

# BREAKTHROUGH MARKETING

## & Management Insights

JW DEWITT  
BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

Volume 1 Issue 1 | June 1, 2009 | [www.jwdewitt.com](http://www.jwdewitt.com)



## IN THIS NEWSLETTER ISSUE

# 2

### Connecting with Customers

A conversation about customer conversations with Adrian Forde, Truman Company's expert on relationship marketing | By John W. DeWitt

**An ongoing, value-adding conversation with customers is critical to success now – not just to market and sell in this difficult economy, but to engage customers and prospects in an interconnected digital ecosystem. Today, information flow is instantaneous, customers segment themselves, and traditional marketing and sales approaches no longer suffice. To learn about leading-edge strategies and best practices for connecting with customers, we catch up with our longtime colleague Adrian Forde, senior vice president at Truman Company, a Burlington, Mass. firm that helps companies communicate and build relationships with their customers' senior executives. "There could be a huge disconnect between what you think is important and what your customers think is important," Adrian warns. "And if your competition gets that conversation right, they are going to be eating your breakfast."**



# 6

### Manage Your Own Content

And 9 other tips to enhance your online presence and deliver exceptional customer interaction | By Patrick C. Davis

**As we crest the wave of the modern economy** and monumental changes in the way we market ourselves, an aggressive Internet strategy is crucial to the future success of our businesses. Why is it then that so many small to midsize businesses settle when it comes to their online presence? Here are a few action points to consider when reevaluating or beginning the development of your firm's online identity.

**BIG IDEAS  
for  
SMALL to  
MIDSIZE  
BUSINESS**

Read or subscribe online at [www.jwdewitt.com/newsletter.html](http://www.jwdewitt.com/newsletter.html)

© 2009 JW DeWitt Business Communications. All Rights Reserved.

# Connecting with Customers

'Companies tend to pull back when times get tough. But those that succeed make sure they have that ongoing trusted advisor conversation with their customers and prospects.' | **By John W. DeWitt**

**E**conomic downturns are especially challenging times for marketing and sales. The tendency for businesses of all sizes is to pull back on marketing and customer relations, to do the minimum of what is considered "tried-and-true," to "buckle down" and "ride it out" until times get better. But what happens when even the time-tested marketing and sales approaches no longer work? That's more and more the case today, according to Adrian Forde, senior vice president at Truman Company, a Burlington, Mass.-based firm that specializes in helping companies communicate and build relationships with their customers' senior executives. We recently sat down with Adrian to pick his brain on the value of strategic conversations with customers and prospects – and what businesses need to do to keep the conversation going.

**Q: The economy stinks and the old ways marketing and selling and keeping existing customers happy don't work as well as they used to. What's a business to do?**

**A:** Everything in marketing and sales is prefaced on the idea that there's *some* money flowing – if you don't have that, if your customers just aren't buying at all, you're really in trouble. That's the Catch-22 for marketing and dealing with customers in tough times. How do you keep the conversation going with customers and

prospects, without spending all your time talking and not doing or selling anything? Today, whatever business or industry you work in, you need to continuously show



*Adrian Forde, senior vice president, Truman Company*

your value and make it really explicit. But everyone is struggling with how to make that happen. Fundamentally, you have to stay strategic in these really tough times – you can't get tactical, you can't revert to doing only what it takes to get by. Because once things start picking up, the companies who kept their strategic focus will take off again. Companies tend to pull back when times get tough; those that succeed make sure they have that ongoing trusted advisor conversation with clients and prospects.

**Q: Why is it so important to strengthen the connection to customers?**

**A:** Because you have to understand your customers' issues as intimately as you understand your own. To serve customers in an increasingly aggressive and more competitive world, you always have to be thinking about how to do it in a totally different way. Think about Google, Twitter, or Facebook – those businesses have created a new spin or angle that seems very different. They took advantage of fundamental changes in the Internet, which is their marketplace, and they understood and capitalized on a distinctively new customer need or desire. Your business has to do the same in its marketplace. This applies whether you are the local

convenience store or you're IBM. It doesn't necessarily have to be radically different from what you used to do. But it must be aligned with rapidly changing needs of customers. Unless you are in that ongoing conversation with your customers, you're going to miss the boat, you're going miss the change that is happening in your marketplace. Unless you're having that conversation with customers, you can't help them meet their changing needs, and if you can't help them meet their needs now, they won't do business with you anymore.

