

Twitter forcing a strategy switch for businesses

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Brand power takes on a whole new meaning on Twitter, where more than a million people follow Sockington, a tweeting feline who muses about litter boxes and salmon.

Companies would like to emulate that kind of success without drawing catcalls.

So far, however, the majority are still on the sidelines, and even most of those that have jumped in are [social media](#) newcomers, stepping up their presence in recent months as it became evident Twitter wasn't a quickly fading fad. Facebook, another social site, has let companies create their own pages only for the past two years.

What corporate marketers are discovering is that many of the strategies they have used for decades don't apply in the new social realm. For one thing, the companies have had to learn to let go of control. They can't be unnerved by an audience that talks back, often with brutal candor.

Such dialogue is occurring anyway, said market researcher Josh Bernoff.

"You can ignore it or you can try to fix it," said Bernoff, co-author of "Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies."

Microblogging site Twitter attracted 21.2 million U.S. visitors in July, according to Internet research firm [ComScore](#) Inc., up from 783,000

visitors a year earlier. Facebook's U.S. traffic more than doubled, to 87.7 million visitors, over the same 12-month period.

Yet only 26 percent of companies use social media such as Twitter and Facebook for corporate purposes, although 70 percent plan to jump in, according to a new survey by Minneapolis-based communications firm Russell Herder and Ethos Business Law.

But they should do so with caution, counsels Jeffrey Kalmikoff of Chicago-based hipster T-shirt company Threadless, which is a social media hit. This form of media is so new it is difficult to predict with certainty what will succeed or bomb embarrassingly.

"Nobody has any idea of what they're doing on social media," said Kalmikoff, the company's chief creative officer. "It's just how comfortable your company is in taking risk. Some things can pay off; some things can fall flat."

Candymaker Mars Inc. saw both with its "Interweb the Rainbow" Skittles promotion. Its Twitter account initially was bombarded with off-color tweets. But the online campaign also has drawn more than 1 million fans to Skittles' Facebook page, where they are trading thoughts on everything from Skittles-infused vodka to whether the tart candies are tastier than M&Ms.

Threadless, which attracted more than 1 million buyers and designers for its T-shirts without any mainstream advertising, finds the best way to reach consumers is through its weekly e-mail newsletter. Facebook is also effective as a communications tool because it has detailed knowledge of its fan base. Twitter is tougher to gauge because it provides little about who the company's followers are or whether they are even paying attention.

"Twitter is still a giant question mark," said Kalmikoff. "I'm highly suspicious of anyone who says they know how to use Twitter properly in a business setting."

Still, Threadless is experimenting with Twitter, using the site as both a bullhorn to blast messages to its nearly 1 million followers and as a means of commerce. The company currently is marketing "Tweets on Tees," shirts emblazoned with sayings like, "Life would be easier if you could mark people as spam."

But there's little doubt of Twitter's clout to influence public awareness, as JetBlue Airways demonstrated with its rollout last week of the "All-You-Can Jet" monthly pass for \$599.

As the promotion became a "trending topic" on Twitter soon after it was announced Wednesday, JetBlue started to see multiple mentions of itself on the site every second. Most were consumers sharing word of the offer, although many peppered JetBlue's Twitter account with questions about how the deal worked.

"We were completely bombarded," said Lindsey Petersen, who works for JetBlue's frequent-flier program in Salt Lake City and is a member of the team that helps manage its Twitter account.

JetBlue planned to make the monthly pass available through Aug. 21. But after less than 36 hours, officials were worried about having to curtail the promotion because the carrier was running out of seats. The airline has only 65,000 airplane seats to sell each day.

"We're going to learn a lot from this," said Jenny Dervin, spokeswoman for the New York-based carrier. "Next time we do this, we may have different rules around it. But, honestly, Twitter will tell us. It's the ultimate market research tool."

To connect with consumers on these new media and to remain timely, companies have to cede absolute control of an advertising message, a risky proposition.

While about five officials at Southwest Airlines typically vet every press release for accuracy and nuance, communications staffer Christi Day flies solo on Twitter. She acts as the discount carrier's voice without editing from her bosses.

"It is a little scary," Day said of the challenge of remaining on point while trying to reflect the humor and playfulness the carrier encourages in its employees.

JetBlue and Southwest have the largest presence among airlines on Twitter, with about 1 million and 460,000 followers, respectively. Both carriers share a steady stream of information, from flight delays to deals.

Day also has started providing live tweets from the company's news conferences as well as updates of weather-related problems and service issues. This summer she tweeted about a hole in the fuselage of one jet, for example, that forced an emergency landing in Charleston, W.Va.

"That's what people are hungry for: providing the facts," Day said. She added that "having that direct communication with our customers allows us to squash any rumors that may be going on."

After spending decades perfecting slogans and one-way conversations, companies that tap social media have to be prepared for an open dialogue with consumers, whose responses can be blunt.

American Airlines is experimenting with a Facebook application in development that lets families and far-flung friends plan trips together. So far, 21 reviewers have rated it an average of 2.5 stars out of a

possible 5, and the airline is using the feedback to improve the planning tool.

"To create a great product, you've got to test it out with loyal customers that will be blunt: 'I like this, I don't like that,'" said Billy Sanéz, an American spokesman. "It's like a virtual focus group and an active user group that's testing it out."

American prefers Facebook to Twitter.

"Twitter is more of a mass simple-messaging platform," Sanéz said. "Facebook is a more robust conversation. You can get to know the consumer a lot better."

Its Facebook offerings include a page called Travel Bag devoted to trip planning, as well as content from its inflight magazine. The wall also features plenty of customer comments, pro and con, along with flight photos.

United Airlines and struggling country musician Dave Carroll learned the power of these new tools after Carroll gained Internet fame in July with a song tweaking the carrier for breaking his guitar, then refusing to pay for the damage. He and friends used [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to get the word out.

Although its brand is known worldwide, United had a difficult time countering the firestorm of publicity because it was new to social media, Bernoff said. "You don't have a lot of defenses because you don't have a lot of followers."

In contrast, Carroll got a huge career boost. His YouTube video has been viewed 4.9 million times, and he plans to release a follow-up Tuesday. Carroll said he's hired three people just to handle the crush of publicity

and new bookings.

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