



Join the Party!

Social media offers organic retailers a chance to connect personally and professionally with the customer.

BY MELISSA KVIDAHL

For independent organic retailers, the tale of David and Goliath hits pretty close to home. Once a niche market, organic has grown into a supermarket staple—and the bread and butter for a variety of large-scale retail chains—causing independents to suffer when they simply can't meet the prices offered by larger companies.

While it's been fairly difficult to level the playing field, independent retailers have stepped up to include specialty items and unmatched customer service. Thanks to modern day technology, though, independent retailers can add one more weapon to their arsenal: social media.

According to Amanda Vega, CEO of Amanda Vega Consulting (New York,

NY) and contributing author of *The Social Media Bible*, independent organic retailers can embrace social media as an affordable way to compete against behemoths of the industry. "While many big retailers move slowly due to a large corporate communications team and big agencies, the smaller guys can really shine since they are more nimble and likely still more in touch with their customer," she said. "Social media allows you to broaden your existing relationships and grow new ones."

A Perfect Partnership

Perhaps it's because the organic industry is accustomed to (and reliant on) this type of personal connection between shoppers and retailers; perhaps it's

because organic stores already reap the benefits of a close-knit community with shared ideals. But one thing is for sure: organic retailers can use the strengths they have already honed to create a presence online.

"Organic retailers have an advantage in that there are well-defined issues regarding health and the environment that unite their customer base," said Dominic Wheatley, CEO of SocialGO (London, UK), a company specializing in creating social media networks for businesses. "Therefore, they stand to benefit from social networking that allows them to create a loyal customer base by expanding their web presence to a community centered around their brand."

And as for the idea that a retailer's audience isn't online, Jeff Hilton, founder and partner of Integrated Marketing Group (Salt Lake City, UT), wants to set the record straight.

According to Hilton, less than five percent of Twitter users are in their teens or 20s, and the fastest growing demographic on Facebook is women aged 55 and older. "While a retailer might think that it's a bunch of young teenagers tweeting each other, the truth is no—it's your customers that are on these sites and they are communi-





cating and talking about you and your store," he said.

Also, added Wheatley, there is a major demographic overlap between those most interested in health and those most likely to engage in social media—namely, mothers of young children.

"The organic industry provides a lot for people to talk about with each other," offered Wheatley. "We find the most successful online communities are built around a common interest that people really rally around. Those involved in the organic industry are very passionate about where their products originate and often excel at sharing their enthusiasm with others."

Organic shoppers are out there—and it's about time that retailers joined them.

Get Started

Like most tasks, the biggest and most intimidating step is the first one. After acclimating oneself to the site, the first big step is to start a Facebook page for a store and begin searching for friends.

To grow a store's friends list (those people that will be viewing and will be linked to that store's page), Hilton suggested a friending contest in which retailers could promote their Facebook page in store, and host a drawing among the friends acquired in 30 days

to provide an initial incentive. "Once you start to get friends, then Facebook itself will suggest friends of those friends," Hilton added.

Nancy Ehrlich, owner of Asbury Park, NJ-based Organic Style, used her mailing list to draw fans to her store's Facebook page. "I send e-mail blasts, and when I do, I always suggest within the body of each e-mail that they become a fan on Facebook. I've had a great response from that," she said. "The first time I sent it I gained 50 fans, the next time I had 75 fans and now I have over 100 fans."

Get Talking

Interaction is the most important facet of social media. Retailers need to not only send out their messages, but also react to the messages of their followers to really maximize the value of the sites. In an industry where educating and building a relationship with consumers are paramount, social media provides an opportunity to do both instantaneously.

Searching through Twitter threads will allow retailers to see a cross section of the most current "tweets" (posts) that interest them, but reaching out to those that have friended or are following the store online will open up personal lines of communication that were previously unattainable.

Hilton suggested that retailers link to interesting articles on Facebook or Twitter and post in-store promotions or education opportunities. He also stressed that Facebook and Twitter can work together seamlessly, by tweeting updates that can be found on a retailer's Facebook page or blog.

This is exactly what Ehrlich has been doing for Organic Style, and it seems to be working. Her blog documents her personal and professional travels; along the way, she notes eco-friendly destinations or vegetarian restaurants that she enjoyed and that might be of interest to her customers.

"On Facebook specifically, I list when I get new products in, or events happening around our town. I'll put notes up that promote vegetarianism or link to a great vegetarian restaurant I recently visited," Ehrlich added.

Jill Hutsler, owner of Shererville, IL-based Organic Market, cited Facebook as her favorite social media platform because of not only how easy it is to

gain friends, but how it enables a forum for health discussions.

"Our website allows customers to ask questions, but it's private—more like an e-mail," she explained. "Facebook is an open forum. Sometimes people are afraid to ask a question themselves, but might see another person's question and our answer. And then it might open up the conversation for more questions."

Of course, promotions also play a part in Hutsler's Facebook plan. "I do some promotions via e-mail, and post entirely different ones on Facebook," she explained. "When a customer comes in and asks about a certain sale, I'll know where they learned about it. I've definitely noticed that the Facebook sales are more successful than our e-mail promotions."

"Facebook is a quick and easy way to post a coupon or send an update to your fans," Ehrlich agreed. "This way, I'm not taking the time to update my website, but people can still link back to my website where they can shop online."

But like all social situations, Varga stressed, social media requires a bit of etiquette. "This is *social* media. This is not a set of places to extend your ad messaging," she said. "If you don't talk with people, then you aren't being social and you will fail." The key, she said, is to pretend like social media is a party. "You would never walk up to someone and start out with 'Buy this! Buy this!' so don't do that in social media. Start chiming into conversations of all interests just like you would at a party, and your following will grow."

Wheatley's advice for any remaining doubters?

"While we can debate the merits of various social media tactics, the fact remains that, in 2010, this is how a large portion of human interaction is taking place," he said. "If you have a product or service that no one talks about online, and none of your customers are wired, then you have no need for a social media strategy. But I don't think such a product or service exists." 🍎

For More Information:

- Amanda Varga Consulting, (480) 275-9797
- Integrated Marketing Group, (801) 538-0777
- SocialGO, www.socialgo.com

