

SOCIAL MEDIA

A Brave New World

Auto dealers across Canada are embracing the exciting possibilities of social media with enthusiasm. They're learning to communicate with a whole new audience through a more meaningful and ultimately profitable dialogue.

The importance of developing relationships with their customer base is common knowledge among auto dealers. And with the advent of social media, there are more opportunities than ever to move beyond making a sale – and to connect with a customer in a more substantial way.

Creating a community

When Montmorency Ford Lincoln sales manager José Gastan saw how much time his kids were spending on Facebook and Twitter, he realized the future had arrived. “Smart companies will take advantage of these

that social media is about building a community around his Montreal dealership. “We never solicit the people who are on our Facebook or Twitter,” he says. “Especially young kids, you can’t just try to sell them. They want to participate, and they appreciate that you’re making an effort to reach them.”

Social media offers another way of taking care of consumers, giving them information and keeping them up-to-date on new products and services that they might be interested in. It creates a laid-back environment that consumers can feel comfortable in, to linger, look around and chat.

Kwan, who had just returned from a three-day digital media conference, emphasizes that this is not a direct selling platform. “It’s an ability to open up a dialogue with a customer who’s either having a problem or wants to brag for you and spreads news about what’s going on,” he says.

“With channels like Facebook, you get a lot of interaction and dialogue between the participants, and the dealer doesn’t have to run the show – but occasionally join in the conversation.”

The people behind the tools

One of the most important aspects of implementing a social media strategy is to ensure dealership staff are not only trained, but actively participating. To make best use of the channels, the people in the dealership need to know what’s going on and maintain the dealer’s presence by interacting regularly.

“The advantage is no longer the technology, it’s the people driving the technology,” says JP Paquin, president of Montreal based Evolio, an auto industry marketing consultant. “You can have the best plan in the world, but if you don’t have the right people to carry it out, it’s useless.”

“You have to recognize that beyond the websites, the Facebook, the Twitter, there are real people. These people have to understand what the name of the game is, they have to have a vested interest in making it work at the dealer level, and they have to have some kind of competency that is not car related but technology based,” he says.

To that end, Paquin recently established Evolio Talent, to help dealerships recruit the right kind of personnel for their social marketing departments. “We’ll advertise the job, go through resumes and interviews, and do training. You need to have people with the proper skill set to pull this off.”

Home grown innovation

But Richie Samy, sales manager at Heninger Scion in Calgary, only needed his ingenuity and creativity to launch a successful social media

strategy. Every time a customer picks up their new Scion, Samy celebrates it with a music video, which is then posted to the dealership’s YouTube channel.

“I do it all myself,” says Samy, whose previous experience included

“People trust social media more than traditional advertising.”

– Josie Cino,
Interactive Media Productions

a stint as a music store manager. “We had to maximize our budget with Scion, there were very few marketing dollars, so we had to rely on our creativity and ingenuity. It’s not hard to do with all the tools that are available.”

Samy takes the video with his smartphone, and uses Windows Live Movie Maker – which is free with any computer – to edit the video. Usually, the video consists of the customer visiting the dealership, where their new vehicle is covered by a large, shiny sheet. A smiling and cheery audience of staff applaud as the sheet is pulled off the vehicle, and the client drives the new vehicle down the dealership’s curved ramp.

For an added touch, Samy hires local talent to provide the music, and then links to their website and fan base for added exposure. If the customer has a business, he’ll include the business in the video and link to their media as well.

“I don’t have any background in film or video, and it’s been trial and error from the beginning,” he admits. “I started doing these videos in April of 2011 and it’s



You can maximize your marketing budget by integrating a social media strategy.

channels, but realize that they have to use them differently,” he says. “It’s not something you get an instant sale out of – you can’t sell a car through Facebook or Twitter.”

Gastan is just one of many Canadian dealers who realize the potential of social media – and that its implementation requires an effective strategy. An Ipsos Reid poll taken last May showed that one in three Canadians has a Blackberry, iPhone or other type of smartphone. They spend an amazing 17.3 hours per week on their device, and 54 percent claim they use it for activities other than talking. Forty-eight percent use their devices to check social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter.

Gastan knows his kids aren’t the only ones chatting and tweeting on their smartphones. And he knows

Building trust

Connecting with consumers in an enjoyable, sometimes educational and always congenial manner creates a familiarity that leads to trust. It’s about creating conversations, interacting with consumers in a way that keeps them engaged but not pressured.

“We want to be able to communicate with our customers in a different way,” says Denis Kwan, general manager and partner of Vancouver’s Clarkdale Volkswagen. “People will go on Facebook and say whatever they want, but in person, they may be a strong introvert. How do you engage and talk to these people?”

“With social media, it’s like sitting at a table, having a glass of wine with your customers, 24 hours a day. And they’re telling their friends about it right in front of you,” he explains.



Auto dealers are embracing the brave new world of social media.

really caught on. Everyone wants their own video. We've won a lot of sales from other dealers just because our clients want to be part of this cool thing."

A spoke in the wheel

At Toronto's Roy Foss Motors, marketing manager Anne He uses social media not only to reach out, but also reinforce the brand in a unique way. Together with a sister dealership in Woodbridge, Roy Foss has organized a program called "Sonic Grades", which rewards high school students who excel academically with the chance to win their own Chevy Sonic.

"We're connecting with students with a Sonic Grades Facebook page, which makes sense because Facebook is used a lot by students," Anna explains. "By using social media, not only are we spreading the message but we're using a medium that they're used to."

The response to the program has been tremendous, not only from students but also from parents. "We had so many phone calls when we launched the program from parents, who were surprised that a dealership would initiate this kind of program," Anna says. "Now, parents aren't likely to go on

social media – they use the phone. So social media is really like a spoke in the wheel, it complements our traditional advertising. It's another channel to communicate."

Stay committed

According to Josie Cino, social media manager at Interactive Media Productions in Burlington, there are many ways for dealers to get started and take advantage of social media. She says that half of her agency's clients are car dealers in the southwest Ontario region.

"All you have to do to get started is open a Facebook account, and post photos of new cars that come in, create a trivia quiz, include news about what's going on in the dealership, and take a photo when someone picks up a new car," Cino says. "It's also a great way for dealers to get inventory out, because social media is so real-time. When they get a new car on the lot, they can promote it. And when they sell it, they can promote that, too."

Customers who have had a positive experience at a dealership should be encouraged to share it with their friends. "They'll be likely to go right away to Facebook or Twitter and talk about it, or do a Google review," she says. "So you're strengthening your



An Ipsos Reid survey from May 26, 2011, showed that three in ten Canadians now own a smartphone.

existing customer relations as well as building new ones."

However, she adds that it's important to stay committed to what you've started. "If you start a social media account and you don't follow through, then no one's going to engage with you and it's going to take longer to be successful, to build that trust," she notes. "It takes a year to get people to trust you – give it time and stay on top of it."

"If you need help to maintain it, hire an agency or a third party," Cino advises. "A lot of people in the auto industry are really busy, they don't have time to keep up with it. But even if you hire someone, it's good to have the dealership involved as well, to keep both parties working together."

She advises starting out with one account, like Facebook, which is the most social and has the largest network, and is popular with dealers. "Social media isn't really that new – it's all about building relationships. For car dealers, that's what it's always been about. It's just the tools that are new."

Krystyna Lagowski

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