

Small businesses get personal with social media

November 13 2012, by Christine Dugas

Small business owners usually have their hands full just handling day-to-day operations. But Jeff Cooper can find time to send an email wishing a client good luck on his daughter's wedding.

"I'm genuinely interested in how it went," he said. "But I can't keep things like that in my head. I rely on technology tools to remind me of that."

As CEO of Expo Logic, based in East Norriton, Pa., Cooper's business handles online registrations for trade association conventions. The small, family-owned business, which was founded in 1979, has changed much since it entered the high-tech world.

Today, it not only manages bar code badges and tickets that can be displayed on mobile phones, it relies on tools such as Google alerts and customer relationship management, or CRM, to keep strong [customer relationships](#).

"We've had some customers for over 20 years," Cooper says. "We heavily rely on that repeat business."

[Social media](#) and the Internet have leveled the playing field for small [business owners](#), helping them foster closer relationships with clients and identify potential customers. Although small business owners are under much pressure to generate new customers, they should spend time nurturing and maintaining their existing clients, says Tory Johnson,

founder of Spark & Hustle, which creates conferences for women-owned [small businesses](#).

In the past, many small business owners gathered personal information on the phone or during company meetings, then stored it in a paper Rolodex or on an Excel spread sheet.

Johnson uses Facebook and Twitter to stay connected with clients and uses the Red Stamp cards app to send them digital cards.

But not all small businesses take advantage of the tools for social connections.

In New York City, for example, fewer than 20 percent of small businesses are capitalizing on technology, says a Smarter Small Business report released in August by the Center for an Urban Future. In particular, they found that there is a technology gap among neighborhood-based mom-and-pop firms.

"It's more important than ever for small-business owners to bridge the gap because they are facing more competition, and this can differentiate them and have them stay relevant with existing customers," says Jonathan Bowles, director of the Center for an Urban Future.

Being able to stay in touch with customers and connecting to them in a personal way makes a difference. Jill Nelson, founder and CEO of Ruby Receptionists, relies on social media to tap into her clients. As virtual receptionists for small businesses, such as attorneys, she uses Twitter, Facebook and [Google](#) Alerts to follow their businesses and offer assistance.

She started the business, based in Portland, Ore., in 2003 and gradually learned that it was important to have a personal connection to the small

businesses she serves across the country. "They have to understand that we really care about them," Nelson said. "We learn things like somebody's car has gotten broken into or somebody has added a new employee, and we'll reach out to them. If we hear an attorney has won a big case or anything newsworthy, we congratulate them."

Today, most small businesses are aware of social media and high-tech tools but are often slow to jump into using them. One reason is that they're spread too thin and wonder how they can find time to do one more thing, said Avery Horzewski, interim president of Women in Consulting, a network of consultants and small-business owners. Others simply don't get it and think it's a waste of time.

Business owners sometimes are not willing to move ahead with social media until they see how it works out for someone else in their industry, said Nika Stewart, CEO of Ghost Tweeting, which provides social-media services for small businesses such as authors and self-help coaches.

Others are plowing ahead without a good plan. That can cause problems. One mistake is when small businesses use social media only to promote themselves. "That does nothing," said Stewart. "Customers don't want to hear about promotions. They want to be talked with and cared about."

Another mistake is when small-business owners try to venture into several social-media tools all at once. They're likely to feel overwhelmed and discouraged when they don't quickly build client relationships, said Horzewski.

Instead, she says, the most natural tool for those who deal with business professionals is LinkedIn. Small mom-and-pop restaurants are likely to benefit most by using Twitter or Facebook to connect to customers.

"We live in a relationship economy," said Scott Steinberg, [CEO](#) of business consulting firm TechSavvy Global. That means it's important for [small-business owners](#) to smartly use social media to personalize their business and build trust. Technology now makes it easy for them to keep track of facts about clients such as birthdays and buying habits.

But that's not enough. They have to act on it. As Steinberg puts it: "It is the high-tech equivalent of the old barbershop or local bar where they greet you by name when you walk in the door."

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