

Thursday May 21, 2009

Social Media for eWinerySolutions and its Client Wineries

What is Social Media?

By now you've probably heard the term "Social Media." Everyone is talking about it. The buzz about it is deafening. And that is exactly what Social Media is. Buzz. Excitement. People talking. What are they talking about? They are talking about you. You may want to talk back. But it's not merely idle chatter. It's more than that.

Is it marketing? Yes. Is it advertising? Yes. Can it lead to sales? Yes. Is social media meant for marketing, advertising and selling your products? No.

So what is it? Social media is conversational media. It's not the authoritative voice of the announcer telling you what to buy. It's not the stern voice of the newspaper editorialist telling you how to vote. It is a two-way (or multi-way) conversation. It's a way of sharing and discussing information. Information that can include images, videos, product discussion, technology, and the stuff of life itself.

- **Social media are a set of tools to create a conversation about you**, your business, your products, or anything else you want to share with others. You create relationships using social media. You build trust. You build a community.

Relationships are key to a successful business, as well as a successful life. And these relationships are what can lead to sales of your products. Your followers will trust you, will like you, will want to know more about you. And this will help sell your products. And maybe you'll buy theirs, too.

Building these relationships can take many forms. How do you want to communicate with your new "friends"? There are perhaps 100 mediums in this universe of social media. Maybe more by the time you finish reading this.

Keep in mind that while you are engaging in these forms of media, while your ultimate goal may be sales, you cannot be hard sell about it. It's a conversation, a dialogue. Social Media is not "buy a case of our wine, get free shipping" though it can be. It's talking about yourself, who you are, what you do, what the weather is like in the vineyard. It's what wines you personally like (yes, even your competitors'), where you travel, what your daily worklife is like.

Think of social media as a cocktail party, or a casual meeting on the street. While theoretically you can go up to someone at a party and say, "Hi. Join our wine club and get 20% off all wines," you probably don't want to do that.

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But you can talk about your new job, how exciting it is to work for a winery that makes such great wines, and can't wait to be at next Saturday's bbq in the vineyard. You can blog about what last night's frost may have done to your vines, about whether you want to add Merlot to the Cabernet still in barrel.

You can go back and forth among topics the way you might actually do so at a party. One moment you are talking to a friend about her child, another minute you are complimenting the host on a great party, and the next you are discussing business with someone who works for a competitor. And it goes back and forth.

Now you are ready to plunge right in and join all the social media networks you've heard so much about. Right? Wrong.

A Journey of 1,000 Miles Begins with a Single Click on Google Maps

You really do need to know where you want to go before you set out on your quest for social media stardom. You need a strategy. A plan. You do know this, of course, but it's easy to forget with all the buzz about social media, that it is just one aspect of your marketing plan.

What aspects or applications of social media are the best to use, and how should you use them? Before you can answer that, you need to ask yourself a few other questions. "What is my overall marketing strategy?" And "What is my Social Media strategy?"

Without an overall strategy, you not only may be spinning your wheels, choosing the wrong platforms, but actually damaging your brand. If you are a high-end winery that sells only through allocations, you might not want a presence on MySpace that is popular with a much younger and less affluent crowd. Would you advertise a \$100 Cabernet on The Disney Channel?

You've probably heard the terms "Blog", "Facebook", "Twitter", "MySpace", "Friend Finder", "You Tube", "Friendster", "Stumble Upon", "Yelp", "Flickr", "Tumblr." There are many "cocktail parties", or applications of social media. You can't participate in all of them, at least if you want to get some real work done--like making wine.

Take a look at each of their websites, ask your colleagues, ask your staff, or even ask us. Get a sense of how other people are using them. Some are more personal, some more business-like. Perhaps a mix of several would work for you. Perhaps none will. Each one of these sites has something different to offer.

The selection of which media to use may be different from those of your neighbor. Over time we will have extended notes on each of these to help you select what will work best within your own marketing plan.

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You don't really have to pay attention to them all. If people like what you say on your blog, they can post it themselves so their friends can see your post and perhaps join in the conversation. And they tell others and bring their friends into the community that you built.

This is how it works. People spread the word. They say things about you. Good things you hope, but sometimes not so good things. Just like life. And if there are many good things or not-so-good things, you really do want to know about them. It allows you to respond to these comments, thanking people for their praise, offering to make good on something that went wrong.

If you belong to several groups and want your readers and customers to talk about you, you could add links to those groups right on your blog and website, like so:

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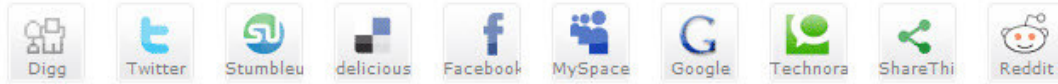
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What are the various types of social media?

1. Blogs

A blog (from the words Web Log) is like a diary. It can be what you did that day, or it can talk about events related to the winery. Perhaps something interesting is happening in the vineyard or you have a new winemaker. It can be whatever you want to write about.

