Zēbis

Information included in the presentation to ABWA January 12, 2010 responding to their request to Zebis. The presentation included additional interactive discussions not recorded here.

When I asked what topic would be of interest, given the broad range of technology, I was told that Social Networking was it. Social Networking is certainly on everyone's lips these days and it bears consideration on a personal and business level. To understand SN and design a plan to use it, you need to have a solid Internet plan. SN is not the beginning. It is one link in the chain of Internet marketing: your Internet presence. What I will review tonight are various steps to using the Internet to the advantage of your business.

The Internet is a vast tool. Why would you want to use the Internet at all? Because it's all about exposure. Information on the Web about your business is exposed publicly with or without your knowledge. By having a specific Internet presence and using it as you want you can influence and manage the information that is flowing over the Internet about your business. A social revolution has changed the way people communicate with each other and with the brands they purchase and support. In the wake of this revolution, customers are no longer content to be passive consumers of advertising. Instead, they want to engage in a conversation with their brands. They want the companies they buy from to be responsive and to acknowledge their feedback. (Think of Ebay. I think many, if not most of you, have used Ebay at some time. How valuable is the feedback section? Would you purchase from a seller who has negative feedback without checking into why?) It has taken only a few years for the interactive Internet to grow from almost nothing, to creep from the personal domain into the business domain. In part, this is because, in an age of laptops and PDAs, working from home, while traveling, essentially anywhere, and the increasing erosion of the traditional concepts of office hours, more people are finding their work and home lives blurring and blending into each other.

However, the Web, the Internet, doesn't work by itself. Before you start with the Internet at all, treat it like traditional marketing: What are your goals? Who is your target audience? Know that print media and traditional promotion is essential to drive viewers to your Internet presence. Once there, they will choose to interact, or not. If they do interact, they will lead others to your presence, who will interact, and on it goes.

Specific Internet tools that can benefit your business are:
1) having your own domain to use for e-mail communication
2) having an easy to navigate, professional and current web site
3) having a blog
4) producing white papers that are published on the Internet
5) producing a newsletter that is published on the Internet
6) using social networks
7) posting press releases online
8) utilizing Ebay to sell products and services

The primary idea when using the Internet is to get information about your company accessible and then lead your clients to it. You will provide helpful and interesting information. Mostly you want to get people interested in your business.

Trying to sell directly using the various Internet avenues will usually turn people off. But once you provide information that they find useful, they will return for more and then when they need help, they will remember you and call you.

To start your Internet presence, get your own domain name and set up an e-mail at that domain. This will give you immediate business name, your brand, recognition every time you communicate via e-mail with a client, a supplier or a potential customer. Your own domain with an e-mail address or 2 is very inexpensive. There are technical aspects that need to be considered when you are deciding where you will register your domain. If you are going to use it for a web site or a blog at some time, you want to use a registrar that provides good stable service. These registrars cost a little more, but the value is significant.

Then next step is a web site. This is where you will detail your products and services: everything you offer. You will explain your products and services, include pictures that will enhance your image and provide location information if that is needed for your business, along with contact information. Your web site is the place you will send people who want to learn about your business.

The design and coding of your site are very important. I'm sure each of you has tried to visit a site that doesn't load correctly, has overlapping information or doesn't come up at all. I would bet that you might have thought there was a problem with your computer or web browser, but you'd be wrong. A properly designed and coded site will look exactly the same on every viewer's screen, no matter which web browser they use, and it will look exactly as the owner wants it to look. A professional looking and acting site will increase and improve your image. If your site doesn't display well, the viewer will just become confused and frustrated and you will have lost a potential client.

When the site is in the design stage, that is the time to think about optimizing it for the search engines to find it. Search engines use an algorithm to determine ranking. There is not a way to really understand what they actually do, just the specifics they look for when searching site. This could be an entire talk by itself and there are companies set up just to optimize web sites. Just know that, the design stage is the time to optimize, not after the site is complete. And even just a little optimizing is better than none.

Once the web site is up and running, you will need to keep it current with new information and updates. The more frequently you change your site, adding new and helpful information, the more people will want to return and tell others about the great information they received. Add your white papers, newsletters, even casual (though professional) thoughts and ideas.

A web site is not a magic answer to getting your business noticed on the Web. You will need to advertise it just like you would any product or service you offer. You will want to tell everyone: every vendor, every client, every contact about your site and ask them to review it and use it. Keeping it current and interesting, linking to it from your social networking and blogs, adding white papers and newsletters, all that is essential if you want people to use it and tell others.