That customer connection also is particularly important because people tend to go with who they know. In tough and trying times, people are less willing to make a bet with people they are not comfortable with. So you have to have that ongoing conversation so you know the customer and the customer knows you, even if there are no short-term opportunities. That way, when something pops up, when they need what you have to offer, they will come back to you.

**Q:** *How do you have these customer conversations? What's different about this compared to traditional marketing and sales approaches?*

**A:** To be in the conversation, you also have to have something to say. Everybody is really, really busy, and there are so many people knocking on their door. How do you distinguish yourself, because the bar to get their attention is so high? The old tried-and-trusted methods in marketing – where you control everything and the audience sees just what you want them to see – that model is gone. Today, we are living in digital ecosystems, and these are much larger and more fluid communities where

information flow really is instantaneous. So it's not just what you say, but what people say about what you're saying and doing. Therefore, you have to proactively think about how you are managing the digital ecosystem that exists around what you're saying and what your customers are saying.

So now it's not just about your product or service, or about your advertising and promotions. It's also about what the bloggers are saying about your product and the discussions you're having with your customers and the discussions your customers are having with your other customers and prospects. How do you create linkages and convey your messages in media and in fluid communities that you do not control? How do you influence it, how do you get your voice heard in the way you want it to be heard in those communities?

The traditional model of marketing says, "Listen to me, I've got something important to say" – and then delivers a self-

serving message. But that model is not only increasingly ineffective, it is often counterproductive. Today, you really do have to have something distinctive and value-adding, something that people want to hear, or people turn you off. And it's often a one-shot deal. People don't have time to listen twice – if you screw it up that first time, it's very hard to regain your reputation and place in the marketplace.

**Q:** *How is this "ongoing customer conversation" different from market research, focus groups, and other typical ways of understanding customers? What's different about the approach?*

*The traditional model of marketing says, "Listen to me, I've got something important to say" – and then delivers a self-serving message. But that model is not only increasingly ineffective, it is often counterproductive. Today, you really do have to have something distinctive and value-adding, something that people want to hear, or people turn you off.*

**A:** There has to be real reciprocal value for the audience, so it's not just about the conversation you want to have and what you want to hear. For example, traditional focus groups work great with testing their reactions to products, but you can't get more meaningful advice and influence people at a higher level without a real conversation with real customers. You have to really put yourself in the customers' shoes – understand where they are coming from, create common ground for ongoing conversations.

Otherwise people rightly see you as self-centered.

The other aspect is people want it to be real. The day of abstract customer testimonials and white papers and other self-serving promotions is dead. With all of these online communities that link individuals together, you can't talk in abstract, anonymous sentences any more. People are saying, "Tell me about a best practice, tell me about a product or service – but I want to see warts and all, I want to see what happened to that customer who used your product or service. Connect me with the other customers you work with so I can validate that what you say is true."

In practice, this means you need to make existing customers available to new customers. If you're in a retail environment, you need to embrace the fact that your customers are talking – whether they're online or on the street – and you need to join in and encourage this conversation rather than fear it. You can't control the process – but you can gain trust by facilitating that conversation. Most people

are open to the fact that no conversation is perfect – but they respect you when you say to them, "Let's have conversations about how we can improve it."

Finding a way to frame a conversation in that open, candid sense is very, very important. If you're not doing it, it's going to happen anyway. But if you're shaping it by participating, it's going to give you credibility. If you're not there, if you're not in the conversation, you won't have any input or credibility.

