

Case Study #CS31499:

Generate Leads with Social Media Strategy: 6 Steps to Fill Up Sales Funnel

SUMMARY: Just over a year ago, Pam O'Neal, VP Marketing, BreakingPoint, shared her team's success using a wide-ranging social media strategy to generate leads. We've asked her to present an update on their tactics -- with a focus on integrating email and social media -- at our upcoming Email Summit.

In advance of this session, we're highlighting the original case study that first demonstrated how the team tested and measured activity from several social media channels. The results included 55% of all leads coming from inbound Web visits, and 75% of marketing-influenced pipeline coming from inbound Web leads.

CHALLENGE

Pam O'Neal, VP Marketing, BreakingPoint, didn't want to adopt a typical demand generation strategy after she joined the networking-equipment testing system provider in April 2008. The startup company had a limited budget, and their target audience of security and quality assurance professionals in R&D laboratories wasn't merely skeptical of marketing -- they hated it.

O'Neal and her team wanted to supplement traditional PR, events and demand-generation campaigns with a social media strategy that created strong relationships with hard-to-find prospects. But they wanted to make sure those efforts were reaching the right audience and turning them into leads.

"It was either going to work big or be a huge failure," says O'Neal. "We didn't know, but we wanted more than anything to have a good solid case study and have metrics that prove social media could work in this climate and with this audience."

They took six steps to develop their social media strategy and measure its impact.

CAMPAIGN

O'Neal and her team tested several social media channels while revamping their public relations tactics to drive visitors to the company's website. They tracked growth and engagement metrics from those initiatives. They then correlated those results to traditional metrics, such as unique visitors, leads, and pipeline activity.

The six steps they took:

Step #1. Create blog to start and join online conversations

O'Neal's team began its foray into social media by launching a company blog. They didn't wait to finalize a blog strategy before launch, however. Their blogging approach evolved over time, based on observation of online conversations related to their network equipment testing niche.

- First, the team set up an online monitoring system that scanned the Web, the blogosphere, online forums and communities to find conversations relevant to their industry and their technical audience. The results were consolidated into an RSS feed that a team member could review each morning.

Scanning tools included:

- o TweetScan, for Twitter posts
- o Google Alerts for industry terms, such as "security threats" and "equipment testing"
- o Boardtracker.com, which monitors technology forums and message boards

- When the scanning tools found a relevant conversation, such as a blog post about cost of network equipment-testing tools, a team member would join that conversation. They would comment on the blog post and point readers to content on the same topic at the BreakingPoint blog.

- The team also used their blog to break stories with the potential to go viral. For example, the company's security research team published tests and research related to clickjacking -- a recently discovered security flaw within websites that takes clickers from a legitimate-appearing button to an illegitimate site.

Those stories generated links from other industry blogs and articles in major trade publications.

Step #2. Establish a Twitter account

The team supplemented their blog with a company Twitter account. It allowed them to post shorter, more frequent updates to their niche audience.

Company "tweets" included:

- Notices of new blog posts, webinars
- Fun entries (e.g., trivia questions, quizzes)
- Informal focus group questions (a poll of Twitter followers about potential names for the company newsletter)

As they did with the blog, the team used their scanning tools to find and participate in Twitter conversations relevant to their industry. They were particularly interested in community members asking for advice about equipment testing, so they set up alerts to find key terms, such as:

- o "Bake off," an industry term for a head-to-head equipment test
- o "Test methodology"
- o Competitors' names (along with the word "sucks")

"People are complaining a lot more on Twitter than in the blogosphere," says O'Neal. "It's a place people go to vent, as well as search for solutions."

They also re-tweeted relevant information found through their scans, such as reports about equipment testing results or interesting industry news. "It gives us a reason to stay in front of our followers and stimulate conversations."

Step #3. Create LinkedIn group

To explore an array of social media channels, the team created BreakingPoint groups on LinkedIn and Facebook. They quickly realized that their target audience wasn't well represented on Facebook. But the LinkedIn group began attracting members with the right professional backgrounds.

