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Media Mania

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As a progressive businessperson, you probably have heard the phrase “Web 2.0.” You can’t escape it. By now you’ve heard of and maybe used LinkedIn, a social networking site for businesspeople on which many promotional products professionals are connecting; Digg, where users can tag news stories and vote on them; and MySpace and Facebook, social networking sites originally used by teens and young adults but now popular with companies and adults.

You may be aware that Web 2.0 technologies exist—somewhere out there in cyberspace—but think they have nothing to do with you or your company. However, all signs indicate that Web 2.0 will have something to do with your

future, and it is as inescapable as having a website is today.

Visit [www.walmart.com](http://www.walmart.com) and a host of other websites, and you’ll see product ratings and reviews written by everyman. Welcome to Web 2.0 where power lies in the hands of the people. This authority exists at the ground level, which is why the Web 2.0 movement is deemed “the groundswell” by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, two Forrester Research analysts who wrote the popular book *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

### **The Way Of Web 2.0**

What makes Web 2.0 so revolutionary? “With Web 2.0, there is bilateral communication instead of unilateral communication,” says Mike Michalowicz, author of *The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur* (HarperCo Books, 2008) and owner/CEO of Boonton, New Jersey-based entrepreneurial investment firm Obsidian Launch. “Web 1.0 was just speak, speak, speak. Web 2.0 is speak and listen, speak and listen, speak and listen.”

If you haven’t heard of *The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur*, you are probably snickering right now. I snickered, too—until I Googled the book’s name and received 22,000 hits. How did Michalowicz rise from obscurity to relative fame? Through Web 2.0, of course.

“We’ve leveraged the living crud out of social media,” Michalowicz says. “It’s been very successful for us.”

But creating such an internet presence has been a full-time effort—for Michalowicz and four of his co-workers. “We spent 10-hour days here at the office cranking the internet,” he says. “We’d

start at 8 in the morning and we wouldn't leave until 6 or 7 at night. It's a full-time effort."

Christopher Dworin—vice president of GoLightly, which creates online community collaboration tools for companies—says Web 2.0 is a fundamentally different kind of communication. "Before, communication was almost always unidirectional—one-to-one or one-to-many," he says. "Social networking communities now provide many-to-many communication. New realms of possibilities open up when you empower people to communicate with one another. Moving forward, I think there will be some fundamental changes in business related to bringing people together in the controlled trust of social networks."

Through the might of "the many," the groundswell derives its muscle. "Any individual can be stopped, co-opted, bought off or sued," Li and Bernoff write in *Groundswell*. "But the internet allows people to draw strength from each other." Users may also post comments anonymously, increasing the cushion of safety. But isn't this a company's worst nightmare?

Some executives do find Web 2.0 technologies a tad troubling. "Personally, I think the concept scares me a little bit," says Mark Abels, president and CEO of Tulsa, Oklahoma-based supplier Selco Custom Time, Inc. (UPIC: SELCO). "I believe you really have to think these things through—you have to think about what you're trying to accomplish—before you put yourself out there."

There is something to be said for circumspection in the Web 2.0 era. In a column ("Social Misfits") from the November 2008 issue of *Fast Company* magazine, Caroline Waxler writes about Starbucks' and Wachovia's attempts to use the micro-blogging site Twitter, on which users post messages of 140 characters or less in length.

"With each sexy bit of social media that catches fire with users, lame companies get to pretend they know how to connect with customers," Waxler writes. "Just this morning the Wachovia Twitterer responded to the Starbucks Twitterer. Starbucks had said, 'It's possible to make a Vivanno with soy, but there is dairy in the whey base. Nutritional info is for standard drinks only.' Get this. Wachovia replied, 'On behalf of my fellow bankers, thanks for keeping us moving along!' You had to be there: It was like having a seat at the Algonquin Round Table."

Ouch. How can companies avoid this kind of response to their efforts to create a Web 2.0 presence?

