

Make Some Noise

How web 2.0 tools can help you communicate with customers more effectively

The web has long been hailed as the next great marketing frontier for entrepreneurs. But even with the best Web site, it's tough for little-known companies to attract online visitors. Sure, pay-per-click campaigns and search engine optimization strategies are a start, but they won't do much to help you find the customer who isn't aware he needs your product or service.

That's where a whole host of new technologies comes in. These low-cost marketing and communications tools let you reach customers and clients across the Web—in many cases, even those who don't know they're looking for you. The idea is to transform a static Web site into a constantly evolving experience, better engaging customers with audio, video, photos, and even community-generated content.

Two of the best known of these tools, Webcasts and blogs, are already being used by more than 400,000 small and midsize businesses, according to a March study by consulting firm AMI Partners. About 260,000 more companies are using podcasts. That's 660,000 entrepreneurs maximizing the capabilities of the Web to market and advertise themselves to new customers. After reading the following profiles of five who've used these tools successfully, maybe you'll be convinced it's time to make it 660,000—and one.

TRAMP THE GRAPES, WRITE THE BLOG

In 10 years since starting the Dover Canyon Winery, Mary Baker and Dan Panico have learned to expect surprises. But last March, when Baker heard someone yelling from her driveway at 3:30 a.m., her heart pounded. "Truly freaked out, I awakened Dan and I suggested (in case it was a homicidal maniac) that he should go check it out," wrote Baker on her blog the next day, adding that the maniac turned out to be a truck driver whose rig was stuck on the road to the Paso Robles (Calif.) winery.

Baker's humorous and informative posts give readers a peek into life at the two-person, \$400,000 winery, which makes zinfandel and syrah. Mail-order sales have almost doubled in the past year, and the blog is an inexpensive way to reach the growing number of online buyers. "It's more important than ever to create a personal connection," says Baker.

Baker started her blog in April, 2006, using a software package called TypePad Pro that costs \$149.50 a year. She got the blog up in a half-hour and spent two weeks tweaking the design. "It grew into this place where I could be creative and tell what we're all about," says Baker. Beyond the daily happenings at the 10-acre winery, she posts articles on sulfites and tannin, grilling recipes, news about Paso Robles, and anything else she feels might pique her readers' interest. That's just what a blog such as hers should do, says Debbie Weil, owner of WordBiz.com, a blogging consultant in Washington. "Nobody cares about your widgets," says Weil. "People care about what they can do with your widgets or the lifestyle surrounding your widgets."

To get people reading her blog, Baker drops a postcard with the blog's address into bags with customer purchases. She includes a link in the winery's e-mail newsletter, and has joined a community of bloggers who in turn link to her. Weil suggests building an audience by making insightful comments on the feedback sections of other blogs and including your blog's address. Just be subtle: Asking influential bloggers to trade links, says Weil, is "totally bad form."

It's a good idea to post at least a couple times a week, but Baker often doesn't have time. TypePad allows

her to schedule posts, so she can write several entries at once that appear several days apart. As she juggles the many tasks of running a winery, Baker takes comfort knowing she can at least blog about them in the morning.

SIT DOWN. LOG ON. TALK RECRUITING

The folks at Hireability wanted to get people talking about their Londonderry (N.H.) recruiting software and services business. So they created a place for recruiters to meet and chat.

In May, the \$1 million, 12-person company launched The Recruiting Network, a social networking site. In two months, some 500 recruiters signed up, with about 90% creating profile pages detailing their specialties. Members can link to friends in the network, post videos and blogs, and participate in discussion forums about everything from techniques for finding candidates to job interviews gone horribly wrong. "We're hoping that, because we've put in this time and energy to build a community, we have another vehicle to promote and highlight our offerings," says Craig Silverman, HireAbility's head of sales and marketing. His employees post company news in the site's forums, and information about HireAbility is displayed in Silverman's blog and in a section of the site called the Recruiter's Toolbox. Silverman says a handful of the site's members already have become HireAbility customers.

Silverman built the site in about a week using a free service called Ning. (Others include PeopleAggregator, GoingOn, and CrowdVine.) Creating a more highly customized site could run up to \$100,000 for developers, servers, and software.

HireAbility announced the site's launch in the monthly newsletter it sends to 35,000 recruiters. Several of its employees have profiles on the site, while others post questions on forums and answer members' questions. Silverman says he's happy with the response, but that launching such a site is like having a housewarming party before you have all your furniture—you have to trust that the guests have as much vision as you do.

THE WIKI AS ONLINE CONVEYOR BELT

Much as Henry Ford's assembly line let him crank out the Model T efficiently, Dan Woods employs a strict division of labor at Evolved Media in New York, but with a digital twist. The \$1.2 million, five-employee company creates technology-related books, guides, and marketing materials. Woods coordinates about 20 editors, writers, project managers, and graphic designers around the world.

