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Social Media 101

Whose program comes first? The franchisor's or the franchisee's?



By Gini Dietrich

Managing the differences between corporate and franchisee branding has been a struggle in the franchise industry. Ensuring each business

owner maintains individuality and local appeal, while representing the greater whole, is a full-time job for any franchisor.

Now enter social media. The battle to achieve consistency still exists—only now the messages are pushed onto Facebook walls, Twitter streams and LinkedIn updates for everyone to read and interpret for themselves. Because the level of attention placed on companies and their business models has increased exponentially during the past year, it's important to prepare for social media early and develop a plan.

In a survey conducted in July 2009 by Franchise Business Review, 72 percent of franchisors stated they are using social media and that 70 percent of their franchisees are, as well. But only 20 percent of those folks use social media for professional use.

Saving Face

There are many reasons to introduce your company to social media before your franchisees beat you to it. You may even be a franchisee trying to convince your franchisor to participate. By getting a head start on the game, you have the opportunity to develop consistent messaging, user names, and support groups that represent your company as a whole, not the individual franchisees. You also get to educate reluctant franchisees about the strong business possibilities social media offers and help them implement strategies into their current business model. Most importantly, you position your franchise as an industry thought leader, bringing new ideas and innovation to your business.

Below are some tactical steps you can take to bring your franchise on board with social media before franchisees do it themselves:

- Develop a set of standards franchisees should follow when starting their social media participation. For example, they should all use the same logos and colors, be involved in relevant groups and post appropriate pictures.

- Build a social media toolkit, featuring strategies on how franchisees can connect and engage with current customers and foster relationships with new customers through specific social networking sites.
- Create daily content on behalf of the corporate brand to engage all networks connected to both the corporate and individual Web sites.
- Build initial profiles and pages for every franchisee and create <http://ping.fm> accounts, allowing the corporate page to automatically populate franchisee pages with company social media campaigns, including promotions, contests, and discounts.
- Remember when KFC offered its new chicken for free on one day? Local franchisees didn't know about the offer and weren't prepared for the masses of customers on that day. Most had to turn people away, which makes for angry customers and upset franchisees. If you have a "free" day your communication firm is promoting via traditional PR and social media, your franchisees need to know about it and be prepared for it so let them know via the traditional channels, as well as by updating their social networks.
- Make it clear you aren't policing: The focus is on ways to use social media to promote the individual locations, rather than ways to avoid embarrassment. Make that clear to new franchisees by helping them create their networks and stress you won't be policing.
- Provide a list of blogs they need to read. Have them subscribe via RSS for efficiency's sake. Finally, encourage them to subscribe to other blogs and explore their interests.

Impress upon them the importance of social media: Consistently discuss the value of social media. Use case studies of success at the franchisor level and use the Intranet and franchisee calls to share best practices and case studies with one another.

This may seem like a lot of work—but you may even worry franchisees won't be willing to jump on the bandwagon—but your efforts will pay off as your branding illustrates the same

concepts, your consumer messages remain consistent, and new customers start running to your door.

Branding existing franchisees

Now you may be thinking, "But my franchisees are already on social networks, representing individual units and regions, and creating inconsistent messages. It's too late for a corporate plan. What do I do now?"

It's never too late for a corporate communication plan—especially when it comes to social media. You just have to change your focus. Instead of walking franchisees through the beginning stages of social media, such as creating a Facebook page, and signing on to Twitter, you can direct more of your efforts toward creating strategic messages and illustrating direct business successes.

One situation you should not take lightly is working with your franchisees to transform their personal social media pages to incorporated company-wide information and branding. As Paul Segreto, president and CEO, FranchisEssentials says, "It's always best to convince rather than demand."

If you convince franchisees that consistent branding and messaging are the best ways for everyone to succeed as a whole, instead of demand they follow new corporate policy, you will find much more success, while keeping motivation high.

Another option is to offer a financial contribution, aiming to motivate franchisees into adopting new social media strategies. While the price to activate and maintain social media accounts is very cheap, the monetary incentive helps ease franchisee tensions as they agree to relinquish their personal pages. This option also ensures the parent company owns and operates one brand identity.

Most importantly, don't get discouraged. Use the technology to develop new relationships with potential franchisees, foster relationships with customers, recruit talent, and create brand loyalty through engagement. It's about finding new ways to connect and communicate with people. And it's fun. So have fun doing it! ☺

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