The next step you could use to get Internet visibility is starting a blog. A blog is an abbreviation for Web log. It is simply a type of web site, where you write commentaries, descriptions of events on an on-going basis. New entries show up at the top so your visitors can read what is new first. You can include graphics or video. Then people comment on the contents, or link to it or e-mail you about it. Or not.

The hard part of a blog is finding a subject that will interest others. You need to be able to develop enough content to post at least 3 times a week. Ideally your blog revolves around your company or industry and shows your understanding

of the topic. Over time people will learn more about your business and what it is that you do to help people. You'll be on the top of their minds should they ever need help with a service or product you offer.

There are many blogging tools available: google has one, blogger.com has one. They walk you step by step through the process of creating and managing one. After you learn how to set up and use your blog, the only thing besides a helpful topic, that you need, is the time dedicates to keep it current, helpful and interesting.

Two quick Internet avenues before I head into SN, are press releases and Ebay. If you don't do print press releases, you should. They are free and present your information in your words when you want the public to know something. Not all your press releases will get printed in the newspaper, but some will if they follow an accepted format and the paper has the room available and the desire to actually print press releases. It's always worth a try as sometimes they will be printed. At the same time, post your press release on your web site; link to it from your blog or social networking feed; e-mail the info to your e-mail list. Press releases are valuable tools as they present information exactly as you want it to be seen.

Ebay: it's not just an auction site. You can open a store, post classified ads, sell fixed price items and services. A basic store is very affordable. Many many people regularly visit Ebay and search it for all sorts of things: about anything you can imagine. One interesting fact is that Ebay items regularly perform well in general Internet searches. With a key worded title for your Ebay item, your item will usually have a better chance of being higher in a Google, Yahoo, etc search than the same item on your web site. An Ebay store, if you set it up with a static group of items, can take little of your time once it's established. All buyer questions and sales are e-mailed to you, so you don't have to constantly check it for status. You do need to respond to all events quickly as that will result in positive feedback which is essential for a successful Ebay presence. Ebay can be a valuable avenue, so don't leave it out of your planning.

Now, on to social networking. I have left it to last for two main reasons: there is a lot of information that I wanted to group all together and social networks will not produce results as you might expect if you don't have a supporting Web presence established and working for you. As I mentioned at the beginning, social networks are one link in the chain of Internet tools for your business.

Social Networking isn't new. What's new is the medium. We've been doing social networking since people started talking with each other: at gatherings, picnics, the dinner table, business events like this one. Online communities are just new places to meet and congregate. They need to be used in combination with other marketing strategies.

Social networking, at a high level, is described as the convergence of technologies that make it possible for individuals to easily communicate, share information and form new communities online. SN began as the province of individuals. Businesses are now trying to capitalize on this trend as they search for specific strategies and tactics to derive value from it.

There is a multitude of social networking sites. The most popular right now are Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and LinkedIn. SN sites are a convenient way to stay connected to current colleagues, people you've worked with in the past, and peers who work in similar jobs or in the same industry as you do. You can engage your customers not only one-on-one, but also in the increasingly important many-to-many venues where your customers now congregate. Social engagement enables companies to create customer networks that turn food customers into better ones and your best customers into full-fledged brand advocates. Value of online customer advocates is tremendous.

Studies show that 60% of Americans use social networking at some time. Many of these people feel a stronger connection with and better served by companies they interact with in a social media environment. Give customers a venue where they can connect with each other, influence your products and carry the flag on your behalf. Optimize a 2-way relationship between yourself and your customer to include the simultaneous interactions that customers have among themselves.

It's the customer advocates that give this process value. Without a critical mass of customer advocates, SN is irrelevant.

Building and using SN is an approach tailored to and shaped by a customer population that spends much of its spare time online and much of its online time communicating and consuming user-created content. Consumers routinely share their opinions on SN sites. They want meaningful engagement.

The consumer advocates, influencers, in your customer network will innovate your products and services, promote your brand and support your other customers. And they will do that because they want to, not because you pay them. These people often have terrific ideas for improvements or for new capabilities. SN can help companies harness this knowledge, move new products to market faster. Customer advocates deliver a stronger message than if you deliver the same message yourself. Your delivery is considered self-serving. Your interaction must be considered customer focused to deliver value. You want customers on the outside to become participants on the inside.

SN works by word of mouth message propagation. Consider a rock dropped in a pond. The ripples it creates decay over time. Likewise, marketing messages fizzle out unless they are rebroadcast. Customer communities help generate market buzz by rebroadcasting the brand message with both strength and frequency. They work like repeating stations: broadcasting their opinions to their own SNs.

You listen to your customers, observe how they behave in social situation and gauge their impact on others, then connect with them directly. Then you must act on the feedback to capitalize on the market advantage being provided.