"This is exactly the problem with the, 'Hey, let's get in and do this stuff,' kind of attitude," Bernoff says. "Sometimes people immediately think about the technology rather than their objectives for creating it. We recommend that companies first figure out what technologies your customers are using now." Bernoff and Li use a social technographics profile to classify customers according to their involvement in the groundswell, placing them into one or more of six groups.

### **Social Media**

Sixty percent of Americans use social media, according to the 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study conducted by the Boston, Massachusetts-based strategy and communications

agency Cone, Inc. Of those, 59 percent interact with companies on social media websites. Additionally, 93 percent of social media users believe a company should have a presence in social media.

Dworin remembers giving lectures on internet marketing in 2001. One of the questions repeatedly asked by business owners was, “Why should I have a website?” No one is asking this question today, Dworin points out. “Similarly, in the next two to three years no one is going to be asking the question, ‘Why should I have social networking tools?’” Dworin says. “The benefits are so strong for every organization, social networking tools are going to become ubiquitous. I think you’re going to find this spreading rapidly.”

Social networking has blazed a trail, enabling the creation of forums for every group and special interest imaginable. In his spare time, Joseph G. Scott—vice president of distributor firm Scott & Associates, Inc. (UPIC: SCOTTASC) and PPAI Board of Directors member—heads a business based entirely on a social networking model, [Patentbuddy.com](http://Patentbuddy.com). “We’ve built a social network for patent attorneys and inventors,” he says. “We make money from advertising, so the more traffic we have on the site, the further up it will go in the search engine ranking.”

Scott also uses the social networking site LinkedIn for prospecting. “If I’m looking for a particular business, I’ll search LinkedIn to see if an individual from that company is there and whether I know someone connected to the person,” he says. “I’ll either ask for an introduction or just contact the person directly. These sorts of e-mails are more well-received by people who don’t know you because they can take a look at your profile before they respond. It’s proven to be very effective.”

Companies are utilizing user-contribution systems in a variety of ways, including social networks, forums, ratings and reviews, intranets and extranets. (An extranet is a part of a company’s intranet that is extended to users outside the company.)

According to the October 2008 *Harvard Business Review* article, “The Contribution Revolution,” Hyatt set up an online concierge service where users provide local travel tips, which are rated by others. Unilever created a user forum for moms to share experiences and share a sense of community. Best Buy boasts an employee-run (really) intranet. Honda established an automotive navigation and information system where customers provide traffic-related data. [Threadless.com](http://Threadless.com) lets users vote on designs submitted by amateur designers and produces t-shirts based on the winners.

Dworin explains how an extranet might work for a business customer. “Let’s say a company wants to get the word out to all its customers about its new policies,” Dworin says. “It might go ahead and publicize something on the community website and upload the new documents to the community library. The advantage of an extranet is customers can communicate with each other. There’s often real value in that.”

Bernoff agrees, pointing out that B2B companies’ customers aren’t really businesses—they are buyers. “Your buyers probably have a lot in common with each other,” Bernoff says. “This creates an opportunity to provide an environment where they can connect and have an affinity

for one another.”

Michael Beckman, marketing strategist for Atlanta, Georgia-based distributor firm Proforma – BPM (UPIC: Profo328), has a similar idea. “What I’m hoping to do eventually is to hold a monthly conference call and have clients throw ideas out there,” he says. “They are all in the same position, just in different markets. First, I’d ask them what are they interested in talking about—not with me necessarily, but with each other.”

Another popular user generated-content site is YouTube, where users post videos they’ve created. Supplier firm Selco just posted its first video on YouTube. (The video targets promotional consultants and is ripe with industry jargon, thereby negating any suspicion that Selco is gunning for end users.)

Selco also has several other educational videos in the works. “We’re going to have a little fun with video,” Abels says. “We’re going to show people what our processes are. We want to show that so much of our product is customized and assembled in the U.S. We also want to highlight some case histories.”