The team established the group as an open forum to discuss issues related to network test equipment and security -- not to the company or its products.

Group members took the lead in starting conversations among themselves. Typical topics included:

- o Advice on vendors
- o Reviews/suggestions for industry events
- o Feedback on new testing approaches or programs

O'Neal's team acted as hosts, joining discussions when they had a pertinent point to contribute, or sharing relevant industry news, blog posts or other content to keep members engaged.

Step #4. Modify press release strategy for blogger coverage

The team revamped its press release strategy to encourage more online coverage for the company. Actions they took:

- Release at least one new press release each week.
- To encourage inbound links, press releases were shorter and contained more links to sections of the company website.
- Shift their release time from 8 a.m. Eastern time to late morning/early afternoon, when West Coast bloggers were most likely to begin scanning for news.
- Publish press releases using a service called PitchEngine, and post releases to social media channels, such as their Twitter feed and LinkedIn group.

Step #5. Promote social media channels on company website and in email signatures

To encourage customers and prospects to participate in their social media channels, the team included links to different accounts from the company's website and in their email signatures.

The news section of the website, for instance, included links to the company's Twitter feed and LinkedIn group under a "join us" headline. They also included updates from the company Twitter account in the right-hand column of the company blog.

Employees' email signatures could include links to the blog, Twitter account or LinkedIn group, along with name, email address and phone number.

Step #6. Measure growth of social media accounts and Web traffic

O'Neal was determined to measure the contribution social media efforts made to the company's marketing and sales activity. So, they tracked metrics to determine the growth of their various social media channels, such as:

- o Unique blog page views
- o Twitter followers
- o LinkedIn group members

At the same time, they tracked a series of marketing metrics, such as:

- o Unique website visitors
- o Traffic generated by SEO
- o Leads
- o Leads by source (inbound Web, email, trade shows, seminars)
- o Marketing-influenced pipeline activity, by source

When comparing the metrics side-by-side, they looked for correlations between activity in social media outlets and an increase in leads and sales pipeline activity.

RESULTS

"After six months, we saw some amazing results," says O'Neal.

The team's analysis showed a dramatic correlation between the use of social media channels and the growth of the company's Web traffic and leads. (See creative samples link below for a chart illustrating growth trends.)

By the end of Q3 2008, their social media campaign resulted in:

- o 10,230 unique blog page views in Q3
- o 280 Twitter followers
- o 141 members of their LinkedIn Group
- o 155% increase in unique Web visitors

Most important, that Web traffic is now contributing the majority of the team's leads and pipeline activity.

- Leads by source:
 - o 55% inbound Web
 - o 23% trade shows
 - o 20.5% email
 - o 1.5% seminars

- Marketing-influenced pipeline by source:
 - o 75% inbound Web
 - o 17% email
 - o 4% seminars
 - o 4% trade shows

The amount of leads and pipeline activity generated from Web traffic demonstrates to O'Neal that their social media strategy is reaching their marketing-averse audience.

"In my prior position, I felt like I was on a treadmill when every quarter I had to come up with more and more clever campaigns to drive demand generation," says O'Neal. "I'm not saying that there isn't a lot of work that goes into social media, but I'm not constantly having to do these elaborate demand gen campaigns anymore."

The team's social media efforts also support their ongoing search-engine optimization strategy. By engaging in conversations about industry issues, they're generating more links on non-brand search terms that help boost their search engine results positions. Non-brand search terms are typically those used by prospects when searching for testing equipment.

When O'Neal joined the company, the ratio of Web traffic from brand terms to non-brand terms was 2.5 to 1. "That's really bad. It means more than twice as many people were searching for our company name versus their own pain point."

Now, the ratio of brand to non-brand search traffic is 0.6 to 1.

Useful links related to this story

Hear Pam O'Neal's update on integrating social media and email for lead generation at MarketingSherpa's 2010 Email Summit in Miami, January 20-22:
<http://www.sherpastore.com/EmailSummit2010.html>

Creative samples from BreakingPoint's social media campaign
<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/breakingpoint/study.html>

BoardTracker

<http://www.boardtracker.com/>

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