The New Face of the Company

ANNA WELLS, Exective Editor, Industrial Distribution

By ANNA WELLS, Exective Editor, *Industrial Distribution*

It's happened to me a few dozen times, but its still feels strange being recognized by someone I've never met. Having my face plastered over the web via our websites, LinkedIn and Facebook, I will sometimes run into a friendly reader at an industry event, and we shake hands or chat about the magazine.

The strangest part of these interactions, likely for us both, is feeling as if we already know one another. They read my articles, use the message boards or re-Tweet our content, and because of this, our community exists before we even lock eyes.

I think it's because social media and web interaction have affected my career so profoundly that I was so intrigued by the results of a recent report put out by The Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA) and Lopez Research on how business-to-business (B2B) marketers were utilizing social media. Essentially, the survey cited a community very much aware of the positive effects of web-specific strategies for growth, but not yet investing significant resources in these tools.

Says the report: "The survey focused on companies' use of email, mobile marketing and social media to build their brands, gain leads, and improve customer support. 'Few doubt that it's helping their business,' said Rhianna Collier, vice president of SIIA's Software Division. 'But our survey shows that marketers may not be dedicating the resources necessary to get the results they want.'"

In its subtle way, the survey analysis makes a great point about how we’re so often willing to take a halfhearted approach to improvements that cost us money. If these results ring true to you, I'd suggest the time has come to stop dipping just a toe in the water of the Internet ocean — because if you're waiting for things to take off before you jump in, then you'd better get used to seeing somebody else’s name at

the top of the page when you run a Google search for your bread-and-butter products. We've got a phrase for this in my industry — it's called “getting scooped.”

I'd take the survey focal points one step further and throw e-commerce into the mix of web marketing tools in need of attention. We know from our own research that many manufacturers are plenty comfortable using e-commerce for their own purchasing, yet derive just a small fraction of their business's overall sales from this medium. Inability or unwillingness to invest is understandable in an era of caution; no doubt, each investment in your business carries its own risk. But as technology moves faster, the online community will only expand, and it's up to you to make sure your brand is in front of as many eyeballs as possible, whether face to face or from a glowing smart phone.

I recently spoke with a man named Chuck Halpin for an article on the evolving value of wholesale suppliers. For the purposes of this point, I'll keep it short: Mr. Halpin has worked for the wholesaler Brighton-Best for over 30 years. We got to discussing his company's e-commerce platform, and he described some interesting functionality in which customers can virtually view inventory in a warehouse in China and remotely pack their own shipment. But what struck me most was how Halpin embraced all the unique changes that he'd seen over the years, especially the web-based ones: "Now with so many of the transactions going through the website — for a lot of people, that is the face of the company," he explained.

So after all the hard work you've put into building your brand, think about what this investment means — keeping your face recognizable to a customer who is also evolving. Because it's great to meet new people, but isn’t it better when they recognize you before you have to say a word?

What’s your take on e-commerce and social media? Have you dived in the ocean yet? Please feel free to comment below or email anna.wells@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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