

## Getting face to Face(book) to reach customers

April 29 2009, By Tannette Johnson-Elie

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Joe Woelfle may not be a celebrity or a household brand like iPhone or Nike, but he's building a loyal fan base by tapping Facebook to market his Milwaukee liquor stores.

The 28-year-old opened the first of his two stores about six months ago and has been a [Facebook](#) user since last year.

He uses the popular social networking site to post regular updates about new products he's offering and to spread the word about beer and wine tasting classes he holds monthly at his liquor stores. In addition, he scours his Facebook network to see who's talking about beer or wine and tries to engage them in conversation.

"It works for me," says Woelfle. "I don't think throwing away the old traditional ways of doing business is going to happen. But for any small-business owner that really wants to find and develop a core group of customers, I don't think there's a better way."

Woelfle can count himself among the increasing number of small-business owners and entrepreneurs who find Facebook a valuable resource for building their brands and connecting directly with consumers.

"I'm cracking into a group of people that would be difficult to reach otherwise," says Woelfle.

Facebook recently redesigned its site and rolled out changes to its business pages, which now are fashioned more like personal Facebook profile pages. The site also offers a variety of new features.

The changes are well-timed. Facebook in April exceeded 200 million users, with older [demographics](#) being among the fastest-growing groups using the site.

Through Facebook's updated fan pages, entrepreneurs can send updates to users who have chosen to become "fans" of their businesses. Fan pages are ideal for cultivating relationships with customers.

It's a smart marketing move.

Some entrepreneurs are designing Facebook group pages, which lets them post updates about their products and services. They can also send out bulk invites, which help make marketing strategies more viral -- or word-of-mouth. Group pages are better suited for hosting quick, live discussions and attracting attention.

Woelfle uses fan pages and group pages, which have a combined total of about 400 members, to promote his products.

"I've learned how to really get my message across," he says. "I've been getting a really good response. That's how I get a good core of people for my events."

Facebook has produced tangible results for Woelfle. His first wine tasting three months ago drew nearly 100 people. That number has dwindled to 20 to 40 attendees, whom he considers to be true wine lovers who are more likely to purchase his products.

Even so, Woelfle believes Facebook is boosting his bottom line. He

estimates he generates 10 percent of his sales through Facebook.

"It's a measurable amount because I know when people come into the store," he says. "They introduce themselves and there's more of a personal connection."

I had considered Facebook just a fad for teenagers and college kids. Now I get frequent requests from small-business owners and start-ups looking to build their brands.

One such person is Yvette Kendall, a Chicago woman who has invented a disposable drinking cup that sanitizes hands seconds after use.

Kendall is founder and CEO of Cleencups LLC, which produces the anti-bacterial cups and other disposable products, including flatware and plates. The products will be available online at [cleencups.com](http://cleencups.com) and in stores nationwide, including Wal-Mart and Target.

Kendall, who joined Facebook seven months ago, started a Cleencups Focus Group, where she has solicited feedback on her product from consumers. The aim is to create a buzz about her sanitizing cups before they hit the market this June.

"We wanted to get people to talk about the product and address concerns people have before the launch of our product," she said. "A lot of people had misconceptions about what the product is. We want people to be educated about our product so that they can talk about it to other people."

While Facebook can be a valuable marketing tool for business, as Kendall and Woelfle illustrate, it is not a panacea. Facebook can be complicated for small businesses, says John Garvey, a national marketing and communication strategist.

"This is not simple stuff. A lot of local small businesses still don't know how to navigate the Facebook arena," says Garvey, who also is president of Garvey Communication Associates Inc., Springfield, Mass.

"Be pragmatic and recognize it requires the investment of time and expertise and understanding what your audience wants."

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