social media person is in tune with the brand and has the right personality. I have a lot of fun doing my job.'

Southern Sun launched its social media activities about a year ago and so far has also focused mainly on Facebook (facebook.com/SouthernSunNews) and Twitter (Twitter.com/

SouthernSunNews), although the hotel group is keen to explore other platforms such as Delicious and YouTube. 'We've just launched a new website that will allow us to take full advantage of these additional platforms,' says Alison Mills, manager of e-commerce and information systems for the hotel group.

Alison points out that while Southern Sun uses these platforms to run competitions and special offers, they also talk to their followers. 'People don't want to be pushed with offers all the time,' she says. Andrew from Yuppiechef agrees that companies need to be careful of only offering click-through options and competitions. 'That does not build relationships, it only tricks people into doing something.'

As a result, Southern Sun's social media sites are used to engage with its followers (approximately 3 500 on Facebook and 700 on Twitter), telling





PIZZA . PASTA . SEAFOOD . GRILLS



Experience the *true* taste of Italy on

NELSON MANDELA SQUARE at Sandton

www.ghirardellis.co.za • Tel: +27 11 884 2632

'They see that we are approachable, that we do respond to queries and that while we don't get it right all the time, we always come back to you'

them about specific projects such as the Go Green campaign at Garden Court Umhlanga, and asking what kinds of holidays people like to take and where they like to go. 'We realise we need to listen to what our followers have to say. Engaging with people on a one-on-one basis allows us to monitor what they are saying about our brand and react to that,' says Alison.

Vernon Chalmers, a part-time lecturer and consultant on internet marketing, SEO and social media agrees. 'Social media is a strategy employed by companies to connect a brand with the consumers of that brand, providing both the brand and its followers with the opportunity to communicate on both negative and positive issues, thereby building a stronger community.' Vernon says it is essential that there is buy-in from top management in terms of a social media strategy, and a need to consider it as an imperative in terms of their long-term broader business strategy. He adds that it would be a serious mistake to view social media as a fad.

One of the most important benefits social media offers to companies is the ability to track conversations about the business, or people or events related to the business, through simple search tools. The company is then able to respond to these conversations and, if necessary, take remedial action.

Alison says, 'What is surprising is how honest people are and how much they appreciate your honesty. By us engaging with them, they see us in a different light – they realise there are real people behind the Facebook page, that this is Alison responding to your query or comment. I think this puts us into the consumers' hands. They see that we are approachable, that we do respond to queries and that while we don't get it right all the time, we always come back to you, we're honest with you and we sort it out.'

International companies in countries where social media has been used as a business tool for some years have had great success, including Kodak, BMW, Starbucks, IBM, Microsoft and US online retail giant Zappos.com, to name a few. In SA there are still relatively few companies that have invested in fully fledged social media strategies, but those that have are already seeing and reaping the benefits.

As Yuppiechef's Marina says, 'It's an incredible way to build a brand and it generates a wealth of information. To not have a presence on Facebook and Twitter when others do puts you at a serious disadvantage.' ●