



BY ELISABETH A. SULLIVAN//STAFF WRITER

10 MINUTES WITH...

JULIETTE POWELL, AUTHOR AND SOCIAL MEDIA CONSULTANT

“YOU CAN’T EFFECTIVELY do social networking online unless you’re effectively doing social networking offline.” So says Juliette Powell, social media consultant and author of *33 Million People in the Room: How to Create, Influence and Run a Successful Business with Social Networking*.

Powell, a New York-born, Montreal-bred media consultant with a background in finance, computer programming and engineering, knows a thing or two about effective social interactions. She has worked as an entertainment interviewer and producer on Canadian television; co-founded a yearly innovation think tank called the Gathering; created the Inspiration Festival, a “creative jam session” held during New York’s Advertising Week; served as a guest speaker at MIT’s Enterprise Forum of Cambridge event; and consulted with clients including Compaq, Microsoft, Nokia, Red Bull and the Department of Justice on their social media strategies.

Marketing News sat down with Powell to discuss how companies can—and should—build social networks to create what Powell calls “social capital.”

Q: Let’s get down to brass tacks here. For those readers who might already be familiar with social media, what new lessons about social networks are you presenting for them in your book?

A: It’s all well and good to know this stuff. It’s another thing to apply it. ...

If businesses that have known about social media for a long time—how to use social tools, how the viral effect works—and still haven’t done anything about it or haven’t really been very effective at it, maybe a positive example like the one we have in the book related to the Obama [campaign’s online] strategy will help them look at how to apply that directly to their companies.

Essentially, what I do is I just give an overview of that online and viral strategy and I just say: ‘OK, great, so now that you get the picture, you see that it can work. How can it work for you?’ It’s really that simple. I don’t think we’re reinventing the wheel here. We’re not reinventing branding. It’s about the mechanisms of distribution, really—how to get that message out there. I think that we need some very concrete examples for business people to really take it seriously.

Q: As more companies enter the social media space, how can a company differentiate itself?

A: One of the things that we’re seeing is a proliferation of people talking but that aren’t necessarily talking from the heart. I mean, more and more brands are turning towards marketing companies to go out and do their social media strategy for them, and people—not just consumers, people—can smell it a mile away. It’s just not genuine. So the space might seem more and more crowded, but it’s not really. Not with genuine voices.

And that’s what makes the difference. It’s not about outsourcing your brand marketing to a company or a bunch of kids that are interns that are going to go and start talking about your product. It’s about somebody who really is passionate about it; who really cares about it; who, even if he isn’t paid or compensated in any way, shape or form, would still be out there doing it. Those are the voices that are going to be cutting through all the noise.

Q: I’ve spoken with a lot of critics who say that social media tools are great for brands like President Barack Obama’s that have inspirational, galvanizing, social power in and of themselves. But for B-to-B software providers, for example, whose brands might be considered a bit boring by the outside world, social media tools might not be very useful. Do you agree?

A: Well, if you believe that you’re a pretty boring thing, then you probably are a pretty boring thing and that’s the first thing that needs to change. In other words, isn’t traditional branding about asking: ‘What does your brand stand for? What value is it bringing to the consumer?’ And if you genuinely believe that your brand is boring, that your product is boring, how do you expect anybody to find it exciting, even your own employees? So right there, that has to be the first thing that changes. ...

This is a great opportunity to use a very simple social networking tool, an internal wiki. Get your employees involved and find out what they think of the brand. What do they think of the product? What can improve it? And you’re often going to see that some of the strongest voices in your

company aren’t necessarily part of your management team. On the contrary, it might be somebody in your shipping room, but he really believes in whatever it is that you’re doing—whether it is a paper company or a shoe manufacturer or a B-to-B software provider.

You want to be able to get those voices inside of your company that are excited about what you do. You want to hear them. And *they’re* your spokesperson. *They’re* your Obama. *They’re* the heart of your campaign. To me it’s not about, ‘This is your job and therefore you are the best spokesperson.’ It’s about, ‘Who’s truly passionate about this stuff?’ That’s who you want to go get.

