

5 tips for connecting with prospective customers online

BY PAUL GILLIN

EVEN IN A struggling economy, good programmers are hard to find. So to find top talent, TopCoder, a developer of custom software for enterprise customers, runs an ongoing series of competitions through its online community, giving programmers the opportunity to unravel thorny problems in exchange for peer recognition and cash prizes.

More than 187,000 developers from 200 countries have entered a TopCoder competition, with some developers earning six-figure annual sums, lucrative consulting agreements and bragging rights for their success. "We're at a point where the capacity to develop code is at a pace that outstrips our client's needs," said Rob Hughes, chief operating officer.

TopCoder's contests are just one of the many ways in which b-to-b companies are leveraging online communities for everything from branding to lead generation to advertising. Marketers are turning to social media channels because of their low cost, novelty and opportunity to engage customers on a more meaning-

ful level than they can achieve with conventional marketing.

Here are five ways social communities can help further your marketing goals.

1) Branding. The trusty blog is one of the most effective ways to generate thought leadership and reinforce market expertise. It's no secret that nearly every major technology firm is using blogs to promote the talents of its people, and services firms such as Accenture and PricewaterhouseCoopers have gotten in on the game, too.

Hospitality companies have also led the way. Marriott Corp., for example, has attributed more than \$1 million in revenue to its CEO blog.

2) Lead generation. Social networks open new channels to reach prospects, with "give to get" being the mantra. Instead of firing e-mail blasts into the dark, marketers can connect with prospects based on interests or needs identified in their online profiles. Plus, social networks make it easy for members to share opportunities with each other.

The Richardson (Texas) Chamber

of Commerce and Metroplex Technology Business Council gathered more than 100 new leads for new members in two months by offering free seminars on how to use social network site LinkedIn to generate new business. Organizers identified prospects by scanning current LinkedIn member profiles and identifying b-to-b interests.

3) Customer affinity. Webcasts have been a tried and true lead-generation channel for more than a decade, but customer affinity is low. At best, attendees can ask a question of presenters—but not of each other. After the event, it's up to the sales staff to nurture leads.

Today, inexpensive social networking tools make it possible to start a conversation during an event and continue it afterward.

Makino, a global machine tools maker, developed a webcast that includes an online conversation about the subject of the event. Attendance has increased with every webinar launched in 2005 to between 270 and 300 attendees per session today. "It

may not seem like a big number, but these people are buying half-million-dollar products," said Rick Segal, chief executive of GyroHSR, the b-to-b agency that oversees the project.

4) Media. In these days of shrinking media, marketers are increasingly taking the message into their own hands. Tools such as blogs, podcasts and Twitter make it cheap and easy to publish, and networks of followers can easily share news with each other. The media are also increasingly tapping into corporate blogs and Twitter feeds to find out what's happening at the companies they cover.

Software maker Compuware Corp. chose to take a message directly to customers and prospects at a recent Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) conference. Staffers searched Twitter feeds to see who was talking about the trade show and whether they might be good prospects. They set up a Twitter account specifically for the event and began following and "retweeting" comments from key prospects to develop a following.

As a result, three executives from

tier one accounts came by the trade show booth for a demo. One visitor wasn't on Compuware's key account list but turned out to be an ideal target customer. "From a sales and marketing perspective, this is huge," said Bridget Weir, Compuware marketing analyst.

5) Advertising. It costs nothing to set up a group on Facebook or a profile on YouTube and to use these additional channels to display marketing messages or to test new concepts. Marketers can resurrect media campaigns that have run their course and reach new audiences at practically zero incremental cost.

"B-to-b marketers are in the best position to capitalize on social networks because their task has always been focused on a community of people," GyroHSR's Segal said. "While there may be only 400 people involved in purchasing a jet aircraft, there are 10,000 people involved in the roll-up that leads to that decision. That makes every b-to-b buy a community decision." □

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