But unlike a diary, it's not one way. It's not "your" diary, it's "our" diary. You blog (write something about a topic) and I read it. I may agree, disagree, or have something to add to it. So I comment on it. You comment back. And someone else comments on your post or my comment. And a discussion is thereby created. Good for them. Good for you. And good for business.

Why should I read your "diary"? Many people write blogs. There are hundreds and hundreds of wine blogs, from wine writers, winemakers, wineries, wine marketers. No one can read all of them. So what will make your blog stand out? There's no single answer. You need to make it compelling for me to read. So whatever you write about, don't just advertise your products. The best way to know what to write about is to know your strengths and passions and write about them. If you are passionate about what you write, people are more likely to read it and respond to it. Read other blogs first. See what you find compelling and see what blogs you can do without.

Always allow for comments on your blogs. People will offer opinions, sometimes helpful, sometimes irritating. But get people involved so they will remember you, come back to you and become part of the community you are setting up. Even if they offer criticism, respond to it.

Q: Why should I leave a comment on there that denigrates my product?

A: Because if you don't leave it there, your blog will be considered merely advertising and it will be ignored. By everyone.

So unless a blog comment is offensive, either in language or against certain individuals or groups, let it stay or perhaps just edit out the truly offensive parts. It will show that you are only human, perhaps you do make mistakes. But like a complaint, you will have to deal with it. Reply to them, and not in boilerplate terms either (We will investigate this and get back to you shortly.) Boring and goodbye customer.

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Plan on writing at least one blog post per week, more is better. Have several people write blogs, each one in their specialty area: Winemakers on what they are doing now in the winemaking process, vineyard managers talking about conditions in the vineyard, tasting room personnel, marketing and sales. The more connections you have with your community, the closer they will be to you.

2. **Facebook.** You've heard about Facebook (and MySpace). Create a presence there, have people become fans. You can communicate to your fans, tell them what's coming up. You can even create a page on your website for your Facebook fans, and perhaps on that page offer them a special discount. Facebook can have links to your blog too. It's a good way of keeping in touch with customers who perhaps are not wine club members but like your wines and want to know more about them.

3. **Twitter.** Twitter is many things. It basically is what is called a "micro-blog." Tiny 140 character statements that can encompass mundane items such as what you had for breakfast, or it can be so much more. You can tell people what you are doing in the vineyard, perhaps linking to your longer blog post on that same subject. You can announce the release of a new wine, or an event you are planning. Tell them you worked in the cellar. Tell them you spent a day in the vineyard and you are so tired you're going to relax with a glass of your Chardonnay. Invite them to join you tomorrow in the winery and you can both taste the Chardonnay. But don't link to your website wine shop. Your fellow "Tweeps" will find it if they want to.

Twitter is a great way to meet up with other wine aficionados and winemakers. Read the Tweets of others. Follow those who you like. Maybe you will find out about what another winery is up to, or discover a winery you'd like to visit. The possibilities for information to give out or receive are endless. With Twitter, it's not so much as a direct line to your customers. But you will reach people who may influence others to become your customers.

You can use Twitter on a daily or several times a day basis, just writing a brief update to keep your followers informed of whatever is going on that day. You can respond to a few "Tweets" that were directed at you, or where you want to be helpful to others. Twitter is a great way to keep up with other blog posts and websites and pages that you might find interesting. Someone else thought it interesting enough to pass on to you.

4. **You Tube.** Have a video of your wine club barbecue? Or a tour of your vineyards? Post it there. Link to it from your website and/or blog. You can post it on your site or blog only, but how will people who don't go to your site find it? Maybe they are on You Tube and had such a good time at another winery they will search for "tasting at wineries" and find your video. And then come visit you. And buy wine, lots of wine.

5. **Flickr.** You Tube for pictures that don't move.

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6. **Yelp.** People will post comments on Yelp about your winery and your wines. Find the posts and see what people like or more likely what they are complaining about.

Here's a comment posted on Yelp about a winery (not yours, I hope):

"The staff managed a blend of ignoring us (their only customers) and a really staggering amount of wine snobbery in the conversation they were having. Places like this are why so many people think that they don't like wine."

Ouch. If it was your winery, do something about this. Perhaps post an apology on Yelp. Or you can offer to have them come back and you'll personally give them a tour and tasting. But whatever you do, don't ignore it. A comment like that can really hurt your business.

The list goes on. We won't attempt to provide a description of all of them right now. We will update this over time and you can, on your own, also see what's out there and find out which ones you need to pay attention to.

So, who is going to do all this? It sounds like new staff is needed. No, not really. eWinery can help you build your blog, perhaps put you in contact with people to build out a Facebook presence, but maintenance really does not take that much time. An hour or so a day is sufficient, but spread out over the day.

Community Forums

Community forums are message board sites where people can leave messages and others can respond to them. The best example of a wine community forum is the one operated on Robert Parker's website <http://dat.erobertparker.com/bboard/>. If they are active, they can be a great resource for you, but if few people participate, it's a dead end.

