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PROMOTIONS & EVENTS, LLC

## THE OTHER HALF OF SOCIAL MEDIA

By John Roush, President, Geronimo Promotions & Events LLC

One rarely hears the term “sales promotion” any more. Instead, the conversation around the conference table is usually about some aspect of social media. Gamification, user interface, hashtags, big data, engagement marketing, cost-per-click and a host of other digital-centric buzz words often obscure the bottom line of marketing: sales and profits.

Sure. Social media is a critical component of any marketing effort. It has transformed the landscape of marketing for some very good reasons. It’s ability to be both interactive, mobile and local is huge. The fact that massive numbers of people use a second screen when watching television opens up a new world to advertisers and content providers alike. Social media IS changing our world.

The primary driver of that revolution is the first half of its name: social. In both good ways and bad ways it has redefined our social communities and how we interact. Many bemoan the growing lack of personal contact, castigate the shallowness of texting and make snarky comments about the way so many people stare at their smart phones even when in an “actual” social situation with someone sitting next to them. So be it. While I may share some of those feelings, as a marketer, this is just the way it is. Good, bad or otherwise, our job is to adapt. As a result, many business managers have jumped on the social media bandwagon lock, stock and barrel. Often to the exclusion of all other considerations.

To the battle cry of “Print is dead!”, marketing managers are putting everything they have into programs designed solely to gain likes, tweets and comments. Yet, rarely do they seem to think about the impact that this is having on the bottom line. One can have all the engagement in the world, but if the marriage is not consummated... if the consumer does not buy the product or service.... the relationship, no matter how rich, doesn’t matter..... and the company will, sooner or later, fail. Cute kitten videos may get people to your site but what do they do for your brand?

Part of the problem is that many seem to forget the other half of the term: media. In the end, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and all the other trendy sites are just that: media. A very rich, interactive, consuming media to be sure, but a media nonetheless. To be effective, media--ANY media-- needs content that is engaging, interesting, ever-changing and in its best form, motivating. Specifically, in a marketing context, motivating the consumer to take a specific action.

Marketing 101 tells us that “sales promotion” is a marketing communication targeted at the consumer (or trade or sales force or all of the above) designed to increase sales or brand share during a specific time frame. Unlike advertising and public relations, which are mostly about awareness and image, promotional marketing is about “action” -- getting a targeted group of consumers to take a specific action during a specific time.

Usually, that action is buying something.

Promotional marketing has been around since the first merchants started trading centuries ago. “Hey, buddy. I will throw in this beautiful saddle if you buy my camel!” We can’t verify that actual conversation, but we all know it happened. And it continues to be a staple of the marketing world for a very simple reason: it works! “FREE” remains the strongest word in the promotional vocabulary, because everyone, and I mean everyone, wants something for free.

Which brings me back to social media. As a medium, it requires compelling content, and promotions have always been a staple of content for media. However, casually throwing a sweepstakes or contest or special offer of some kind onto a Facebook page or web site doesn’t work any better than it ever did back in the day when they were casually tossed into FSIs or magazine ads. Nor does it help to simply make them a text-to-win. Yes, you are using the hot new media; and yes, you might be using some cool technology..... but if you aren’t achieving the business objective, you are wasting your money. You are also wasting the potential of this wonderful new medium.

While sales promotion is rarely a topic of serious conversation around the conference room these days, perhaps it should be. With advertising and public relations, it is still one of the three legs of marketing, and good promotional marketing remains just as rigorous a discipline as it ever was. Knowing the audience, shaping the offer, communicating the opportunity, understanding the legalities and managing the fulfillment remain critical issues that can only be addressed by professionals. And if done right, good promotional marketing can not only enhance the engagement of social media by giving it compelling content, but can significantly influence that all-important bottom line.

So, the next time there is a marketing conversation about social media, invite a promotional marketing professional to join you at the conference table. Remember: everyone wants something for free!