SN is a new channel for your business. It provides grass roots online marketing initiatives. It's egalitarian and informal. It becomes part of your marketing mix. You will use it for for several purposes:

-gain exposure for your blog and web site
-gain potential readers
-build your network with transparency and trust
-market your work, products and services
-learn new things from other industry professionals
-share tips and resources
-meet and talk with others
-stay connected
-seek out industry colleagues for assistance with special projects
-increase your brand familiarity
-access business contacts
-link to publications and events
-post information on your SN site and link to your web site for details
-carry on conversations about your area of expertise
-convey your personal brand: people like to like people: your brand is you

Concentrate your efforts in 2 main areas: building your presence and reaching out to the social web. The 1st gives you an advantage as you engage with customers, prospects and influencers and allows you to identify and develop your customer advocates. The 2nd allows you to listen and react to what's being said about your brand, wherever the conversation is occurring. Working in these 2 areas will help you identify how SN can further enhance and extend your core business processes and customer initiatives. You will find like-minded individuals who will help form ad hoc committees based on mutual interests. SN sire help shift power from the company to the consumer as the masses are able to channel and exert their influence.

The challenge is not to control the conversation: that is no longer possible. There are simply too many conversations occurring that are beyond your reach. Use the conversations you are involved in to find your brand advocates. It seems that brands today aren't about "messages", they are conversations, and today, important conversations are happening through social media.

Professionals want to be collaborative in the decision-cycle but not be marketed or sold to online. Professional networks are emerging as decision-support tools. Decision makers are broadening their reach to gather information especially among active users. You want to provide helpful and useful information. When you help others get what they want through SN, you will get what you want. Be of service to others.

SN amplifies what you do: you do good, it amplifies it; you do something bad, same thing. Reputations matters now more than ever. The increase in social interactions brings a corresponding increase in noise. Open and transparent communities not only attract highly passionate advocates, but also users with malicious intent.

You will want to focus your SN efforts on 1 or 2 sites and put a solid effort into making it work. Include your SN links on all print media and other Internet locations.

The most frequented SN sites today are Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. There are many others that may work for your specific industry, so it bears taking the time to search out other specific sites that might work for you. As an example, Zebis is a computer and technology company, so one of the sites we interact with is a technology site. We post white papers, join conversations and track what is happening on that site.

I'll talk briefly about 3 SN sites.
Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging site that enables its users to send and read messages, known as tweets. These messages are short comments that the owner of the site wishes to post. The postings are each limited to 140 characters, but you can post as many tweets as you want as frequently as you want. You can search for people, companies, organizations and follow their postings. As you follow people, they will begin to follow you also and you begin to build your network. You are able to contact your followers directly if you want to have a more direct relationship.

It started as an idea for individuals to send short messages on the fly to others in their group of contacts. As everyone now knows, it has grown dramatically and is being used in the business arena. It is not clear if this activity translates to increased revenue, but the exposure increase is valuable.

One of the great things about Twitter is that you can access and interact with the site from your computer and your PDAs, making it a quick information tool wherever you are.

It's focus is quick delivery of information, branding opportunities and enhanced marketing opportunities. Your Twitter feeds provide everything from information alerts to new blog posts to breaking news. You will place a link to your web site or blog in each Twitter feed, encouraging people to search out more information about your company.

One example of a string of Twitter feeds:
A potential customer tweets: Is it worth the money?
A customer advocate sees the question, responds to it on Twitter and brings it to your blog or forum, where other advocates respond.
The original questioner hears about the blog/forum discussion and becomes engaged.
Based on the positive comments from your customer advocates, the potential customer decides to buy from you or use your services.

Facebook is another popular SN site. You create a detailed profile, with personal information, pictures, links to your other sites. You start by adding friends and sending them messages. When you update your personal profile, you will notify your friends about the changes. You can join various networks by city, job category, schools, etc. You can join or create groups based on your areas of interest. When others search for that interest, your group will appear.

The information you put on Facebook can be private or public. This means exactly what it sounds like: you can make your information viewable by people who get to your site or not. There have been multiple incidents with Facebook where users privacy has been compromised or information sold and users have received viruses when clicking on e-mail links, purportedly sent from other Facebook users. I will address the security issues in a moment as they relate to all interactive sites.

LinkedIn is a business oriented SN site that is mainly used for professional networking. The idea behind LinkedIn is to gather a list of contacts that you know and trust in business. You can invite anyone to become a connection, even if they are not yet a LinkedIn member. This base contact network then is expanded by making additional connections with the users that your base network connects to...and so forth. You can gain an introduction to someone you wish to know through a mutual and trusted contact. You need to grow these contacts: the more, the better because these contact lead to unexpected opportunities.