Participate in these forums. If you've been on the Robert Parker Bulletin Board, you know how many winemakers, winery owners, wholesalers, retailers and just wine aficionados participate. You might want to join them. There are others too, such as the Open Wine Consortium, Wine and Hospitality Network, Wine Lovers Page, Wine Spectator. See which ones are active and if you feel comfortable joining and participating in the ongoing dialogue about all aspects of wine.

Should all wineries and businesses participate in Social Media?

Social Media is all about communication with people on a personal rather than business level. Because you are building relationships with the ultimate goal of converting these people into customers, you can't expect to be successful if you view every person merely as a prospect from

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the beginning. You need to be “transparent.” People need to see you as a person first. Perhaps only then will they trust you enough to become loyal to you and your brand.

You can’t outsource this either. You can’t hire a media firm to write your blog or your “tweets” and expect it to sound authentic. If you don’t think you can do this, then don’t engage in Social Media.

Who on your staff should blog, Twitter and maintain Facebook:

Let’s say you have an intern who is really into social media and knows everything about it and built websites when they were three years old. They are so excited and eager to post and Tweet. This is the perfect person, right? **No!!** This is not the right person. You want someone knowledgeable and loyal who can represent your brand, not someone who just runs off at the mouth. “We don’t let frogs and snakes in our crusher, the way Winery XYZ down the road from us does.” Oops. You have to watch that. You want someone who is responsible and can chat about you without putting your business at risk.

You should have a company policy on social media to let your employees know the rules. And this policy should include notifying the employee that even if they use social media on your behalf from their home computers, they are subject to the same rules as they are at work, i.e. company policies on harassment, ethics and company loyalty remain in force.

Now don’t just jump into it. Stand back and watch for a while. Just like entering a party after most people are already there. See who’s there, see what they are talking about and join in the conversation.

When you do, there are several basic principles to keep in mind about social media.

1. **You no longer own your brand.** You own the name. But control of the brand is in the public domain. It’s not about what you say about your brand, but what others say about it. Are you listening to them? Think of what happened to Domino’s Pizza and that notorious video. Be afraid. Be very afraid.
2. **Be real.** And be friendly. Have a personality. Don’t be dry and stand-offish. If you can’t do it, get someone on staff or a good friend of your brand to speak for you.
3. **Create your own strategy.** Just because something worked for your colleagues in another winery, don’t assume that will also work for you. First, it’s been done. Second, your brand is different. So differentiate it.

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Mistakes People Make:

Now that we've told you what to do, we will tell you what not to do. Many businesses are so eager to finally get into social media that they make some very serious beginner mistakes. We will try to prevent that from happening with your new blogs, tweets and Facebook page.

1. **Lack of a real plan.** Don't just plunge in. Decide what it is you wish to accomplish. Do you really want to create a community or do you just want to sell more products? It's ok if all you want to do is to sell, but don't try to sell using social media. People who participate in these groups are not interested in buying from you just because you say how wonderful your products are. They want to talk to you, engage with you. They will buy if they are so inclined, but even if not right now, your brand will be imprinted on their consciousness. Plus their friends will see their comments and your comments and their friends may buy your wines.
2. **Ignore negative comments.** If you do, people will call you out on this and will not pay attention to anything you say.
3. **Don't allow comments at all.** If you fear negative comments, don't blog, or do anything else. If you even ignore positive comments, people will return the favor and continue to ignore you. Just keep doing the business the old way. And keep your resume up to date
4. **Blog once and forget it.** If you do not consistently update your blog people will start to ignore it. And they will *never* return.
5. **Use only one application of social media and think your work is done.** This is the most difficult part, because not only will you have to keep up with where your customers and potential customers are, but this is an ever-changing world. What is hot today, is not tomorrow.
6. **Ignore the world outside your winery.** People can be loyal to your brand, but they also do buy other wines. Recognize that and talk about other brands or events at other wineries. Just as your tasting room staff might recommend a winery down the road when a customer asks, do so here. That winery may return the favor and you can gain their customers too.

Don't assume that by entering the world of Social Media you can ignore the basics of marketing. Social media is just one more tool in your arsenal. It may need to be part of your overall marketing strategy, but you need that strategy first.

The world of social media is changing rapidly. And the pace of change is increasing. You already know how to keep on top of information in your own industry (Wine Business Monthly, Wines

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and Vines, etc.) but you also need to keep on top of what is happening in the world of social media.

A few good sources of information:

www.mashable.com. A good overall source for social media information.

www.socialmediatoday.com. A bit technical at times, it can steer you towards how to use social media to better advantage.

<http://traffikd.com/> A good blog on social media.

One of the very best white papers on social media is from a new company called VinTank. While this paper is long (85 pages) it contains much detailed information that is worthwhile. Go to <http://www.vintank.com/> and look for their Social Media report.

A simple search on Google for "Social Media" will bring up hundreds of useful links. And probably thousands of useless ones. But very few boring ones.

This is an exciting time to be in marketing and a fearful one too. You don't really know how the economy will turn, or what might be coming down the pike. But if you are creative and can respond nimbly, you will definitely see people respond to you and perhaps become your customers. Hold on tight and enjoy the ride.

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