### About Adrian Forde

Adrian Forde directs advisory councils and thought leadership at Truman Company ([www.trumancompany.com](http://www.trumancompany.com)). Previously Network Producer for Tapestry Networks, VP of Education & Professional Service at Availant and principal of Gen3 Partners, Adrian also was an associate with Mitchell Madison Group and a project manager in Global IT for McKinsey & Company. He began his career with Cambridge Technology Partners. A native of Galway, Ireland, Adrian was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where he gained a B.A. (Hons), and an M.A. in Computer Science, Linguistics, and German. He also holds an M.B.A. degree from Columbia Business School. He can be reached at [aforde@trumancompany.com](mailto:aforde@trumancompany.com).

**Q:** *How should you respond to input you get from the conversation – particularly if it is sharply critical of your business or its products and services?*

**A:** You have to have the ability to take negative input and use it positively – and immediately. You have to be willing to listen to what people are saying and react in real time – because the flow of information is increasingly real time. With online tools – like Twitter, Facebook, blogs, discussion forums – that stuff is out there very quickly, long before traditional

marketing approaches can react. You often need many aspects of traditional marketing – but you can't rely upon them alone when it comes to engaging in that real-time conversation with customers and prospects. Instead of marketing driving the conversation, you have to let the ongoing conversation with customers continuously shape and reshape the way you market and sell your products or services.

**Q:** *How do you measure the value of your customer interactions?*

**A:** First, you have to understand where the conversations are happening. You cannot just rely on “eyeballs” and web hits and CPM [cost per thousand] and other traditional measures of marketing impact. You have to understand what people are actually saying, where are they engaging or not engaging with you. You have to have more direct connection. Maybe it’s not the conversation you think they should be having – so if you want to find them and bring them back to your business, you need to know why someone is having this conversation.

What if you know your customers are having a tangential conversation – for instance, about how green your products are – but your sales and marketing messages focus on the usual features and functions instead of talking about carbon footprint? You need to take that conversation and “sales-enable” it, so you are able to participate in a way that’s intelligent and then leverage that participation into earning more business from the customer. The point is there could be a huge disconnect in what you think is important and what your customers think is important. And if your competition gets that conversation right, they are going to be eating your breakfast.

**Q:** *How do you make sure you “get that conversation right” with customers? How does the approach you advocate compare to the way traditional marketing manages the interaction?*

**A:** The key part to remember is you’re not going to be able to control those conversations, but you can find ways to insert your business into them and influence them. The traditional marketing model is you’re a company, you have something to say, you define your audience, you segment them, you target something to them. The day of that being sufficient is gone – because there are entirely different ways that audiences are segmenting themselves, often very different from the way you might categorize them. This is very much a shift away from controlled

communications towards an ecosystem-based conversation. And be warned, there may be parts of that conversation that you never touch – but you still need to figure out how to map the ecosystem and involve yourself in those ecosystem conversations.

Having the right conversation is about creating value – if you’re not creating value, there’s no reason why customers and prospects should talk to you. And in creating value, you have to understand what matters to the customer – and what has changed about what matters to the customer in the current economy.

Now is the time people need to be talking a lot more. The natural tendency is to stop, to be busy, but that really is the wrong thing to do. It can be hard to see what the long-term payoff is going to be in these conversations, but it is more important now than ever to really keep driving your business that way. Because if you keep customers engaged in the conversation, when things turn around, you’ll be in consideration for their business – as long as you’re adding value in the conversation.

One very important distinction: It’s talking with, not talking to, your customers. Increasingly, the only way you will get people engaged going forward is through a conversation with them, as opposed to talking to them. You may be pushing a point of view, offering a product that they don’t need or can’t afford. Unless you’re having that conversation, you don’t get the feedback. And especially in tough economic times, you can get so caught up in justifying your own existence, so focused on getting the answer to one question, that you don’t actually hear what the customer is saying. And if you’re not listening, customers will communicate in the language you cannot fail to hear – they’ll take their business elsewhere. Then it will be too late to do anything when you hear about it. □

*John W. DeWitt, senior consultant at JW DeWitt Business Communications, has authored many business articles since 1985. He can be reached at [john@jwdewitt.com](mailto:john@jwdewitt.com).*

# Manage Your Own Content

## And 9 other tips to enhance your online presence and deliver exceptional customer interaction

Small and midsize business owners have little time, skill, or resources to manage an aggressive online strategy – even though it’s now essential for success. But you can control your online destiny. | **By Patrick C. Davis**

**T**he world has transitioned to an on-demand environment. The pressures of a down economy, light wallets, and skyrocketing overhead can distract you from what’s needed most: marketing, harnessing the Internet, and growing your business, even when times are tough.