Since the contacts are known, the link is quite valuable. You can use it to find jobs, employees, people in your industry and business opportunities. You can list positions you want to fill. By using the contact network, you can search for someone who can introduce you to the person you want to meet.

Since contact with any professional requires either a pre-existing relationship or the intervention of a contact of theirs, there is a measure of trust among LinkedIn users. You will build your credibility by how you interact online, the information you share and what others say about you.

It is important to optimize your profile just as you would optimize your web site. This will increase your chances of being found and, once found, credible. In your profile, include your white papers, newsletters, links to your web site. Use key words that will help you be found.

One feature that will get you involved with the LinkedIn community in your area of expertise is the Questions and Answers feature. This allows users to ask questions for the community to answer. The questions are usually business

oriented and the identity of the people involved is known. The more interaction you have with this feature, the more you will become known by those on LinkedIn in your industry and you will build your credibility. You can add links to your responses, leading people to your blog or your web site.

The Group feature allows you to establish business relationships and expand your horizons by joining specific groups that are of interest: industry, professional, school, etc. Anyone can create a group on any subject. When you want to join a group, you send a request and are notified whether you are accepted. Some groups send periodic newsletters or updates directly to your e-mail on record. Groups are a great way to get connected with others in your field and get more exposure for your business. You can indirectly help other members and share information, staying away from a direct sales approach. Seek opportunities to provide value. This is a long term approach. You will only start to see a return after people see your value to themselves.

Update your status daily: stay in front of your network, participate in group discussions, share success stories, announce new products or initiatives. Thoughtful posts and questions can start great conversations. Commenting on other's posts is also a great way to interact and present yourself.

If you decide to start a social media program for your business you will want to outline the policies and guidelines for all to follow. Follow accepted norms and values. In all online interactions you want to conduct yourself politely. You can disagree but do not be argumentative. Handle yourself as you would in any public situation. Many more people are seeing you online than at a public gathering. It's about building relationships. Don't overuse it with too many posts or messages. Listen to what is being said before jumping into conversations. Find SNs that are targeted to your business demographics.

There are some negative aspects of SN of which you need to be aware.

SN takes time, sometimes more than you want to spend. Be sure that you, or the person you designate to handle the task, isn't wasting time. They need to stay on target. If you update too frequently, clients may notice and think that work isn't getting done. Be sure to keep business confidential information confidential. It is easy to offend people. Since no one can read the emotion in the posting and everyone is encouraged on SN sites to speak plainly, there is a danger of offense being taken. Take care not to tell too much: keep your trade secrets, your core values, private. If you give away too much, who will pay for it? Maintain professionalism, honesty and respect. Do not be anonymous. Be relevant to your area of expertise.

There are security challenges in all SN. One of the positive aspects of SN is that you can interact with it from many devices and locations. But that opens your device and the information on it to the public. Your identity and personal information are stored on the device you use, whether it's a computer or a PDA. You need to know the risks and put in place the hardware and software needed to keep your information private. Anytime you are in a public place, a hotel, airport, Internet cafe, any wireless hotspot, your device is fully accessible to others and susceptible to the viruses that are on any other device on that network now or in the past. There are easy solutions that will fully 100% protect your devices and you need to have this protection if you are going to interact with these SN sites safely.

In addition to the dangers in using your device in a public place to access SN sites (or, in fact, use the Internet in a public place at all) there is an additional issue. The participatory nature of SN sites raises exposure and susceptibility of all users. It desensitizes them when it comes to clicking on links. There is a large potential for malicious people to contribute content that incorporates malware and/or links to infected sites and send it to your e-mail so that it looks like

it is coming from the SN site, when in fact, it is not. Most of us today are very careful not to click on e-mail links or attachments. But when something is received that appears to be from a SN site, people seem to forget the caution they usually exhibit. This often leads to serious virus infection, data loss, identity theft and the compromising of private information. It is vital to follow normal precautions and not relax those precautions with SN sites and e-mails.

SN can be a rewarding and energizing experience, forging team spirit among the staff, improving morale, motivation and job satisfaction. Weigh the pros and cons, the risks and benefits in the context of your own particular field of business, your aims, your working practices and your business culture. This will lead to a level of control that delivers effective protection without negating the informality and fast moving fluidity that lie at the heart of the whole concept of SN.

To briefly sum up: think of the Web today, the Internet, as a new platform for your business. The Web is a large and expanding collection of techniques, technologies and applications that involve a way of generating, sharing and processing data. Blogs, forums, social networking sites, white papers and newsletters posted on the Internet, online stores and your own web site all work together to form a solid Web presence. Design a plan, start small and grow your Web presence over time. That's what it's all about: showing people you know your business, so they tell others and you increase your exposure.

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