### **Blog Boost**

The October 2008 issue of the Public Relations Society of America’s tabloid, *Public Relations Tactics*, features a “Spotlight on Web 2.0” section, which discusses user-generated content sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and others. In an article (“This Blog’s For You”) Erik Battenberg writes, “Blogs may have started as a channel for people to start conversations and build virtual communities, but more and more companies are using blogs as marketing tools.”

You may have already created your own blog, or know of someone who has. Bruce Felber, creative director/account executive for Twinsburg, Ohio-based distributor firm Felber & Felber Marketing (UPIC: felber), says his company has a blog, which was created in 2008. “I think it helps us out quite a bit,” Felber says.

Beckman writes articles every two weeks and posts them on his blog. He believes the time investment is worthwhile. “I have experienced quite a few sales from my blog site,” he says. “When I call on a prospect I haven’t talked to before, I send the link to them ahead of time. They will actually say, ‘Oh yes, I read your blog article, and I thought it was interesting.’ So I know they’re reading it.”

“Your customers need to find something useful on your blog every time they read it,” Bernoff advises. “Think about what your customers’ lives are like. If your buyers are marketing people, perhaps you could comment on activities happening in the marketing industry. Things like, ‘I went to a tradeshow and found this interesting’ or ‘Here’s a new research study that shows this succeeds.’”

Bernoff also says it’s important to find ways to drive traffic to your blog to achieve success. “Every time you put a comment on somebody else’s blog, add the link to your blog,” he says. “That will create more hits for you. Also, add your blog link to your business cards and your e-mail signature.”

## **Ratings And Reviews**

You may be thinking that implementing ratings and reviews leaves your company open to negative input via its website. You're right; most likely, that's what would happen. But, according to Michalowicz, getting a negative review is good.

If you perform a search for "the toilet paper entrepreneur" on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), you'll see the book was reviewed by 32 people and received a five-star rating. You might assume this means all 32 users gave the book five stars, but that's not the case—one reviewer gave the book one star.

"As hard as it was to swallow a one-star rating, the negative review elicited responses from other people," Michalowicz explains. "A one-star rating may be the best marketing tool you have because it starts a dialogue. I think the most helpful review is the negative one."

Bernoff says companies must allow negative reviews to appear on their websites because people will not have faith in a site that includes only positive reviews. "We don't all live in Happy Land; lawn mowers break, some cars are more dependable than others and some products just stink," Bernoff says. "We recently conducted a survey of reviews on Amazon.com and, generally, 80 percent of reviews are positive. Unless most of your products are terrible—in which case you should perhaps get out of business—you're going to find that reviews are overwhelmingly positive, and negative reviews give credibility to the positive ones."

Dworin agrees. "You can say, 'Well, I don't want people to see that,' but you know they're hearing it and seeing it in other contexts anyway," he says. "Whether it's bad or good, it's better for you to know what people are saying and for you to have some control over it. It's better to give people a way to blow off steam than to have them do it elsewhere, or just go away and not tell you why they left."

How much would it cost to have GoLightly implement its social networking platform for your company? Prices start at \$8,000 at the lowest end. The fee includes everything you need to get your online community up and running, such as a community home page, searchable member directory, unlimited groups, unlimited e-mail lists, resource library, forums/bulletin boards, unlimited blogs, unlimited wikis and training.

Abels likes the idea of setting up a product ratings and reviews sections as part of Selco's website. "We're already a little exposed anyway because our industry has SAGE and ESP ratings," he says. "I have read about putting up ratings and reviews systems, why they work and why it's positive even if you get a negative review. I suspect if you get 80 percent negative reviews you probably want to re-think your business. We've got a lot of website additions in the works, and we'll probably have a ratings and reviews section up by summer 2009."