However, most small to midsize business owners and managers have little time, skill, or resources to deal with developing, maintaining and marketing an aggressive online strategy for their business. These are the target market for web development firms that prey upon overworked, under-informed buyers who end up paying more for less value. Fortunately, thanks to more and varied competition, prices have dropped for web design and integrated online marketing solutions that transcend traditional models of business-to-customer contact.

The bottom line: research is king. We all want value and quality in what we buy, coupled with a decent return on investment and limited recurring costs. These govern our ability to make a profit from our strategic moves. As we crest the wave of the modern economy and monumental changes in the way we market ourselves, an investigation of the web and our businesses is crucial to future success.

Why is it then that so many professionals settle when it comes to their on-line presence? I’m not suggesting that many of the options currently available are necessarily inferior; they’re just more expensive and time-intensive than is required.

Here are a few “action points” to consider when reevaluating or beginning the development of your firm’s online identity. Facts coupled with the erasure of some fictions should make this a powerful tool in your investigative process, even if you are currently served by a trusted provider.

### **1 Pay attention to recurring costs, not just upfront development fees.**

Most web design firms make a substantial portion of their living on recurring costs. Hosting fees, new content posting fees, monthly management fees, domain administration fees, custom recurring engineering and design fees, and annual license fees round out this list. The upfront cost of developing a site may be “affordable,” but you could spend two to 10 times that initial value in recurring fees in a five-year term. I’ve watched it happen in multiple industries, and ours is no exception.

### **2 Make sure you have the ability to manage your own content.**

Small to midsize businesses very often neglect to maintain control over content management. Many design firms will do “initial set-up” with a stock template and your verbiage. Good luck changing those areas without major expense and outside professional assistance. Many web sites are custom coded by designers who make it almost impossible to move a finger without hourly rates coming into question.

### **3 You should own your web domain.**

If you don’t own your own web domain, that’s just silly. You can buy any domain you choose at a registrar such as GoDaddy or Network Solutions, among

others, and control that vital piece of intellectual property. If you don't own your domain, and your designer licenses it to you, beware a change in service provider: you may be staring down a hefty fee to reacquire what should already be yours.

#### **4 Hosting must be reliable and affordable.**

Few design firms have their own web servers; they purchase bandwidth (the speed behind your web site) and server storage (the engine) from third parties who administrate those services as a pass-through cost, many at extreme margins of profit to the developer. If you are spending \$50.00 or more per month to host your site, it's probably too much. If it's slow or has a significant amount of downtime, you are being shortchanged and should take immediate action. A competent web services provider wants the customer's experience to be exceptional, just like you expect in your own business.

#### **5 You can manage your own web site, affordably.**

It's possible, and in many ways, essential. Timely updates of information on the web are required in today's economy. If you have to send your content off to get placed on your site, you're not in control. If you have no way to make content changes dynamically, you aren't in control. If you have to send off scans of photos to get resized and applied to the web, you're not in control. Control equals value, and that value is greater than any initial cost savings. Control equals peace of mind.

Content management systems (CMS) afford the best opportunity for this kind of management. A CMS is a software platform that provides dynamic management tools for various content areas of your site. And we all know that, in the world of YouTube and MySpace, interactivity is the gold standard for any web experience. A CMS should allow you to change, apply and remove content from your site, including new products, news items, the latest promotions, new images, and site pages at any time and from any computer

in the world, using editing tools that rival the ease of Microsoft Word. If you can write an e-mail, you should be able to manage routine content updates to your web site.

