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Having trouble with social media? Just tell them a story

John Sadowsky believes we are at a watershed moment in marketing communication.

Advertisers and marketers are now coming to grips with digital media and how it is changing the very nature of interaction with customers and prospects. In many ways, it is calling for a complete change of behaviour and practices. "Nowadays, we cannot start with our product or with our message around the product. We must learn to begin by studying the human beings who are our potential consumers," he argues.

Sadowsky's book, "**Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling**" isn't a tome that will tell you anything you shouldn't already know, but it does set down guidelines, and defines the confusion.

It used to be so easy. If you wanted to market something, you send a direct mailshot. If you had more money, you invested in a television advertising campaign, or hard hitting national newspaper full pages. If you wanted to reach the luxury market, you chose a glossy for your ad. Essentially, those with the biggest budget got the best results.

Oh to have that simplicity back.

Today, it isn't only about the 'how' of communicating to customers, it is the scary part of knowing how to react when the conversation is going on unprompted on the social media cloud. Taking advantage of that is now as much about intuition, acumen and one's ability to be a friend as it is about size and stature.

We should be telling stories, suggests Sadowsky, not preaching, or even promoting.

Communicating is crucial, interacting is even better and story telling is best.

Listening is more productive than talking, but email remains a prime selling tool, even if this isn't as powerful as getting people to recommend your product and services to their family and friends. Facebook, Twitter, and even blogs are better for communicating stuff than virtually any other method currently.

But be prepared to give up control, he warns. Never be afraid to respond, retract and make good.

If you choose to fight online, be aware that it will be a public battle, and because nothing ever dies when it is spread virally, be warned that you won't be able to retract anything that is said. You can never guarantee that the public will be on your side, or even that they will remain in favour.

Just consider the Nestle battle with Greenpeace over the use of non-sustainable palm oil from virgin rainforest. Nestle won in the courts, to get Greenpeace to remove their video from YouTube, but Greenpeace never lost the moral high ground, and Nestle finally retracted and promised that no more virgin forest palm oil would be used in KitKat bars. The value of hindsight says they should never have embarked on the battle in the first place. It was a classic case of not being able to hide the company skeleton. YouTube, can be great fun, and very informative. It is also a very public way to be humiliated.

You can't hide from social media, and it is not going to go away. Even Filofax has a social media strategy. (And you thought they were a yesterday company didn't you?)

"Companies are realising," says Sadowsky, "that they are only as strong as the stories people tell about them."

You can tell your stories in as many different ways as you like. But don't forget also to listen.

"Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling", by John Sadowsky, published by Altal editions (price Euro25) is a small book that only takes a couple of hours to read, but it has some strong messages. It also contains a host of delightful quotes, including Albert Einstein's first rule of work: "Out of clutter, find simplicity." If you do nothing else in today's confusing world, achieving this will hold you in good stead.

If that seems too hard, consider this one: "If it is a good story, you don't have to keep it alive by yourself. It is automatically retold or replayed in the minds of your listeners." – Annette Simmons, The Story Factor.

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