

Commentary

Small Business Leaders Prefer 'Passive' Social Media, For Now

Ben Hanna, Jan 18, 2010 07:00 AM

While the concept of "social media" brings to mind images of active online discussions, a new study of small business social media use by Business.com finds that small business leaders currently show a strong preference for "passive" social media sources of business-relevant information -- such as viewing webinars or reading online ratings, reviews and company blog posts -- over those that require more active interaction with others. However, the use of social media resources requiring more active participation, such as asking business-related questions through Twitter or online question-and-answer forums, is set to rise among small business leaders as they gain access to effective online business networks.

The Business.com study involved more than 1,700 small business owners or managers currently using one or more social media resources to help them get the information they need to do their jobs on a day-to-day basis. The top five social media resources among study participants were:

- 1. Webinars / Podcasts** - small business leaders find webinars and podcasts to be highly useful for learning new skills, ongoing professional training and/or researching industries, products and services without the expense and time commitment required to attend seminars in person.
- 2. Ratings & Reviews** - whether looking for the most useful software, best business book on a particular topic or qualifying potential products to stock in retail stores, small business leaders find that online ratings and reviews provide valuable input into the business buying process.
- 3. Company / Brand Pages on Social Networking Sites** - according to a recent social networking study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 46% of U.S. adults now participate in online social networks such as Facebook, and 25% do so weekly. With online social networking becoming mainstream, and as companies rush to establish a corporate and/or brand presence on these sites, many small business leaders turn to social networking sites for the latest information from important vendors.
- 4. Company Blogs** - an old standby in the world of social media, small business leaders praise company blogs -- at least, those that are "well written, current and with good thought leadership articles" -- as great sources of information about business-relevant products, services and the underlying character of a company. Increasingly, small business leaders are connecting to company blog content through social networking sites.
- 5. Social Media Search** - while some of the business-relevant information on social media sites can be found through general search engines, a great deal cannot. Realizing this, over half of small business leaders using social media search for business-relevant information directly on sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Business.com Answers, SlideShare and many more.

Several more "active" social media resources, including participating in online communities/forums

(52.9%) or asking questions on Q&A sites (50.4%), fell just outside the top five for small business leaders, while using Twitter to find or request business-related information (26.9%) was used by the smallest number of respondents out of the twelve options provided. Should we therefore conclude that small business leaders have little interest in the "social" aspects of social media? Both yes and no, according to the study.

A more detailed look at hundreds of write-in comments from the study suggests that business social media is definitely not about "socializing." Instead, small business leaders judge the value of different social media resources based on how efficiently they can find what they need. More passive social media, like webinars, product/service ratings, company "fan" pages and blog posts, can be relatively quick ways to find basic, business-relevant information. But in many cases, directly asking a question or requesting help through a well-established, targeted online network is the most efficient option, as was the case for this small business owner:

"I was trying to fix something with one of my products for weeks. I searched Google for hours looking for an answer. I finally broke down and asked the question on a forum site that I use. Within a day I had 3 answers -- all of which fixed the problem."

While a higher proportion of small business leaders turn to passive social media resources for business information today, the ongoing growth of business Q&A Web sites and rapid development of business social networks are likely to drive much greater participation by small business leaders in interactive social media in the not-so-distant future.