Of course, the aesthetic presentation of your site is crucial, and you should be willing to pay for it. And so should you pay for a CMS, under certain conditions:

- Pay no excessive residual monthly or annual expenses; find a value!
- Exceptional customer support should be readily available.
- Hosting should be affordable.
- You should actually know and like the people you are working with. It's an antiquated concept, but it's the best way to guarantee you get the value you've contracted for.

#### **6 Retain, contact, and manage customer contacts online.**

If that's not happening, you're not getting the real value of a web site for your business. Online environments should be dynamic these days, down to the "contact us" feature. Does your web site capture, in a database, the visitors who come to your site? Can visitors leave dynamic feedback? Can you capture their user information, including web address, e-mail, and other metadata for marketing needs? If not, maybe it's time to take your online presence to the next level of interactivity.

#### **7 Be at the top of the list: optimize your web site for search engines.**

If your site isn't well-positioned in standard search engines using SEO (search engine optimization) technology and techniques, it doesn't matter if you're "found" among a listing of other local providers. The only thing customers get when they find your site through a list or through your developer's site is a list of your competitors. "Searchability" can be done much better, and in a singular fashion, with your business prominently emphasized.

Here's an example you can test yourself with a web browser and online search engine such as Google: Search for your

business name and zip code and see if your location appears. If you aren't the first or a top-three result, you are not getting the results that you need to compete. You have not effectively optimized your site for the searches of your customers and prospects.

## **8 Make sure your site is accessible to the vast majority of potential customers.**

Your site must be accessible to the wide range of technology – web browsers and access speeds – used by your customers and prospects. If your site is heavy with graphics, tons of flash animation, video, audio, etc., there will be potential customers and visitors who can't access your content, no matter how much you paid for it or how sexy it may be. If you have an old Windows 95 computer, try viewing the majority of "plug-ins" designed for modern Windows XP or Vista or Mac OS machines. People still have old computers, many are still on dial-up (especially in rural areas), and they blame you when they can't interact. Frustration translates into a visit to your competitor with an accessible web site.

## **9 Recognize that different customers interact with you in different ways online.**

Most customers visit you for a look around, which means your web site might be their first point of entry to your business. Others search for meaningful content, education, and resources online as they make current

purchasing decisions. There are still others who are making decisions from miles away about services they may need from you in the future. What works for all of these customers: Openness, plentiful resources that are easily accessible on your site, a clean and modern feel, thoughtful technological inclusions, and a great design.

## **10 Take into account the generation gaps among web users.**

The 25- to 40-year-old bracket makes decisions about the trustworthiness, professionalism, and relative value of a business by viewing and interacting with its web site. For folks over 40, it's more common to make decisions on the basis of brand loyalty, identification, and longevity of the business – though many are extremely savvy technology users and also pay close attention to the online brand and experience. Customers over 65 typically make decisions on the basis of engrained behaviors, locality, and market-based experience – and they expect those factors that matter to them to be reflected when they visit your business online. Make sure your web site addresses the generation gap by taking into account the expectations of all potential users. □

*Patrick Davis, a senior consultant at JW DeWitt Business Communications, is co-founder and managing partner of Montague WebWorks ([www.montaguewebworks.com](http://www.montaguewebworks.com)). He can be reached at [pdavis@jwdewitt.com](mailto:pdavis@jwdewitt.com).*

---

## **Breakthrough Marketing & Management Insights**

Edited by John W. DeWitt, Patrick C. Davis, and Jon Laviertes  
Published by JW DeWitt Business Communications

To request a print or electronic subscription, contact:

JW DeWitt Business Communications | 16 West Main Street, New Salem, MA 01355  
978.544-1918 | [info@jwdewitt.com](mailto:info@jwdewitt.com) | [www.jwdewitt.com](http://www.jwdewitt.com)

Read or subscribe online at [www.jwdewitt.com/newsletter.html](http://www.jwdewitt.com/newsletter.html)