## **Progressive Promopeddler.com**

When it comes to implementing Web 2.0 technologies, one of the most progressive companies in the promotional products industry is the Sherwood, Oregon-based distributor firm [Promopeddler.com](http://Promopeddler.com) (UPIC: Bagpe110).

“We’ve got a lot of Web 2.0 projects in the pipeline for 2009,” says Monte Baumgartner, president of Promopeddler.com “We’re going to bring a lot of customer interaction online. We’re also going to allow users to rate and comment on products.”

Katrina Plam, social media specialist for Promopeddler.com, interacts with people on a blog where she introduces promotional products and comments on them.

“It’s all about creating good content that’s useful to people,” Baumgartner says, mirroring Bernoff’s words. “Once Kristina creates the content, she posts the link so people can find it.”

“We’ve posted some viral video on YouTube,” Plam says. “We try to create funny but informative stuff.”

“Hopefully people will like it, find our site and ultimately order from us—but we don’t have any control of that,” Baumgartner says. “All we can do is create useful content and hope people like it.”

Promopeddler.com has a blog, which is headed by Dale Kirby, Promopeddler.com’s director of marketing. The company has been pursuing Web 2.0 platforms for more than a year now. Is it working?

A quick search on del.icio.us.com reveals the answer. (Del.icio.us is a tagging site that allows people to classify a link under a “tag” of their choosing. Getting tagged means your online presence has been duly noted and classified by the blogosphere.)

Baumgartner types “promopeddler.com” into the Del.icio.us search engine, and 45 results appear. People with user names such as “momomaestro” and “Durham Dad” have posted links of Promopeddler.com’s website pages.

“There’s all kinds of ... our web pages that have been tagged,” Baumgartner says with wonder and reverence. The tags—which include “promo,” “promotions,” “linen,” “promo-products” and “paper”—are all positive. There’s nothing negative—no mention of “swag” or “freebies.”

A Google search for “promopeddler.com” yields 350,000 results. A search for “promotional products” yields 8,960,000 results and Promopeddler.com is on the first page.

It’s official: Promopeddler.com has successfully tapped into the groundswell.

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## **WEB 2.0 TOOLS**

**Here are some Web 2.0 tools you can use to explore the world of social networking.**

[Google Blog Search](#), [Technorati](#), [Dailymotion](#), [Metacafe](#)—Blog search engines that can help you determine which blogs have the most influence.

[Forrester.com](#)—A customer technographics tool that can help you profile customers’ social computing behaviors by selecting specifics from dropdown menus. The tool will create a profile for your selected demographic group.

[Compete.com](#)—A competitive intelligence service that combines site and search analytics in one site to help you quickly master online marketing. Identify rival search marketing strategies. Sign up for a free account and you can use the site analytics tool to compare up to five sites at a time.

[Contribution Revolution Wiki](#)—Assembled by Scott Cook, cofounder and chairman of the executive committee of Intuit, this wiki features information on myriad user contribution systems. Click on “resources and ideas” on the right side of the page.

[Del.icio.us.com](#)—A tagging website that allows people to bookmark any website—yes, even your company’s—by classifying with any classification tag people want to choose. Visit del.icio.us and enter your company’s web address into the search box to see how it’s tagged. Also, create your own del.icio.us account and tag your company’s website(s).

[Digg.com](#)—A website where people can share content from anywhere on the internet by submitting links to stories and then commenting and voting on the stories.

[Google Alerts](#)—E-mail updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) based on your choice of query or topic. You can create a Google Alert for your company name, the promotional products industry, etc.

[Flickr.com](#)—An image- and video-hosting website and online community platform. The site features organization tools, which allow photos to be tagged and browsed by users.

[Reddit.com](#)—A social news website on which users can post links to content on the web. Other users vote the posted links up or down, causing them to appear more or less prominently on the Reddit home page.

[Twitter.com](#)—A social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send and read each others “tweets” (updates), which are posts of up to 140 characters in length.

[YouTube.com](#)—A video-sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips.