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### Talking about a 'Webolution'

By Peter Jones

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Webolution?

That might have once sounded like Elmer Fudd-speak for the political actions of "crazy wabbits." But with the advent of the Internet — and social networking, specifically — the business world has turned the World Wide Web into a revolution worthy of new vocabulary.

Just ask John Vachalek, CEO of Webolutions, a Greenwood Village marketing firm specializing in Internet-based communications.

"We'll write something for a blog," he said. "Then we'll take that blog and turn that into a newsletter. Then we'll take that information and put it up on Facebook and put it on Meetup.com. Then we'll take that information, make tiny URLs and incorporate it into Twitter."

Such a descriptor would have raised eyebrows little more than a decade ago. But today, the multi-tiered world of Web marketing is raising the profiles of small businesses, attendance at their promotional events and eventually, profits.

Twitter — once a literal reference to light chirping — has virtually changed meaning in the common lexicon. The almost ubiquitous Web presence for instant mass communication — by anyone to anyone — is well known, even among those disinclined to "tweet."

"Every business should have a Facebook and Twitter presence," Vachalek said. "More content is going to be consumed over mobile devices than by TV or the Internet by 2012. You've got to make your information available over multiple channels."

Facebook, once mostly a venue for friends to mingle in cyber circles, has increasingly become a medium for politicians, entertainers and businesses to communicate with "friends," "fans" and "supporters" in a personal, yet broad-reaching way.

According to Vachalek, the key to operating a successful Facebook business page is to get passed the temptation to generate as many "fans" as possible. He says a firm — a medical center, for example — should instead identify one's relevant market base and target its Web presence directly to that audience.

"Women generally make health care decisions for themselves, their children, and often for their husbands," he said. "Then we ask, how old are these decision makers? What income level are they at?"

The particulars of a given audience should determine everything from a corporate Web site's color schemes to the key words used in a company's Facebook and Twitter postings, he said.

"Having 10,000 fans on your site that are not engaged, not active, not part of your tribe, who cares?," Vachalek said. "I'd rather have 300 highly engaged evangelists for my business. The quantity is not the endgame."

Nor is it a contest for generating a record number of postings. Vachalek says he works with his clients to ensure that their online missives are select, targeted and to the point.

"What's special about your internal culture?," he asks clients. "How are you active in your community? What new technology do you employ? If I run a cooking school, maybe I post what I'm cooking for dinner tonight. If I'm an aviator, maybe you don't care what I had for dinner."

Understated marketing is also favored over hard selling in the world of social networking. On a Facebook homepage, for example, a blatantly commercial pitch for long-term care insurance may not play well amongst a friend's birth announcements or a co-worker's happy-hour musings.

Gayle Jetchick has learned that lesson by trial and error. She is executive director of the tax-supported Havana Business Improvement District, otherwise known as On Havana Street, in central Aurora.

Part of Jetchick's responsibility is to create a distinct Web presence for the range of car dealerships, ethnic restaurants and other businesses that comprise a roughly four-mile stretch of Havana between 6th and Dartmouth avenues.

"If you try to sell people something on Facebook, it doesn't seem to work," she said. "But if you review an event or a product and share your opinions, that seems to work better. A couple of our businesses have tried to sell a product and they haven't had very good results."

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Instead, Jetchick has tried to focus on creating community in the nearby business and residential communities — a “soft sell” approach that creates awareness of what the district has to offer while playing to Facebook users’ social instincts. The strategy has been successful, according to Jetchick.

“We’ve been offering one event a month just to get people to come into the area,” she said. “It’s like social networking where everybody comes down and meets their friends. For our ice cream social, I purchased 200 sundaes thinking that would be plenty. We had 500 people show up.”

Reinke Bros., a popular costume and novelty store in Littleton, has been equally surprised by the success of its Facebook-based marketing.

The store has had a page on the site for only about two months and co-owner Greg Reinke was skeptical about a plan to hastily schedule a recent pre-Halloween “Zombie Crawl” that would be promoted solely on Facebook.

“I thought we’d be lucky to get 20 or 30 zombies show up,” he said. “I’m an old dinosaur. I had my doubts about what would happen. When we got out of the car, it was like being in a zombie movie. Car doors started opening and all of a sudden we were inundated with all these people coming at us.”

More than 150 zombie-clad enthusiasts, mostly Facebook users, turned up for the ominous saunter down Littleton’s Main Street.

“The business almost becomes like a friend to people,” Reinke reasoned.

Despite such apparent successes, Facebook can also be addictive. Businesses say they need to be mindful of how many hours they spend on social networking sites.

“It takes up a lot of time if you keep up with Facebook and you tweet every day,” said Kathleen Shelton, Reinke’s web developer. “There are other things I have to do. I have to stock the store.”

According to Vachalek, it is time to get used to social networking as a reality of 21st-century commerce and find ways to balance the time commitment and language of the media with the other more timeless aspects of doing business.

“The culture reflects how we communicate,” he said. “When we had to send up smoke signals, we probably had a bit slower conversation. We probably interacted quite a bit differently during the industrial age when people worked on a line and didn’t have to have an imagination. Today, everybody wants to use their imagination every day.”



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