He gets a big assist from a wiki, online collaboration software that lets anyone with access to a particular Web site edit content. Woods uses TWiki software (some Linux knowledge required) to create about 50 secure online workspaces since starting Evolved in 2002.

Woods divides a project into small chunks, and the wiki functions much as a conveyor belt. One person may conduct interviews and post digital audio files. An alert is then sent to the transcriber, who downloads the file, transcribes it, and posts the results. Writers then use that information to craft chapters, and so on. Clients sign on via Evolved's Web site to see the progress of their project. TWiki can be downloaded free from www.twiki.org, but there are other costs. Woods' server runs about \$150 a month, and he has a systems administration consultant come in occasionally to check the wikis and deal with any problems.

Small companies that don't want to run their own servers have other options. PBwiki and Neticpia are two free hosting services offering private wikis. Other companies, such as Socialtext and Atlassian, offer wikis for \$49 to \$449 a month with features such as extra security. "Hosted services are excellent for quick sites," says Woods. "But I have multimedia files that are very large, and the access control [offered by hosted services] is not nearly as good."

Now, with editors and contractors working together more efficiently, projects get published in a fraction of the time it used to take. Seven people recently completed a 452-page book in six months, instead of the 18 months to two years it might have taken in the past. Says Woods: "I couldn't run my business without it."

RADIO DAYS

Christopher Penn belts out the news with the smooth delivery of a professional radio broadcaster. But he is actually chief technology officer of Edvisors Network, a 20-person, \$6 million company in Quincy, Mass., that works with banks to market student loans. Nearly every weekday since 2005, Penn has recorded a 10-minute podcast about financial aid and scholarships for college students and their parents.

Each episode attracts about 3,500 listeners in the 90-day period Penn tracks responses. Edvisors earns fees by referring people seeking loans to banks, and Penn credits the podcasts with boosting revenues by

about 5% last year.

Penn spends an hour a day on the podcasts. To record, he uses a MacBook Pro equipped with GarageBand podcasting software, broadband Internet access, and a \$99 microphone from a music store. He has built an audience by e-mailing people who receive the company newsletter, and by setting up a blog, FinancialAidPodcast.com, on which he posts notes about each episode. The blog also helps people searching on Google to find the podcast, as most searches are built around text, not audio. Penn registered the podcast on Apple.com, so people can find it via iTunes. And in 2006, Edvisors started an affiliate program to syndicate the program to other Web sites. Penn also plays music from new artists at the end of each show. "When you promote someone else, they are likely to promote you, too," he says, adding that 5% to 10% of traffic comes through links from those musicians' sites. After about 550 episodes, Penn is going strong: "I still look forward to it, and I still have lots to talk about."

THE LITTLE AD THAT COULD

Dirk slaps a post-it note on Brent's backside that says "reboot." Brent retaliates by stapling Dirk's tie to the desk, causing him to fall backward when he tries to stand. So begins what the two twentysomething interns call *Cubicle War 2006*.

Dirk and Brent aren't real employees, of course. They are characters in a two-minute online video promoting Boulder (Colo.) software maker Windward Studios. The video, posted on YouTube and Digg.com, has been viewed more than 2 million times since 2006 and won an award for creative excellence in advertising from the American Advertising Federation in 2007. David Thielen, CEO of 12-person Windward Studios, says the company had a 20% increase in downloads of its demo software in the six weeks after the video was posted. And 2006 revenues jumped 100% from the prior year, to \$1 million.

Thielen doubts he could have achieved such excellent results had he used a traditional campaign. Aware that software developers are largely immune to direct mail or phone pitches from companies such as Windward, Thielen thought that a funny video would be a better way to promote his software, Windward Reports, which takes information such as customer names from databases and puts it into templates. For \$2,500, Thielen hired Corner Booth Productions, a video production company in Spokane, Wash., to make a humorous video about what even he calls "the absolute most boring software segment in the universe."

Thielen liked the initial script but surprised Corner Booth's Luke Barats and Joe Bereta by saying it mentioned Windward Reports too many times. The final version included only one reference. Thielen posted the video on Windward's site, and urged by the enthusiastic response, had it up on Digg.com and YouTube within a few days. Word of mouth took care of the rest.

Doing it yourself can be cheaper, depending on which digital video camera, computer, and editing software you choose. Posting a video is free on YouTube, Revver, and about 70 other online video sharing sites.

Cubicle War boosted the careers of Barats and Bereta as well. The pair signed a one-year development deal with NBC, and their rates are now well beyond Thielen's advertising budget. Says Thielen: "Once we realized it was a giant hit, we should have contracted for three more."

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