Q: But do you agree that for some brands, a blog or a Facebook page might not be as worthwhile? Do you think it’s appropriate for everyone from CPG brands to B-to-B companies to have a social media presence?

A: Most already do. It’s just that they’re not in control of it. They’ve got employees who are on Facebook, who are on Twitter, who are talking about their products. [The company’s social media presence is] already there. [Companies] just need to catch up with [their employees]. It’s not whether it’s appropriate or not. It’s, ‘Are you going to be involved in the conversation about you?’ ...

If you’re Costco, it’s not necessarily going to be a conversation about Costco. It’s going to be a conversation about the great products that Costco offers. And that’s a very, very important distinction when you’re talking about doing an outward-facing social network for your customers. Do your customers want to talk about Costco? Probably not. But do they want to talk about that really cool gadget that’s sold half-price at Costco? Probably, yes!

Q: If the company does get involved in the conversation, who’s listening?

A: I think that we really have to make the distinction between internal social networking capabilities and outward-facing social networking capabilities. If you look at employees of Best Buy or British Telecom, these are employees that are highly connected already. They are definitely

talking about what's going on in the companies, and the products and services and whatnot. Not just because it's their job, but because this is what they do. I mean, geeks love to talk about geeky stuff. It's a natural thing. And if the company isn't giving them an internal way to do that, they're going to find other ways of doing that. Whether it's on Facebook, on Twitter, via SMS or e-mail, they're already doing this. ...

I look at Best Buy and their Geek Squad. [Their initial foray into social media] was never done for the general public. It was strictly done for the employees. You've got all these geeks that are talking about stereos. You've got the stereo geeks and the car stereo installer geeks, and they're all chatting on this internal wiki about the different subwoofers and how to install them on a Honda versus a Prius, and so on and so forth. These are distinctions that don't matter to consumers until they go to buy something. But if you've got a bunch of stereo geeks in New York and you don't have any in the stores in Ohio, for example, well, here's an internal wiki where people in Ohio can get the information to give a better service to their clients. ...

You could easily allow customers to be able to have access to that wiki because, essentially, you're not talking about Best Buy. You're talking about the products that Best Buy sells. It's a bunch of experts that are talking about this stuff, and at the end of the day, the information is there to help consumers.

Q: How do you measure success? You say in your book that social networks can help you drive real ROI. How do you determine that?

A: Our measures of success definitely have to change in this economy. ... Nobody's really feeling successful right about now.

I do think [it's important to look] at not just the buzz that's created around a company that's starting to use social networking tools and initiatives, but also, 'What is the nature of the conversations that are happening?' I think it's incredibly important to be able to positively reinforce those kinds of trends, those kinds of movements, the people that are generating not just, 'Hey, kudos, that's a great brand; you should try it,' but also, 'What are the connections between the people and those conversations that are actually leading to a sale?'

The more you can understand that mechanism, which changes for every product and every company, the easier it's going to be for you to understand what your measures of success should be for your company.

Q: Who's doing this well? Who's drawing those connections between conversations happening online and how they lead to a sale?

A: There's Zappos.com, who's doing Twitter. They're doing really, really well in terms of that charismatic leader that's out there that becomes one of the biggest proponents for the Twitter service itself and, in turn, Twitter and the 'Twitterati' love Zappos.

It's kind of a win-win situation where the consumers get to be in on the conversation with the guy that's heading up the company. I mean, how wonderful is that? And he seems to do it naturally, genuinely. Nobody's twisting his arm. He genuinely seems to enjoy the process. That, to me, has success written all over it. You want to interact with him; you want to learn from him directly as opposed to just ordering the shoes. You want to know: 'Who is this guy? What's he all about?'

Brands need to be able to get back to the human side of things. Frankly, as markets go down, the value of relationships goes up. Well, how do you create relationships and reinforce them? You've got to connect with people, but there are only so many hours in the day. So [social media tools] are the tools that allow you to broadcast to thousands of people at the touch of a button. **m**



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