

ChannelWeb

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Social Networking: What Does It Mean To You?

As I near my 30th year as a professional journalist, the topic of social networking somewhat worries yet excites me. My main concern is that every self-processed expert who tweets or blogs has suddenly become an authoritative source who can render true journalistic services obsolete.

Who will readers trust more: some sales guy or engineer attending a conference posting his take of an event, or the trained eye and sharp assessment of a reporter? Maybe, just maybe, this is a moot point. The point may well be that with more information floating around via tweets, Facebook and on wikis, perhaps there is an important role for someone to filter it all to make sense of it for decision makers.

With that backdrop, I listened carefully to the opinions of six IT executives who tackled the broad topic of social networking's impact on companies during the Midsize Enterprise Summit, a conference Everything Channel hosted May 3-7 in Miami. Panelists included six CIOs and vendor executives, who are grappling with how social networking is changing how their companies communicate with customers and employees or how such tools can be utilized to provide better customer support.

The backdrop to the conference was the rather sticky issue Domino's Pizza faced just a week before when a disgusting and brand-tainting video appeared on YouTube catching a Twitter-less Domino's off-guard.

While the social networking sites struggle with the issue of how to monetize their innovative platforms, companies such as Google are using the platform to drive collaboration among employees in an attempt to solve business problems, said Tom Mills, head of midmarket sales for Google Enterprise. It is also helping the company understand the big issues its executives must address to congeal the workforce around its goals. For instance, it uses the openness of the Google Moderator platform to present questions to its founders and CEO during company meetings.

However, the questions those executives address are ones "voted-on" by employees as pressing or important enough for the big boss to answer. The scenario drew a chuckle from the crowd. The irony of a platform that could allow a janitor to stand on equal footing with a vice president seems comforting until you factor in the voting.

While Google's view of social networking may exclude some workers, one panelist said truck drivers who had never before been even given e-mail accounts were suddenly tied more closely to company information, news and important messages via social networks.

The superbly articulate and bright Niel Nickolaisen, CIO of Headwaters, said social networking allows his company to connect with customers in ways it never could in the past. The company is dependent on distributors to sell its products to resellers, who in turn sell to the customer, so it was somewhat removed from the "problems" its customers faced.

By leveraging social networking tools, Headwaters can respond to customer needs both large and small. Making a fitting a fraction of an inch smaller was one innovation the social networking Web caught, allowing Headwaters' engineers to make a change critical to a customer.

But his advice to fellow CIOs or integrators developing a social-networking solution for customers is to conduct pilot projects in small departments before a full-fledged rollout. Headwaters did exactly that with a wiki-based project, working the bugs out of the system before an enterprisewide rollout. "I roll the pebble up the hill today, not the boulder," he said.

Social networks may allow companies to capture customer information more rapidly but they are also a platform for selling, said Vikas Sehgal, president of software developer Nagarro. Every employee is influencing a sale. "It's everyone's job. Sell or help someone sell," he said in a point well-received by the nearly 100 CIOs gathered for the session. He finally slammed home his message with this perspective: "There is no such thing as business to business, it is business to community," a play on the popular acronyms B2B and B2C.

Sehgal's point is that social networks shape the opinions of analysts, editors, peer groups and individuals who are either going to buy your product or recommend your stock or not.

Perhaps the final frontier is how social networks will allow companies -- even ones with stodgy images -- to attract new employees, especially those between the ages of 18 to 35 years old.

It is certainly a topic ChannelWeb and CRN have written about for some time. The panelists all agreed social networks help recruit bright, young people with ideas that could improve products or processes by the very nature of ideas transmitted over Twitter or Facebook. One panelist said his company is pushing hard on its human resources department to be more active in social networks to identify job candidates and manage the company's image.

Risks do abound, the panel agreed. Social networks can become pipelines to competitors if information is leaked inadvertently or intentionally. They can also serve as PR headaches if an inappropriate or ill-timed comment is captured and posted. Nickolaisen said employees must be reminded of what's appropriate and to protect the company's assets as they would in any setting.

Finally, one panelist said he scours Twitter for what analysts and reporters have to say about his company. "I don't want to hear from sales and marketing," he said, but from those objectively covering and tracking his company.

Well, maybe for us journalists there is hope.
Posted by Robert C. DeMarzo at 11:37 AM